

## Super League's Only Match a Good One

Written by Pat Clifton  
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*(Cody Secker photo)*

Saturday's bout between the Denver Barbarians and Old Puget Sound Beach at Dick's Sporting Goods Park is the Super League game of the week. Not just because it's the only RSL game on tap for Easter weekend, but because it ought to be considered round one of the West playoffs.

At 3-1, OPSB clinches a semifinal berth with a win over the host Barbos, who at 2-3, can throw their name back in the postseason hat with a victory. Denver would also need the Utah Warriors to beat OPSB next week, and the bonus point/point differential scenarios to fall their way, but with a win, the Barbos' playoff hopes are still very much alive.

And after beating the Dallas Harlequins 84-10 last week, Denver's confidence is on an uptick during what would normally, by Barbo standards, be considered a lackluster season.

"Putting a good score on Dallas, it always boosts the morale to get a win, and then to get one like that helps with confidence," said Denver fullback Taylor Howden. "The boys haven't checked out yet. They're ready to go, and we're playing inside the stadium, we're expecting a

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good crowd, and we're ready for this game 100-percent."

OPSB's 31-29 home win over Denver in week two was about as close as a match can get, with the final whistle being triggered by the Barbos' attempt at a go-ahead try being held up in goal. That play and that game has had a massive impact on the shape of the West standings. Denver was without flyhalf Maximo DeAchaval and center Cristian Sarmiento, and OPSB felt like it didn't put forth its best effort, so both are looking for improved performances in the second go-round.

"I felt we took our opportunities when we had them," said OPSB fullback Evan Haigh. "Our defense wasn't functioning well, so we had to scrap, and to win when we don't play well is always a positive. It's the sign of a good side. If you find a way to win when the chips are down, I reckon that's a big positive."

Eagle Alipate Tuilevuka, who was banged up and missed most of OPSB's win over Utah earlier this month, has been cleared to play, and his presence will be paramount in the Seattle club's effort to sweep Denver.

"Pate's been a big influence for us. He's our leader, he's our captain," said Haigh. "He's a player's player. He knows what's required to win, so it's always a big boost for us not to have to change and reconfigure our backline yet again."

OPSB's backline suffered a big blow early in the season when flyhalf Isi Daveta was lost with a broken arm, and the Beach Dogs have struggled to find continuity at standoff since. But, fairly or not, OPSB's backline is still considered its strength. With internationals like Tuilevuka and Filimoni Botitu in the lineup, and the stellar play of Haigh, it's easy to see why. Denver's backline, featuring Howden, Sarmiento and DeAchaval, has a fair amount of pride, too, and they're keen to meet the challenge.

"You can't count them out, right?," said Howden of OPSB's backs. "They've got some fast players, but we have the personnel in our backline to match up with them...I don't want to take anything away from them, but they're not better than anyone else. We played Golden Gate and they carved us up. (OPSB) has a couple fast players, but we have the guys to match up with them."

And, fairly or not, Denver's pack has long been, and probably still is, considered its best asset, despite stalwarts like John Van der Giessen and Nic Johnson playing elsewhere. Nonetheless, Haigh said there was parity in that matchup in the first meeting, and there will be again Saturday.

"They've got a very strong scrum. They blew Dallas off the ball very impressively at times last weekend. Dallas has a pretty good scrum, so it was a pretty impressive display by their front three," acknowledged Haigh. "But I've got faith in our front three really taking it to them, and it's going to be a great battle, with our guys going strength for strength and applying themselves up there."

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