

STEEL'S FOUR POINTS LEAD GULLS TO 6-1 WIN OVER ONTARIO

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The San Diego Gulls stormed past the Ontario Reign 6-1, scoring six consecutive goals tonight at Pechanga Arena San Diego. Sam Steel scored two goals and added two assists, setting a new career-high and tying a Gulls rookie record with four points in the win. San Diego has now won seven of their previous eight games on home ice, outscoring their opponents 33-21 over that span. The Gulls have also won 12 of their last 15 and earned points in 18 of their last 20 games (15-2-1-2).

“I think we saw flashes of what this team can be if we’re willing to keep our shifts very short,” said Gulls head coach Dallas Eakins. “We’re able to just turn four lines over and it turns into a very tough matchup game for the other team.”

Kevin Boyle made 15 saves to earn his 18th win of the season. San Diego’s first AHL All-Star goaltender has posted a 13-1-1 record in his last 15 games. He owns a 2.20 goals against average and a .926 save percentage over that span.

The Gulls took several penalties early in the game, giving the Reign 21 seconds of a five-on-three power play. Matt Moulson, Ontario’s leader in points (18-17=35) and goals, received the puck just outside of the crease as the first of the two power plays was expiring. After holding the puck, waiting to get an angle on Boyle, Moulson roofed a shot to give the Reign an early lead 5:24 into the game. Carl Grundstrom picked up the primary assist in his first game since being traded from Toronto, Jan. 28.

Late in the first period, Chase De Leo finished off a rebound opportunity to tie the game for the Gulls. As the Reign tried to move the puck out of their own zone, Justin Kloos intercepted a pass and went to the net. His shot bounced off the stick of Kiefer Sherwood and right to De Leo, who backhanded it past netminder Cal Petersen to even the score with 3:52 left in the opening frame.

De Leo has registered 2-4=6 points in eight matchups against Ontario this season. In his home debut with San Diego, Kloos picked up the secondary assist, giving him three points (0-3=3) in five games with the Gulls. With the primary assist, Sherwood has recorded a point in each of his two games facing the Reign.

With Alex Lintuniemi sitting in the box for hooking early in the second period, a tic-tac-toe passing play put San Diego in the lead. Steel collected the puck along the right wing wall and sent a pass across the middle of the ice to Troy Terry, waiting in the left faceoff circle. Terry froze the defense with a pump fake before sliding a perfect pass to Sam Carrick on the backdoor, who buried the puck into an empty net, giving the Gulls a 2-1 lead 2:51 into the middle frame.

Carrick's tally marked his 21st of the season, moving into a tie for the most goals scored by a Gull in a single season. In addition, he is the fastest to ever reach the 21-goal marker, surpassing teammate Corey Tropp's record of 53 games. The score also moves Carrick into a tie for third with Nic Kerdiles and Antoine Laganiere for all-times goals by a Gull (37).

Just under two minutes later, Steel got to a bouncing puck in front of the Reign to double the Gulls' lead. With Sherwood pressuring the Ontario defense on the forecheck, the puck hit the side of the net and carrommed in front. Steel beat everyone to the loose puck and lifted it

over Petersen's shoulder for his 10th goal of the season, putting the Gulls ahead 3-1 at the 4:27 mark of the second period.

Three rookies teamed up for the Gulls fourth tally of the night as Jack Kopacka capped off a three-goal barrage over the span of 2:21 seconds. After an Ontario turnover in the San Diego defensive zone, Steel grabbed the puck and raced up the ice for a 3-on-2 rush with Terry and Kopacka. Steel gave the puck to Terry in the high slot, who set up Kopacka for the one-time goal, extending the Gulls' lead to three just 5:12 into the middle frame. The goal marks Kopacka's third of the season and second in as many games.

"I didn't say a word to the group in between periods, after the first," said Eakins. "That's a strength of our group. From our first year guys, who had excellent nights, right through our veterans, we've got really good men in there. I just felt like they could coach themselves in between periods, it's an important thing for them to do. Obviously, they got their feet underneath them and showed what they can do in the second period."

San Diego kept its foot on the gas, as Berry added the team's fifth consecutive goal on a wrist shot from the faceoff dot. Carrick set the goal up as he slid the puck past two Ontario defenders and right to the stick of a wide-open Berry, who ripped a shot past Petersen's glove for his fourth goal of the season. With the assist, Carrick's night of milestones continued, as the helper was 55th with San Diego, moving him into a tie for fourth in club history with Andy Welinski and Jaycob Megna.

Steel capped off his big night with another goal late in the third period. As the Gulls passed the puck around the perimeter of the offensive zone following a power play, the puck came to Max Jones above the right faceoff circle. The rookie winger fired a low shot on goal and the

puck bounced directly to Steel in front of the net for the rebound goal, giving San Diego a 6-1 lead with 6:02 to play. With four points on the night, Steel has earned 5-8=13 points in his last 11 games, leading the Gulls in points over that span.

“He’s a competitive kid and he has come along really nicely,” Eakins said about Steel. “I think he was -10 at one point and now he’s battled all the way back to even. I think he had four points and was +3 tonight. Those are great signs for a young player.”

Gulls defenseman Josh Mahura was on the ice for all six of his team’s goals and posted a +5 rating, setting a new club record.

The Gulls continue their three-game homestand in a matchup against the Iowa Wild tomorrow night, Feb. 2 (7 p.m. PT, TV: FOX 5, Radio: Mighty 1090).