

First-time section champions!

BY BILL STICKELS III

EDITOR@COUNTYSTAR.COM

"Homeless" hockey team makes it to state tournament. The story of the North Branch boys hockey team is too easy for most media to resist. Dutifully, Viking head coach Matt Cottingham answers everyone's questions about the team's lack of an arena within the borders of the school district. But inside, the coach would much prefer to simply talk about how far the program has come regardless of where or when they practice.

"We feel that Chisago Lakes arena is our home rink," Cottingham said. "Yes, we practice at 5:15 in the morning, but our kids have owned it and have embraced the roll.

"It feels great going to the state tournament," he continues. "It's such a surreal feeling. For the last four years, North Branch has been breaking barriers and creating a historic path. This year has been one for the ages."

Before that, North Branch was stuck in a position of being at the bottom of not just the conference and section, but one of the lowest-ranked teams in the

state. The team's 8-19 record in 2015-2016 was the school's second-best season record ever.

This year, while not quite equaling last year's 22-6 record, the team has eclipsed everyone's goals. Included in that was the team's first-ever win over STMA, and of course, last Thursday's 3-2 victory over Chisago Lakes that sent the team to their first-ever state tournament.

CLAIMING THE SECTION TITLE

As would be expected from two teams who split their two regular

season games and who consider each other their biggest rivals, the Section 5A finals on Thursday, Feb. 28, in Elk River was a tight game, both on the scoreboard and in the emotions of the players.

"I would say our boys were nervous in the first period, especially our goalie," Cottingham said.

After a brief feeling-out period for both teams, Chisago Lakes jumped on the scoreboard at the 4:40 mark to give the Wildcats a 1-0 lead. That lead would

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