

SPORTS

Section 5AA Boys Hockey Championship: Blaine 2, Maple Grove 1

Championship 'D' leads to the 'X'

Bengals shut down Maple Grove to advance to state



The Blaine boys hockey team celebrates with the Section 5AA championship trophy after defeating Maple Grove 2-1 in the finals at Aldrich Arena in Maplewood Feb. 28. With the win, the Bengals advance to the Class AA State Tournament March 7-9, which they will enter as the No. 2 seed. Photo by Patrick Slack

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It was a dream scenario.

Rolling into the section finals on a 16-game winning streak, looking to lock up a trip to state with a premier forward line and a lights-out defensive corps. All mixed with a chance to exact revenge on the team that knocked them out the previous three postseasons.

And, while the start didn't go exactly as planned – as Maple Grove sprinted ahead with a goal 17 seconds into the contest – the finish was all that mattered for Blaine in the Section 5AA Championship at Aldrich Arena in Maplewood Feb. 28: a game-tying goal by Mr. Hockey finalist Bryce Brodzinski in the second period and the game-winner by Carsen Richels on the power play in the third. A 2-1 victory. A trip to state secured.

"It's amazing," senior defenseman Nick Hauck said. "We've worked for this ever since we were kids. This is what we dreamed of. For it to come true is amazing, but we're not done yet."

To get past Maple Grove, the Bengals had to dig out of a 1-0 hole created in the game's opening sequence, as the Crimson quickly worked the puck behind the net and scored on a quick flip up and in.

The deficit was nothing new to Blaine, though, having rallied through five first-period deficits during its 19-2-2 regular season, including from 2-0 down against Maple Grove Jan. 19.

"We've been in those situations all year," Brodzinski said. "We were down 2-0 to them earlier in the year and we ended up winning 5-3, so it was just sticking to our base and just keeping going."

"Honestly, I feel like it happened so fast everyone was trying to figure out,

all right, what's going on? So that wasn't too bad," Blaine head coach Chris Carroll said. "Our kids responded. We knew it would be a long game and we just kind of had to weather that. I felt that we played pretty well after that, so that kind of helped us settle in a little bit."

Both sides had to fight to keep the other off the board the remainder of the first, as each team had a pair of power-play opportunities and a combined 34 shots. Blaine goalie Joey Daninger made a string of point-blank saves early on, as he and the Bengal defense locked down a potent Crimson attack the remainder of the night.

"He played awesome," Carroll said. "He was phenomenal. One of our assistant coaches was like, 'Oh my gosh, Joey D was unbelievable,' and I was like, 'He was.' I mean you don't win a section championship if you don't have a good goalie. He was our backbone."

After persistent pressure in the first period, Blaine was finally able to break through four minutes into the second. Richels found Cole Hansen speeding into the Maple Grove zone on a long pass. Hansen then slid a centering pass through the Crimson defense and onto the stick of Brodzinski. With no one between him and the goalie, the senior standout buried his 35th goal of the season.

The game remained tied 1-1 through the second, with the two fast-paced attacks pitted in a defensive battle. Something that suited the Bengals just fine.

"It's just fun," Brodzinski said. "You never want to play in a blowout, even though you want to get to state in any way. Just playing in a game like that, it keeps you going."

The energy intensified as the game

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