

SPORTS

Michigan sidelined by COVID protocols, UMD advances

By Matt Wellens

mwellens@duluthnews.com

FARGO, N.D. — Back in the NCAA tournament for the sixth consecutive season after the COVID-19 pandemic wiped out last year's edition, Minnesota Duluth will go after its fourth straight NCAA Frozen Four berth at 6:30 p.m. today at Scheels Arena in Fargo.

But the opportunity didn't come in the fashion the third-seeded Bulldogs expected. UMD advanced to its sixth-straight regional final after Friday's regional semifinal against No. 2 Michigan was declared a no contest around noon due to positive COVID-19 test results within the

Wolverines program.

Instead, the Bulldogs now await the winner of Friday's second regional semifinal in Fargo. Top-seeded and host North Dakota plays No. 4 and 16th overall seed American International in a game that was moved up an hour to 7:30 p.m.

"Certainly we're obviously disappointed to not play the game because we were looking forward to playing them," Bulldogs coach Scott Sandelin said. "We felt it was going to be a great game, but as I just told a couple people, the weird year continues. We'll just try and get to get ready for whoever we're going to play."

UMD and Michigan were scheduled to drop the puck at 3:02 p.m. on Friday in the first meeting between the two schools since the 2011 NCAA championship at Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul, which UMD won 3-2 in overtime.

The Wolverines were making their first NCAA tournament appearance since reaching the Frozen Four in St. Paul in 2018, when they lost 4-3 to Notre Dame in the semifinals. The Wolverines led 2-0 in that game before giving up the game-winning goal with 5.2 seconds left.

"I'm devastated for these players," Michigan coach Mel UMD: Page B2



Clint Austin / caustin@duluthnews.com

Scheels Arena in Fargo, N.D. Friday, March 26. Michigan had a positive COVID-19 test forcing them to forfeit the game, allowing Minnesota Duluth to advance to the regional championship game.



Jason Wachter / The Rink Live

Minnesota Duluth defenseman Wyatt Kaiser (5) takes the puck past St. Cloud State defenseman Nick Perbix (25) toward the goal in the second period March 6, at the Herb Brooks National Hockey Center in St. Cloud.

Fleck: 2021 Gophers 'dangerous'

By Andy Greder

St. Paul Pioneer Press

Big expectations followed the Gophers football team into the 2020 season. With a preseason ranking of 21, Minnesota quickly fell out of the Top 25 with a season-opening blowout loss to Michigan.

The U then lost two one-possession games in overtime (Maryland and Wisconsin) and won two one-score games in regulation (Purdue and Nebraska). In between, the U dismantled Illinois and got demolished by Iowa.

"You beat Wisconsin and you beat Maryland and you end 5-2, it's a different story. That didn't happen," Gophers head coach P.J. Fleck said Thursday. "We also could have lost to Purdue and next thing you know you are 2-5 and everybody is scratching their head."

The pandemic made everyone's head spin, and the Gophers' season was turned upside down by COVID-19, with two games called off and 33 players out when they returned in mid-December to beat the Cornhuskers. Fleck called it one of his most memorable games as a head coach. But the U finished 3-4 and opted out of playing in a bowl game.

Now with 20 of 22 starters returning and eight transfers joining the team, the 2021 Gophers will be the deepest and most experienced team Fleck has had since he took over in 2017.

"What they went through together (in 2020), what they've overcome together, how they've failed together, how they've succeeded together," Fleck said Thursday. "They've gone through it together and we have a lot of guys that have done it. And to me, that is a dangerous football team."

Fleck isn't the only bullish. College Football News has the Gophers as No. 19 in the country, behind Wisconsin (11th) and ahead of Iowa (20th) and Northwestern (25th). They said, "Don't sleep on a Gopher team that struggled last year."

The Gophers lost star receiver Rashod Bateman and

GOPHERS: Page B2

THE STATE OF COLLEGE HOCKEY

All 5 Minnesota teams head to the NCAA men's hockey tourney; Herb Brooks' dream has come true

By Jess Myers

The Rink Live

On the list of significant dates in Minnesota sports history, only the most ardent trivia buff could tell you why Oct. 3, 1987, is important. All but forgotten in that month, which saw the Minnesota Twins bring their first World Series title to the state, was an exhibition hockey game played in a historic high school rink on the Iron Range.

On that particular Saturday night in Eveleth, the powerful Minnesota

Gophers men's team, fresh off a trip to the Frozen Four and on their way to what would be two consecutive WCHA titles, took on an upstart bunch from St. Cloud State in the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame game. It was the first time the Huskies, in their first season as an NCAA Division I independent program, took the ice at college hockey's highest level.

By all accounts, it was a scrappy, penalty-filled game, won 6-0 by the Gophers. They wouldn't play each other again for more than three years, until the

Huskies became members of the WCHA themselves. But it was the start of a kind of Minnesota hockey growth that culminated last Sunday, during the 2021 NCAA Hockey Selection Show.

Everyone headed to the party

Today, the state of Minnesota has five D-I programs, and the ESPN hosts called the names of all five as members of the 16-team field that begins play this weekend, with trips to the Frozen Four on the line. It is far from the first NCAA tournament

NCAA TOURNAMENT

Minnesota Duluth's NCAA tournament game vs. Michigan took place after this printed edition of the News Tribune went to press. For a recap of that game, check out the sports section in the E-edition of this paper or duluthnewstribune.com.

trip for any of them, as four of the five have been to the Frozen Four in the last dozen years. But it is the first time that all five of them — Bemidji State, HOCKEY: Page B5

4 items on new Gophers coach Johnson's to-do list

By Andy Greder

St. Paul Pioneer Press

The role of head men's basketball coach at the University of Minnesota won't feel normal to Ben Johnson for a while at least.

First, there's the personal significance it holds to the former Gophers player and assistant coach. "When you talk about a dream job and a dream opportunity, this is it," Johnson said. "I've hit it."

Then there's the whirlwind of it all. Interviewed on Sunday, hired on Monday. He met

with players on the current team when the agreement was signed, and once his plane touched down Monday at dusk and cell service returned, he immediately started making recruiting calls.

Tuesday contained a long list of media obligations — news conferences, photo shoots and other interviews.

Wednesday, maybe, held a few more bits of normalcy, but those moments were likely fleeting with all the tasks Johnson has to do.

Here's a look at major items

on his to-do list:

Staff investments

Johnson's five-year contract calls for an annual salary starting at \$1.95 million, which is about \$500,000 less than predecessor Richard Pitino was set to make in 2020-21. In turn, that frees up more money for assistant coaches, Gophers Athletics Director Mark Coyle said.

Johnson said Tuesday he wants to potentially add an assistant with head coaching experience, who can help

guide him in his first season in charge.

Dave Thorson, Johnson's high school coach at DeLaSalle in Minneapolis, could be a target. Thorson has been an assistant to Niko Medved at Colorado State since 2018 and at Drake in the 2017-18 season.

When Johnson left Minnesota to become an assistant at Xavier in 2018, Thorson said to the Cincinnati Enquirer, "I told (Ben's) dad the year he was a senior in high school, I said, 'Someday, I'll prob-

ably work for Ben.' It wouldn't shock me at all if that happened."

Another assistant to keep a closer eye on is Pitino's former associate head coach Ed Conroy. He overlapped with Johnson on Pitino's bench for two seasons, and he's the uncle of current Gophers center Liam Robbins.

Ball handler

With junior Marcus Carr exploring the NBA Draft and freshman Jamal Masburn Jr. in

JOHNSON: Page B2

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SCOREBOARD

TODAY'S EVENTS

Baseball

MLB Spring Training
Tampa Bay at Twins, 12:05 p.m. (FS North and KDAL AM 610 & FM 103.9)
Brewers at Kansas City, 3:10 p.m.

COLLEGE
Northland at St. Scholastica, 1 p.m.
Wisconsin-Superior at St. John's, 1 p.m. (DH)
Minnesota Duluth at Winona State, 1:30 p.m. (DH)

Basketball

NBA
Houston at Minnesota, 7 p.m. (FS North and KDAL AM 610 & FM 103.9)
New York at Bucks, 7 p.m.

Hockey
COLLEGE MEN
NCAA Tournament
Michigan or Minnesota Duluth vs. North Dakota or American International, 6:30 p.m. (ESPNU and KDAL 103.9 FM/610 AM if UMD)

Softball

Augsburg at St. Scholastica, 1 p.m. (DH)
Wisconsin-River Falls at Wisconsin-Superior, 1 p.m. (DH)

Tennis

COLLEGE MEN
Martin Luther vs. St. Scholastica at Virginia, Minn., 1 p.m.

Track and Field

St. Scholastica at UW-Platteville Early Bird Meet

Volleyball

Concordia-St. Paul at Minnesota Duluth (exhibition), 2 p.m.
St. Scholastica at Crown, 3 p.m.
North Central at Wisconsin-Superior, 3 p.m.

BASEBALL

Professional MLB Preseason

American League
Thursday's Games
Oakland 6, Seattle 5
Minnesota 7, Boston 4
Detroit 3, Toronto 3
National League
Thursday's Games
Miami 7, Washington 3
LA Dodgers (May 1-0) at Chi. Cubs, 9:05 p.m.
Milwaukee (Anderson 1-1) at San Francisco (Sanchez 0-1), 10:05 p.m.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Men's NCAA Tournament Glance

Regional Semifinals
(all games at Indianapolis, Indiana)

Today's Games

South Region
1. Baylor vs. 5. Villanova, 4:15 p.m.
3. Arkansas vs. 15. Oral Roberts, 6:25 p.m.

BASKETBALL

Professional NBA Eastern Conference Atlantic

W	L	Pct	GB	
Philadelphia	31	13	.705	
Brooklyn	30	15	.667	1.5
New York	23	22	.511	8.5

Central

W	L	Pct	GB	
Milwaukee	29	14	.674	—
Indiana	20	23	.465	9.0
Chicago	19	24	.442	10.0
Cleveland	17	27	.386	12.5
Detroit	12	31	.279	17.0

Southeast

W	L	Pct	GB	
Charlotte	22	21	.512	—
Atlanta	22	22	.500	.5
Miami	22	23	.489	1.0
Washington	15	28	.349	7.0
Orlando	15	29	.341	7.5

Western Conference Northwest

W	L	Pct	GB	
Utah	32	11	.744	—
Denver	26	18	.591	6.5
Portland	26	18	.591	6.5
Oklahoma City	19	25	.432	13.5
Minnesota	10	34	.227	22.5

Pacific

W	L	Pct	GB	
Phoenix	29	14	.674	—
L.A. Clippers	30	16	.652	.5
L.A. Lakers	28	16	.636	1.5
Golden State	22	23	.489	8.0
Sacramento	20	25	.444	10.0

Southwest

W	L	Pct	GB	
Dallas	23	19	.548	—
San Antonio	22	20	.524	1.0
Memphis	21	20	.512	1.5
New Orleans	19	24	.442	4.5
Houston	12	31	.279	11.5

Central

Thursday's Games
Portland 125, Miami 122
New York 106, Washington 102
L.A. Lakers, San Antonio 85
Sacramento 141, Golden State 119
Philadelphia at L.A. Lakers, 9 p.m.

Friday's Games

Brooklyn at Detroit, 6 p.m.
Phoenix at Toronto, 6:30 p.m.
Boston at Milwaukee, 6:30 p.m.
Miami at Charlotte, 7 p.m.
Portland at Orlando, 7 p.m.
Houston at Minnesota, 7 p.m.
Denver at New Orleans, 7 p.m.
Indiana at Dallas, 7:30 p.m.
Memphis at Utah, 8 p.m.
Atlanta at Golden State, 9 p.m.
Cleveland at L.A. Lakers, 9:30 p.m.

Saturday's Games

Detroit at Washington, 7 p.m.
New York at Milwaukee, 7 p.m.
Houston at Minnesota, 7 p.m.
Chicago at San Antonio, 7:30 p.m.
Dallas at New Orleans, 8 p.m.
Boston at Oklahoma City, 8 p.m.
Memphis at Utah, 8 p.m.
Philadelphia at L.A. Clippers, 9 p.m.
Cleveland at Sacramento, 9 p.m.

Sunday's Games

Phoenix at Charlotte, 12 p.m.
Portland at Toronto, 6 p.m.
Atlanta at Denver, 8 p.m.
Orlando at L.A. Lakers, 9 p.m.

North Division

GP	W	LOTSO	Pts	GFGA
Toronto	33	21	10	2 0 44110 85
Winnipeg	33	20	11	1 1 42109 92
Edmonton	34	21	13	0 0 42116 97
Montreal	31	14	8	6 3 37100 87
Vancouver	37	16	18	2 1 35100120
Calgary	34	15	16	2 1 33 89102
Ottawa	36	12	20	3 1 28 94135

West Division

GP	W	LOTSO	Pts	GFGA
Vegas	30	22	7	0 1 45100 67
Colorado	31	20	8	2 1 43106 71
Minnesota	32	21	10	1 0 43 94 78
St. Louis	33	16	12	3 2 37 97106
Arizona	33	14	14	3 2 33 83101
Los Angeles	32	13	13	5 1 32 91 90
San Jose	31	13	14	2 2 30 89106
Anaheim	34	9	19	4 2 24 74115

Tuesday's Games

New Jersey 4, Philadelphia 3
Chicago 3, Florida 2
Nashville 2, Detroit 0
Tampa Bay 2, Dallas 1
Arizona 5, Colorado 4, SO
NY Islanders at Boston, PPD

Wednesday's Games

Ottawa 3, Calgary 1
Minnesota 3, Anaheim 2
Pittsburgh 5, Buffalo 2
Winnipeg 5, Vancouver 1
San Jose 4, Los Angeles 2
Edmonton at Montreal, PPD

Thursday's Games

NY Islanders 4, Boston 3, OT
NY Rangers 8, Philadelphia 3
Washington 4, New Jersey 3
Carolina 4, Columbus 3, OT
Toronto 3, Ottawa 2, OT
Pittsburgh 4, Buffalo 0
Chicago 3, Florida 0
Nashville 7, Detroit 1
Minnesota 2, St. Louis 0
Tampa Bay at Dallas, 7:30 p.m.
Vegas at Colorado, 8 p.m.

Friday's Games

New Jersey at Washington, 6 p.m.
Edmonton at Montreal, PPD
Anaheim at St. Louis, 7 p.m.
Winnipeg at Calgary, 9 p.m.
San Jose at Arizona, 9 p.m.

COLLEGE MEN

NCAA TOURNAMENT MIDWEST REGIONAL Fargo, North Dakota Friday's Semifinals
Minnesota Duluth d. Michigan, walkover due to COVID-19 protocols
No. 1 North Dakota vs. No. 4 American International, 8:30 p.m. (ESPNU)

Saturday's Championship

UMD vs. North Dakota or American International, 6:30 p.m. (ESPNU)

EAST REGIONAL Bridgeport, Connecticut Friday's Semifinals

No. 1 Wisconsin vs. No. 4 Bemidji State, noon (ESPN2)
No. 2 Massachusetts vs. No. 3 Lake Superior State, 5:30 p.m. (ESPNU)

Saturday's Championship

Semifinal winners, 4 p.m. (ESPNU)

WEST REGIONAL Loveland, Colorado Saturday's Semifinals

No. 2 Minnesota State-Mankato vs. No. 3 Quinnipiac, 4 p.m. (ESPN3)
No. 1 Minnesota vs. No. 4 Nebraska-Omaha, 9 p.m. (ESPN2)

Sunday's Championship

Semifinal winners, 7 p.m. (ESPN2)

NORTHEAST REGIONAL Albany, New York Saturday's Semifinals

No. 1 Boston College d. No. 4 Notre Dame, walkover due to COVID-19 protocols
No. 2 St. Cloud State vs. No. 3 Boston University, 5:30 p.m. (ESPNews)

Sunday's Championship

Boston College vs. SCSU/BU winner, 4:30 p.m. (ESPN2)

HOCKEY

Professional NHL

Central Division
GP W L OTSO Pts GFGA
Tampa Bay 32 24 6 1 1 50117 74
Carolina 32 22 7 2 1 47108 81
Florida 33 20 9 2 2 44107 94
Chicago 34 16 13 3 2 37101108
Columbus 34 13 13 5 3 34 89110
Nashville 34 16 17 1 0 33 86104
Dallas 29 10 11 3 5 28 81 77
Detroit 34 10 20 4 0 24 72113

East Division

GP W L OTSO Pts GFGA
NY Islanders34 22 8 3 1 48102 76
Washington 32 21 7 2 2 46110 95
Pittsburgh 34 21 11 2 0 44109 90
Boston 29 16 8 3 2 37 80 70
NY Rangers32 15 13 3 1 34102 85
Philadelphia32 15 13 2 2 34100119
New Jersey 31 12 15 1 3 28 78 97
Buffalo 32 6 22 2 2 16 66115

West Region

1. Gonzaga vs. 5. Creighton, 1:10 p.m.
6. USC vs. 7. Oregon, 8:45 p.m.

Women's NCAA Tournament Glance

(all games at San Antonio, Texas)

Tuesday's Games
Second Round
(all games at San Antonio, Texas unless otherwise noted)

Mercado Region

1. North Carolina State 79, 8. South Florida 67

Riverwalk Region

5. Iowa 86, 4. Kentucky 72
6. Michigan 70, 3. Tennessee 55
2. Baylor 90, 7. Virginia Tech 48
1. Connecticut 83, 8. Syracuse 47

HemisFair Region

5. Georgia Tech 73, 4. West Virginia 56
1. South Carolina 59, 8. Oregon State 42

Alamo Region

1. Stanford 73, 8. Oklahoma State 62

Wednesday's Games

Second Round
Mercado Region
4. Indiana 70, 12. Belmont 48
3. Arizona 52, 11. BYU 46
2. Texas A&M 84, 7. Iowa State 82 (OT)

HemisFair Region

2. Maryland 100, 7. Alabama 64
3. Texas 71, 6. UCLA 62

Alamo Region

6. Oregon 57, 3. Georgia 50
5. Missouri State 64, 13. Wright State 39
2. Louisville 62, 7. Northwestern, 53

Saturday, March 27 Regional Semifinals

RiverWalk Region
1. Connecticut vs. 5. Iowa, noon
2. Baylor vs. 6. Michigan, 2 p.m.

Mercado Region

1. North Carolina State vs. 4. Indiana, 5 p.m.
2. Texas A&M vs. 3. Arizona, 7 p.m.

Sunday, March 28 Regional Semifinals

HemisFair Region
1. South Carolina vs. 5. Georgia Tech, noon
2. Maryland vs. 6. Texas, 8 p.m.

Mercado Region

1. Stanford vs. 5. Missouri State, 2 p.m.
2. Louisville vs. 6. Oregon, 6 p.m.

SPORTS SIDELINES

300 Game
Who: Ron LaLiberte

When: March 10

Where: Village Lanes

Average: 210

Team: Country Squires

UMD

From Page B1

Pearson said in a statement Friday. "These student-athletes have done a wonderful job all year of making sacrifices to get to this point of the year. It's unfortunate. I don't completely understand the final decision but I have to respect it."

"They've given so much and to get this opportunity taken away from them, it's hard to swallow. I know it's just a game, but it's extremely important to these young men. It's two years in a row now we've been denied an opportunity to compete in the national championship. It hasn't quite sunk in yet."

Michigan is the third team forced to withdraw from the NCAA men's hockey tournament this year and the second to do so after reaching their regional.

St. Lawrence originally disqualified itself from consideration late Sunday after the Saints' coach tested positive for COVID-19 after they had won the ECAC postseason championship. Contact tracing and quarantining resulting from the positive test made their appearance not possible.

Notre Dame, which snuck into the tournament as an at-large after St. Lawrence withdrew, dropped out of the Albany regional on Thursday after arriving Wednesday for initial testing and quarantining prior to its first game against Boston College. That regional semifinal was also declared a no-contest and the Eagles were advanced to the regional final, where they will play either Boston University or St. Cloud State on Sunday.

The entire 2020 NCAA tournament, for which UMD would have qualified for as it was in contention for a No. 1 seed, was canceled due to COVID-19.

The NCAA only allowed replacement teams to be added to the tournament within 24 hours of the bracket being released on Sunday night, hence why the games featuring Michigan and Notre Dame — both Big 10 schools — were declared no contests.

"The NCAA and the Division I Men's Ice Hockey Committee regret that, because of COVID-19 protocols, Michigan's student-athletes and coaching staff will not be able to compete in a tournament in which they earned the right to participate," the NCAA said in a statement sent out around noon Friday. "The Michigan-Minnesota Duluth game scheduled for this afternoon at Scheels Arena in Fargo, North Dakota, will now be considered a no-contest, and therefore, Minnesota Duluth will advance to the next round of the tournament. This decision was made in consultation with Fargo Cass Public Health. Because of privacy issues, we cannot provide further details."

The Bulldogs are still the defending back-to-back NCAA champions after appearing in the last three Frozen Fours and the last three NCAA title games, winning the last two in St. Paul and Buffalo, New York.

UMD has won eight straight at the NCAA tournament and 11 of its last 12 national tournament games, including three straight regionals in Fargo (2017), Sioux Falls, South Dakota (2018), and Allentown, Pennsylvania (2019).

The entire 2020 NCAA tournament, for which UMD would have qualified for as it was in contention for a No. 1 seed, was canceled due to COVID-19.



Jesse Johnson / USA TODAY Sports

Minnesota Golden Gophers head coach P.J. Fleck waits on the center of the field for Purdue Boilermakers head coach Jeff Brohm (not pictured) to meet him for a hand shake after a 2018 game at TCF Bank Stadium in Minneapolis.

JOHNSON

From Page B1

the transfer portal, Johnson's primary player-personnel need is at point guard.

Johnson said he hopes no player transfers out, so maybe there is a shot Johnson can get Mashburn to remain. Carr is a longer shot with him exploring the transfer portal as well.

But if those guys do leave, Johnson will need an instant talent infusion at a key position. Mining the transfer portal will be the best way to immediately fill the need.

Forward transfers

A familiar name entered the portal on Wednesday when

Indiana forward Race Thompson opted to explore other options. The 6-foot-8 forward averaged 9.1 points and 6.2 rebounds in 27 games for the Hoosiers this season. The son of legendary Gophers running back Darrell Thompson is from Plymouth and played high school ball at Armstrong.

Thompson is the third Hoosier to enter the portal since the firing of coach Archie Miller, and could be an option for Johnson.

Johnson, who transferred to the Gophers after two years at Northwestern, will take a look at other Minnesotans looking for a fresh start. Here could be two: Mahtomedi native Parker Fox, a 6-foot-8 Division II All-Amer-

ican from Northern State (S.D.), and DeLaSalle's Jamison Battle, a 6-foot-7 forward who is in the portal after two years at George Washington.

Tre Holloman

Gophers football coach P.J. Fleck stepped off to the side before Tuesday's news conference to chat with Johnson. The topic of conversation was likely recruiting, but recruiting talk is never far from their minds.

One recruiting target they're both pursuing is Cretin-Derham Hall guard/cornerback Tre Holloman. It will be interesting to see how the two coaches approach the best two-sport prospect in the state of Minnesota in the 2022 class.

GOPHERS

From Page B1

a top cornerback in Benjamin St-Juste — two players expected to be higher picks in next month's NFL draft. The U also had wildcat quarterback/receiver Seth Green and a top 2020 recruit, linebacker Itay-vision Brown, enter the transfer portal in the offseason. (Green has yet to make a decision on his next stop, while Brown announced Tuesday he is going to Michigan State.)

Beyond that, Minnesota has every key contributor back, including a handful of returnees along both lines. On the offensive side: tackle Sam Schlueter, guard/center Conner Olson and

tight ends Bryce Witham and Ko Kieft, with new transfer in Karter Shaw (Utah State). On defense, it's tackles Micah Dew-Treadway and Keonte Schad, with new transfer in Nyles Pinckney (Clemson) and Val Martin (North Carolina State).

Also, Big Ten running back of the year Mo Ibrahim and cornerback Coney Durr, all-Big Ten in 2020, are back after declining to enter the draft.

The NCAA decision to waive eligibility for the 2020 season will create deeper teams in the Big Ten and everywhere, but Minnesota appears to have even more than others.

Typical spring practices have roughly 60 to 70 scholarships players

due to seniors exiting and transfers moving on, but this year the Gophers have roughly 95 scholarship players on campus right now. Approximately 10 more freshmen will join this summer.

The Gophers planned to kick off spring practice with two shorter and lighter practices on Thursday and Friday, with the official start date Monday. Given the abundance of players, Fleck said they will be able to go three deep in team portions of practice.

PREP REPORT

Hermantown awarded No. 1 seed

News Tribune
Hermantown earned the No. 1 seed for the Class A boys hockey state tournament Friday and will play unseeded Dodge County in a quarterfinal at 6 p.m. Tuesday at Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul.

emy in the final Let's Play Hockey poll, but the 17-time state tournament entrants and three-time state champions earned the top spot ahead of the tournament debutants.

Hermantown captured its 11th Section 7A title in the past 12 years with a 7-1 win over Duluth

Denfeld — its 12th consecutive victory over the Hunters — in Thursday's title game.

Dodge County is also making its first appearance at state after winning the Section 1A crown, 4-3 over Mankato West on Wednesday.

The winner of the Hermantown-Dodge County

game will play the winner of the game between No. 4 Little Falls and No. 5 Delano on Friday, April 2. The championship game is set for 6 p.m. April 3.

Due to changes relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, there are no consolation games this year.

PREP BOYS BASKETBALL

Saldivar, East shoot down Coon Rapids in 7AAAA final

By Jon Nowacki
jnowacki@duluthnews.com

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story originally appeared in Friday's News Tribune E-edition.

Duluth East senior guard Giovanni Saldivar passed up his first open look Thursday in the Section 7AAAA boys basketball championship against Coon Rapids, and Greyhounds coach Rhett McDonald would have none of that.

"You're only in to shoot the ball," McDonald said.

Saldivar took the message to heart, draining seven 3-pointers and scoring 24 points as Duluth East started fast and rolled to a 74-60 victory over the Cardinals as the Greyhounds earned their first trip to the state tournament since 2012.

It doesn't take a scouting report to quickly see Saldivar likes the corners.

"Yes I do," he said with a smile. "It's much closer to the hoop, and my guys will find me right there. If the defense collapses, they'll find me right in the corner for an easy shot."

Saldivar was treating corner 3s like bunnies. "Ever since last year I really improved my shooting to where they became like layups," Saldivar said. "Coach said it's just about repetition and building up confidence."

Saldivar appears plenty confident at the best time of the year. East (16-3) will find out Saturday who and when it plays in the

Class AAAA state quarterfinals.

Noah Paulson (16 points), Mattie Thompson (12), Michael Kastelic (11) and hockey-player-turned hooper Joe Vos (9) all scored at least nine points apiece to lead Duluth East.

And for an East team that already features two Minnesota Duluth recruits in the 6-foot-8 Paulson — more your traditional banger inside — and the 6-foot-7 Thompson — more your slasher type — the Greyhounds can be awfully tough when they are sinking shots from outside, spreading the floor even more.

Now all Saldivar has to do is shoot. "We said we absolutely needed him to be aggressive shooting the basketball," said McDonald, himself a former UMD sharpshooter. "He was confident and when the first couple went down it only spurred more."

"I don't care how many he shoots. This is the same message he's heard throughout his high school career. I don't care how many shots he misses — he can miss a million — but he's got to shoot the next one (when he's got a good look). He's that type of volume guy. If you give him 12 shots, he's going to hit six. I'm a big believer that the percentages always work out."

Coon Rapids 19-41-60
Duluth East 36-38-74
Coon Rapids — Armani Henry 8, M.J. Gallimah 20, Jordan Doe 6, Matthew Ellingson 14, Elijah Smith 6, Alex Beck 6. Totals 21-57 13-23 60.

3-point goals — Gallimah 2, Ellingson 2, Smith.
Duluth East — Zaa Buffalo 2, Giovanni Saldivar 24, Joe Vos 9, Michael Kastelic 11, Mattie Thompson 12, Noah Paulson 16. Totals 25-42 15-25 74.

3-point goals — Saldivar 7, Kastelic 2.

PREP PLAYOFF SCHEDULE

BOYS BASKETBALL

MINNESOTA SECTION 7AAAA Thursday's Result Championship
Duluth East 74, Coon Rapids 60

SECTION 7AAA Thursday's Result Championship
Hibbing 80, Princeton 59

SECTION 7AA Wednesday's Result Semifinals
Upsala 66, Barnum 56

SECTION 7A Wednesday's Results Semifinals
Deer River 89, North Woods 83
Nashauk-Keewatin 60, Northland 51

Friday's Result Championship
Deer River (19-2) at Nashauk-Keewatin (18-2), night

GIRLS BASKETBALL

MINNESOTA SECTION 7AAA Thursday's Result Championship
Grand Rapids 58, Chisago Lakes 48

SECTION 7AA Wednesday's Results Semifinals
Duluth Marshall 92, Pequot Lakes 75
Esko 63, Crosby-Ironton 60, OT

BOYS BASKETBALL

Thursday's Results Section 7AAAA Championship
Coon Rapids 19-41-60
Duluth East 36-38-74

SECTION 7AAA Championship
Hibbing 36-44-80
Princeton 30-29-59

SECTION 7AA Championship
Hibbing 36-44-80
Princeton 30-29-59

SECTION 7A Championship
Moose Lake-WR 25-32-57
Pequot Lakes 18-33-51

SECTION 7A Semifinals
Northland 20-31-51
Nashauk-Keewatin 28-32-60

SECTION 7AA Semifinals
Cloquet 29-21-50
Hibbing 33-36-69

SECTION 7AAA Semifinals
Cloquet — Adam Schneider 15, Connor Barney 15, Alec Turnbull 5, Nathan Blatchford 2, Dylan Heehn 7, Caleb Hansen 6. Totals 18 10-13 50.

SECTION 7AA Semifinals
Hibbing — Hayden Verhel 4, Mayson Brown 12, Jack Grzybowski 10, Tre Holmes 2, Parker Maki 8, Amari Manning 2, Eli Erickson 4, Ayden McDonald 27. Totals 22 21-22 69.

SECTION 7A Semifinals
Cromwell-Wright 19-19-38
Mtn. Iron-Buhl 39-32-71

Friday's Result Championship
Duluth Marshall (17-2) at Esko (16-3), night

SECTION 7A Thursday's Result Championship
Mountain Iron-Buhl 60, Cherry 28

SECTION 7A Thursday's Result Championship
Hermantown 7, Duluth Denfeld 1

STATE TOURNAMENT At Xcel Energy Center, St. Paul CLASS AA Wednesday's Quarterfinals
Wayzata (13-5-2) vs. No. 2 Hill-Murray (18-2), 11 a.m.

Friday, April 2 Semifinals
Upper-bracket winners, 6 p.m. Lower-bracket winners, 8:30 p.m.

Saturday, April 3 Championship
Semifinal winners, 8:30 p.m.

CLASS A Tuesday's Quarterfinals
Northern Lakes (18-3) vs. No. 2 Gentry Academy (16-0), 11 a.m.

Friday, April 2 Semifinals
Upper-bracket winners, 6 p.m. Lower-bracket winners, 8:30 p.m.

Saturday, April 3 Championship
Semifinal winners, 8:30 p.m.

CLASS A Tuesday's Quarterfinals
Northern Lakes (18-3) vs. No. 2 Gentry Academy (16-0), 11 a.m.

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Upper-bracket winners, 6 p.m. Lower-bracket winners, 8:30 p.m.

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Upper-bracket winners, 6 p.m. Lower-bracket winners, 8:30 p.m.

Saturday, April 3 Championship
Semifinal winners, 8:30 p.m.

CLASS A Tuesday's Quarterfinals
Northern Lakes (18-3) vs. No. 2 Gentry Academy (16-0), 11 a.m.

Friday, April 2 Semifinals
Upper-bracket winners, 6 p.m. Lower-bracket winners, 8:30 p.m.

No. 3 East Grand Forks (13-8), 1:30 p.m.
Dodge County (17-3-1) vs. No. 1 Hermantown (19-1), 6 p.m.

Friday, April 2 Semifinals
Upper-bracket winners, 11 a.m. Lower-bracket winners, 1:30 p.m.

Saturday, April 3 Championship
Semifinal winners, 6 p.m.

MINNESOTA STATE TOURNAMENT At Xcel Energy Center, St. Paul CLASS AA Today's Quarterfinals

Edina 1, Centennial 0, forfeit
Alexandria Area (14-4-2) vs. No. 3 Minnetonka (15-3-3), 1 p.m.

Thursday, April 1 Semifinals
Minnetonka/Alexandria Area winner vs. Edina (20-0), 6 p.m.

Saturday, April 3 Championship
Semifinal winners, 1 p.m.

CLASS A Friday's Results Quarterfinals
Rochester Lourdes (9-8) vs. No. 2 Warroad (19-1)

Friday, April 2 Semifinals
Upper-bracket winners, 6 p.m. Lower-bracket winners, 8:30 p.m.

Saturday, April 3 Championship
Semifinal winners, 8:30 p.m.

CLASS A Tuesday's Quarterfinals
Northern Lakes (18-3) vs. No. 2 Gentry Academy (16-0), 11 a.m.

Friday, April 2 Semifinals
Upper-bracket winners, 6 p.m. Lower-bracket winners, 8:30 p.m.

Saturday, April 3 Championship
Semifinal winners, 8:30 p.m.

CLASS A Tuesday's Quarterfinals
Northern Lakes (18-3) vs. No. 2 Gentry Academy (16-0), 11 a.m.

Friday, April 2 Semifinals
Upper-bracket winners, 6 p.m. Lower-bracket winners, 8:30 p.m.

Saturday, April 3 Championship
Semifinal winners, 8:30 p.m.

CLASS A Tuesday's Quarterfinals
Northern Lakes (18-3) vs. No. 2 Gentry Academy (16-0), 11 a.m.

No. 5 Mound Westonka Area (14-2) vs. No. 4 Chisago Lakes (18-2)

Thursday, April 1 Semifinals
Proctor-Hermantown/Luverne winner vs. Warroad/Rochester Lourdes winner, 11 a.m.

Friday, April 2 Semifinals
Chisago Lakes/Mound Westonka Area winner vs. Gentry Academy/River Lakes winner, 1 p.m.

Saturday, April 3 Championship
Semifinal winners, 11 a.m.

STATE TOURNAMENT CLASS AAA At St. Michael-Albertville H.S. Thursday's Results Semifinals

Shakopee 34, Anoka 25
St. Michael-Albertville 31, Stillwater Area 27

Friday, April 2 Semifinals
Upper-bracket winners, 6 p.m. Lower-bracket winners, 8:30 p.m.

Saturday, April 3 Championship
Semifinal winners, 8:30 p.m.

CLASS A Tuesday's Quarterfinals
Northern Lakes (18-3) vs. No. 2 Gentry Academy (16-0), 11 a.m.

Friday, April 2 Semifinals
Upper-bracket winners, 6 p.m. Lower-bracket winners, 8:30 p.m.

Saturday, April 3 Championship
Semifinal winners, 8:30 p.m.

CLASS A Tuesday's Quarterfinals
Northern Lakes (18-3) vs. No. 2 Gentry Academy (16-0), 11 a.m.

Friday, April 2 Semifinals
Upper-bracket winners, 6 p.m. Lower-bracket winners, 8:30 p.m.

Saturday, April 3 Championship
Semifinal winners, 8:30 p.m.

CLASS A Tuesday's Quarterfinals
Northern Lakes (18-3) vs. No. 2 Gentry Academy (16-0), 11 a.m.

Friday, April 2 Semifinals
Upper-bracket winners, 6 p.m. Lower-bracket winners, 8:30 p.m.

Saturday, April 3 Championship
Semifinal winners, 8:30 p.m.

PREP SUMMARIES

Esko — Eli Blue 9, Cale Haugen 3, Cade Berger 3, Cuinn Berger 13, Riley Fischer 16, Braedyn Male 3, Nick Swanson 1, Chad Hurt 6. Totals 21 5-9.

Pequot Lakes — Bode Magnuson 6, Nic Kotaska 4, Alex Morgan 12, Ryan Monahan 2, Evin Ruud 2, Simon Wufflestad 15, Eli Laposky 11, Sam Rysavy 22. Totals 28 9-11 74.

Moose Lake-WR 43-44-87
Duluth Marshall 28-45-73
Moose Lake-Willow River — Logan Orvedahl 16, Phillip Sheetz 9, Sam Dewey 4, Brady Watrin 7, Landin Kurhajetz 8, Mason Olson 30, Carter Johnson 13. Totals 32 12-13 87.

3-point goals — Orvedahl 4, Sheetz 3, Olson 2, Johnson 2.
Duluth Marshall — Jasper Timm 26, Ben Bergeron 2, Mason Boos 15, Brooks Johnson 10, Alex Olson 2, Oscar Timm 18. Totals 30 2-3 73.

3-point goals — J. Timm 5, Boos 3, Johnson 2, O. Timm.
All-Lake Superior Conference First Team
Adam Schneider, sr., Cloquet; Jasper Timm, jr., Duluth Marshall; Kaden Kimmes, sr., Superior; Austin Hanson, jr., Grand Rapids; Oscar Timm, sr., Duluth Marshall.

Second Team
Blake Schmitz, soph., Hermantown; Conner Barney, jr., Cloquet; Ryan Zastrow, sr., Hermantown; Lars Olson, sr., Superior; Alec Turnbull, jr., Cloquet.

nich 10, Kyra Granholm 3. Totals 17 1-1 38.
3-point goals — Libbon, Pocernich, Granholm.
Mountain Iron-Buhl — Jacie Kvas 5, Hali Savela 6, Jordan Zubich 26, Sage Ganyo 15, Ava Butler 10, Lauren Maki 6, Mya Gallus 3. Totals 24 15-18 71.

3-point goals — Zubich 3, Ganyo 2, Butler 2, Gallus.
All-Lake Superior Conference First Team
Gianna Kneepkens, sr., Duluth Marshall; Ely Schmitz, sr., Hermantown; Taryn Hamling, soph., Grand Rapids; Madelynn Young, jr., Cloquet; Savannah Leopold, soph., Superior.

Second Team
Payton Rodberg, jr., Proctor; Hallie Evans, sr., Proctor; Jessika Lofstrom, fr., Grand Rapids; Emma Raye, soph., Superior; Alexa Snesrud, soph., Cloquet.

All-Iron Range Conference
Lexiss Trygg, sr., Virginia; Rian Aune, jr., Virginia; Anna Fink, jr., Virginia; Aaliyah Sahr, sr., Mesabi East; Kora Forsline, sr., Mesabi East; Hannah Hannuksela, sr., Mesabi East; Haley Hawkinson, sr., Hibbing; Fanci Williams, sr., Hibbing; Elli Jankila, sr., Eveleth-Gilbert; Morgan Marks, soph., Eveleth-Gilbert; Morgan Sullivan, sr., International Falls; Jadin Saville, jr., Greenway; Jordan Temple, jr., Chisholm; Grace Bergland, jr., Deer River.

McClure, Davidson), 15:00.
Saves — Brayden Boyer, HC, 14; Evan Radovich, HC, 24; Jacob Snyder, DD, 21.
Virginia/MIB 0-0-0-0
Hermantown 3-2-3-8

First period — 1. Gavin Blomdahl (Wyatt Carlson), 11:35; 2. Carlson (Beau Janzig), 13:10; 3. Aydyn Dowd, 14:01. Second period — 4. Ty Hanson (Dowd, Ethan Lund), 7:43 (pp); 5. Joey Pierce (Dowd, Lund), 8:45.

Third period — 6. Carter Rother (Aaron Pionk, George Peterson), 6:05; 7. Pionk (Dowd, Cole Antcliff), 9:30; 8. Matt Kauppinen (Rother, Dominic Thomas), 10:44.
Saves — Ian Kangas, VMIB, 48; Garron Opsahl, VMIB, 13.

All-Iron Range Conference
Joe Allison, sr., Hibbing-Chisholm; Erick Sanborn, sr., Hibbing-Chisholm; Ethan Lund, sr., Hibbing-Chisholm; Connor Willard, Hibbing-Chisholm; Ryan Scherf, sr., Virginia/Mountain Iron-Buhl; Braden Tiedeman, jr., Virginia/Mountain Iron-Buhl; Ian Kangs, jr., Virginia/Mountain Iron-Buhl; Nick Troutwine, jr., Eveleth-Gilbert; Andrew Torrel, sr., Eveleth-Gilbert; Brandon Lind, sr., Eveleth-Gilbert; Nathan Jurgensen, jr., Greenway; Aidan Rajala, jr., Greenway; Mitchell Nemeck, sr., International Falls; Brady Wicklund, sr., International Falls; Ryder McMillen, sr., North Shore.

Thursday's Result Section 7A Championship
Duluth Denfeld 1-0-0-1
Hermantown 2-2-3-7

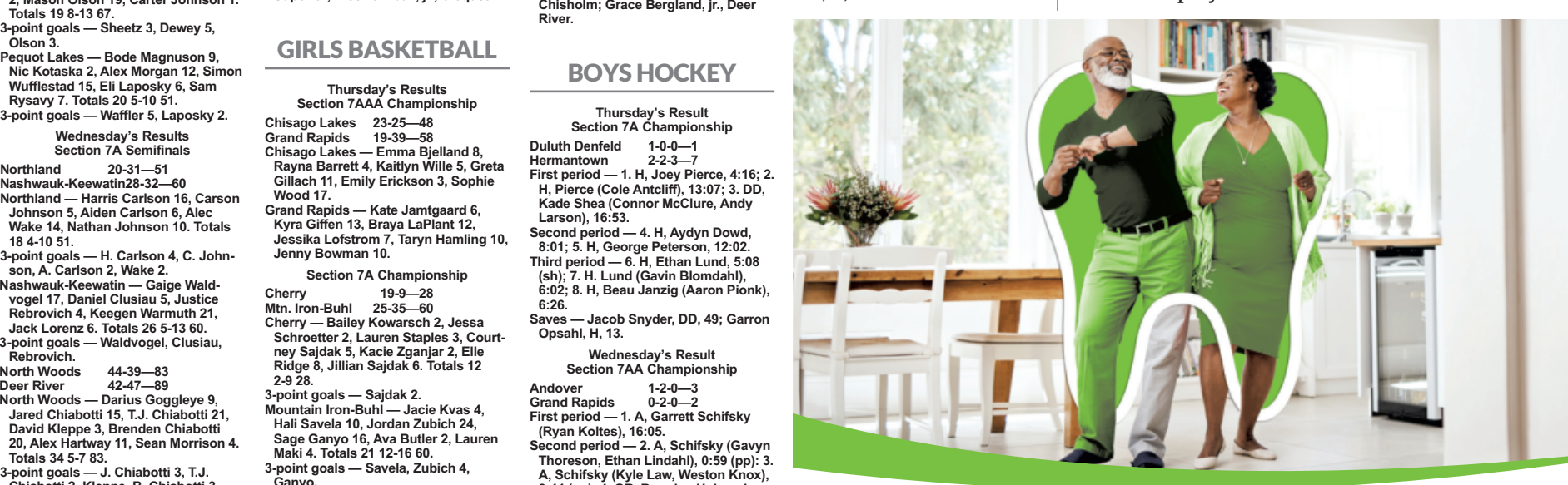
First period — 1. H. Joey Pierce, 4:16; 2. H. Pierce (Cole Antcliff), 13:07; 3. DD, Kade Shea (Connor McClure, Andy Larson), 16:53.
Second period — 4. H. Aydyn Dowd, 8:01; 5. H. George Peterson, 12:02.
Third period — 6. H. Ethan Lund, 5:08 (sh); 7. H. Lund (Gavin Blomdahl), 6:02; 8. H. Beau Janzig (Aaron Pionk), 6:26.

Saves — Jacob Snyder, DD, 49; Garron Opsahl, H, 13.
Wednesday's Result Section 7AA Championship
Andover 1-2-0-3
Grand Rapids 0-2-0-2

First period — 1. A. Garrett Schifsky (Ryan Koltes), 16:05.
Second period — 2. A. Schifsky (Gavyn Thoreson, Ethan Lindahl), 0:59 (pp); 3. A. Schifsky (Kyle Law, Weston Knox), 8:44 (pp); 4. GR, Braeden Holcomb (Joey DelGreco, Jack Peart), 10:52 (pp); 5. GR, Hayden DeMars (Hunter Bischoff, Holcomb), 15:34.

Third period — No scoring.
Saves — Will Larson, A, 33; Wyatt Pilkenton, GR, 13.
Tuesday's Results Section 7A Semifinals
Hibbing-Chisholm 1-0-0-1
Duluth Denfeld 1-2-3-6

First period — 1. HC, Beau Frider (Ethan Lund), 1:54 (pp); 2. DD, Simon Davidson (Kade Shea, Nate Burke), 8:14.
Second period — 3. DD, Andy Larson (John Bloomquist), 3:05; 4. DD, Andy Larson (Sam Kartch, Kaden Postal), 9:37.
Third period — 5. DD, Shea (Davidson), 0:24; 6. DD, Davidson (Burke, Shea), 6:07; 7. DD, Connor McClure (Cooper



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PREP BOYS HOCKEY / HERMANTOWN 7, DULUTH DENFELD 1

Pierce, Hawks boot Hunters in 7A final

Mr. Hockey candidate scores twice after returning from foot injury

By Rick Weegman
rweegman@duluthnews.com

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story originally appeared in the News Tribune's Friday E-edition.

The last time Hermantown played Duluth Denfeld's boys hockey team, star defenseman Joey Pierce was on crutches with his left foot in a walking boot.

A high ankle sprain caused Pierce to miss several games and, at least for a moment, raised doubt about his ability to achieve what he had set out to do the moment the Hawks lost in overtime of the 2020 Class A state final: win a championship.

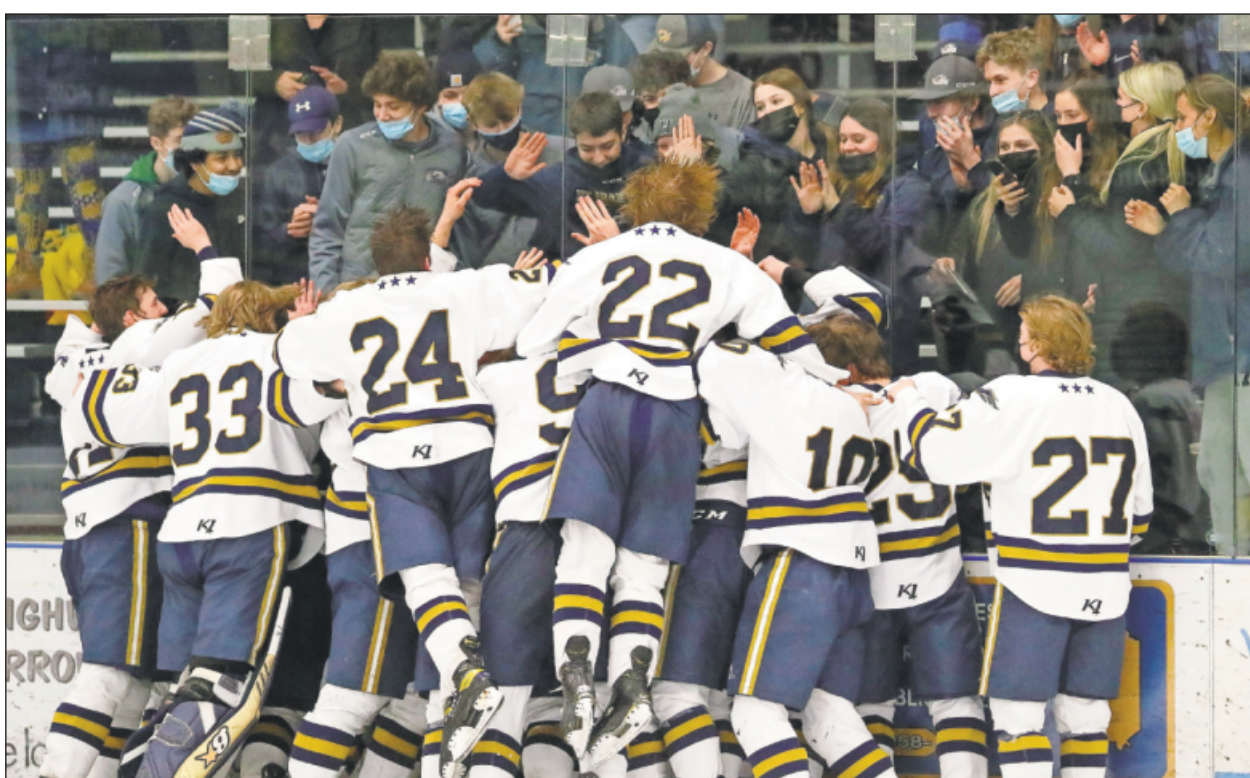
But Pierce recovered in time and scored the first two goals Thursday night to lead Hermantown to a 7-1 victory over Duluth Denfeld in the Section 7A title game at Hermantown Ice Arena.

"It was a slow recovery and frustrating not to be out there, but it definitely feels good to be back," Pierce said. "I always was fairly certain that I would be back by this time and be able to help us here."

The second-ranked Hawks (19-1) advance to the Class A state quarterfinals Tuesday at Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul against an opponent to be determined.

Pierce, a senior captain and Mr. Hockey finalist, struck 4:16 into the game when he took the puck off a faceoff and fired it in from the right circle.

Less than nine minutes later, Pierce picked out the upper right corner of the net for a 2-0



Steve Kuchera / skuchera@duluthnews.com
Above: The Hermantown Hawks celebrate with fans after winning the Section 7A championship 7-1 over Denfeld on Thursday, March 25. **Right:** Hermantown's Joey Pierce brings the puck up the ice during the Section 7A championship game on Thursday, March 25. Pierce scored the Hawks' first two goals as Hermantown beat Denfeld 7-1.

advantage.

"You could sure tell that's why he came back," Hawks coach Patrick Andrews said of Pierce's goal of winning a state title. "He was not going to lose tonight. From the drop of the puck, he got us going and calmed us down. Two goals and then everyone could breathe. That was 100% Joe. Joey Pierce was not going to lose tonight. Period. That's why he came back because he's on a mission to win the whole thing. It's pretty cool to take the next step to earn

that goal."

The second-seeded Hunters (10-6-1) scored in the final seconds of the first period when Kade Shea knocked in the puck from out front. But, with a 56-16 edge in shots on goal, the Hawks controlled play throughout.

"A quick start like that was huge; we needed that," Pierce said. "We played well the whole game. It was 2-1 after the first, a little closer than we wanted it to be, but we didn't panic and just kept going. We never doubted ourselves



tonight, and that mindset helps." Aydyn Dowd and

George Peterson scored unassisted goals in the second period and Ethan

Lund scored twice within a minute in the third period to secure the Hawks' 11th section title in 12 years.

But it was Pierce's play that started the ball, or puck, rolling.

"Joey carried us in that first period," Lund said. "He's one of our best players, obviously, and a great leader so it was great to have him back. He was huge throughout the whole game."

Goaltender Garron Opsahl stopped 15 shots and hasn't allowed more than one goal in any game since the Hawks' only defeat to Grand Rapids on March 4.

Still minus leading scorer Zam Plante due to injury and having recently sat six players for 14 days due to COVID-19 protocols, Hermantown's depth could have been in question.

But by midway through the second period, the result was clear.

"I was so proud of our guys' resiliency," Andrews said. "We dominated the second period after giving up that late goal."

The Hawks will find out Friday morning who they play in the quarterfinals. No matter the opponent, the focus is the same.

"Our goal hasn't changed, we still want a state championship," Pierce said. "This one feels good, but we're still focused on that."

Duluth Denfeld 1-0-0-1
Hermantown 2-2-3-7
First period — 1. H. Joey Pierce, 4:16; 2. H. Pierce (Cole Antcliff), 13:07; 3. DD, Kade Shea (Connor McClure, Andy Larson), 16:53.
Second period — 4. H. Aydyn Dowd, 8:01; 5. H. George Peterson, 12:02.
Third period — 6. H. Ethan Lund, 5:08 (sh); 7. H. Lund (Gavin Blomdahl), 6:02; 8. H. Beau Janzig (Aaron Plonk), 6:26.
Saves — Jacob Snyder, DD, 49; Garron Opsahl, H, 13.

PREP BOYS HOCKEY / ANDOVER 3, GRAND RAPIDS 2

Huskies hold off Thunderhawks

Editors note: This story originally appeared in the News Tribune's Thursday E-edition.

By Rick Weegman
rweegman@duluthnews.com

GRAND RAPIDS — There's a scene in "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" where Sundance, portrayed by Robert Redford, is trying to land a job on a Bolivian company's security detail and must prove he is good shot with a gun.

Upon his first effort at shooting a stationary target, Sundance fails and seemingly loses his opportunity for employment. When he asks for a second chance and if he is allowed to move while shooting, he strikes the object several times.

"I'm better when I move," Sundance said.

Garrett Schifsky can relate. The Andover senior forward scored the first three goals, showing just how good he is when moving and shooting, and the Huskies held off a spirited Grand Rapids comeback to win 3-2 in the Section 7AA boys hockey championship game Wednesday night at IRA Civic Center.

The win sends the second-seeded Huskies (18-2-1) to the Class AA state tournament next week at Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul. No. 1 seed Grand Rapids finished the season 15-2-1.

have come together as a team, I'm really proud of them," Schifsky said. "This was a great Grand Rapids team, the best we've played all year."

While Schifsky staked the defending 7AA champions to a 3-0 lead, the Thunderhawks gave everything they had to overturn the deficit.

Braeden Holcomb and Hayden DeMars scored second-period goals and Grand Rapids owned a 15-3 shots-on-goal advantage in the third period to give the team a chance of forcing overtime.

"They are an experienced team and we had 15 first-year varsity players so we were scared to win," Andover coach Mark Manney said. "The first 10 or 12 minutes we were pretty bad, then we found ourselves until the middle of the second period when, all of a sudden, we said, 'Hey, we're up three-nothing and we're not expecting this.' I think we were a little afraid to win, but maybe we'll settle down and play better next week."

Schifsky opened the scoring in the final minute of the first period when he rifled a shot coming across the blue line for his 26th goal of the season.

The Thunderhawks outshot the Huskies 12-3 in that period but failed to convert on three power-play chances.



Photos by Clint Austin / caustin@duluthnews.com
Above: Hunter Bischoff (12) of Grand Rapids shoots the puck on goal against Andover during the final moments of the Section 7AA championship game Wednesday, March 24, at IRA Civic Center in Grand Rapids. Andover defeated Grand Rapids 3-2 to advance to the Class AA state hockey tournament in St. Paul. **Left:** Joey DelGreco (10) of Grand Rapids controls the puck near Davis Gohman (28) of Andover during the Section 7AA championship game Wednesday, March 24, at IRA Civic Center in Grand Rapids. Andover defeated Grand Rapids 3-2 to advance to the Class AA state hockey tournament in St. Paul.

He struck again on a power play in the first minute of the second period when he sniped a shot to the lower right corner of the net.

"He's broken like 25 sticks this year, that's like \$6,200 worth of sticks," Manney said. "Some work better than others, but tonight he had one where he put the shot where he wanted to. Those first and second ones, especially."

Twenty-two seconds into another power play,

at 8:44, Schifsky picked out an area underneath the crossbar for goal No. 28.

"I just came out to shoot the puck and lead my team, nothing really fancy," Schifsky said.

Goaltender Will Larson, who made 33 saves, wasn't surprised by his fellow senior's play.

"He's been our guy all year, there's a reason why he's our captain," Larson said. "Whenever we need him, he's there. He's got more than 50

points this season so I can't say enough good things about him."

Schifsky and Larson were the only regulars returning from last year's section champions so the Huskies relied on them in the final period when Grand Rapids threatened several times, including when one attempt barely deflected over the goal and another time when a loose puck sat in Larson's crease for what seemed like an eternity.

"We had just one fore-

checker and we didn't want to jeopardize our lead," Schifsky said of the third-period strategy. "We just wanted to play simple, get behind their 'D' and block shots and do everything the right way."

Andover 1-2-0-3
Grand Rapids 0-2-0-2
First period — 1. A. Garrett Schifsky (Ryan Koltjes), 16:05.
Second period — 2. A. Schifsky (Gavyn Thoreson, Ethan Lindahl), 0:59 (pp); 3. A. Schifsky (Kyle Law, Weston Knox), 8:44 (pp); 4. GR, Braeden Holcomb (Joey DelGreco, Jack Peart), 10:52 (pp); 5. GR, Hayden DeMars (Hunter Bischoff, Holcomb), 15:34.
Third period — No scoring.
Saves — Will Larson, A, 33; Wyatt Pilkenton, GR, 13.

HOCKEY

From Page B1

Minnesota, Minnesota Duluth, Minnesota State Mankato and St. Cloud State — are all in the NCAA tournament in the same season.

While those teams' five coaches all compete, on some level, for the same in-state talent pool and their head-to-head rivalries are fierce, they all have taken a congratulatory tone as they scatter to their respective regional sites.

"I think it's awesome. It's great for our state," Bulldogs coach Scott Sandelin said. "It's great for all the guys, the coaches, because they're all good guys and they're friends of mine. I'm just glad we won't see any of them until later."

Growth in the Granite City

This is the 100th season of Gophers hockey, and the program in Minnesota's largest city was the pioneer of college hockey in the state. For four decades, the Gophers were also the only D-I program in Minnesota. That changed in 1961 when Minnesota Duluth, which had been running roughshod over the private schools in the MIAC for years, became a D-I independent and, four years later, joined the WCHA. It would be another 25 years before more Division I opportunities for Minnesota kids were recognized as a real need, by one of the game's true legends.

Fresh off a stint coaching the NHL's New York Rangers, and six years removed from the Miracle on Ice, Herb Brooks journeyed up I-94 from his home in the Twin Cities and set his sights on SCSU. There, a forward from Austin, Minnesota, named

Bob Motzko was just finishing up his on-ice career and looking to get into coaching.

In a TV interview this week, Motzko admitted that Brooks didn't have any particular connection to or necessarily an affinity for St. Cloud State, but it was a convenient place where he could grow the game. Motzko also said that as a proud Minnesotan, Brooks was rankled to see Michigan and Massachusetts each had seven D-I programs, while his home state had just two.

In a short stint in Stearns County (he coached the Huskies for just one season), Brooks not only elevated the SCSU program to the top level of the game, he helped secure the funding for the National Hockey Center, which now bears his name. Seeing all five Minnesota schools get into the NCAA tournament on Sunday, Motzko admitted thinking of Brooks, and the fulfillment of his dream.

"I think that's a

really cool story. I was part of St. Cloud State and was just finishing when Herb Brooks came there, and I heard him talk," said Motzko, who coached the Huskies for 13 seasons and now is in his third season coaching the Gophers. "His mission was to get more Division I teams in this state. Here we are all these decades later and all five teams are going to be in the tournament, and nobody slipped in, I can tell you that. All five teams earned their right to be there and any of the five have a chance."

Mavericks and Beavers join, and Tommies coming soon

In Mankato, Minnesota State (then known as Mankato State) won a D-III national title in 1980, became a Division II team in 1992, then moved up to the D-I level four years later, joining the WCHA in 1999. The Mavericks are making their seventh trip to the NCAA playoffs this weekend.

Bemidji State was a true power at the D-III and NAIA levels, winning 13 national championships before elevating their program as well. The Beavers became a Division I program in 1999 in the now-defunct College Hockey America conference and joined the WCHA in 2010.

And next season, the Minnesota D-I ranks will grow to a half-dozen, with the University of St. Thomas elevating its program from D-III and joining the new CCHA alongside Bemidji State and Minnesota State Mankato. There will be 116 Minnesota kids dotting the rosters of 15 of the teams competing this weekend (Boston University, which faces the Huskies in round one, is the only Minnesotan-free squad) and six Minnesotan head coaches in the tourney. Enthusiasts like to point out that with a Minnesota team in each regional (and two — the Gophers and Mavericks — in the West) the concept of an all-Minnesota Frozen Four is in play.

A century since the start of college hockey in Minneapolis, and more than 30 years removed from a mostly-forgotten exhibition game played a stone's throw from the Eveleth iron ore pits, one man's dream of making Minnesota the true State of Hockey has already come true.

Jess Myers (@JessRMyers) can be reached at jrmyers@forumcomm.com.



Marc Lebrink / USA Today Sports

Oregon State guard Ethan Thompson (5) celebrates with head coach Wayne Tinkle after defeating Oklahoma State in the second round of the 2021 NCAA men's basketball tournament at Hinkle Fieldhouse in Indianapolis.

West may finally be best in NCAAs

4 of Sweet 16 come from Pac-12

By Larry Stone
Seattle Times

SEATTLE — This is going to take some getting used to.

The Pac-12 not being demeaned, belittled or mocked in men's basketball and/or football?

An enterprise overseen by Larry Scott getting lauded for its overachievement?

Our poor, forlorn little conference proving to be the biggest, baddest dudes in the NCAA Tournament?

Who in the world saw it coming, other than the psychedelic sage of Westwood, Bill Walton? But when Walton revealed his Final Four prediction that included five Pac-12 schools — don't sweat it; that's just Bruin math — it was just Bill being Bill. No one would have ever guessed that his over-the-top reverence for the "Conference of Champions" would be prescient rather than puerile.

Yet here we are. The league that in 2019 inspired a Bleacher Report headline reading "Pac-12 Might Be The Worst Major Conference In Shot-Clock Era of Men's Basketball" — with advanced statistical evidence to back the claim — is suddenly the toast of the town. And the town is Indianapolis, site of the NCAA men's basketball tournament.

Of the five Pac-12 men's teams that qualified for the tourney, four have made it through to the Sweet 16. That's more than any other conference, including the hyped Big Ten, which had nine teams qualify and only one make it through to the second weekend. The Big Ten lost three No. 1 or No. 2 seeds, while the Pac-12's rogue band of misfit toys (including two double-digit seeds still alive) has produced a 10-1 record, the third-best of any conference with five teams since the expansion of the field in 1985.

This all means a lot of

money for the conference. Based on the "unit" system in which conferences accumulate money via victories by its teams, the Pac-12 has racked up 15 units. At roughly \$1.8 million per unit (paid out over six years), that's a \$27 million windfall for the conference to distribute. Because USC and Oregon face each other in the Sweet 16, at least one more win is guaranteed, and the payout will keep growing if the other teams keep winning.

Obviously, that's a godsend to a conference that has been battered and bruised financially by the COVID-19 shutdown. But what the Pac-12 has gained over this past week is far more valuable.

Respect. Praise. Prestige. A reputation boost. All the things that the league receives regularly via its women's hoops teams, which very well could have produced the champion last year in Oregon and possesses the No. 1 overall seed in Stanford among the three conference teams still alive this year. The league also is lauded regularly for its so-called Olympic sports, in which the Pac-12 still racks up championships like no other.

But in the sports that are the vital revenue producers — football and men's basketball — the Pac-12 has become a (pick your favorite descriptor) laughing stock, punching bag, underachiever, perennial disappointment.

That's one huge reason Scott is on the way out. But this kind of unqualified success, and

the positive publicity it is engendering for the Pac-12, should be a huge boost in recruiting. And could even help in enticing a higher level of candidates for the vacant commissioner's job.

What exactly is fueling this Pac-12 revival? You could go psychological and say the league is being driven by disgust over the lack of respect it has received. You could go practical and point out that the Pac-12, more than any other league, was hampered in its preparation for the season by COVID-19 and thus took longer to find its groove. Or you could go nuts and bolts and note that the coaching represented in the tournament from Pac-12 schools is first rate.

UCLA's Mick Cronin makes the case that the league has been vastly underrated all along — though, to be fair, there was little that happened in the regular season to make people think otherwise.

"You're finding out that the Pac-12 not being ranked all year was an absolute joke," Cronin said to reporters after the Bruins' win over BYU. "I've been doing this a long time. Back in 2011 I coached in a league where 11 teams made the NCAA Tournament. And the national champion finished in a tie for ninth, 10th and 11th. So I know good teams. So Oregon State, Oregon, Colorado, SC, those teams winning is just not a surprise at all to me."

But the Pac-12 got no breaks from the seeding committee. Oregon State, despite winning

the Pac-12 men's tournament, drew a 12 seed. UCLA is an 11, Oregon a 7, USC a 6. The league's highest-seeded team, Colorado at No. 5, is the only one to lose, getting bounced by Florida State in the second round.

But the league has been on a roll from the very beginning. UCLA was down double digits in its First Four game with Michigan State but stormed back to win. The Pac-12 is 9-1 against the spread, with eight of its wins by double figures and an average victory margin of 13.1 points. That's the fifth largest of any league with five or more teams since 1985.

Maybe the fun is about to run out. The USC-Oregon winner likely runs into mighty Gonzaga in the Elite Eight. Oregon State has to face a more celebrated underdog in Loyola of Chicago, which took down No. 1 seeded Illinois and has Sister Jean on its side. UCLA meets a very tough No. 2 seed, Alabama.

It would take another upset for the Pac-12 to get just its second men's Final Four representative in the past 14 years (the other being Oregon in 2017). It would take a minor miracle for it to get its first men's team to the title game since UCLA in 2006, and a major miracle for its first men's champion since Arizona in 1997.

But considering where the Pac-12 ranked on the stature scale going into March Madness, the men's tournament has already been a smashing success for the conference. Just like Bill Walton and nobody else predicted.

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Counting March winners and losers

By Mark Story

Lexington Herald-Leader
Who's up and who's down as the 2021 men's NCAA Basketball Tournament enters the round of 16:

UP: The Pac-12. When Bill Walton projected five teams from the "conference of champions" to make the Final Four, it seemed ludicrous even beyond the mathematical impossibility.

Nobody was talking about the Pac-12 as the nation's best hoops league. By acclamation of the hoops talking heads, the Big Ten and the Big 12 were battling for that designation.

Well, lo and behold, so far in the 2021 Big Dance, the left coast is the best coast.

The Pac-12 stands a robust 9-1 after the opening rounds of the NCAA tourney. It has four teams among the 16 remaining.

With USC and Oregon set to face off in the West Region semifinals, the league is guaranteed at least one team in the

round of eight.

So strong is the Pac-12 mojo, Mick Cronin — Mick Cronin! — has already coached UCLA to three NCAA tourney wins.

That's the same Mick Cronin who had coached in 11 prior Big Dances without ever winning three games in one tourney.

For Kentucky Wildcats backers, the MVP of the NCAA Tournament so far is Pac-12 Cinderella Oregon State.

Coach Wayne Tinkle's Beavers (19-12) had to win the Pac-12 Tournament to make the NCAA tourney.

When OSU did just that, it knocked UK's intrastate rival, Louisville, from the field of 68.

In the NCAA first round, Oregon State bounced Kentucky's SEC rival, Tennessee.

When the Beavers upset Oklahoma State and star freshman Cade Cunningham in the round of 32, it sent Oregon State to the sweet 16 for the first time since 1982.

Of the Pac-12's blow-

torching of the NCAA Tournament field, "we're obviously putting everybody on notice," Oregon State's Tinkle said.

DOWN: The Big Ten. For every skeptic who feels the Big Ten is persistently over-hyped, this NCAA tourney has been for you.

The Big Ten got nine teams in the 2021 Big Dance. It had two No. 1 seeds (Michigan, Illinois), two No. 2s (Ohio State and Iowa) and a No. 4 (Purdue).

What has happened since Selection Sunday has been brutal.

Traditional league kingpin Michigan State was bounced by Mick Cronin — Mick Cronin! — in the First Four.

Ohio State was stunned by No. 15 seed Oral Roberts, while Purdue fell to No. 13 seed North Texas.

When the tourney reconvenes with the round of 16, there will be exactly one Big Ten team — Michigan — still playing.

UP: Sister Jean. After

engineering a thorough take down of No. 1 seed Illinois in the round of 32, Loyola Coach Porter Moser has the Ramblers two victories from their second Final Four since 2018.

Having been vaccinated against the coronavirus, Loyola's 101-year-old team chaplain, Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt, is back on the trail with the Ramblers for their tourney trek.

Since she became a media darling during Loyola's run to the 2018 Final Four, Sister Jean has added something new to her arsenal:

The trolling of sitting-at-home hoops powers. Before March Madness began, Sister Jean pointedly noted "I filled out my bracket. ... I don't see Kentucky any place."

With Loyola advancing to the round of 16, Sister Jean proclaimed on Twitter "I'm looking at the bracket and I thought we played Duke next, but I can't find them on here anywhere."

DOWN: Brad Under-

wood. In four seasons as Illinois coach, Underwood took the Fighting Illini from 14-18 in 2017-18 to a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament this year.

Yet an awful lot of goodwill Underwood had banked probably evaporated with Illinois' decisive 71-58 round-of-32 loss to intrastate foe Loyola.

UP: Nate Oats. Two wins from the Final Four, the brash second-year Alabama head man and his free-wheeling team would seem to have a chance to use the 2021 NCAA tourney to morph the Crimson Tide into "the new Florida" — an SEC "football school" that becomes a consistent hoops force.

DOWN: Mike White. Fans of the original Florida are growing restive with their head coach after the Gators were bounced from the round of 32 by No. 15 seed Oral Roberts.

In his six seasons since replacing Bill Donovan, White has gotten Florida past the

round of 32 once — a 2017 trip to the round of eight.

UP: Gonzaga. Four wins from an undefeated national title, are we watching Mark Few and the unbeaten Zags (28-0) transform into the West Coast version of Duke?

DOWN: Bill Self. If having the Jayhawks in the teeth of a major NCAA investigation were not enough, the veteran KU head man presided over Kansas' 85-51 thrashing by USC in the round of 32.

The 34-point beating was the third worst in KU basketball history.

"Kansas deserves better," Self said afterward.

The Jayhawks ended their season 21-9. Kansas gained 12 games on Kentucky (9-16) this year in the men's college hoops all-time wins battle.

Entering next season, that race will stand: 1. Kentucky 2,327; 2. Kansas 2,323.

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