

THE CRAZY COLLEGE HOCKEY

OFFSEASON OF 2021

DUE TO A UNIQUE SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES, THE SPORT FACED A SUMMER LIKE NO OTHER

North Dakota head coach Brad Berry talks to reporters during NCHC Media Day on Thursday, Sept. 16, 2021, at the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul.
Clint Austin / Duluth News Tribune

++
++
++
++
++
++



By Brad E. Schlossman
Grand Forks Herald

Deep inside college hockey coaching offices, you'll find a whiteboard or spreadsheet detailing the program's future.

It holds a chart that projects rosters for up to four years down the road, marking the year players will graduate, estimating when some may turn pro and listing when committed recruits might be ready to make the jump to college.

These guides help the coaches know how many players they need to recruit at each position for each season.

When the spring comes and the roster turns over, they use their charts to identify the replacements.

Those charts were obliterated this offseason.

A number of unique circumstances — from a change in eligibility rules to new NCAA legislation to COVID-19 disruptions — converged at the same time and threw the off-season into chaos.

"I've been doing this for 20-some years and it was the craziest off-season I've ever seen," Miami coach Chris Bergeron said.

Five developments had the biggest impact.

FIRST, the NCAA ruled that the 2020-21 season would not count against anybody's eligibility. That meant every senior in college hockey could return for 2021-22.

SECOND, the NCAA ruled that seniors coming back for 2021-22 do not count against scholarship limits. For one year only, schools received the green light to award more than 18 scholarships in men's hockey. Some administrations allowed their teams to go over 18. Others did not.

Schools had to decide if they could or wanted to bring their seniors back, and if so how many, while being conscious of spots they had promised to incoming freshmen.

Those who wanted to play one more year of college hockey, but were unable to stay at their schools, flooded the transfer portal.

THIRD, the NCAA passed a long-anticipated rule allowing players to transfer one time without having to sit out a year. Prior to the new rule, only graduates or those who received a special waiver could transfer without sitting out. The new legislation made the transferring option a lot more attractive for underclassmen.

Together with fifth-year seniors who were unable to return to their schools, they created a wave of players in the transfer portal like no other summer.

In the 2019 off-season, 77 players entered the portal. In the 2020 off-season, 98 players entered the portal. This offseason, 248 players entered.

"The assistants were watching the transfer portal every day, like, by the second," Bergeron said. "It's refresh, refresh, refresh. And I know we weren't the only ones. It was crazy."

FOURTH, coaches were forced to make determinations on the readiness of recruits without having seen any of them in person for more than a year. NCAA pandemic rules barred coaches from scouting in person or bringing recruits to campus for official visits, so they were reduced to watching webcasts and speaking with junior hockey coaches for evaluations.

FIFTH, some of the recruits did not play at all because of COVID-19 restrictions, especially in Canada. Junior A seasons north of the border were all significantly shortened or cast aside altogether.

This led to the smallest incoming freshman class in NCHC history, 43 players. The previous low was 56 and the average is 62.6.

While the NCHC has averaged 17.25 freshmen from Canadian Junior A leagues each season, the league brought in just two this fall. Others were sent back to junior hockey for another year while fifth-year seniors or transfers filled their spots.

"We're almost like general managers now and not just coaches, because you've got all these different layers and things you're dealing with," said St. Cloud State coach Brett Larson. "You think of the wave that hit college hockey with not just the transfer portal being used more, but the rule that you can transfer without penalty coming at the same time with the super seniors."

DIFFERENT TEAMS, DIFFERENT ROUTES

Teams chose different routes this offseason.

In the National Collegiate Hockey Conference, St. Cloud State, Minnesota Duluth and Western Michigan went big with fifth-year seniors.

UND and Miami, teams that finished polar opposite in the standings last season (UND first, Miami eighth), were aggressive in the transfer portal.

Omaha dabbled in, keeping three seniors and bringing in one transfer.

Denver opted to turn over almost all of its senior class in order to make room for a decorated incoming freshman class.

Colorado College, meanwhile, pounced on a couple junior hockey players who were committed to other schools but whose college arrival date was pushed back a year in order to make room for fifth-year seniors or transfers. The Tigers also strategically grabbed young transfers with three-plus years of eligibility remaining.

THE SUPER SENIORS ROUTE

The first step for coaches this offseason was to determine how many players were coming back. For the first time, they had to nav-

bender, blue liners Matt Anderson and Louie Roehl, as well as backup goalie Ben Patt for a fifth season. Only one Bulldog senior left. Forward Nick Swaney signed a pro contract with the Minnesota Wild.

"College hockey just got older," Minnesota Duluth coach Scott Sandelin said, "which is good but it was interesting to see. For our team, I was excited to get them back. They were guys who were excited about being back. We had discussions with them during the season on whether that was something they were interested in, and obvi-

(ECHL) and Gabe Bast (Finland).

Meanwhile, goalie Peter Thome transferred to St. Thomas and defenseman Josh Rieger opted to attend school in Calgary.

Add in four more early NHL signings — Shane Pinto (Ottawa Senators), Jacob Bernard-Docker (Ottawa Senators), Adam Scheel (Dallas Stars) and Jasper Weatherby (San Jose Sharks) — as well as Harrison Blaisdell's transfer to New Hampshire, and UND was left having to fill a nearly unprecedented number of roster spots.

UND brought in its largest group of new-

four first-round NHL draft picks in Jonathan Toews, T.J. Oshie, Brian Lee and Joe Finley. It also had two second-round picks in Taylor Chorney and Andrew Kozek, along with a future Hobey Baker Award winner in Ryan Duncan.

Instead of attempting to bring in 14 freshmen, the Fighting Hawks used the explosion of players in the transfer portal to mix in older and more experienced players, as well as balance the classes so they didn't start a cycle where every four years they'd turn over half their roster.

THE TRANSFER ROUTE

The impact of transfers was flashed in every coach's face at April's NCAA Frozen Four.

UMass, which won the NCAA national title, grabbed three players out of the portal the previous summer. One of them, Carson Gicewicz, led the team in goals by a wide margin. Another, Garrett Wait, scored the overtime winner in the Frozen Four semifinals.

Frozen Four participants St. Cloud State and Minnesota Duluth were led in plus-minus by defensemen they grabbed out of the portal the previous summer (Donohue and Matt Cairns), while Minnesota State-Mankato reached its first-ever Frozen Four via a game-winning goal by a transfer, Sam Morton, in the regional final.

It became a race to land the big-named players this spring and summer.

Once a prominent player entered the portal, coaches used InStat — a software program that allows them to single out a player and watch all of their shifts in a game — to do instant scouting.

OFFSEASON: Page 3



“COLLEGE HOCKEY JUST GOT OLDER, WHICH IS GOOD ... [F]OR OUR TEAM, I WAS EXCITED TO GET THEM BACK.”
- SCOTT SANDELIN, UMD HEAD COACH

Minnesota Duluth head coach Scott Sandelin talks to reporters during NCHC Media Day on Thursday, Sept. 16, 2021, at the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul.
Clint Austin / Duluth News Tribune

igate a world in which seniors could return.

St. Cloud State and Minnesota Duluth allowed their men's hockey team to take advantage of the one-year exception and go over the usual 18-scholarship limit. Both teams brought back five seniors, accounting for 10 of the 17 NCHC seniors returning to their teams.

St. Cloud State was able to largely keep its roster intact after last year's run to the NCAA national championship game, bringing back fifth-year seniors in leading goal-scorer Easton Brodzinski, forward Kevin Fitzgerald, defenseman Seamus Donohue, defenseman Luke Jaycox and starting goalie David Hrenak.

"We liked all of our seniors and wanted them back if they wanted to come back," Larson said. "They were core guys for a long time and really good people."

"This year's super seniors don't count against your 18 scholarships. Next year, they do. So, that's going to be a whole new can of worms, because you can't just keep bringing people in. You have to figure out how to manage your recruiting list and how to manage the seniors that want to come back."

Minnesota Duluth brought back explosive-skating wingers Kobe Roth and Koby

ously, we were able to make it work."

But not every team was able to do that.

UND, which was not allowed to go over 18 scholarships, had eight seniors last season and all of them left.

Six of them signed pro contracts within a couple weeks of the season's end — Jordan Kawaguchi (Dallas Stars), Matt Kiersted (Florida Panthers), Collin Adams (New York Islanders), Grant Mishmash (Nashville Predators), Jackson Keane

comers, 14, since 1973.

In the last 48 years, UND has only brought in two groups of newcomers larger than 11. In 2001 and 2005, it brought in 13.

The 2001-02 team is the only UND team of the last 27 years to finish with a sub-.500 record. The large freshman class in 2005-06 worked out — after a slow start, that team went to the Frozen Four — but that also was one of UND's greatest freshman classes in program history. It featured

TRANSYSTEMS

ARE YOU READY TO DRIVE?

HIRING CLASS A CDL DRIVERS!



driveteamgreen.com | 701-746-0389

OFFSEASON

From Page 2

“What happens is when a name comes over the transfer portal, then immediately you look at that name, then get into watching that video,” UND coach Brad Berry said. “You’ve got to be really efficient in your time of trying to drill down on the details of what you want in a player. If how they play is how you play in your lineup, then you go after that player.”

“You don’t have a lot of time. Their name comes in the portal, you’ve got to watch their game, then you’ve got to get into the recruiting battle with other programs.”

Although nearly every coaching staff debated exactly how deep to jump into the transfer pool, few teams could resist it at all.

Outside of the Ivy League schools and the service academies, which face significant hurdles in adding transfers academically, only four schools in the nation didn’t dip into the transfer portal — Western Michigan, Bemidji State, Alaska Fairbanks and Colgate.

Western Michigan attempted to recruit two players — Michigan’s Josh Groll and Bowling Green’s Connor Ford — but they ended up at Minnesota State-Mankato

and UND, respectively.

“This would have been a great year for us to add one or two because we have such a strong core,” Western Michigan coach Pat Ferschweiler said. “If we didn’t, and we added a bunch of new guys, who are your leaders? There are things to figure out moving forward. What’s the proper way? I would imagine every year may be unique. Do we add them this year? Is this the right year? Do we not? Certainly who you’re adding will factor into that as well. I think that will be a fluid situation.”

“We’re certainly open to transfers, but again, it has to be the right fit, the right guy.”

Miami, which is trying to rebuild under Bergeron, added the highest number of transfers of any team in the NCHC, six.

“We didn’t think we were going to snap our fingers or hit a light switch and all of the sudden the transfer portal is going to change an eighth-place team into a first-place team,” Bergeron said. “That wasn’t the intention. We’re a program in transition. Is it going to be made through the transfer portal? No, it is not. But this gave us an opportunity to talk to some people, whether it be grad transfers or what have you, to come in and have an opportunity to leave a mark on a place

that needs some help. Let’s be honest. That’s where it is.”

UND hasn’t typically been big on transfers.

In the 19 years prior to this summer, UND added a total of five transfers — Mitch MacMillan in 2011, Clarke Saunders in 2012, Nick Jones in 2017, Westin Michaud in 2019 and Brendan Budy in 2020.

Then, in the span of just over a month, the Fighting Hawks added five, picking up star players from the Western Collegiate Hockey Association. UND landed the league’s top goal-scorers, Ford from Bowling Green and Ashton Calder from Lake Superior State, as well as goalie Zach Driscoll from Bemidji State and defenseman Chris Jandric from Alaska Fairbanks. The final transfer was South Dakota native Brady Ferner, who played at RPI for two seasons.

“One thing we really haven’t had in years past is a lot of transfers coming into our group,” Berry said. “We lost (a lot of) players this year. Now, we’ve brought in nine freshmen and five transfers. I think that’s going to help us a little bit from the experience standpoint — guys that have played in high, intense college hockey games and know what’s coming down the road, and have played in influential situations

offensively and defensively.”

Both Bergeron and Berry said watching video isn’t the only important part in scouting players in the portal. They also make a lot of calls.

“The other part, too, is once their name comes up in the portal is to make phone calls to their previous coaches, whether it’s their junior teams or youth teams or people who have been a part of their lives,” Berry said. “What type of player are they? Even more important, what type of people are they? Hard-working? Do they do the right things on a daily basis? Make good choices? Those are all the things that have to happen between video and conversations.”

Colorado College, looking to rebuild under first-year coach Kris Mayotte, had a unique portal strategy. The Tigers were only willing to recruit players who had three or more years of eligibility left.

“We really wanted to be smart about the portal,” said Mayotte, previously an assistant coach at Michigan. “We wanted to make sure we were bringing guys we felt we could grow with. We didn’t want band-aids. We didn’t want quick fixes. We didn’t want guys that were going to be here for a year and

OFFSEASON: Page 9

BY THE NUM83RS

- 335** Division-I men’s players entered the transfer portal between Sept. 1, 2020 and Aug. 31, 2021
- 154** total players landed at new NCAA D-I programs
- 89** of the transfers are non-seniors
- 65** of the transfers are fifth-year seniors
- 43** incoming freshmen will play in the NCHC this season, an all-time low
- 35** transfers went to Atlantic Hockey schools, most of any conference
- 22** fifth-year seniors or super seniors will play in the NCHC this season
- 17** transfers went to the NCHC
- 11** teams did not pick up a single transfer
- 8** is the highest number of transfers for any single team (Sacred Heart, Long Island and St. Thomas)
- 5** players entered the portal but ended up back at their original school
- 2** incoming freshmen are from Canadian Junior A leagues, the lowest ever
- 1** player transferred into an Ivy League school (Notre Dame forward Ryan Carmichael went to Yale)

NUMBER OF INCOMING TRANSFERS BY LEAGUE

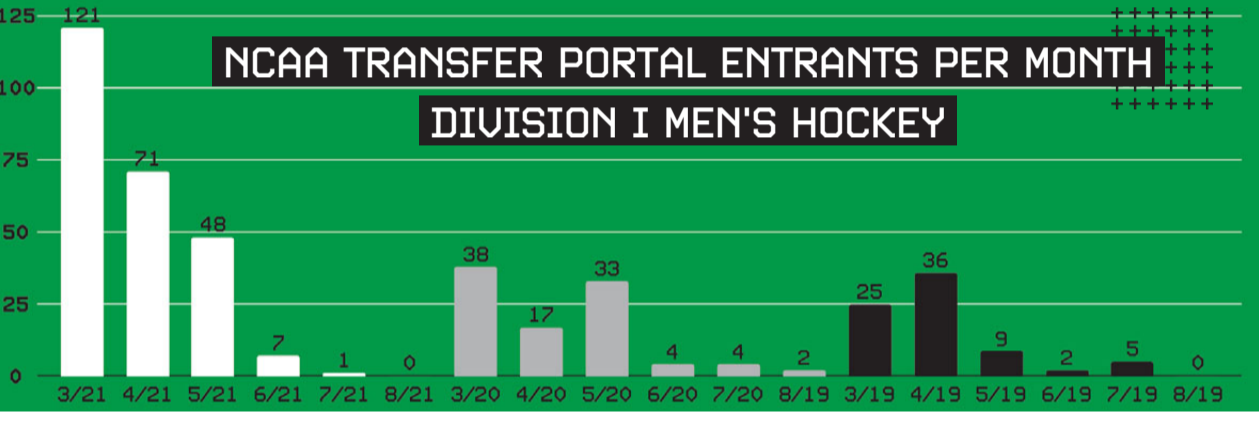
- 35** - Atlantic Hockey
- 31** - Hockey East
- 26** - CCHA
- 17** - NCHC
- 16** - Big Ten
- 15** - ECAC
- 14** - Independents

MOST INCOMING TRANSFERS BY TEAM

- 8** - Sacred Heart
- 8** - Long Island University
- 8** - St. Thomas
- 7** - Canisius
- 6** - Miami
- 5** - North Dakota
- 5** - Quinnipiac
- 5** - Bentley
- 5** - Arizona State

TEAMS WITH NO TRANSFERS

- NCHC:** Western Michigan
- Big Ten:** None
- WCHA:** Bemidji State
- Hockey East:** None
- ECAC:** Brown, Colgate, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Princeton
- Atlantic Hockey:** Air Force, Army
- Independents:** Alaska Fairbanks



WHEN YOU'RE READY TO

Fly GFK

WE'RE READY FOR YOU!

DELTA www.delta.com

allegiant www.allegiantair.com

GFK Grand Forks International Airport www.gfkairport.com

Vilandre

Heating / Air Conditioning / Plumbing / Seamless Gutter

701 N. 7th St • Grand Forks, ND 58203 • 701-775-4675 • www.vilandres.com

SINCE 1935!

OFFSEASON

From Page 3

then gone. We wanted to make sure the guys that we brought in on our roster, we're putting time in, and we can see the fruits of that labor a couple years down the road."

THE FRESHMAN ROUTE

Without the ability to get in-person viewing of recruits, teams relied on HockeyTV and InStat to follow their games.

HockeyTV live streams and archives games for nearly every significant junior hockey league in North America. InStat breaks down each player's shifts, just as it does at the college level.

Despite being able to track recruits electronically, NCHC teams were more likely to go with the sure thing — fifth-year seniors or college-experienced transfers — than bring in rookies.

Only two NCHC teams are bringing in freshman classes of more than five players.

UND is bringing in the league's largest rookie group with nine, while Denver is bringing in seven.



Clint Austin / Duluth News Tribune

Miami head coach Chris Bergeron talks to reporters during NCHC media day on Thursday, Sept. 16, 2021, at the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul.

Although the Pioneers may have been interested in bringing back more than one senior — they have speedy winger Ryan Barrow returning for a fifth year — they needed to clear space for a freshman class that includes four NHL draft picks (Sean Behrens, Shai Buium, Carter Mazur and Massimo Rizzo) and a potential first-rounder in 2022 (Jack Devine). Had they sent them back to juniors, they would have risked losing them to another program.

"I think you've seen around the country dif-

ferent directions with how they're going to roster management," Denver coach David Carle said. "Our staff, we probably started talking maybe in July or August of 2020 that really the next 18 months of roster management are going to set up the next three-to-five years.

"When we got into the offseason, decisions had to be made. I think if everyone came back and everyone came in, we could have 35 players. Obviously, decisions have to be made. We wanted to get down to a normal number of 26 for us —

eight 'D,' 15 forwards and three goalies."

NCHC teams were extremely hesitant to bring players who played limited or no games in Canadian Junior A leagues.

Only two NCHC freshmen — Rizzo (did not play last season) and Omaha's Ty Mueller (15 games played) — came from Canadian leagues. That's a sharp contrast from last summer when 20 rookies were from Canadian Junior A.

A couple of incoming freshmen like UND's Matteo Costantini and St. Cloud State's Ryan Rosborough were scheduled to play Canadian Junior A, but found homes in U.S.-based leagues after Canada shut down due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Even so, the majority of Canadian Junior A players were deferred another year.

Colorado College was a school that took advantage of deferred players.

"There were a couple guys who probably could have gone into the schools they were committed to that ultimately didn't because of transfer portal and fifth-year guys that we were able to scoop up," Mayotte

said. "And again, now we can grow (with them). We think it was a good summer in that way. We thought it helped our program. We lost a couple guys, but we're excited to move forward with what we have."

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Some of these circumstances are already on their way out.

The NCAA has opened in-person recruiting again. Junior A leagues in both the United States and Canada have started their seasons and are a full go. Prospects will have complete seasons under their belts and coaches will have live viewings like normal.

But the transfer portal is here to stay.

The one-time free transfer without having to sit out is permanent.

Fifth-year seniors, eligible to use their free coronavirus-impacted year, will be around for three more years. Bringing them back will become more difficult, though. Schools won't be able to go over 18 scholarships anymore.

"What I'm a little concerned about for all of

us is this wave goes for three more years," Larson said. "Every year, not knowing who you're going to have back from your senior class until probably March or April is going to be difficult. Some of those conversations you're having with recruits, especially if they're reaching their 20-year-old year of junior, they may not have an option to go back and play another year of junior hockey. So, that's where the next few years, there are going to be some challenges."

Other coaches acknowledge they're not sure how the next few years will play out.

"The transfer portal is going to be part of our life," Bergeron said. "The fifth-year COVID year will be three more years. Kids being able to transfer without sitting out (is here to stay).

"Once the dust settles, I don't think it's going to be like the spring of '21, where it's the Wild West. But it will be interesting, once it settles, what it looks like, and what type of impact it's having."

Reach Schlossman at
bschlossman@gfherald.com or
(701) 780-1129.

MICHIGAN

From Page 6

pandemic wiped it out for everyone else.

In the wake of those teams, especially the Boston University one, several college hockey powerhouses made conscious efforts to mix in older players with their young stars.

UND is one. Minnesota is another.

But Michigan has diverged from the pack, pulling in as many top

prospects as possible. The Wolverines have had significant success reeling in players who are advised by the NHL's most prominent agent/advisor, Pat Brisson. Brisson's son, Brendan, is one of Michigan's first-round picks.

Although the super team strategy hasn't been overly successful in the past, there's a big difference between this year's Michigan team and the others. The Wolverines not only have the abundance of first-round picks, they also

have guys who were taken at the very top of the first round.

Wisconsin's 2019-20 team, for example, had four first-round picks. Michigan has four of the top five picks. A top-five pick is generally a much different player than someone who goes in the 20s.

Michigan is not hesitating to go forward with its strategy of loading up on as many young superstars, even if they're only going to be in college for a year or two. It recently picked up commitments

from future first-round picks Adam Fantilli and Rutger McGroarty, who will presumably replace Beniers and Johnson next season.

Michigan is currently mired in a few droughts.

The Wolverines haven't won a national championship in 23 years. In fact, they haven't even won a regular-season conference title in more than a decade.

Ferris State, which didn't win a Division-I game last season, has won conference titles

in two different leagues (Central Collegiate Hockey Association, Western Collegiate Hockey Association) since Michigan's last one.

In all, 27 college hockey teams have won a regular-season conference title since Michigan's last, including a program that didn't exist (Penn State) back when the Wolverines won the CCHA in 2011.

If this star-studded Wolverines lineup wins big and ends those droughts, there's little doubt that Michi-

gan will double down on the philosophy. You may see others attempting to employ the same strategy — if they can find a way to reel in all those top prospects, which is no easy feat.

But if Michigan doesn't win big this season — if the Wolverines are good, not great, like other NHL talent-laden rosters before them — everyone will have to ponder whether that philosophy can work.

Reach Schlossman at
bschlossman@gfherald.com or
(701) 780-1129.



MIDCO SPORTS™

More hockey than you can shake a stick at.

If a puck drops in North Dakota, you can bet Midco Sports™ is there. Check out all of your University of North Dakota hockey in one place. Tune in and start cheering.

[MidcoSports.com](https://www.MidcoSports.com)