

WCHA Final Five

MINNESOTA AND DENVER SKATED into the WCHA playoff championship game with victories on a big day for homestate hockey at the Xcel Energy Center, where a state record college hockey crowd of 18,523 watched the Gophers whip St. Cloud State 4-1 in the second semifinal.

Semifinals: March 15, 2002 Xcel Energy Center, St. Paul

St. Cloud State W4-1

The Gophers (29-7-4) worked steadily and hard to pull ahead of the archrival Huskies, while goaltender Adam Hauser blanked St. Cloud State until the middle of the third period, when the Gophers already had four goals on the board. Homestaters Jordan Leopold, Troy Riddle, Jeff Taffe and Matt Koalska got the Minnesota goals, while Johnny Pohl set up two of them and Riddle added two assists to his goal.

In the afternoon semifinal, Denver University (31-7-1) beat Colorado College 3-0 in quite similar fashion, scoring a goal in each period—two of them by Twin Cities native Chris Paradise—then entrusting the lead to all-WCHA goaltender Wade Dubielewicz, who stopped all 26 CC shots.

St. Cloud State (29-9-2) and Colorado College (25-12-3) were thus relegated to the third-place game, which could become important for NCAA seeding, because all four semifinalists are expected to be named to the 12-team NCAA tournament field.

The Gophers struck just 55 seconds into the first period, when Pohl fed Riddle for a hard shot from right wing. St. Cloud State goaltender Jake Moreland kicked out his right leg and got a toe on the shot, but the rebound bounced straight out the slot, and Leopold was first to it, slamming a shot that glanced past Moreland.

The goal was the 20th of the season for all-WCHA and All-America defenseman Leopold, breaking the school record for single-season goals by a defenseman.

The teams traded penalties the rest of the first period, and on through the action-filled second period. But 17 seconds before the middle period ended, the Gophers took some of the steam out of the Huskies when Pohl caught a pass as he broke toward the net, only to curl to his right to gain full attention of the defense before sending a neat little back pass to Riddle, who got off an explosive slapshot that beat Moreland and caught the extreme left edge of the net.

The 2-0 lead looked good, and it looked better 35 seconds into the third period, when Jeff Taffe cut right-to-left across the slot, and drilled a hard wrist shot just past a screening body and into the upper right extremity of the net for a 3-0 cushion.

At 7:03, Matt Koalska backhanded a rebound in for a power-play goal and a 4-0 Gopher lead. St. Cloud State coach Craig Dahl replaced Moreland with Dean Weasler for the last 10 minutes, and while that had no effect on the offense, the Huskies did retaliate for a goal at 11:32, when Ryan Malone moved in unmolested from the right corner and forced a shot through Hauser on a power play to make it 4-1.

Denver's victory was remarkably similar. Paradise, who grew up 10 miles north of Xcel Center in Shoreview, scored midway through the first period to stake the Pioneers to a 1-0 lead, which could have been worse but for the sterling play of CC goaltender Jeff Sanger, who also played in Thursday night's overtime victory over Wisconsin to qualify for the semifinals.

Greg Keith made it 2-0 at 14:10 of the second period, capitalizing when a careless back-pass in the neutral zone slid between the two Tiger defensemen, and Keith got to it first for a breakaway. Paradise came through again at 12:10 of the third period with the play of the game. Rushing end to end up the left boards, Paradise put on a late burst of speed, then turned the corner and powered past the last defenseman, veering in front of the net, from where he flicked a late shot up into the short side.

"I thought we played methodically to come out and win each period 1-0," said Denver coach George Gwozdecky, the league's coach of the year. "We've had three goals from the start of the season, and winning the regular season was not even one of them. First was winning the WCHA playoff championship, second was qualifying for a first-round bye in the NCAA, and third was winning the national championship.

"Chris Paradise has been looking forward to coming back here to play in front of his family and friends. He has tremendous skills, he's big, strong, and his two goals—especially the second one—are typical of what he can do."

Paradise said: “The only time I was ever in Xcel Center was when I was home at Christmas and went to a Wild game. It’s always been a dream of mine to play in the WCHA, and another dream is to come home and have a chance to win the WCHA championship here.”

However, if Denver is the league’s best regular-season team, they had to get by the Gophers—the league’s hottest team.

Pohl reflection

“We completely outplayed St. Cloud,” said John Pohl. “From the drop of the puck, we were more ready. Just like 100 percent opposite of the year before. We were up 4-0, they scored a power play late. They scored with about five minutes left. One of those things.

“I attribute the way we played to the end of our season as juniors, when they swept us and killed us both nights at the end of the year, and absolutely killed us in the Final Five. This was an absolute reversal. Yeah, that motivated us. And we had some confidence because of the way we played ’em in the series at the end of the regular season.”

Championship

Denver L2-5

As cool, poised and methodical as a pro team, Denver University scored in all three periods and beat Minnesota 5-2 in the championship game of the WCHA Final Five tournament, before 18,126 fans at Xcel Energy Center. It was the first time since North Dakota in 1997 that the same team had won the MacNaughton Cup for the regular-season WCHA title and the Broadmoor Trophy as playoff champ.

The big crowd ran the five-game tournament total to 75,151, eclipsing the year-old record set last year, the first in the Xcel Center. Adjusted tournament crowds for suite sales were 13,103 Thursday night, 12,438 Friday afternoon, 18,523 Friday night, and 12,961 Saturday afternoon, before the final 18,126.

The Gophers played hard from start to finish, but had their winning streak stopped at nine straight by the brilliant goaltending of Wade Dubielewicz, who made 38 saves, as if he needed to reinforce his stature as the league’s top goalie by adding the tournament most valuable player award.

The Pioneers were pro-like in their error-free attention to detail in their own zone. David Neale scored in the first period, Kevin Ulanski and Max Bull in the second, and, after the Gophers closed it to 3-2 by the second inter-

mission, the Pioneers finished it when Greg Barber scored on a breakaway at 8:11 of the third period. Barber punctured Minnesota's final hopes by flipping a long clearing pass up the left boards, and Kevin Doell raced to it and backhanded the puck into an empty net from an extremely wide angle with 45 seconds remaining.

Denver (32-7-1) and Minnesota (29-8-4) are both certain to advance to the NCAA tournament, and they are expected to be joined by Colorado College and St. Cloud State as well.

Colorado College (26-12-3) finished a grueling three games in less than three days stretch by beating St. Cloud State 2-1 in the third-place game, as Jeff Sanger, the goaltender who beat Wisconsin in overtime Thursday and lost 3-0 to Denver in Friday's semifinals, came back to stop 35 of 36 shots. St. Cloud State is 29-10-2. The Huskies lost twice in two days at the Final Five, a tournament they won last year. This year, that was left to the Gophers and Denver to decide.

Denver struck for a 1-0 lead in the first period on a goal by Neale at 3:32. The Pioneers had an early power play when Erik Wendell was called for hooking Greg Keith into a breakaway spill that resulted in a head-first tumble into the goal post at 2:25. Ryan Caldwell carried deep on the right and passed to the slot where Neale only got a piece of his shot, but enough to send it sliding under the armpit of the sprawling Adam Hauser.

The Pioneers made it 2-0 when Jesse Cook fired from the right point at 1:29 of the second period and the puck hit Kevin Ulanski, who was jostling for position in front of the net when the puck hit him and glanced in.

Minnesota cut it to 2-1 on a controversial goal that had to withstand a video review exactly one minute later. Matt Koalska rushed up the left and passed hard across the slot, but the puck hit Barry Tallackson's skate and caromed back to defenseman Keith Ballard, who quickly shot it into the left edge, past goaltender Wade Dubielewicz—the first goal he had allowed in two tournament games.

Referee Tom Goddard was summoned to stop the game and pause while the goal was reviewed. The replay showed that just before the goal, Wendell had skated directly into the crease and kicked Dubiewicz's left leg. The goalie was understandably knocked to his left, just as the shot flew past him on his right. While officials in this tournament have whistled play dead and faced off outside the zone for merely skating through the crease, this time they decided to allow the goal and it was 2-1.

Undaunted, Denver came back to make it 3-1 at 4:03 when a forecheck-

er knocked the puck free from Jeff Taffe in the Gopher zone, and Max Bull moved in to drill a slapshot into the left edge of the goal.

The Gophers got a key goal back at 13:38 of the middle period, when former Duluth East star Nick Angell cranked a power-play shot from the left point, wide to the left, where Riddle was able to deflect it past Dubliewicz and make it 3-2.

But when the Gophers pressed in the third period, the Pioneers sprung Greg Barber for a breakaway, and Barber rushed up the left side, cutting to the net unmolested and firing a shot that hit Hauser's legpad and carried in at 8:11.

The game took an odd turn after that. Hauser, possibly frustrated, was called for slashing at 11:13, and Grant Potulny served the sentence. At 12:48, Hauser stepped out, grabbed and body-slammed Denver's Greg Keith and was called for holding, this time with Dan Welch serving for him. That left the Gophers in need of a rally, but instead killing a two-man disadvantage—both via penalties on the goalkeeper.

CC Upends Huskies 2-1

Colorado College, hoping to secure its position in the NCAA field, battled St. Cloud State as well as exhaustion and came up winning both matches. Not that it was easy. The Huskies, trying to get things together after a faltering finish, outshot the Tigers 36-25 and took the early 1-0 lead on a goal by Colin Peters.

But after Peters scored at 5:02, goaltender Jeff Sanger simply slammed the door on the Huskies, who still stumbled into the NCAA tournament after having gone 3-5 in their last eight games. The Tigers tied it on a screened shot from center point by Richard Petiot at 6:39 of the first period, and the go-ahead goal came at 3:48 of the second, when Chris Hartsburg scored a power play goal on a rush to the slot.

After that, it was all goaltending, and while Dean Weasler played well for St. Cloud, Sanger was flawless the rest of the way for CC.

"Jeff Sanger gave us three outstanding games in less than three days," said CC coach Scott Owens.

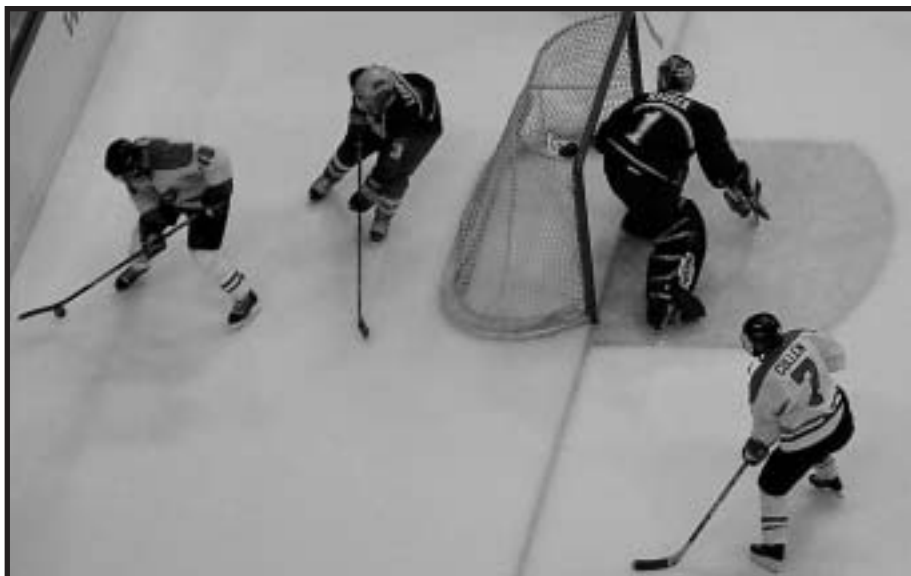
Hartsburg chose to talk more about his goaltender than his goal, as well. "I just want to say that Jeff Sanger is the reason we're here. He made five unbelievable saves in the third period," said Hartsburg. "Jeff has put us in position to go into the NCAA and maybe make some noise there."

Sanger said as a senior, he recalls vividly when Colorado College lost to Michigan State in the final minutes of the NCAA regional at Madison, preventing the Tigers from going to the final four. The next year, the Tigers were

upset and didn't even reach the WCHA Final Five. "As seniors, we realize how close we were to making it, and we try to instill the feeling to the freshmen that when you get a chance, make the most of it because you don't know when you'll get another chance."

All-Tournament

The all-WCHA-tournament team included Denver's goaltender Wade Dubielewicz, who also was most valuable player, plus Chris Paradise at a forward slot and defenseman Ryan Caldwell, and Gophers Jordan Leopold on defense and Troy Riddle at forward. The other forward was Colorado College center Mark Cullen.



Jordan Leopold chased behind the net as Adam Hauser kept a wary eye on the St. Cloud Huskies in the WCHA Final Five semifinals.



Adam Hauser sprawled under heavy pressure at the Minnesota goal, as Denver beat the Gophers for the WCHA playoff championship – the only loss in the Gophers' last 12 games, and one that the players say caused them to refocus on the NCAA tournament.



Gopher goalie Adam Hauser proved the old adage about being both good and lucky as he turned acrobat to survive one St. Cloud attack while Jordan Leopold (3) and Matt DeMarchi (19) defended (above), then he got lucky when a rebound squirted through but Ryan Malone was unable to knock it into the open net (below) as Keith Ballard tried to help.

