

NCAA Men's Frozen Four: Minnesota State vs. Minnesota

Tuesday, March 29, 2022

Boston, Massachusetts, USA

TD Garden

Minnesota Gophers Coach Bob Motzko

Semifinal Media Conference



But this is another step forward for us. I know three a few years back, and two this year. Notre Dame had a great push as well, getting the overtime victory the other day.

So it's a very solid statement for Big Ten knowing that we're in a good spot.

Q. You talked at the regional a lot about the grit of your team. How is it that with the players, the new players of the program, when they come in, how is it that you get through those expectations and carry it through a long season?

COACH MOTZKO: The expectations to win or a grit standpoint? I'm not sure what you're asking me.

Q. What's required to win at this level.

COACH MOTZKO: Well, I mean, the big thing -- I'll give you an example. I made a statement when I got hired: We need to get older. And obviously I lied to everybody when I got hired, because we haven't gotten a lot older, but we have gotten more experience. We brought five freshmen in this year and they all played two years in the USHL or two years in the U.S. program.

So we're more battle tested up front like with the guys we've been bringing in versus the true freshmen that maybe traditionally at Minnesota were just out of high school. And because we can't control when our guys leave, but we do have a little control on the front end if they come in with more experience. They're battle tested, many of our guys.

The fact that we went through the grind last year to win our playoffs, the Big Ten playoffs a year ago, and we got to a region championship last year. We drew off of that. And it's been a couple of year process for us. Developing that grit that's needed to play and you feed off of other teams in your league that have that and then we have to play a nonconference schedule against North Dakota and Duluth and Mankato and St. Cloud and we'll get Bemidji eventually because we have to play the Minnesota teams. That's the only style that these teams know. And it makes us better.

MODERATOR: We're joined by Bob Motzko.

COACH MOTZKO: Outstanding weekend for us. Scary moment in the first game with -- in a 50-second span we give up two goals on a delayed penalty. They score it with the goalie pole with the hand up. Then they get on the power play and score.

And that was in the first period. And you've been in this tournament so many times and you just said, oh, God, it was a crushing feeling that to come back from two goals against a heck of a team in UMass. The good thing was we had a lot of time on the clock and we dug in, only gave up one goal up the rest of the weekend. That was the good news.

We dug in that night. Great battle. Huge goal at the end of the first period to get it back to 2-1. And our guys had great resolve. Power play scored both nights, which was critical for us. Solid goaltending against two heavy, tough teams.

And we're going to walk right into another one with Mankato. So exciting time for us and a hard-fought weekend, and we're very excited.

Q. Obviously there's two Big Ten teams in the Frozen Four this year. The last time there were Big Ten teams was 2018 with three. What does this do for growth of Big Ten hockey in general?

COACH MOTZKO: Well, it makes a statement. I mean, I was in a league going against the Big Ten for many years. Now I've been over here for four. And the Big Ten takes some criticism. And I believe our programs are very strong. We've beat the snot out of each other, a lot like the NCHC. And all the leagues.



So we try to play as competitive a schedule as we can in the country, one of the top. We want to play these gritty teams. It makes us better. And our kids are buying into it.

Q. You got hot down the stretch, what changed for you was it the team coming together, the goaltending switch, something in the room, what prompted that hot stretch that you're still on?

COACH MOTZKO: I'm going to tell you that I don't know if it was a switch as much as we were transforming that way. And I talked about this at the region. Early in the year, when you coach at Minnesota, God forbid you split a weekend because you're not supposed to do that here.

We split five straight. So we were getting criticized why aren't we playing well. Well, the truth was, I thought we were playing well. And we had some big wins there and we were growing.

We were waiting for our young players to gain experience and to gain confidence. And I'm repeating myself from last week, but we had a real solid returning group, but we added five new forwards.

Knies and Lucius took off out of the box as elite players. And Huglen started to come. And then Pitlick started to come and then Broz started to come to mesh with Meyers, McLaughlin, Walker and our D corps that was all returning. It took a little time for that to come together. An example was, in February, our freshmen had 16 goals.

Last weekend, of our seven goals, freshmen had four of them. And yet Ben Meyers and McLaughlin and Walker and then Close in net, playing so strong for us, are the backbone. We needed that young group to materialize offensively for us, because they're awful talented. And the second half they really hit their mark as a group. A few were there much earlier. That's the long and short of it. It took us a while to come together.

Q. Bob, you talked about your freshmen, Aaron Huglen, his development in the second half this year and just getting him after the injury problems, how difficult was that?

COACH MOTZKO: Well, he had a lot of injuries his two years in junior hockey. And he went through an enormous amount. Over a two-year period I think he only played maybe a year. But he came to us ready to go. I mean, he was battle tested.

He was good last year for Fargo down the stretch. And that was critical he got to be an integral part of their playoff run last year. He's been steady. Like I said, Knies and

Lucius shot out of a cannon, they were elite players from the get-go. Hugie has been just getting better. Nothing fazes him. We can play him at center. And very quickly we've got him rat the wing now. But at center he can play against other team's top players. He's going to be a terrific college player. And right now we're getting it in doses and more confidence as he goes. But it's been a remarkable recovery for him.

What's really going to be great for him he's had a couple of offseasons where he couldn't train. This is going to be a great offseason for him. He hasn't had one for a couple of summers. He's going to be a terrific player. We're just seeing the beginning stages of what he can do.

Q. You kind of touched on Knies there and getting shot out of a cannon. Were you guys expecting that out of him? Were you expecting the level that he has reached this season and where maybe has he exceeded expectations?

COACH MOTZKO: We knew we were getting an awful special player. We knew that he made a big impact at the World Junior camp this summer. And we weren't surprised. But like quickly, when we started practicing, there's something different in him. And part of it is physical. He's just a big, strong -- he's just a big, strong dude that likes to use it. And a little bit of a throw-back type player.

And we put him on a line with Ben Meyers -- this rarely happens in coaching. I never make the right lines up in the summer. I have yet to ever sit there in the summer and say these are going to be the lines. But we put him with Meyers from day one and those two are just workers.

And when Lucius was on that line, it was fantastic. And then when Chaz's injury broke, then we moved Huglen over there and he's picking up the slack and doing a great job. He's pretty fortunate -- one, we're fortunate he's a heck of a player and strong, but he's also fortunate he gets to play with Ben Meyers, and that's a pretty deadly combination. And we're fortunate.

Q. Going back here a little bit, you coached the U.S. World Juniors twice, won a gold in '17, bronze the following year. How special is that experience? And can you speak to the importance, you and the team felt, in following up that gold with another medal, whatever the color might have been?

COACH MOTZKO: You're bringing us back a few years. One, to have the opportunity to coach U.S.A., it's a bucket list thing. And you've heard me say that in years past, but we had a special group in '17. And we were so fortunate to

do it in Canada and win the gold.

And then they ask you to do it again. And you don't want to, but you can't say no. And in that group, we were so close. We just had one game that -- we're very proud that we medaled. I don't think it had happened, am I right on that, that a back-to-back -- there was something that we were drawing off back then. But the fact that we lost the semifinal game was heartbreaking. But I was proud of that team, we didn't get down, we played a great bronze medal game to medal twice.

Great players. It's always fun when you coach great players. They sure make you look good. And I'll cherish those memories forever.

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