

NCAA Men's Frozen Four: Michigan vs Denver

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TD Garden

Michigan Wolverines

Mel Pearson

Mike Pastujov

Jimmy Lambert

Semifinal Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome. Glad to have you here. Congratulations. Mel, maybe you can kick us off, you've been through a lot of these, thoughts about being back in Boston and your semifinal opponent.

MEL PEARSON: Thanks. Personally a lot of great memories from being here in Boston. It was a great host to us in '98. Thrilled to be back, especially with this team. Got a great group of young men who have overcome a lot of the expectations that were placed upon them this year. I feel like we're playing our best hockey at the right time of year.

I've been around the game, it's my 40th year at the Division I level as a coach. I have a little idea what it takes to win in these games. We have the goaltending, we have the defense, the forwards, got the depth, a great group. Just so proud of them and excited they get this opportunity.

THE MODERATOR: Any Boston connections? How was the trip in?

JIMMY LAMBERT: Good. My first time in Boston. I haven't been out here before.

MEL PEARSON: It's a long ways from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

JIMMY LAMBERT: Enjoyed it. We went to a nice dinner last night, which was great. Got to see a little bit of the city.

MIKE PASTUJOV: It's been great. Haven't been here since I played at a USA NTDP. It's been great. We had a great dinner on the water yesterday. Guys are really getting in sync now, ready for the game tomorrow. But the city's been great.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Do you prefer the track meet? Teams have tried to slow you down this year. Denver's coach joked they're going for a 9-8 win tomorrow. What kind of game would you prefer to play?

JIMMY LAMBERT: The best thing about our team is we can play any type of game. We've shown that all year long. We've played teams that play both styles of game and we've beat those teams.

I think no matter what is in front of us, we're ready for it. The type of game I want to see tomorrow is a 1-0 or 2-0 game.

MIKE PASTUJOV: Jimmy hit it right on the head. We played a lot of teams, a lot of different styles. We matched up against all of them pretty well. Whether it's 9-8, good luck on getting 8 on us, or 2-0 on us, I think we'll be ready for the occasion.

THE MODERATOR: Mel, what do you prefer?

MEL PEARSON: It's going to be a great game. I said this week, I wouldn't be surprised to see a 7-6 game, I wouldn't be surprised to see a 2-1 game. Denver played two tough games last weekend. They're a real good team. It's like looking in the mirror a little bit. They can score, get up and down the rink, they can beat you in so many ways, but they can play good, hard-nosed defense.

We just want to play our best game. That's the bottom line. We just want to bring our best tomorrow and make sure play to our identity, who we are. We won a lot of hockey games playing the style we play. That's how we're going to go after it tomorrow.

Q. Players, you are no strangers to big atmosphere. Do you play up a little bit when you're playing in an NHL barn on national TV? Does that motivate you to raise your game?

MIKE PASTUJOV: Sure, yeah. I think it definitely gets the



juices flowing a little bit more, gets you a little bit more centered.

Yeah, I mean, we've been great on a big stage all year. We played great in the Big Ten championship, the biggest Big Ten attendance there's been. We played well last week in Allentown. I definitely think we step our game up a little bit on the bigger stage. This is going to be our biggest stage yet so we're excited.

JIMMY LAMBERT: It's always exciting when you play in these historic buildings. It's always a lot of fun. A little bit more hyped up obviously. This is the Frozen Four so this is the biggest stage you can ever play in college hockey. We're all excited and we're all going to be ready to go.

Q. You have far more history in this game than I do. These two programs have a storied history. Haven't played much lately. How come?

MEL PEARSON: Good question. George Konik was a great friend of mine, great friend of my family, played at Denver, was a great player at Denver. Grew up in the same town, Flin Flon, Manitoba, as I did. A few players that went to Denver. Two great programs.

What it boils down to is the schedules we have, both playing really tough schedules all the time. I'd love to play it. Dave and I have talked a few times about trying to get a game on the schedule. We'll work towards it.

I'd love to play them. They play, to me, I'm not saying this negative against anybody else, but I just really like the style they play. They play the game how I envision it, how I'd like to play. If I was a player on his team, I'd be so happy because they play the game a certain way. They like to play with skill, get up and down the ice.

I'll say it. We're in the entertainment business, the academic business, too, but people pay good money to come and watch us. I want people that want to go back to Magnus or Yost and say, Wow, we had a great time there, I can't wait till I get to go see another hockey game there. Hopefully we can do that in the future.

Q. Winning is obviously most important. The entertainment aspect to grow the sport or what you like to see to your eye?

MEL PEARSON: To grow the sport. You want people to come and be entertained and really enjoy it. Whether it's watching Luke Hughes or Savoy, down the list, or these guys. Walk out of the rink and say, That was fun, that was fun. We have to get that in the game.

Again, my opinion. Some coaches will argue with that and say you have all this talent. Recruit to that. Try to recruit to that.

I had a great mentor in Red Berenson who wanted to emulate the great Canadian teams from the '70s, the Oilers, Islanders. These guys can tell you it's a lot more fun to play, it's a lot more fun to coach.

Q. I know this was before your time for the players, but how much do you know about the '98 team or have you heard Mel or Bill Muckalt talk about that run?

MIKE PASTUJOV: We have Billy in the locker room, Bill Muckalt. He's been a great role model for us. Was in our shoes. Won two national championships for Michigan.

Going back and watching the old film, seeing the emotion that they play with, the raw emotion that college hockey brings to the ice. For them to be able to get it done two years of their four years, it's outstanding. It brings a lot of pride to Michigan. We're looking to follow in their footsteps and get it done in Boston.

JIMMY LAMBERT: Yeah, our coaches have national championships in their pocket. They know what it takes to win. They've told us all year long we have that and they believe in us.

I think it's something pretty special to have that kind of experience in our locker room. I think all 29 of us players are looking to gain that experience this weekend.

Q. Talk about Matty coming home to play a big game in Boston. What kind of teammate, player is he?

MEL PEARSON: Just so excited to have a player like Matty Beniers. When he walks in the door, the rink every day, he makes us a better team just by entering the door. He's got an infectious attitude. He's a very positive person.

I found him one time, I think it was last year, I was getting a little excited on the bench. He turned around to me and said, Coach, coach, it's okay. We have this. He's so calm. This is a freshman.

Phenomenal player. We were very fortunate to have him come to Michigan. He's just continued to grow and grow and get better. He's a great teammate. Can use him in any situation, PK, power play, last minute, whatever it might be. He's a top-notch college player.

Very deserving of any recognition he gets. More importantly, he's a really good student and he's a really good person.

JIMMY LAMBERT: Yeah, I mean, ever since he came in as a freshman, I've learned a lot from him. Every day in practice he's one of the hardest guys working on the ice. He's out there early, he's out there after practice, he's always in the gym working hard. He's just a treat to be around and a lot of fun to watch out there. Hopefully I can be a champion along his side.

MIKE PASTUJOV: Yeah, no, seeing Matty's growth since he first came on campus, it's been great. On and off the ice, great student, great athlete. He's a heck of a hockey player, heck of a leader. I can see him being a captain in the NHL, he's got what it takes. He's got the attitude and leadership skills.

Taking a second year really helped him grow in his game. Really been off the charts. I expect him to have a big weekend.

THE MODERATOR: Pretty good playlist from the Olympics. Wow, they were kind of old school. Does he do it for you guys, too?

MIKE PASTUJOV: No.

JIMMY LAMBERT: No (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Okay, that's a negative (laughter).

Q. Mike and Jimmy, I'll ask about another guy with a Boston connection, Johnny Beecher, Bruins' draft pick. What does he bring to your team?

MIKE PASTUJOV: I mean, Johnny brings size, a great attitude, just being a great guy all the time. It's obvious that he's not having the points streak or goal streak that he wants. You don't see him pouting about it. He's one of the hardest working guys in the game. I think he brought this year a big physical aspect to his game. Guys are scared to line up across from him. I think that's going to help him out once he plays in the next level.

I think he should be not moving his stall once we leave this weekend. I think he should stick around for a bit.

JIMMY LAMBERT: Mike said it best. He's a pro frame. We all love him in the locker room. He's a pretty infectious guy. He's pretty funny. He carries that on to the ice, he's a leader. He's going to be successful here in Boston in the future.

Q. Have you talked to them? What does it mean for team to be playing here in Boston?

MEL PEARSON: Thank you for the question.

They're both extremely excited. Matty obviously, I think he told me -- he only could get 17 tickets from our allotment. He needed a lot more.

Being a Boston kid, the only young man we have from this area, he's really excited. I know his family is, too. He's looking forward to it.

He's the guy with the extra pressure. Being home won't affect him. He's just a player.

Beecher is excited. They've been bugging him all week about letting him pick out the first stall when we get in the locker room. But Johnny has had a really good year for us. He was injured the first part. He's really come on. He really adds a lot to our team, has really accepted his role and thrived on it.

He's a good player, has a bright future. I know he's so fired up to be here. We've got a lot of pictures of him in the locker room already.

THE MODERATOR: Michigan is the top seed and has the Bruins' locker room.

Q. Have you figured out how to solve the third period problem yet?

MEL PEARSON: You might want to ask these guys (laughter).

MIKE PASTUJOV: No issue (smiling).

MEL PEARSON: Yeah, we had our longest video session I can remember in my 40 years, I think it was on Tuesday. It wasn't the most pleasant video. I'm usually real positive with our players. You just can't sweep it under the rug. You have to address it.

I appreciate the question.

Sometimes you get comfortable when you have a lead. The things that happened in those games were very fixable. As a coach, you're a little concerned but not overly. We talked about it a lot. We drilled a few things.

I would love to have a 4-0 lead going into third period tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: What about the third period problem?

MIKE PASTUJOV: I think anybody who watched our game against Quinnipiac, it was pretty evident they came out



flying in the third period. There were definitely some changes we needed to make to our game. Like Mel said, we had a lot of video sessions, a lot of on-ice walkthroughs, a lot of work we put in this last week to improve. I think we got it all figured out.

Q. Mel, going back to the '98 team, how do you and Bill try to relate to these guys what it takes to win two games on this stage? That's obviously the hardest thing to do once you get here. How do you win the weekend? Do you have older guys from the '96, '98 teams talking to them?

MEL PEARSON: Yeah, thanks for the question. Good question.

My first thing was to call Coach Berenson, I think it was on Saturday, just ask him for a couple pointers because we went through that together. I thought we did a real nice job in not only '98, but '96, of having our team to play.

One of the big things that came up, we did player surveys after it. Some early years when we lost. One of the things that came up, our team was too tight. We're trying to keep them relaxed and normal, not try to make the game more than it is. It's an important game, but let's not make it more than it is.

We've taken that to the team. We try to do things, not tell them so much, but how we proceed every day in practice, how we approach, what we talk about with them about this. We keep it to a minimal. We want to just keep continuing to play how we have.

This team is fairly loose. They're relaxed. They know what it takes to win. We're on another stage, but it's another hockey game. We just have to find a way to win 60 minutes.

Billy has probably told these guys more than I have about his experience, and more so after the fact, what it's done for them, how tight they've been. That's something that you'll take with you forever. I know these guys have talked about this one little area at Yost Ice Arena, it's just perfect. It's been this way for a long time. You could stick another banner right in there. I know these guys went up as a team and went up in the stands, we pointed that out, that there's a spot right there.

That doesn't quite answer your question, but we put some emphasis how great it would be, they'd have this forever as a group.

Q. Mel, there's a relatively limited number of teams that play DI hockey. I think it's kind of a Big Ten. This

Frozen Four shows you a couple Power 5 schools, Minnesota State plays up. How cool is that to you, that different kinds of schools can get here?

MEL PEARSON: I think it's awesome for the sport. I'm really happy with Lindenwood, Augustana, and obviously Stonehill. I think it's great. I think it's awesome. I wasn't as familiar with Stonehill. I played at Michigan Tech back in the day, small school way up in the boonies, in the upper peninsula. I got to a Frozen Four with that team. It was awesome. It just goes to shows you that not only the big schools.

It's great. And Minnesota State. That program has just continued to rise and rise and rise. I just see the crowds that they draw, the community. The smaller communities, I've experienced this at Michigan Tech, it's a community game. It's not just the university, it's the whole community. I think that's awesome. I think it's great.

I'd love to see the expansion. I know I'm getting off script here. Georgia, they're talking about University of Georgia, a new building coming in, all excited about that. I can't wait. Arizona State, Arizona jumps on. There's a lot of opportunity to grow the college game not only at the big schools but the smaller schools like we're seeing now.

There's enough players, too. There's more and more players. So I think it's great.

Q. Mel, a lot of experience as an assistant coach at the Frozen Four. This is your second as a head coach. How is the experience different when you can't pass the questions off to Red? What did you learn in 2018 in your first experience on this level?

MEL PEARSON: Good question. Thanks.

I had a great tutor and obviously been in I think 11 previous Frozen Fours, or 12. From each one you learn and you grow. Even in '18, Mike was with us in '18. Just being ready to play. Just all the distractions, all the things that come along with it, you just have to push those aside. Even more so this year with the type of roster that we have. I think that's the biggest thing, try to really focus on getting things done early, focusing on the game.

I've been through it. Most of our staff hasn't. I could tell today, they're a little anxious and antsy. Being the older, senior guy, I have to make sure I remain calm and put some calmness in them. They're driving me crazy right now, my staff (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: Older, senior guy. That's quite a descriptor.

MEL PEARSON: Thanks (laughter).

Q. Coach, you mentioned '96 and '98. My job is to bring up '97. You had the big target on your back, more like this season where you're No. 1 the whole year. Is there a difference in that kind of thing that you drew out of that experience, the warnings of having that target on your back?

MEL PEARSON: Great, great comment. You're right. I think we learned more, I did personally, from that '97 year. That might have been the best team that I've ever been associated with at Michigan. We won it in '96. Everybody came back as juniors and seniors. We were loaded.

But we weren't ready for that first game. BU came out and just put us on our rear end. They played physical. They were ready to go. That's the one thing I left them today with the ice was, what, boys?

MIKE PASTUJOV: Focus on the start.

MEL PEARSON: Focus on the start and be ready. It's my experience in this tournament, is you have to make sure you're ready and get off to a start. Sure, teams have come back. When that puck drops, the time to prepare is long gone.

That's one thing I learned in '97. We had a heck of a team. Everybody was just anointing us the champion. You have to earn it. The teams here are all good. If you're not ready to play, even if you play your best, it might not go your way, but you have to make sure you're ready to bring your A game. That's a great point. That is a great point. That '97 probably taught me more than the '96 and '98.

Q. Mel, you made the comment earlier it's like looking in the mirror a little bit with Denver. How does that affect preparation? Does it help?

MEL PEARSON: You know, thanks. I think it really helps because we play against a similar style every day in practice, so we're well-versed in it.

Their offensive zone, how they move around, how they puck possess, our guys do that every day in practice with the forwards we have. We're used to defending that. Obviously how they play in transition. I'd like to say we have a pretty good transition game, too.

It's a great point. We see it every day. It is like looking in a mirror. Not only, that they have a Swedish goalie, we have a Swedish goalie. They have a lot of freshmen, then sophomores and seniors. We have the same.

I think it helps going against that every day in practice. They've got good players. We have good players. Our practices, these guys have made the comment that sometimes their practices seem tougher than games. I think that only helps and prepares us for a team like Denver.

Q. Mike, I think you're the only holdover from that '17, '18 team. What have you taken away from that experience? How is the experience different for you this time than last time?

MIKE PASTUJOV: What I just really learned was it's two games, you're two games away from a national championship. You just got to do what it takes to win.

We lost that game, the first game of the Frozen Four, with I think less than 10 seconds left on the clock. You can't take a second off. Every play matters, every shift matters.

This year kind of we were talking about how it's different than that year. 2017 and '18, we were picked to be sixth out of seventh in the Big Ten. We were .500 at Christmas, had a good push the second half, came together. This year we've been the talk of college hockey, had the target on our back all year. We've risen to the occasion.

I'm not really worried about having the target on our back. It's fun. Draws a big crowd. I think we'll be ready.

Q. Jimmy, you heard coach talk about an exciting type of hockey, playing maybe akin to some of those 1980s Oilers teams. Grant Fuhr was holding them down in net. Can you talk about this goaltending battle we're going to see.

JIMMY LAMBERT: Erik is amazing. It gives us forwards and our offensive players a lot more confidence knowing that you have a guy like that backing you up. If you make a mistake, he's there to have your back. He's done that all year long.

Our coaching staff is pretty high on the statistics, keeping track of the numbers. I think one day we sat down and had a meeting. Coach Naurato said if we didn't have Erik in this game, we would have got our rear-ends handed to us (smiling).

It just goes to show how much he means to the team. He's our most valuable player. He probably will be this weekend. We need him just like we need every other guy.

He'll be ready and so will we.

Q. Mel, you mentioned about the '97 season. How have you as a coach drawn on the 2018, your first Frozen as a head coach? How are you different or what have you learned from that?

MEL PEARSON: A lot calmer. A lot more in tune to the approach leading up to it, what we need to do. Not changing things so even, but just refining some things.

I think had a tendency to maybe overcoach in that because it is a big stage. You start making sure that you look at everything. At this point these guys have played a lot of hockey, won a lot of hockey. I'm not trying to overcoach, just encourage them, give them a couple things that we have to shore up, just let them play.

I think the first time, yeah, I was a little nervous, for sure. Even though I'd been an assistant for a long time, been to a lot of them.

I think that's the biggest thing, just mellow out a little bit, be yourself, be true to yourself, let these guys be true to who they are, lead them the best you can.

Our staff has done a good job, too. It's not just me. They've been around the block, Brandon and Billy. They know what it takes, too. I've relied on them a lot.

Q. Mel, last weekend. Regular season was a stumble. You've had other stumbles through the season. How has this team, in your experience, responded to negatives, and what has been the cause, what has led you out of the negative points?

MEL PEARSON: Yeah, Notre Dame was a tough weekend. We were in first place with two games to go in the Big Ten standings. We went in there and got swept. We hadn't beaten Notre Dame, that was the fourth time in a row that we lost to Notre Dame.

But it was a positive. It was good. We reflect on it a lot. You can't change what's happened in the past. You can't go back and rewrite that. But you are going to have a say in the future how you want to write the next chapter.

That's what we've talked about. It's done, Okay, great. But what are we going to do about it? Nobody is going to feel sorry for us, especially being at Michigan. We regrouped, got our Olympians back into sync. The second half we were out of sorts. We had the world junior, guys were gone, the Olympics come, we just didn't have our whole team.

After that Notre Dame game, guys made I think a real good commitment to come together and make a push. That's

why we had so many guys come back to Michigan. That's why Mike came back. He's a fifth-year senior. That's why Nick Blankenburg turned down an NHL contract which you won't see many players do in college hockey, to come back and be our captain and play for us. That is why you see Owen come back, No. 1 pick, and Beniers.

At that point they really said, Hey, we all came back for a reason, with a purpose. We were happy we got Notre Dame in the semifinals. Everybody was saying, Oh, boy, that's their kryptonite. Even my wife was saying, You don't want to play Notre Dame. What do you want to play Notre Dame for? I remember watching the game and Notre Dame won. Looking at me like I was crazy. But we wanted that.

That was good. That was good. I think it really brought our team together after that win. We went into Minnesota on the road against the largest crowd they've ever had and beat them for the Big Ten tournament championship.

You have to learn from that, and we did. We did a lot of learning, a lot of soul searching after the Notre Dame weekend.

Kristy (Michigan hockey SID) does a fabulous job. Todd Copeland, who lives in Boston, I don't know who does your TikTok. I didn't know what he was talking about, this other stuff. But she does a fantastic job. She really does. Thanks, Kristy.

THE MODERATOR: Did you have a police escort to come here?

MEL PEARSON: No. We had to change airports so we flew into Bedford. That's one of the my fondest memories is the police escort to the game in '98. We had a policemen and the motorcycles. They started kicking this Mercedes. I'm going, What's going on? They were moving cars left and right. I'm looking forward to that tomorrow. That may be a highlight.

THE MODERATOR: How did the bus driver do backing up the rump.

MIKE PASTUJOV: Unbelievable. I don't know if you've ever seen a bus go up that ramp backwards, but it's tight.

Q. To the players, coach mentioned having fun. You look like you have fun out there. Can you speak about how fun it is to be in such an offensively gifted unit.

MIKE PASTUJOV: For sure. We have fun every day, practice, game. We like to keep it light. We got a lot of teenagers, younger guys on the team. Tough to keep it

strict when you got a lot of kids on the team.

Us as seniors, it's our job to keep them tame, let them have fun as long as it's within the guidelines. Our offense is probably the most fun of our team. Mel lets us really play in the offensive zone as long as we do our job and take care of the D zone.

JIMMY LAMBERT: In practice you can see how much fun we have. Play so many game-like situations. It's always a competition and the losing team is pretty sour afterwards. There's a lot of hooting and hollering on the ice and in the locker room. We always have fun. A great group of guys. Fun to be around.

THE MODERATOR: Who won the games today?

MIKE PASTUJOV: It was blue today.

THE MODERATOR: You were blue, I take it?

MIKE PASTUJOV: Yeah (smiling).

Q. Mike and Jimmy, I've asked Mel this before, but since you are seniors, how do you balance the line between letting guys be creative but making sure they don't make mistakes?

JIMMY LAMBERT: Yeah, it's a tough question.

I think, like Mikey said, you have to take care of your defensive game. After that, like, you can go do whatever you want really. We have so many creative players on this team, so many offensively gifted guys.

We're all here for a reason. This is Michigan hockey. You don't get here by being bad defensively, you know? It's a high level of hockey.

Guys have a lot of confidence here, they're not afraid to make mistakes. We just go out and play.

THE MODERATOR: Is it Mikey or Mike?

MIKE PASTUJOV: We'll keep it formal, it's Mike. It's Mikey in the locker room.

I think a lot of it has to do with our lines. Our lines are really balanced. Our first line of K.J., Briss and Beniers, they like to focus a little bit more on the offensive zone. Guys will hold them accountable if they're not making the right decisions.

That's like us, seniors, our role, just making sure that we have four lines playing the same way. Even though some

might be taking advantage of the offensive zone a little bit more, just keeping everybody in line and playing Michigan hockey. I think we've been doing a good job of that.

THE MODERATOR: Not too formal here, Mikey.

Guys, thank you very much.

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