

NCAA Men's Frozen Four

Friday, April 12, 2024

St. Paul, Minnesota, USA

Xcel Energy Center

Jeff Schulman

Scott Sandelin

Erik Martinson

Steve Metcalf

State of the Game Press Conference



We're always talking as a committee, as a college hockey community, about how we can make the championship experience better for student-athletes, for the teams, for fans, and we'll continue to do that and make whatever changes are necessary as we go forward.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

Steve, we'll go to you. You're on record as saying how much you're in support of the current regional format. Want to give us your take on that?

STEVE METCALF: Steve Metcalf. Commissioner of Hockey East.

I've gone on record saying I'm supportive of the current format. I see some of my friends in the audience smiling because they're heard me say this before.

I think for a national tournament, this continues to be the best format. I know there are other formats. The other suggested formats, I think, have fatal flaws for a national tournament. I think neutrality is important. I know the majority of coaches support the format we currently have.

I also have to give kudos to the committee. Jeff's group this year and last year made a couple tweaks in the seeds to try to help attendance and atmosphere at the regionals. I would say this year's regionals and last year's, probably back to back some of the strongest attendance we've ever had in back-to-back years with regionals. It shows that it's working.

Sure, I get sometimes the travel for some teams, it's not going to be ideal. I think it's the best format for now. Like I said, I give the committee kudos for what they've done. Yeah, that's it.

THE MODERATOR: Steve also said he's not afraid of any question on any topic. Feel free to take advantage of that (laughter).

Erik, obviously rules here heading in, perhaps an overview of what the committee is looking at, what we can expect

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started. We'll go down the line, probably be helpful for you to introduce yourself first. I will essentially give everybody up here an opportunity to talk about their area of expertise, then we'll open it up for questions.

Jeff, we'll start with you. Obviously a fantastically competitive NCAA tournament so far. From your seat on the committee, what are you seeing in terms of the quality of the competition and the fan experience?

JEFF SCHULMAN: Good afternoon, everyone. Jeff Schulman. I'm the Director of Athletics at the University of Vermont, currently in my second year as the chair of the Division I Men's Ice Hockey Committee.

I think from the committee's perspective, we've been really pleased with the championship this year. Certainly want to say a big thank you to the folks here at XL Energy, St. Paul, the University of Minnesota who are experienced and incredibly professional at putting on a Frozen Four. This year has been no exception.

As a committee, we've been really happy with the championship from start up till this point on the eve of the championship game.

We had four really competitive regionals. Parity in college hockey is as great as it's ever been. We have three No. 1 seeds here for the Frozen Four, two No. 1 seeds competing in the championship game.

The regionals' attendance was strong. I think the experience of the team at the four regions was really positive, the fans had a good experience. Some new sites for us. But we feel like the state of college hockey is really healthy. Certainly the championship is really healthy.



coming out of those discussions.

ERIK MARTINSON: Yeah, Erik Martinson with the University of North Dakota, also the Chairman of the Rules Committee. Fourth year on the committee. Really excited for going through the rule change here coming up.

Ultimately we think the game is in a great place. The last rule change year that we had, we had a lot of body of work within the realm of standalone fives for check from behind, head contact, a lot of discussion around video reviews and challenges. We truly think it's in a good spot.

We have some work to do on kind of going through this next iteration of what we can do to progress some of these rules that we changed up and looked at and modified.

Going in the last two years, we've taken a lot of feedback. Jeff Fulton has done a great job as Secretary Rules Editor working with Ty, helping and others within the committee of getting feedback from coaches, administrators, fans, media, and really kind of going through and looking at what's best for us as a game from a Division III, Division I men's and women's scope.

We're really excited. A lot of things we'll be diving into, goaltender interference, the challenges, the video review process, looking at the faceoffs, the infraction, how we move one way and maybe do we go back? Stay the same? How do we do what's best for the game? That's what we're looking at going into the summer.

THE MODERATOR: Sandy, we talked a little bit about last night. We'll leave the portal and NIL questions to them. Maybe we can get your perspective on the current health of the sport from a coaching standpoint.

SCOTT SANDELIN: I think number one, it is in a really good spot. I think you look at the talent level that's in our game right now, we're attracting some of the top players in North America and Europe. They're playing college hockey. I think our game is good. I think the competitive level is good.

Am I worried about where it could go? Yes. But right now it's in a good spot. Hopefully we can continue. There's obviously things that are coming up in our meetings in Florida that we need to have discussion about. Obviously the professionalism, CHL, all those things that could have an impact moving forward.

I mean, you watch the players that are playing our game right now, the number of guys that are moving on right into prominent roles in the National Hockey League, it's going to continue to grow. We're in a good spot there.

There's certainly concerns from coaches I've talked to just about where it could go moving forward. I like where it's at right now.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

Q. I have covered hockey for decades, followed hockey since I was a little boy in Detroit. Only one black player on four teams. Yesterday you don't see a lot of black players. When are your plans to continue to match this game forward? We keep hearing you say hockey is for everyone, but we still haven't seen that growth amongst fans or players.

STEVE METCALF: I guess it was three years ago now, a group of folks across the college hockey space came together in a group or committee College Hockey for DEI. This was a cross-section of commissioners, athletic directors, coaches and student-athletes.

Talking about whether there were some grow-the-game initiatives that you referenced, some of the issues that occasionally show up in the game, might we recommend I guess best practices in how they're handled within the conferences or the structure with the NCAA folks.

A lot of it is, it's a long game that this is to play. So it's hard to say you can see a direct, tangible result that's happened year over year. The intent is to try to grow some awareness and bring the game to maybe places it hasn't been, trying to work with the NHL folks in communities where the NHL and college hockey both exist.

There is some work being done there. We all know that hockey has never been as diverse as perhaps we would all like it to be. There's certainly conversations going on to try to make improvements there.

Q. Erik, I think beyond high school, this is maybe the only level of hockey that's still wearing the full cage mask. Seemed like there was momentum towards half shield or less facial protection for college hockey players. Any discussion that way? Seems like it's quieted down.

ERIK MARTINSON: Yeah, I think that's one of the topics that's on our document. Every time I've been a part of the rule change process, that's always been a topic of conversation.

Ultimately we need to be there for the student-athletes' safety and the well-being of the student-athletes on what that is from the NCAA level. That's something we'll definitely talk about this summer.

SCOTT SANDELIN: I'd like to see it. The other part of that, too, is the neck stuff, right? Obviously, went through a pretty tragic time this year with a former player. I think it shocked everybody. Certainly had an impact on the hockey world. I know that's something, too, you're seeing more and more people take a look at. Hopefully that's something that will probably be on our docket.

Q. Scott, obviously the transfer portal a big issue these days. How has it changed your job as a head coach/recruiter?

SCOTT SANDELIN: It really hasn't changed our job. I know I was pretty vocal about this about two weeks ago. I think it's not changing. The pool is different now because you don't know. We used to just worry about who was going pro. Now you got to worry about whether you are going to have a player from year to year.

As far as our work, we're going to continue to recruit players, fill holes as long as the portal is there. This is our team. We're going to build from the recruiting world and continue to do that.

But that's part of what I was saying. We'll see the impact it has over some time here. It certainly changed a little bit in just the last couple years. So there's a little bit more challenge. I think everyone's going to do what they need to do. From our school, that's what we're going to do. We're going to follow that path. Hopefully we create a program where nobody wants to leave.

Q. With the regionals, the neutral sites, campus discussion, has anything changed in the discussion, or are we making the same arguments just in a round and round way? Do you see anything that could change in that discussion from a committee perspective or NCAA, if it goes higher than that, to force anything to change?

JEFF SCHULMAN: I think the landscape is changing all the time. We're sort of taking in the various inputs, right? As I mentioned before, we're coming off a year where we think we had four really successful regionals, and that followed a year in 2023 that we thought was also successful in terms of attendance, the quality of the sites.

That's a big part of it, making sure we're able to attract quality facilities that are worthy of a national championship experience for student-athletes.

I think things are changing all the time. I think this conversation, Steve referenced it a little bit, too, has ebbed and flowed over the year.

I played in the national tournament as a student-athlete in 1988, when it was on-campus sites. We went to Bowling Green. This is in the total goals format. I don't think anybody's planning to return back to that (smiling). Certainly not on the radar or agenda of the committee.

College hockey community is small. We all have relationships. We have a committee with a wide range of experiences, coaches and administrators from different conferences. There's lot of conversations about how do we put together the best national championship that we can. We all care deeply about the game. As a committee we feel a real responsibility to make sure we're acting in the best interest of the sports on a lot of different levels.

We'll continue to have conversations down in Naples after that. If there's tweaks to be made, we're not afraid to do that.

It's a special sport. Part of what's so special is the environment on our campuses. Many of us have invested lots and lots of money in our on-campus facilities. How we factor that into this discussion is something we talk a lot about.

STEVE METCALF: One thing that has changed that I think maybe we've forgotten already is the last two years, there's a day off between the regionals. There's no question that, at least in my mind, it makes the attendance of the last two years more impressive. You put a day off in between, it was something that I think is good for the game. The coaches were certainly in favor of it, especially the coach to my right. I think that was good.

Once you put that day off in between, you push games to Thursday. The day off in between was not good for fans. Probably wasn't good for attendance. Buildings didn't like it much. We did what was best for the game.

To me it makes the last two years of attendance even more impressive because we've put in element into the regionals, and we've still done well.

Q. Jeff, these issues like NIL and transfer portal, we can sit here and complain about it, but it's mainly way above any of us. It's at the Supreme Court, a lot of this stuff. Is there anything you can foresee that would mitigate some of the craziness going on with the NIL and the transfer portal in particular?

JEFF SCHULMAN: Are you saying the four of us aren't equivalent of the Supreme Court (smiling)?

No, you make a good point. It's easy to sit here, all of us



have been around college athletics for quite a while, sort of think nostalgically about a different time. I'm sure people did that in the generation before us.

Yeah, listen, the horse is out of the barn when it comes to this stuff. These are legal issues that have been decided at the highest level. We have to adapt.

The thing I think about as an athletic director is how do you evolve and stay current but stay true to your values personally, but also institutionally and not get caught up in chasing institutions that have resources that really don't align with ours? All of us are in our different roles, different types of places. That takes a lot of thought and a lot of discipline. It's not easy. It does change all the time.

Each sport has also evolved in a little bit of a different way. If you look at what's happened in basketball and football over the years, how the concentration of elite programs has aligned with resources. That hasn't happened as quickly in hockey. I think a lot of us are paying close attention to that to see if hockey is going to go in that direction as well.

It's one of the beautiful things about college hockey, is that institutions with very different profiles and resource levels have been able to compete with each other, I don't know if it's a level playing field, but they've been able to compete with each other.

I think a lot of us hope that that remains the case. Whether it will I guess has yet to be seen.

ERIK MARTINSON: I echo Jeff's comments. It's where we are right now. I think we have to continue to adapt and try to put our best foot forward with the rules and regulations that are set forth.

Every sport is different. We're trying to figure those things out with the football and the basketball pieces. But hockey being cross divisional, I think that adds an extra layer. We just want to keep what's best for the game, the true pieces of what we love so much about the game of hockey.

I think there's different dimensions with that when it comes to the cross divisional stuff. We have to keep our tabs on things, how they're going.

Every day we wake up, it seems like something is changing. We just have to keep our eyes on it and keep moving forward on what those are.

Q. Scott, back to the portal. I'm not trying to rank leagues in order. Some of the smaller programs, they develop a good player, immediately they seem to be

out and headed to a bigger program. Because of that, do you feel there's a need to increase the player pool, i.e., the CHL has to be given more serious consideration? The rules were put into place so long ago at the CHL, it was about making a couple hundred dollars. Now we talk about NIL money...

SCOTT SANDELIN: That's a great question. Again, in talking to some of my colleagues, they've opened my eyes to a lot of things, too. That's why discussion is good.

This is a major topic. Obviously for us in a couple weeks. It's probably not going to get solved in Florida. We need to have some serious discussion because I do think that could be an avenue to expand our player pool, for sure, with all the other stuff.

I don't want to sit up here and say I'm for it or against it. I want to have good discussion about it, but certainly probably two years ago I was fine with saying, Hey, I like where our game is at. I still do, but I think we have to have some discussion and look at that, for sure.

Q. Scott, from a coaching perspective, and the other members from an administrative prospective, piggybacking on what was just talked about with professionalism, I think of the unlimited transfers a few months ago when it got pushed through quickly, everybody had to react. There were players that suddenly became eligible in the middle of the season. When it comes to professionalism, do you feel there's an advantage to being proactive instead of having to be reactive to something you may be forced into?

SCOTT SANDELIN: I think that's kind of the discussions that we've had with the people from the NCAA. We've had a couple calls with all of the coaches. One in particular a couple months ago, to have some discussion about what we really want, what will be the best, right?

I don't feel like it's getting forced. I think if we don't have good discussion and come up with a plan, then I don't know what's going to happen. I feel like the ball's kind of in our court. That's why I think it's a serious topic, not just talk about it a little bit, I think we have to have some time to listen to people and have good discussion about what direction we want to go.

I think if we can put together a good plan that does help everybody, that includes maybe those players, then I hope we come out of that at some point with a plan.

That's how I feel, just the discussion that we had. It's kind of up to us a little bit to kind of take what's in place and either add to it or stay status quo or make some

adjustments.

I'm excited about having the discussion down in Naples.

STEVE METCALF: I echo everything that Sandy just said.

The NCAA is going to wait for feedback from the coaching body until after Naples. Every couple weeks you read a media report like it's going to happen tomorrow. Let's make sure that's fake news. Nothing's happening tomorrow. Nothing's happening next week. Someone from the NHL called me yesterday, Is this changing like next week?

I'm like, No, it's not changing next week.

The NCAA has said, Okay, we'll wait till the end of the year, get the feedback from the coaches, digest that and take the next step.

If anyone hears otherwise, it's false.

ERIK MARTINSON: I think ultimately from an administrative point of view, what's on the table is pretty robust. The discussion will help quite immensely.

I think we just have to be aware of the unintended consequences of certain things if we just approve what's on the table or if we approve different parts of it, what is that going to mean for certain aspects of what we're allowing back into the recruiting process, to players back in?

I think not my concern, but I just want everybody to be aware of the unintended consequences of certain things. Once you do go down a path, it's hard to bring it backwards. We need to be thoughtful in what that is. I appreciate, and I think that's what the discussion is going to be. There has been robust discussion about it, so it's appreciated.

JEFF SCHULMAN: I think the way that we're going about the discussion is the right way, to be thoughtful. But to your point, it can change very quickly if there's litigation. That's what's happened on so many issues facing college athletics right now.

As an enterprise, we'll have thoughtful conversations about something like NIL, we think about how we want to implement it with certain guardrails we think we can live with, or transfers, then somebody files a lawsuit and the best-laid plans go awry.

I think as a college hockey community, I certainly have no insight into anything that's happening, but it is a little hard

to defend the current system when we have college athletes that are benefiting in a big way from NIL, and yet we've said that people playing major junior hockey who are getting meal money or stipend, whatever it is, are professional, not eligible.

It's a pressing issue, I think. No, I don't think things are going to change right away through the NCAA structure. There's other ways that change can happen.

Q. I want to preface this by saying I think the tournament is at its very best right now, really enjoyable. My thought is, I started my company to help grow the game. Arizona State started an NCAA program. We evolved and took on coverage of the independents. My thought is, is there discussion right now or thoughts for any of you how we're going to get these independents to get into a conference, to make it a little bit more balanced? I know the talent is there. How do we get together as a group and bring these independents, give these student-athletes the opportunity to compete for this great championship whether they're in a conference or not?

THE MODERATOR: You said any questions, Steve. That's a question (smiling).

STEVE METCALF: I did say that (laughter).

Yeah, first of all, let me say these independents and these new programs I think we'll all agree that's great for the game. It's great to have new programs all over the place.

That being said, some of these programs -- let's see the best way to put this.

They started their program and they knew they didn't have a home right away. That was the chance they took. Now I guess there's a few more that have grown. I hear scuttlebutt all the time about maybe some of them banding together or jumping onto another league, perhaps a little movement within the conferences, which might make sense as well.

Also the geography of some of these schools is also a challenge. That's the reality that I think all the conferences are dealing with. How can they support the new programs but in a way that makes sense.

Q. To tie all this together, the transfer portal has been here for a few years now. I think college hockey as a whole is committed to the parity, knowing the smaller schools can survive. This is the first year in a long time that it's been 'all bluebloods'. Back on the idea that there are things that you can do possibly.

Obviously you're not getting rid of the transfer portal. Has there been any talk about any things that can be done so the smaller programs aren't left behind? I know the CHL, expanding the player pool, is one of them. I don't know if there's been any other kind of thoughts along the way.

JEFF SCHULMAN: I'll talk a little bit about it from a committee perspective. I'm trying to think of the types of areas that overlap with what your question is.

One of them is waiting away results more heavily than homes. It's one of the challenges for smaller programs, is to get home games. We've built into the (indiscernible) a bonus for away results. It's a small thing, but it comes to mind.

I think the larger programs, higher-resource programs, they feel responsibility to the good of the game, as well. It's somewhat unique in that if you want to use the term 'Power Five' doesn't quite exist any more, call them 'higher-resource programs', just given the nature of college hockey, in a sense they need the smaller resource programs more than in some other sports, right?

Take away the non-Division I schools, take away the mid-major schools, the low-major schools and you don't have much left in college hockey.

Again, it's back to what I said before. It's one of the nice things about the college hockey community. As competitive as everybody is, I do think people care about the collective. Certainly we feel that way as a committee. In the areas where we can make an impact on that, I think we will continue to look to do so.

Q. We keep hearing college hockey is so unique, so unique. We've seen football somewhat breakaway from the NCAA. Basketball feels like that. Is there any conversation right now about really unifying college hockey? You don't really have the seat at the NCAA table as prominently as other sports do.

STEVE METCALF: Certainly I don't think there's anyone in college hockey that wouldn't like to have more say in how college hockey is governed through the NCAA model.

The commissioners and some others have been having conversations about could college hockey have a little more freedom in kind of self-governance. That's the wrong choice of words I think. Basketball and football have their own oversight committees that helps govern everything that goes on in those sports.

Of course, hockey thinks they're special, but they also are

multi-divisional, as has been noted a couple times. 10 of the 11 men's and women's conferences are single-sport conferences, so it is unique in that regard.

There's a conversation coming up with all the right folks and commissioners and Charlie Baker about the subject. I make no promises, but the conversations are being had to see at least on our side what we think might be best. I guess we'll see how those go. Stay tuned. Maybe next year we'll have some news.

THE MODERATOR: I'm cognizant of time, but I want to give everyone a last chance to say something.

Some numbers that indicate a lot of what we talked about here. As of right now, to today, average capacity across the nation is at 77%, which is the highest number since '18/'19, which is the last full season not affected by COVID. That is up from 71% last season. Certainly we had two sold-out days TD Garden for Hockey East. The women for the Bean Pot had 11,000 people in the building. The viewership numbers have been strong, over 500,000 watching the Michigan State/Michigan regional final. 200,000 folks watching the Bean Pot in the U.S. and Canada. Our upcoming future host of the Frozen Four being in St. Louis and Vegas, which are non-traditional hockey markets.

Guys, thoughts in general about the success of those numbers, what the trajectory of college hockey is on.

Erik.

ERIK MARTINSON: I think ultimately, like we said before, we feel like the game is in a great spot. The wave of people wanting to be a part of it, watch it, is tremendous.

From the talent level that's on the ice to the product that's on TV, ESPN, the coverage, the different pieces here doing, we're continuing to progress and progress the game as a whole. It's been exciting to watch it grow.

SCOTT SANDELIN: Just echo that. I think it's going to be exciting to be in St. Louis and Vegas. When I found out I was on the committee, I thought it was a three-year commitment and it was four. I asked where the fourth year was. They said Vegas. I said good. Hopefully we're going to be playing in it (laughter).

I think they're going to do a great job. Obviously St. Louis has hosted before. Obviously Vegas is Vegas. We've had some great spots.

Like I said before, our game is good. Hopefully we can continue to keep it there and not let this crazy world

change it.

JEFF SCHULMAN: I reiterate what's been said. I feel really good about the state of college hockey and college athletics is changing in pretty dramatic ways. I think as leaders, we all have a responsibility to make sure we don't get mired in sort of lamenting things that are challenging, that we continue to evolve the sport in the best way that we can and maintain the momentum that we have.

I look around this room, I see people have been to Frozen Four after Frozen Four, who cover the game on a daily basis and care deeply about it, like we do. It makes me feel good about where we're going in the future.

STEVE METCALF: Yeah, I mean, I think the game is in a really great place, probably as good a place as I can remember. Some of the stats that you rattled off, in my neck of the woods in New England, those attendance figures at the Garden are incredible. Every team in Hockey East has had a sellout, many sellouts. I've been to games outside of our league and have seen incredible crowds.

Someone mentioned the talent in the game. The first-round draft picks, this high-end talent that you see. You see a great team, see some great teams, then you see these first-rounders doing unbelievable things and are going to be stars at the next level. That's good for our game, too. Right now we have all of the above.

So thrilled to be here. I think this is a real sweet spot with where we are in our game.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports