

NCAA Men's Frozen Four: Michigan vs Denver

Tuesday, March 29, 2022

Boston, Massachusetts, USA

TD Garden

Michigan Wolverines Coach Mel Pearson

Semifinal Media Conference



MODERATOR: We're joined by Mel Pearson.

COACH PEARSON: Obviously we had to earn our victories in Allentown. I thought AICU was very formidable team, really good team, actually. We got off to a good start in that game. And they came back. They pushed us right to the end. And we held on to win.

Obviously Quinnipiac, without a doubt, is as good as advertised and as good as their record was. And we were fortunate to get off to another really good start. I think that was the key in both games, getting off to a good start. And as you all saw, we held on. Quinnipiac pushed hard. We totally got away from our game and found a way to hang in there and win that game and get to Boston.

So we're excited to get to Boston. Obviously there's been a lot said and written about our team this year with the players we have. And you just have to earn your way there. It doesn't matter how many draft picks you have or what type of team you have, you just have to find a way to get it done.

I think this year, more than any other year, it's wide open as far as the team goes. I thought there were at least 20-plus teams that could have made it to Boston. That's how tight things were.

So, we're excited to have the opportunity to play Denver. We haven't played Denver for a while. Obviously I'm really impressed with their team. Co-champions of the NCHC. They've got a nice blend of skill, older guys, younger guys. They know what it takes to win. They've got a lot of winning under David Carle there. He's done a fabulous job, he and his staff. We're looking forward to the opportunity to play on Thursday against Denver.

Q. The curse of having a lot of talent is you might not know how long you'll have it. How do you balance your roster structure so you know you have sustained

success year after year after year when there tends to be a lot of roster turnover?

COACH PEARSON: I think that's one of the hardest things this day and age is roster management, not only our team a lot of teams. You look at the NCAA players that have signed contracts and are leaving early, in the last two weeks even. That's part of the issue you have.

I think the biggest thing is you have to have a real good open line of communication with your players, your student-athletes, and what their intentions are and with the NHL teams and what they're thinking and just understanding when players might leave.

And that's critical, because like this year, we're not sure exactly who is leaving. We've got a really good idea. And we just have to make the most of it when those players are here.

We weren't sure we'd have Owen Power back or Matty Beniers back and a couple of other guys. But they decided to return to Michigan and have the experience they didn't have last year with COVID and not playing in front of fans, not having the opportunity for us to play in the NCAA Tournament. But that's a real good question. And that's an ongoing concern going forward, with your roster management.

Q. Mel, I wanted to ask you about Johnny Beecher. Those out here in Boston, maybe we just see the stats. But what does he bring to your team and what have you seen from him development-wise this season?

COACH PEARSON: Yeah, he's been a real key for us here as of late. Unfortunately, Johnny's had injury problems last year and shoulder, and then this year he's all set to have a great year and breaks his thumb and sat out for quite a while again.

So we really didn't get him until the second half of the year. That's when we made our push. A lot of the reason is Johnny anchored a line. He's used his speed. The numbers maybe aren't as high as you'd like them to be. But he's not playing on one of our power play units right

ASAP sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

now. So guys get a lot of points on the power play.

So wouldn't be overly concerned with the stats. It's what he brings to our team. And what he brings is speed, physicality, he's got good size, great on faceoffs. He's more taken a defensive role on the penalty kill and done a great job there. But he's really given us another line in his game, added to our depth. His development has been good. He's continued to grow not only as a player on the ice but off the ice and matured. You can see that now.

Maybe last year I might have to calm him down on the bench a little bit. The other day I found him calming our coaches down on the bench. It's a reversal. He's really grown in many areas. He's still young. He's got a lot of good hockey in front of him.

Q. I'm not trying to be a snitch or anything but after your win the other night on ESPN one of the studio analysts said Michigan would try to end its curse because the program hasn't won a national championship since '98. I know you haven't been at Michigan for every one of those seasons since. But is that a fair assessment? Do you feel like there's been, I don't know, bad luck involved? You've gotten this far, or is it just hard to kind of close the deal?

COACH PEARSON: Well, that's the first time I've heard anything about any curse. But there's no curse on our program. It's hard to win. It's become very difficult. If you look at the games this past weekend, the regional, the overtime games, the one-goal games. Ohio State didn't make it in the NCAA Tournament. They were a heck of a hockey team in our league.

You could go around, in Hockey East, whether it's Boston College or Boston University had good teams. Clarkson. It's difficult. You need to be good. You have to have good players. You need good coaches, good staff. And you have to be lucky.

And even when you play some of your best games, you're not always going to win. A goalie can make a difference in a game, what not. So many factors that go into it.

We haven't even thought about the past. All we can do is we can't change the past but we have something to say about the future. And to write the future. And we have the opportunity this weekend.

So what's happened, has happened. We can't control that. But we have a say in what's going to go forward and what's going to happen in the next coming week.

Q. What have been the biggest improvements you

have witnessed in Luke Hughes from day one until now?

COACH PEARSON: Just I guess just his decision-making. Luke, a great offensive player. But he's become more responsible with making better decisions, because when he gets the puck, he's so confidence he thinks he can end-to-end, seeing some of the things he can do on the offensive blue line and offensive zone. So confident in his ability. And he's had to learn at times, manage the game. What's the situation? What's the score? Where are we at? Do we need offense? Can I just lay the puck in and live to see another day?

And I think that's been one of the areas he's really grown is just his management of the game and understanding that. He's plus, I think, 28, plus 28. A lot of people didn't think he could defend, his defense wasn't this or that. But he's become much, much better in his defending, become much more physical. He's the third youngest player in college hockey this year. And as he grows and gets matured he's going to even get better.

I think the sky's the limit for him. When Owen Power went to the Olympics, Luke really stepped up his game. And obviously to score 17 goals as a freshman, just any freshman is phenomenal. But for a defenseman to put up numbers like that is just great.

So just his all-around game, but more just his approach and being responsible I think are the areas where I've really seen him grow.

Q. Ethan Edwards, around the same time, around the Olympic break, appeared to take strides. I know he was kind of a rotation early on in the season for you guys. How has he become an important piece of this puzzle?

COACH PEARSON: Good observation. He was in and out of the lineup early. Had to find his game. I think he was pushing for offense too much. I think too many players when they come to this level, the freshman, how do you evaluate yourself? A lot of what we find is your numbers, am I putting up the numbers? It's tough.

But when he came back for Christmas we saw a difference. He came in and just started to play solid defensively. And then, you're right, we had some guys out of the lineup, and obviously the Olympics, and his game grew. He got confidence.

And I always say this, you can't go down to 7/11 and say I want \$10 worth of confidence. You have to earn it. And Ethan, once his defensive game started to come around,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

he got that confidence and he was playing well. And then the offensive came a little after that.

But he's turned into a real force for us, a real good player. He's probably our most physical defenseman. He skates well. He has offensive creativity which you saw in Allentown; he scored a big goal, a nice goal. He has patience and poise jumping in from the blue line. We think the sky's the limit for him. We think, when it's all said and done, he's going to be a very good player.

Q. I wanted to ask about the off day in the regional. What did you think of it? How did your team spend the off day? Do you think it affected maybe the amount of fans that traveled at all to support your team?

COACH PEARSON: I really don't know about the fans. That's a good point. As far as we're concerned, I'm still not sure. I'm still not sure. And we won. You're so used to playing back to back. And I know there's situations where overtime comes into play and whatnot, a late game, having to come back. I'm not sure. I'm not sure.

I didn't mind it. I didn't mind it. But it did seem like we were there for a long time. You fly in Tuesday and we end up getting home late Sunday night. So it just seemed like a long trip for us.

But Dave And Busters, I'm not trying to put a plug in, but Dave and Busters, there wasn't as much as we thought in Allentown, the weather wasn't great. Didn't get outside. All the bowling alleys were full. The leagues were all fired up on Saturdays. Dave and Busters, the guys took over Dave and Busters. We practiced that date. Had a light skate. Got some rest, downtime. But I think the guys had a good time at Dave and Busters.

Q. Against Quinnipiac, you guys are facing the statistically the best defense in the country and you score four goals in those two periods. What are you liking from your offense right now heading into this matchup with Denver?

COACH PEARSON: We've got guys who can score. I don't think we created as many grade As as we normally do on average, even though we had some breakaways and some odd-number rushes. But we have guys that can finish. And that's something that's really hard to teach.

You can work on things. You can change the angle. There's different things you can do to try to make people scorers, but we have natural goal scorers, things that we can't teach them and they're good. We get opportunities. We've got poise, patience. We've got guys who know where to shoot the puck on goalies and they bear down.

And now we're getting some offense from some other guys, too.

Yeah, Quinnipiac was -- you look at the numbers, and they're scary. You wonder how you're going to score. But like I said we have guys who get to the net, know how to put it in the net. And that's really important this time of year.

Q. I just wanted to ask you if you could remember back to just your reaction when Matty Beniers became available, when he decommitted from Harvard, how fast you guys had to move. And what he's been like for you for these past two years.

COACH PEARSON: He makes our team better the moment he walks in the door every day. And I've said that many times. Just his personality, positivity, the energy that he brings. A fabulous young man.

I knew Matty because obviously we take a few players from the program over here. And I remember always going to the games and, jeez, he's good, he's really good. Too bad he's going to Harvard. And unfortunately with COVID and what happened in the Ivies, we're very lucky one of our assistant coaches, Kris Mayotte, had a relationship with Matty and his family from when he was out east of Providence. So we were very fortunate to have a little bit of an in there.

Matty wanted a good school. Obviously Harvard's Harvard. But Michigan's not too far behind. So when they started looking at schools, obviously Michigan had what he wanted in a school, not only athletically, as a hockey program, but obviously academically. But he's been fabulous.

He has a bright future. I think, obviously I got a lot of (indiscernible) but I'll put a plug in here for Matty for the Hobey Baker, I know voting's already been done. But he played at the National World Championships. He played at the World Championships, won a medal. He played at the World Juniors, won a gold medal. Played at the Olympics, and he plays at Michigan. We're very fortunate to have a player of Matty's caliber and character. He's been a real solid player for us and one of our most valuable players.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.