

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

Wednesday, April 6, 2022

Boston, Massachusetts, USA

TD Garden

Minnesota Gophers

Bob Motzko

Sammy Walker

Ben Meyers

Semifinal Media Conference



around and have them at this level?

SAMMY WALKER: Yeah, our fans are awesome. I mean, I think everyone's just super excited to have us back. We're just ready to get going, for sure.

THE MODERATOR: What is the mood like?

BEN MEYERS: I think there's a lot of excitement. We see it on campus. We're just hearing about students who are making the trip out here. That was really cool to hear. Just people following us out here.

I think everybody's just excited for us. Mariucci has had great crowds all year, which is obviously fun for us to play in, so...

Yeah, I think a lot of excitement.

THE MODERATOR: Bob, what has it been like?

BOB MOTZKO: They weren't real happy with us in November when we split five straight series. We heard about that. We're not supposed to split. We were playing awful good hockey.

The greatest thing is we had a ton of faith in this group, knew that we had a chance to become a real good hockey team. But I think by the reaction of our crowds coming down the stretch, all-time record at Mariucci, Big Ten championship game, it showed the Gopher fans were out in force, loud and proud. I know they're awful excited.

Q. Bob, you talked about the splitting that was going on, the frustration you had. What turned it around so you could actually get sweeps?

BOB MOTZKO: We weren't frustrated; the fans were. I can tell you. We had a tough schedule. We beat 'em on Friday night, beat 'em pretty good. The next night was a battle. Outside of that, same thing, we played Michigan the week after.

We just stayed steady. I mean, we had to stay steady sometimes in that noise that kind of surrounds social

THE MODERATOR: We have the Gophers here. Bob, maybe you can get us going, talk a little bit about the journey here and your semifinal game tomorrow.

BOB MOTZKO: Well, we sure like Massachusetts, I can tell you that. We were excited to get through the region that we did out in Worcester. I'm still saying it wrong from what I've been told (smiling). That was our thing. The opportunity to come back to Boston, I can tell you, we're one excited group.

Couldn't be more happy for our older guys who have been so close. Two years ago we got shut down by COVID, last year one game away, this year we punch our ticket through. We're an excited group.

THE MODERATOR: Do you know where you're at right now? What is it called, this building?

BEN MEYERS: Boston. No, TD Garden.

THE MODERATOR: Questions. Sammy, you've been the captain of this team for three years now. You've been watching the Gophers for a long time and the Frozen Four. What is it like to be here?

SAMMY WALKER: Yeah, no, it's been unbelievable. Just growing up and obviously watching the Gophers, then playing for them and seeing being so close to making it, finally to be here, it's unbelievable.

Q. What is the reaction when the Gophers make the Frozen Four? It's been seven or eight years since it's happened. The overall reaction to be able to walk

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media. I don't read a lot of social media. My wife tells me about it (smiling).

But you got a feeling with your group, with your leadership. I think I said it today, I think I kicked one trash can all year. This has been a really easy group. We knew we were getting better. We knew what we were capable of doing.

You can't push a panic button in November.

Q. So you were confident all along you could get here if things fell your way?

BOB MOTZKO: Yeah. A year ago we were knocking right on the door. We were in the region final a year ago with the same leadership back, at least same goaltending. Justen Close has been a terrific story. Our young guys did need to catch up and help us offensively because we lost a lion's share of goals last year with Ranta, Reedy, and McManus. We knew we had the returning group that was going to do what they did a year ago.

It took a bit for that to come together.

THE MODERATOR: Bob, how many garbage cans do you average a season?

BOB MOTZKO: You can never go more than three (laughter). I said that a long time ago and I stuck with it.

Q. Ben, I know you have two more games you want to play. This year, Olympics, you have a chance at a national championship. Have you allowed yourself a minute to reflect on the path of the last year?

BEN MEYERS: Yeah, it's been a lot. Honestly, I haven't reflected too much. During this whole time, I've always been a part of a team. That's kind of been the focus. Maybe I'll take some time in the off-season to reflect.

Right now I get to spend each day with a great group of guys. I enjoy every minute of that. That's all I really care about right now.

We have two games left. I hope for all the Minnesota fans that we can make something special happen.

Q. Bob, this is the 20th anniversary of 2002 Gophers national championship season. Do you draw back on that in your coaching career?

BOB MOTZKO: Yes, you do. But unfortunately you draw back on the losses rather than the wins that you think teach you a lesson.

It was a special time back there in 2002 and '03. I was pretty fortunate to jump onboard at the right time. What I do remember is what it meant to everybody, like, in the Twin Cities. 2002 was in St. Paul. What an event that was.

It's been awhile. Our fans are excited. But from a coaching standpoint, these guys don't remember that, unless they hear stories from Paul Martin and myself. It's about their experience, what we've been going through, the path we've been on, the journey we've been on.

I'll go back to a year ago when we were so close to get to the region final and Mankato knocked us off. That leaves a burning hole in all of us. You draw on that, on how it felt, what happened in that game, maybe what led up to that game.

I think there's some things that we can draw off of that. The only thing is Mankato can draw off it, too. That's why it sets up for one heck of a battle tomorrow night.

Q. Coach talked about learning from losses. Has there been a loss this season that has been particularly enlightening for you guys and why?

SAMMY WALKER: Yeah, I mean, I think the Michigan and the Big Ten final there, we were kind of on a run there, then we just kind of ran into a good team. I think we needed that coming into the playoffs just to get us ready. That was a playoff hockey game. I think that was good for us.

BEN MEYERS: Yeah, I'd agree. I'd have to say the same game. I think it was a little learning lesson for us on that's championship playoff hockey. If you get that win, you get to hang a banner. I think we learned those games are a lot harder than any other game you're going to play.

Yeah, I think that's what we learned.

Q. A question about Sam Rossini, a kid that came back to your program. Talk about what he means to the team.

BOB MOTZKO: A unique situation. We kind of had it a year ago, as well, when COVID was going around, we brought Schmidty back.

I kind of bumped into Sam a couple times. He said, Coach, I can come back, you know. He still had that fifth-year. We'll think about it, Sam.

I kind of knew he wasn't kidding. He's just a terrific young man. Last year during world juniors, we lost three

defensemen in the world juniors. Sam didn't play a lot a year ago, but he went in and did a great job for us. This year there was a chance we were going to lose two to the Olympics. With COVID still going on and injuries, I called him, he was sitting behind a desk. I said, I'm only going to do it if we lose two defensemen to the Olympics.

He said, No, Coach, even if you lose one, I want to do it.

I think these guys could answer better. He comes back in the locker room and he fit right in with our guys. He got a couple games for us, did a terrific job. He truly is an incredible young man to have in our locker room, to be around us.

He's enjoying the experience as much as any of these guys. I think these guys would attest to it. I love the young man. I'm really excited he's back with us, gets to experience this. He said it beats sitting behind a desk, too.

SAMMY WALKER: Yeah, no, that hits it on the spot. He's a great guy, one of my good friends. He's a guy that he always invites everyone to his house.

But, no, we're a tight group. When he came in, even brought us closer. It's been nothing but good.

Q. Coach, last year nine shots in the first two periods against Mankato. How heavy did you go on the tape of that game with the guys versus maybe this is a different team?

BOB MOTZKO: I got ten minutes through it, the two goals we gave up, they were just dumb mistakes on our part. I don't need to see any more of it because we're not playing like that right now.

They can do that to you. When we got down, we got discouraged, and they can do that to you. That's why it's important tomorrow night in the first period. That is an old, grizzled veteran hockey team we're going to play. I can already tell you, you can replay the tape of how the game's going to be, we have to be up for the fight and we got to bring the fight the first period to them.

It's going to go back and forth. They're going to smack us. We got to get our smacks back to keep the game on an even playing field. We didn't do that last year when we got down. We got discouraged in the game. It happens. Let's hope we learn from it.

Q. I've spoken to Hasty about how much he loves to be part of the fraternity of five Division I coaches. How much bragging rights are there from last year? What is it like to be part of this fraternity?

BOB MOTZKO: We are a very close group. There were three Minnesota teams last year and we weren't one of them. They were going to enjoy that with us not being there. If you're going to pick on one team, they're going to pick on the Gophers, I can tell you that.

We got our shot this year and we're back in it with them. Sandelin was here today. I thanked Sandy for finally letting someone else come to this darn thing (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: Did you get a call from John Perpich by chance?

BOB MOTZKO: Regularly.

Q. (No microphone.)

BOB MOTZKO: Well, he's only got one loyalty. Is he captain of the Gophers? I think so.

Q. What leads into the third period success you've had? Is it the gritty play or just maybe something else?

BEN MEYERS: Yeah, honestly I don't quite know. I wasn't even aware of that stat. I think we just stick to the game plan. It doesn't matter what period it is for us. We just keep playing our brand of hockey. I guess we've been fortunate enough to play better than teams down the stretch.

THE MODERATOR: Some secret coaching deal there?

BOB MOTZKO: No. If I told you, it wouldn't be a secret, so no.

Q. The second half of the season and the run you went on there, especially defensively, this Frozen Four, has four of the top four-scoring teams in the country. How quickly did integrating Justen into the crease and how did it become a genesis real quick?

BOB MOTZKO: It took him two weeks. He went 2-2 his first two weeks, then he went on a roll.

Justen, he didn't play for two and a half years. I'm telling you, all of us had tremendous faith in him. You just can't be sitting on the bench and getting game time. He did it. We just had to keep throwing him out there. You could see him getting stronger as it went and gaining confidence in himself, the players in him. It was just a handful of things that just kept coming together.

Probably none more important, pretty impressive numbers,

pretty impressive what he's done.

SAMMY WALKER: Justen has been outstanding for us. I think we also kind of learned to play the right way, not cheat the game. That's kind of when we figured out our game.

Q. Bob, you've been through this once previously. What did you learn about preparing a team to play on this stage?

BOB MOTZKO: I don't know if I can draw back that far to say what. I can just tell you going through what this team has gone through the last two years, one, to get into the tournament today, it's not an automatic anymore like it was for so many years. Michigan went 19 or 20 straight years. This doesn't happen all the time now.

For what we went through the last two years, I'll even say three years, to win an NCAA game a year ago, to get into a regional final, I've already repeated that, then to go into difficult Worcester - I just said it wrong again - but there was no question that was a heavyweight bracket that we got thrown into.

I'm more on that right now than looking back to 2013 and 2002. What these guys have gone through, what we went up against in UMass and Western Michigan, I think it really helps us going up against Mankato because they're two big, strong teams. It's exactly what we're going to see tomorrow night.

Q. Bob, speaking of Justen, you know you needed a volunteer goalie coach, you reached out to Mike Hastings to talk with Brennan before he came over. That seems uniquely like a college hockey thing that you would have a conversation. What went into that and the relationship you two have?

BOB MOTZKO: That wouldn't be unique. In the coaching world, we are going to reach out to other coaches. You see guys switching jobs and changing schools, I did it many times. He was commuting for seven years. Just had a second young baby, brand-new baby at the time, was actually a way to keep him closer to home. They're a volunteer, don't get paid. Also saved on his gas bill driving back and forth.

We're very fortunate. He had great experience, a great job there. He's terrific with our goaltending. So we're really happy with that. But we're a pretty close-knit group. Always going to talk to each other except when it comes to recruiting.

THE MODERATOR: Any Boston connection? Been here?

Played here?

BEN MEYERS: No.

SAMMY WALKER: No.

Q. How do you control your emotions going into a game like tomorrow?

BEN MEYERS: Yeah, I think you get a lot of experience doing that throughout the year. We play a lot of big games for regular season titles, then for Big Ten playoff titles. I think you got to draw back on those experiences and rely on what gave you success in those situations.

SAMMY WALKER: Yeah, I mean, it's a huge game, but we've been playing hockey our whole lives. Kind of once you get a couple shifts in, it's just another game, so...

Q. Bob has talked about how he's not on social media a lot. What social media platform would Bob be best at and why?

THE MODERATOR: Who wants to start with that one?

BEN MEYERS: I don't know.

SAMMY WALKER: I'd love to see him on TikTok, but...

BEN MEYERS: No, I don't know.

SAMMY WALKER: Instagram, I don't know.

BEN MEYERS: I could see him having some funny tweets. I don't know.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, have you been on TikTok?

BOB MOTZKO: I have no idea what TikTok is. I tweet a couple times a year.

THE MODERATOR: Is that you yourself tweeting?

BOB MOTZKO: Yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Will there be a tweet from Boston?

BOB MOTZKO: I almost did it the other day because I walked in, the hotel has a display of David Ortiz. I'm a big-time Twins fan. Throw that in my face. We gave him away for free (smiling). Think of that. He was a Twin.

Us Minnesotans get that right now. You're welcome (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Guys, thanks so much.

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