

NCAA Men's Frozen Four: Michigan vs Denver

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Boston, Massachusetts, USA

TD Garden

Michigan Wolverines

Coach Mel Pearson

Garrett Van Wyhe

Nick Blankenburg

Semifinal Postgame Media Conference



jersey again. But very thankful for my time here and I'll remember it forever.

Q. Erik Portillo has been stellar for you guys all season. He gave you guys a really good shot tonight. Could you reflect on his season and what he did for you guys?

NICK BLANKENBURG: He's an unbelievable goalie, and an unbelievable guy to have around on the team. He's a great competitor. He'll do anything to win.

And that guy will have a successful career in the NHL, I can tell you that, just his work ethic and his attitude and just how bad he wants to win. A lot of respect to him and wish him the best at what he does in his future.

Q. Garrett, what did Denver do that kind of kept your team from having, I guess, it's normal offense? And was it a frustrating game in some respects?

GARRETT VAN WYHE: I think with any hockey game you get ups and downs and flows. And just staying even keeled is probably the biggest thing for us.

But, I mean, when it comes down to it, I think we kind of got a late start, and Mel harped on us all week that it's all about the start, all about start, all about the start. And in that aspect I think we have to take accountability.

But that being said, I mean, Denver's a great team. They made it to the Frozen Four. Like I said, at the end of the day, I think it just comes down to us and our game. And I don't think we executed for a full 60 minutes.

Q. You guys have a pretty young team. Can you put it in perspective what it meant this season to not only be part of this team but to be crucial leaders for this team as well?

NICK BLANKENBURG: Yeah, I mean, looking back at just this last year and just thinking about how I was able to be the captain of this team and -- I mean you look at all the NHL draft picks and you look at all the guys who are going to have successful NHL careers, it means the world to me.

Denver - 3, Michigan - 2 (OT)

COACH PEARSON: First and foremost, I just want to congratulate Denver. It was a hard-fought game. They're a heck of a hockey team. I want to wish them all the best. They did a nice job.

Secondly, I couldn't be -- this is my 40th year in Division I hockey -- I couldn't be more proud of the young men that I was able to coach this year. It's the most fun I've had. And I owe it all to them.

And I just told them at the end, that this one game is not going to define who they are as hockey players or people. There are a lot of expectations on this group, and they exceeded those expectations and dealt with all that pressure so well. So I just want to thank them publicly.

Q. Nick, yesterday your coach praised your character and mentioned that you turned down an NHL contract to come back and play an extra year. When you reflect on this last season, this extra season that you got to have, what are your thoughts on what it meant to spend that extra period of time?

NICK BLANKENBURG: Good question. I think any time, being a Michigan kid and getting a chance to wear the letter at Michigan, I think it's something special. And God has blessed me in so many different ways over my hockey career. And I'm just so thankful and so blessed to be able to wear the letter at the University of Michigan and to be able to be part of the leadership group at this team and to be able to graduate from U of M. So very blessed and very thankful.

And it's hard to put into words thinking of not putting on that



And like I said earlier, just to be a Michigan guy and to be able to be the captain of this team and be able to lead these guys will -- I'll definitely cherish it forever and it's something that nobody can ever take away from me being able to come to the University of Michigan, be a captain and have lifelong friendships forever.

GARRETT VAN WYHE: I think just adding on to what Blanks was saying, they're just unbelievable teammates, unbelievable guys on and off the ice. And they worked their asses off -- I don't know if I'm able to say that right now -- but they gave us everything, everything they've got. So I'm really proud of them. I'm really proud to be one of their teammates. So like Nick said, I'll cherish it forever.

Q. Nick, in what ways did you see Owen Power grow as a leader and on the ice this season after he came back?

NICK BLANKENBURG: Yeah, I think just his maturity on and off the ice. I know I was talking to him yesterday, and we've been roommates ever since he came in here. And you just get so close to someone and you care about these guys a lot. And you see them grow, and it's something special to see it, especially with Owen.

He's never done laundry before he came here. And his mom and his girlfriend would cook his meals for him. He's able to do that now. So just maturing and becoming more of a man has helped him off the ice. And just dealing with the whole college experience of time management, of managing expectations of school. He never got to do that last year with COVID.

And just on the ice, you see his confidence all over the ice. And just his maturity as a player has grown over this last year. So I'll be excited to watch him continue his career on.

Q. Can you get to the Xs and Os about why it was difficult out there tonight? Obviously Denver had some good layers. We'd seen their defense blocking shots. Everything seemed to be what was somewhat frustrating for your offense. What did they do right?

COACH PEARSON: You know, the first period they had a third guy back all the time. And we tried to carry the puck through that. They created too many turnovers especially in what we call the danger zones, the blue line, the top of the circles.

As the game wore on, we got a little bit better with our puck possession, started to make some plays, got a little more comfortable. But they played desperate. And with the

layers and the blocking the shots, they took a lot away from us. And we just would dump it back in the corner and reload and grind.

They're just structurally really good defensively. Everybody thought this might be a high-scoring game. But both teams played solid defensively. And the goaltending was great, too. They check. That's their MO. And everything starts off their defense offensively and they worked hard tonight. They really made it difficult on us, as you mentioned.

Q. It's been talked about throughout the year that you guys have guys -- you're not going to have the same group of guys together in coming years. I'm wondering for you as a coach what you hope this group of guys gets from out of this season and their time at Michigan?

COACH PEARSON: First and foremost is the friendships that they've built. Those are lifelong friendships, as these guys alluded to.

I've been doing this a long time. This team was as close as any. They really came together as a group, whether it was missing guys from controversy, the Olympics, whatever it might be. I mean, they dealt with a lot. And just the pressure of -- just because you get drafted, you're a high draft pick, no one sprinkles magic dust on you and you become this great player. You have to earn that. Those guys continued the work and they were driven. Just a fantastic group of young men to be around.

Q. Getting back to the Xs and Os part, your defense likes to jump in the play a lot, but they're -- a lot of stretch breakout passes, it looked like. Did that prevent you from being able to get your defense up in the zone a lot?

COACH PEARSON: A little bit. They did, when they had time and possession they stretched us, and that makes it a little more difficult. For us we wanted to make sure we played sound D. Even in the zone. Like, we didn't jump in as much as we did because they played so sound defensively.

You saw the odd time we jumped up. Luke Hughes jumps up on a 2-on-1 in overtime, just really starts in the defensive zone. We just didn't seem to have the push like we do. But give them credit. They did a fantastic job of just not allowing us to get into our game.

Q. You got six goals from the fourth line in this tournament, all seniors. What have they meant and your senior class in general, to this team?

COACH PEARSON: They're fantastic. I mean, you need seniors. You need seniors to lead your team. And not only did they score those goals, but they were great leaders. And just handling all the expectations and the young people.

But they played their best hockey when they really needed to. They stepped up for us. I mean, they're not known for goal-scoring. Try to use them against other top lines and checking, but we got a bonus from those guys. They not only checked, they scored.

But they did everything we asked them to. And I just wish we got a little bit more from other lines that played like that. They played to our structure and had success. It wasn't pretty. They didn't make a lot of fancy plays. They scored.

Q. What did you think about Owen Power tonight in a tight game like that? And your thoughts just reflecting on how he's improved during this season?

COACH PEARSON: He's made great strides -- I think Nick alluded to it, not only on the ice but off the ice. And just his maturity and leadership, taking charge of a game. Here's a young man that's played in the World Championships, played in the Olympics. And we really needed him to take a step forward this year.

His offensive game has just matured. You could see he wants the puck on the stick. He's driven. He's a game-changer, and he wants that. But his game, from last year where he was to where he is now, this year, has just grown exponentially. And Buffalo is going to get a really good hockey player. I hope maybe one more year we can get out of him.

Q. I know you mentioned 40 years in college hockey. Have you gotten the sense that this tournament has become more difficult to win over the years with the parity in college hockey?

COACH PEARSON: This is my 13th time at the Frozen Four as a coach, 14th overall. I played as a player. I've been to three championship games in the 14 years. It's hard to get here. There were some really good teams that never had the opportunity to get here.

You have to be good. And you need a little bit of luck. We just didn't seem to have any lady luck on our side tonight. But these guys did a great job. Especially all the expectations and the pressure that they had to even get here. And we were in the game. It's one shot could go either way. And that's the single game elimination, especially in hockey makes it so difficult to win.

Q. You mentioned your 40 years in the game and how hard it is to get here. David's been here twice now in such a short period of time with his age. Could you just talk about that, how impressive it is to see somebody like that come to this stage?

COACH PEARSON: He's a good, young coach. He's done a fabulous job. You look at the recruiting and the players that they have there. And he was a good assistant coach. And they've recruited well. I like the way they play. They played the right way, a lot of talk about they mirror us, have some skill guys.

He's done a real good job. He's got a bright future. Got a bright future. And good for him. I think I taught him a thing or two. I coached him back at a midget festival, I think, when he was 15 years old. He reminded me today, I kept calling him Matt. He had a brother named Matt that played in the NHL a long time. I kept calling David Matt. But very happy for him. And they're going to do a good job.

Q. Obviously your contract's expiring on April 30th. Will you be the coach for Michigan next season?

COACH PEARSON: I'm glad you care about me, but I'm just going to talk about the game and our team tonight.

Q. It seemed like your team played its best hockey early in that overtime period, what was your message to them in that third intermission?

COACH PEARSON: Get the lead. We only needed one shot. It's one shot. We were in the game. We hadn't played our best. I thought as the game wore on we got better and better versus some games recently that we got worse as the game went on. But we were right there, one goal.

The message was to keep playing, play our game and get everything to the net. There's no bad shot in overtime. And we had it. I thought the first five minutes there especially, or maybe the first 10 that we were the better team, we just couldn't get pucks through them or to the net or get a bounce or a break.

Q. Yesterday we talked about whether it was going to be '98 or '97. But it didn't look like you guys were physically not ready to play this game like '97. Would you say that's -- looked more like an execution thing, not necessarily being ready physically.

COACH PEARSON: You know, there's a lot that goes into it. And again, it's one game. And they're good. Every team here is really good. Minnesota State's good. Minnesota's good. Denver's good. The teams we played

last weekend are really good. It's hard to advance. I thought we were ready to play. We're a fairly loose group. They were comfortable today.

As a coach, all you can do is give them the opportunity and lead them and give them a few things they need to work on. I thought they did that.

But Denver played hard. They played well. And there's a reason Denver's won -- I don't know -- is it 32 games now? They're a good hockey team, and you have to play your best. Even when you play your best, some nights you're not going to win.

And I don't think it was our best game tonight. We had a lot of guys play hard, but there were certain guys who had difficulty playing in this game tonight for one reason or another. But hats off to Denver. Don't take anything away from them.

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