

NCAA Men's Frozen Four: Michigan vs Quinnipiac

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Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Michigan Wolverines Interim head coach Brandon Naurato

Semifinal Media Conference



Q. You've been there at the Frozen Four as a player and as an assistant coach and now as a head coach. Your thoughts as we head towards Tampa?

COACH NAURATO: We're excited about the opportunity. It's good to get a couple of days to rest and recover and start the prep. But excited to be there. And looking forward to a great event.

Q. Questions about Luke Hughes. When you look at his development, what would you say has been the biggest area of growth from year one to year two? And the second part, when you look at young defensemen, the first rounders that come out of college after two years, what does Luke share in terms of similarities or what makes him different?

COACH NAURATO: I would say Luke has grown a ton. I think first and foremost as a leader. We all know what he can do with the puck. Even from the first half of his freshman year until now, Luke's always been unbelievable just with his physical skills of being reactionary in regards to breaking other individual players down.

I think he has more of a plan with what he's doing now and reading queues instead of seeing what happens and making a decision, he's got a plan to bait a guy left to go right, if that makes sense.

And his overall defending, he's always been a good defensor. I think he's become an elite defender using his physical attributes like his skating just to close time and space and kill plays as quick as possible.

Q. When you look at a lot of these defensemen, like Zach Werenski, Cale Makar, Quinn Hughes in all seriousness, when you look at those players seems like those two guys within two years you know what

makes them legit. When you look at Luke what are some of the similarities he shares with guys like that, or is he kind of a different sort of person altogether in terms of what he's done at two years at Michigan?

COACH NAURATO: I think I've worked with both Quinn and Zach Werenski for years. And I would say similarities, just like their overall hockey IQ, how they drive -- play through possession, I'd say the difference with Luke is, not that Zach and Quinn don't do this, but just his ability to break people down one-on-one. Like he beats people one-on-one at the offensive blue line. A lot of coaches wouldn't like this kind of stuff when you're not supposed to.

These young prospects are, like, ah, it works in college, or will it work in NHL? Talking to both Quinn and Zach about Luke, I believe they think it's going to work at NHL level. And like any prospect Luke will have success and learn along the way but he'll be an elite player for a long time.

Q. After going through the run last year as an assistant and now reaching the Frozen Four this year, what are some constants that you've come to know about winning this time of year? Is it a certain type of team or style that has success? What's the difference maker in these types of games?

COACH NAURATO: I think it's just playing your best hockey at the right time. Obviously everyone's going to be up for the games. One thing I told the guys at the beginning of the year and I think it rings true is that it's not the most talented teams that win at the end. It's the teams that play together and it's the teams that are closest.

And we've got a really tight team, I would say for us. We've had this business approach going into the playoffs this year and what we do on the road. And I would tell them to have fun. Don't put too much stress on yourselves. Enjoy the ride, enjoy the process, and let's just make the most of the opportunity.

But we're going to keep it light. We'll be prepared. Our routine will be consistent. But just enjoy the ride. That would be my advice to the guys.

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Q. Knowing the amount of work you put into this, I would think you've aspired to meet any challenge you face as a head coach this season head on. So that said, what has been your biggest challenge as a head coach this season in reaching this point?

COACH NAURATO: I think my biggest challenge is that everything's new. And you've got to figure a lot of things out and problem solve on the fly. I think it's important to surround yourself with the right people that have some more institutional knowledge or ask for help. But in general, it would be like any professional, if you're a real estate agent, you're switching companies or you have a similar type of role in the same marketplace.

So I feel comfortable in what I'm doing. It's just the first time. I would say I haven't failed at everything yet to have learned from it, if that makes sense. So just everything being the first time would be the biggest challenge, and we're just figuring it out as we go.

Q. My question is about last weekend. You played two very different games, both, from my perspective, entertaining in very different ways. What is it that your team can take from those two different kinds of games into the Frozen Four that you can learn from it?

COACH NAURATO: After the 11-1 win from Colgate we just, hey, great job, let's refocus. We have a job to do a couple nights later. We played a really good, very well coached Penn State team. I thought you never play a perfect game but I thought we played really, really good hockey, hockey that would put us in a position to be up three or four goals halfway through the game.

And they had some great goaltending and they made a push as well. I think we built some more confidence in our team that we can win tight games. And when it doesn't go in the back of the net to just continue to stick to the process.

So just gaining more confidence that whether it's 2-to-1 or 7-to-6 and there's a lot of penalties or very few, we can play any style of game.

Q. Looking at the extra week off between the regionals and Frozen Four, what do you do to make that to your advantage? And is it a situation where would you rather be playing right away?

COACH NAURATO: I'm okay with a week off. I'm okay playing right away. I think it allows guys to rest up a little bit, recover the body, and then just get the feel back. Like, we'll probably focus on a lot of tactics and just overall skill development this week. And then we'll get back into the

normal routine.

I want these guys to continue to feel good. I want them to enjoy coming to the rink every day, feel like they're getting better and just having fun with being with their teammates. So that would probably be the plan going into the break.

Q. You played in a Frozen Four and you were an assistant coach last year. What do you draw on from those experiences? And what are your memories, I guess, as a Frozen Four player and as a Frozen Four assistant coach that you'll take into this year?

COACH NAURATO: I would say just the momentum shifts in the game. The Big Ten Tournament, the NCAA Regionals and then especially the Frozen Four, we were down 2-0 to Notre Dame, we end upcoming back, we lose in overtime.

Last year Denver scores the first goal. It's kind of back and forth. They get one. We get one, and then you go to overtime again. You never know what's going to happen.

You might have to kill a 5-minute major early in the game. You might be up two, down two. But you have to stick to the process and keep the bench energy up and be even keeled because the momentum shifts, they come in waves. And it's something that you can't control.

What you can control is how you act going forward. So that's what I would say. The momentum shifts in the game. That's what I took from it.

Q. Last year was, I imagine, maybe perceived as one of the most talented teams that Michigan has had. This year maybe on paper not the same way yet here you are at the same spot. Obviously still extremely talented, not selling anything short, but how did you sort of keep things going? And does this speak to just Michigan hockey, the brand and where things are -- I don't know the exact phrase you've used -- but sort of implied this may be somewhat of a retooling, reculturing things after everything that's happened the past few months, now under your tutelage, what's this say about Michigan hockey and to be back here?

COACH NAURATO: That's been the goal. I think Michigan as a university sells itself. It's great to get talented players. We want the right type of player. And not all talented players or NHL draft picks or first-rounders are doing what our kids are doing; they're getting better.

There's first-round draft picks graduating from college and not signing after two years. There's first-round draft picks in the NCAA with only five goals. So just because you

have talent doesn't mean you have success as a team or individually.

And that's a credit to our kids. That's not about me. That's a credit to our culture. And these guys just want to do it for their teammates, for Michigan. And kids are getting better every single day. And that doesn't mean just skills. That means they're becoming better people on and off the ice.

Q. The Big Ten and so many teams in this Frozen Four have so many young talented players. Is there anything intentional you do to help them along through the ups and downs of the season to get the most of them at this part of the year?

COACH NAURATO: Everything we do from week one to now is all about player development and player-first focused. It's constant communication and building relationships and trust with these kids so that when we are delivering a message, they understand it comes from the heart, whether it's positive or a teaching moment.

But everything we do is about these kids and their heart, their mind and their bodies.

Q. Is there anything unique about this group that's made them so successful in that journey?

COACH NAURATO: They're super, super tight. And I think our senior class and our leadership group has done an unbelievable job of bringing this group together from day one and gaining the trust and respect of the freshmen and vice versa. And we've got a lot of freshmen leaders now and future captains in this class, like, a lot. So I forget that quote but you've got to follow before you lead. We've got a lot of leaders learning to follow at a young age. It's been awesome.

Q. We've talked all season about how strong the Big Ten is this year. Obviously, in the history of the conference, there are no national champions from the Big Ten. I guess what does it take for a Big Ten team, either you or Minnesota, to win it all this year?

COACH NAURATO: I don't think it's one thing. What it would take? It would take winning the game. I don't think it's one thing. I think that the Big Ten is so deep this year from 1 through 7 that it's prepared teams like us and Minnesota to play in tough games every night. And they're going to get even tougher through the Frozen Four, but you hope through some experience of success and failure throughout the regular season and playoffs that we've experienced enough to be ready to do something going into this event.

Q. Something that's been striking throughout the postseason has been this team's confidence at navigating all sorts of different situations. I think Mackie said after the game on Sunday there was never a doubt in his mind you were going to win, even trailing going into that third period. From your perspective where does that confidence come from?

COACH NAURATO: I think the confidence comes from how tight the group is. We've had some success. But just the preparation every day, like, everybody works hard. But what we're doing every day, in our way, they believe that that prepares them to give them a chance. And when you believe you can do it and have a chance, that's confidence.

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