

Webster Takes the Lead In Title Game Win

Denver Captain Scores 2 Goals as Pioneers Earn 3rd NCHC Championship



(photo: Aaron Eckmann)

by **Heather Rule**/Special to CHN

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Denver senior captain McKade Webster remembers the last two NCHC Frozen Faceoffs in St. Paul when his Pioneers didn't score a goal and were bounced in the semifinals. That's part of what made Saturday's championship feel so good.

Webster scored two goals to help propel No. 2-seed Denver to a 4-1 victory over No. 5 seed Omaha in the NCHC Frozen Faceoff championship game Saturday at Xcel Energy Center.

"It meant a lot, and I wanted to win this one," Webster said. "At the start of the year, I preached it. So, I'm happy with the guys and the fellas and everything they gave to win this trophy."

After getting down 1-0 to Omaha at the first intermission, Webster scored a pair of goals within the first five minutes of the second period to give his team a lead they never gave up. Webster added a goal in Friday's semifinal, giving him 14 goals for the season, three for the tournament and four goals in his last four games overall.

His first goal came at 1:33 of the second period when he slipped the puck through the five-hole. For his encore, he was along the boards when he fired a shot that went into the net in the upper corner stick-side. He said he wasn't sure what worked so well for him to tally three goals this weekend.

"Just getting the puck to the net," Webster said. "Just keeping the game simple. Just playoff hockey. To try to take the game to the next level as much as you can."

His only other multi-goal effort this season came back on Nov. 25 in a 9-0 victory against Yale in which he tallied a pair.

“There’s a lot of guys in that room that did a lot to get us to this point and win that trophy,” Webster said. “Whatever it is to get the team to this point, it feels good.”

The victory is Denver’s third NCHC Frozen Faceoff championship and 18th conference tournament championship in program history. The Pioneers also won the inaugural conference tournament in 2014, a victory over Miami at Target Center in Minneapolis and then won in 2018 on the same Xcel Energy Center ice against St. Cloud State.

Denver returned for the 2023-24 season with a young group, but a lot of those young players have come a long way since the start of the season, buying into the team-first mentality, said senior Connor Caponi.

“I think a lot of guys are leaving their pride at the door and playing for each other,” Caponi said. “Which is what you need to win a national championship. I think everybody’s just coming together really well. We believe in each other. It’s been awesome to see from these young players.”

A couple of those underclassmen contributed in big ways Saturday night.

Webster’s opposite winger, freshman Miko Matikka, scored a goal on a delayed penalty late in the third period to make it a two-goal lead. Matikka also tallied three goals on the weekend. Sophomore Rieger Lorenz scored with two minutes to play, giving him seven goals in his last nine games and 15 on the season.

Webster has been the leader of the group, and those young players including 11 freshmen, all season.

The Pioneers would not be sitting with the NCHC Frozen Faceoff trophy and all the other



(photo: Aaron Eckmann)



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Omaha

strides they've made this season, without Webster's leadership.

"I think the team has followed him into the battle all season long," Denver coach David Carle said. "Because he's willing to put his body on the line. It's not just words with him. It's more action. And he's done an incredible job with a young team here, leading them."

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Webster can connect with his teammates and hold people accountable, Carle added. Webster is also a very competitive person who wants to "win at all costs" and contribute any way he can. He's making his teammates better through his communication with them, Carle said.

After he got his hardware, Webster's sister, Makenna, will play for the women's NCAA championship with Ohio State on Sunday. So, it's been quite the weekend already for the Webster family, something Carle pointed out after Friday's semifinal victory over St. Cloud State.

Carle said his team showed "a lot of growth this year" to win the NCHC championship. He added that his team learned a lot of good lessons as they now head into what he called the "most important part of the season" coming up with the NCAA Tournament firmly in the windshield.

While Denver won its third NCHC tournament trophy, Omaha fell just short in its first appearance in the NCHC Frozen Faceoff. The Pioneers swept the Mavericks in January in Omaha. Since that point, Omaha went on a run of 12-2-2 and went unbeaten in 10 of its last 11 games before Saturday night. That run got Omaha all the way to the NCAAs, but short of an NCHC crown.

Omaha senior Brock Bremer scored his second goal in as many nights, and eighth of the season, at 13:56 of the first period Saturday for a 1-0 lead. The game essentially remained a one-goal contest until later in regulation. Although Denver outshot Omaha 12-3 in the third period and 35-16 for the game.

"I think they (Denver) did a good job of kind of clogging up the neutral zone and making us put pucks behind them, which we wanted to do," said Omaha forward Jack Randl. "They were pretty good on our breakouts there. We wanted to try and slow them down. I thought we did that, for the most part, but they did a pretty good job of slowing us down as well."

Though disappointed with the result, Omaha coach Mike Gabinet said he liked his team's game, for the most part.

"I liked our game plan. I liked our game," Gabinet said. "I thought we kind of made a couple of unfortunate plays there in the second period that resulted in a goal against. And they're a team that can make you pay for a turnover."

