

# At full-strength again, Gophers women's hockey looking like a title contender



By Heather Rule ([/author/heather-rule/](#)) Dec 10, 2018



With a thinner roster in an Olympic year last season, the Gophers women's hockey team fell short of its past postseason success, losing in the NCAA quarterfinals.

Disappointing year, right?

"I think it's funny people look at last year like, 'Oh, it didn't go great because (the Gophers) didn't make it to the Frozen Four,'" said redshirt senior and 2018 gold medalist Kelly Pannek. "But they won the Final Faceoff last year. And the year before that we didn't win anything."

Maybe that just shows how high the bar is set for Gophers women's hockey, a program that's made 11 consecutive NCAA postseason appearances.

With seven national titles (2000, 2004, 2005, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016), expectations are there. After a bit of a different year last season — one without Pannek, who was part of Team USA that won gold in the Olympics, and without contributors Amy and Sarah Potomak, both on Canada's national team — the Gophers finished 24-11-3 and were saddled with that national quarterfinal loss.

“We were good last year, but we weren't elite of the elite,” said Gophers coach Brad Frost, who added that last year was one of the most fun he's coached. “The bar is set really high.”

You just can't win every year, even though that's the goal, because it's not necessarily realistic, Pannek said. She looks to regular-season conference championships as the big benchmark. Those feats show a team's consistency, especially in a competitive WCHA.

Back at full strength this season, the No. 2-ranked Gophers look poised to make another deep postseason run in hopes for their eighth national title. They're 17-2-1 overall after a home sweep of Robert Morris this weekend sent them into the three-week holiday break with a 10-game winning streak. They sit atop the WCHA with 28 points and a 9-2-1 record — just ahead of No. 1 Wisconsin, though the Badgers have two games in hand.

Their only blemishes this season came against Ohio State and at Wisconsin in October. They also tied Minnesota Duluth 2-2 on Oct. 6. The No. 7 Buckeyes and Bulldogs rank third and fourth in the WCHA standings behind the Gophers and Badgers.

Last year's WCHA scoring champion, Grace Zumwinkle, noted how last year's Gophers were different, where they seemed to struggle in games and lost more than they should have, she said.

“I think this year especially, we found a way, even in the close games, to finish teams off, which I think is a cruciality for a top team,” Zumwinkle said.

Overall, the coach and players are happy with where things stand headed into the break. Again, with the end-goal in mind of striving to win, hang banners and give themselves a shot to win a national championship, Frost said.

“Really like the way we're playing,” Frost said. “The expectations from fans and others out there is that if we don't play perfect ... but gosh dang it, we're playing some real good hockey here.”

Redshirt senior Nicole Schammel leads the Gophers in scoring this season with six goals and 25 points, just seven off her career-high 32 points she put up last season. Schammel is paired with sophomore forward Zumwinkle, the team leader in goals with 13.



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Let the teddy bears fly! Zumwinkle gets the #Gophers on the board.



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Eleven Gophers forwards have tallied at least four goals this season while 21 players have at least a point. Eleven players are also into double-digits in points. All the points make sense for this Gophers team that averages 4.35 goals-per-game, a top mark among WCHA teams and second-best in Division-I. The Gophers went 7-0-0 in November when they scored 40 goals for a 5.71 goals-per-game average.

All this makes ranking line combinations seem like an irrelevant task.

“I don’t think anyone on our team really thinks of first, second, third, fourth line,” Schammel said. “I think that we’ve all been contributing, and there’s really no difference of where you’re listed in the lineup.

“I think that it kind of makes people hungry to be the first one to score and get the team going.”

The depth they have this season up and down the lineup is unprecedented for the program, according to Frost, who's in his 12th year as Gophers head coach.

"We've never been able to have 12, 13, 14 forwards, (and) six deep playing consistently," Frost said. "It's been a great boost for us."

Part of that depth also comes from a stellar freshman class. So much local talent, in fact, that Frost couldn't even single anybody out. The five forwards are all in the top-12 on the team.

2018 Ms. Hockey winner Taylor Heise and redshirt freshman Amy Potomak are tied for fourth in team scoring with 16 points apiece; they also are tied for second in freshman scoring among WCHA players. Edina's Emily Oden has five goals and five assists. Catie Skaja, from New Prague, is also in double-digits with 10 points. Hill-Murray grad Abigail Boreen has a pair of goals and pair of assists, plus she leads the conference in faceoff percentage at .707 (65 faceoff wins, 27 losses). Defensemen Gracie Ostertag and Crystalyn Hengler are in the top-six in defensive pairings and have four and three assists each.

Sophomore Emily Brown leads WCHA defensemen in scoring with four goals and 16 points. She's also third among WCHA players in plus-minus at plus-22. Frost has been happy with her consistent play.

"I think she's been arguably our top defenseman, both from a defensive standpoint but also from the offensive end as well," Frost said.

In net for the Gophers, sophomore and Vancouver native Alex Gulstene has seen the bulk of the time, after appearing in 13 games (11 starts) as a freshman. She's undefeated this year with a 13-0-0 record, including shutouts against Ohio State and at Wisconsin. She's allowed 21 total goals and no more than three goals in a single game, which pairs well with the high-scoring Gophers offense.

"She's made some really big saves in some games that have kept our leads pretty stretched out," Schammel said.

Sydney Scobee, out of Breck School, has also seen some time in the cage, most recently getting the 5-0 shutout win over Robert Morris on Saturday. The junior transfer from the University of Vermont is 4-2-1 with two shutouts this season and boasts a 1.42 GAA and .930 save percentage.

## Pannek comes back

One of the biggest differences in personnel is having gold-medalist Pannek back on the team. Even preparing and skating in the Olympics last year, her mind was never too far away from her Gophers, as she said she kept a pretty close eye on the team.

After being away for a year, she returned to about half the teammates she left. Of course, the perk of playing in Minnesota is that most of the players are from the area, so Pannek was familiar with a lot of her new teammates from playing with or against them growing up. She's also appreciative of the senior class welcoming her back with open arms.

"Otherwise, it's a totally different experience. Coming back from an Olympics, it's really weird," Pannek said. "It's not something that I've ever done."



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Goals on goals on goals. Pannek gets in on the action!

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She talked with former Gopher and Olympic teammate Lee Stecklein about the transition, since Stecklein returned to the team after the 2014 Olympics.

Everybody looks to Pannek as a team leader, according to Frost. Zumwinkle mentioned Pannek's return as one of the biggest benefits this season from a leadership standpoint and the caliber of hockey she's played.

"I was always the one asking Hannah Brandt or Dani (Cameranesi) or Lee (Stecklein) or whoever what's going on, and now to be someone that they look to for some advice or just any way I can help them have confidence going into those moments and reassuring them, 'Just keep doing what you're doing because it's awesome, and people will notice that in the long run,'" Pannek said.

Pannek scored 19 goals and 62 points in 2016-17 and is the active career leading scorer for the Gophers. She ranks 10th all-time in scoring with 174 points (67 goals, 107 assists), chasing Gigi Marvin in ninth with 195.

## **Zumwinkle leads the way**

With the roster cupboard less stocked last year, Zumwinkle seemed to fill the void, leading the team in scoring with 17 goals and 38 points. The highlight-reel goal scorer hasn't missed a beat in her sophomore campaign either.

Frost said she's taken her game to another level.

"Her shift intensity is a little higher than it was last year, more consistently," Frost said. "She's been more of a consistent threat. That line with Schammel and (Taylor) Wentte, they have pretty special chemistry."

Schammel and Zumwinkle are the top two scorers on the team, and sophomore Wentte has six goals and 15 points. Zumwinkle was the WCHA Forward of the Month in November with seven goals in seven games. She also scored her first collegiate hat trick, a natural hat trick in the second period of a 7-1 win over Yale on Nov. 30. She finished that game with a career-high five points.

Her 13 goals so far this season are just four shy of her total last season as a freshman.



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“The sky is the limit for her as she continues to understand the game at a little faster pace,” Frost said. “But physically, there are not too many people with the tools that she has.”

The Gophers return to action Jan. 5-6 when they host the inaugural Minnesota Cup at Ridder Arena, a four-team tournament with Minnesota Duluth, Minnesota State and St. Cloud State.

Pannek doesn't see the upcoming holiday break as any kind of momentum killer, especially for this particular team. They've earned their wins so far, rather than feeling lucky to get Ws, so the team is happy with where they sit overall, she added.

“It's not a fluke that we've done well to this point,” Pannek said.

*(Photo of Kelly Pannek: Richard T Gagnon / Getty Images)*

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