

Back-to-Back For Wolverines

Different Coach, Different Stars, But Michigan Wins Another Big Ten Championship at Minnesota

by **Heather Rule**/Special to CHN

MINNEAPOLIS — Michigan freshman Rutger McGroarty took control in the second period. Well, certainly for 34-seconds worth, long enough to grab a 2-1 lead and get his team back in the game in a hurry.

Early in the second period, McGroarty cut through the slot for a quick shot off a rebound to tie the game. Next, he was in the perfect spot on the back door for his second goal in 34 seconds. He celebrated each tally emphatically in front of the Gophers student section.

“Getting to the net, finding those soft areas... good things happen when you’re around there,” McGroarty said.

Good things happened for Michigan, too. By the end of the night, McGroarty and his teammates celebrated by tossing their gear and hugging everyone on the team in celebration of Michigan’s second consecutive Big Ten Tournament championship with identical-in-score 4-3 victories at Minnesota.

No. 4 Michigan (24-11-3) later scored a pair of third-period goals to seal the victory and upset the No. 1 Gophers (26-9-1) on their home ice Saturday at 3M Arena at Mariucci.

“It’s pretty cool to see where we’ve come from at the beginning of the year,” McGroarty said. “Who would’ve thought?”

Where they came from was the tumult of their head coach, Mel Pearson, getting fired. Not just getting fired, but it happened in August. After a Frozen Four appearance last year, the loss of lots of high-end talent but with just as much



Related Articles

coming in, the Wolverines scrambled to get a new coach, naming 37-year old alum Brandon Naurato as the interim successor.

It was a trial by fire for both Naurato and his young Wolverines, but seven months later, they're right back where they were last year.

"We learn a lot as we go," said Adam Fantilli, that nation's leading point scorer. "We're really grateful for the opportunities we're given and how much ice time we're given to be able to prove what we can do."

The freshman forward McGroarty quickly added that while the Big Ten championship is "awesome," they still have another tournament to win, with the NCAA Tournament on the horizon.

But he's playing well at the right time. McGroarty has a four-game goal streak going in the month of March and five-game point streak with five goals and five assists in his past five games. So, is anything different lately? McGroarty cited more confidence during the second half of the season, along with the benefit of playing a whole first half.

"You get used to the speed, you get used to the pace," McGroarty said. "I mean, it helps playing with [freshman center Adam Fantilli] and Brinds [freshman right wing Gavin Brindley]."

"But I would just say confidence, definitely picked up in the second half."

Like last year's championship game, the Gophers took the 1-0 lead in the first period Saturday. Freshman Brody Lamb blocked a shot in his own end, which sprung him and freshman teammate Logan Cooley for a 2-on-1 chance that they didn't miss. Cooley slid the puck over, with Lamb finishing the play for his third goal of the season.

Then McGroarty took over with his pair of goals in the second period. That line of McGroarty, Fantilli and Brindley wasn't too happy with how they played in the first period, said Michigan interim coach Brandon Naurato, adding that Michigan's play was "average" in the first 20 minutes.

"For them to come out and ... just get to the net, as simple as that sounds, good things happen," Naurato said. "He pops a couple and obviously gets us going."

But turnovers leading to offensive production were a theme on both sides, and the Gophers cashed in on a neutral-zone miscue from Michigan midway through the middle period, leaving the puck to the dynamic Minnesota line of Cooley and Jimmy Snuggerud, who passed the puck over to Cooley for an easy goal, his 19th of the season.

But it was the Wolverines capitalized on Gophers' turnovers in the third period after Minnesota took the lead back. Gophers coach Bob Motzko called the game "a heavyweight

Michigan

- » **Something Old, Something New, Something Blue**
- » **Pedal to the Metal**
- » **The Big Ten's Big Day**
- » **NCAA Tournament Allentown Regional Preview**

Minnesota

- » **Grand Cooley**
- » **Minnesota Explodes in 3rd and Survives Canisius**
- » **NCAA Tournament Fargo Regional Preview**

tilt.”

“That means you can’t make those kinds of mistakes in the third period,” said Motzko, who added that his team’s whole game plan was to limit mistakes, which they didn’t do.

Entering the third period in a 2-2 game, the Gophers got the goal they needed only 1 minute, 57 seconds into the period. From the highlight-reel and did-you-see-that?! category, Minnesota sophomore Rhett Pitlick took the puck from center ice and stickhandled beautifully through Michigan defenseman Steven Holtz before popping the puck top-shelf over Michigan junior goaltender Erik Portillo for the lead. The sold-out crowd of predominantly maroon and gold faithful reached a game-high volume at that point.

“There’s some highlight goals you’re going to see out of those guys,” Motzko said. “But to win, we can’t do the things we did.

“It really stings that we gave up a third-period lead, which we don’t do too often.”

Michigan simply talked about “next-shift mentality” after the Pitlick goal, Naurato said.

Michigan tied the game only a few minutes after Pitlick’s goal when freshman defenseman Seamus Casey’s long shot from the top of the zone made it through traffic for his seventh of the season and a 3-3 game.

The Wolverines then took the lead for the final time with 8:14 left in regulation when sophomore winger Dylan Duke went to the net and scored his seventh career goal against Minnesota, and 17th overall this season, right at the goalmouth practically from the seat of his pants on top of a Gophers defender.

“That’s Duker,” McGroarty said. “He gets the greasy ones, and we love him for it.

“Big-time players score big-time goals at big-time moments.”

McGroarty’s all-freshman line had its own big-time moments. Brindley finished the game with three assists, McGroarty added an assist on Casey’s goal and Fantilli assisted on McGroarty’s first tally for seven points from the line.

“I think we’ve been capitalizing on our chances,” Fantilli said, “and I think the guy on my right and the guy on my left have been the best linemates I could ask for.”