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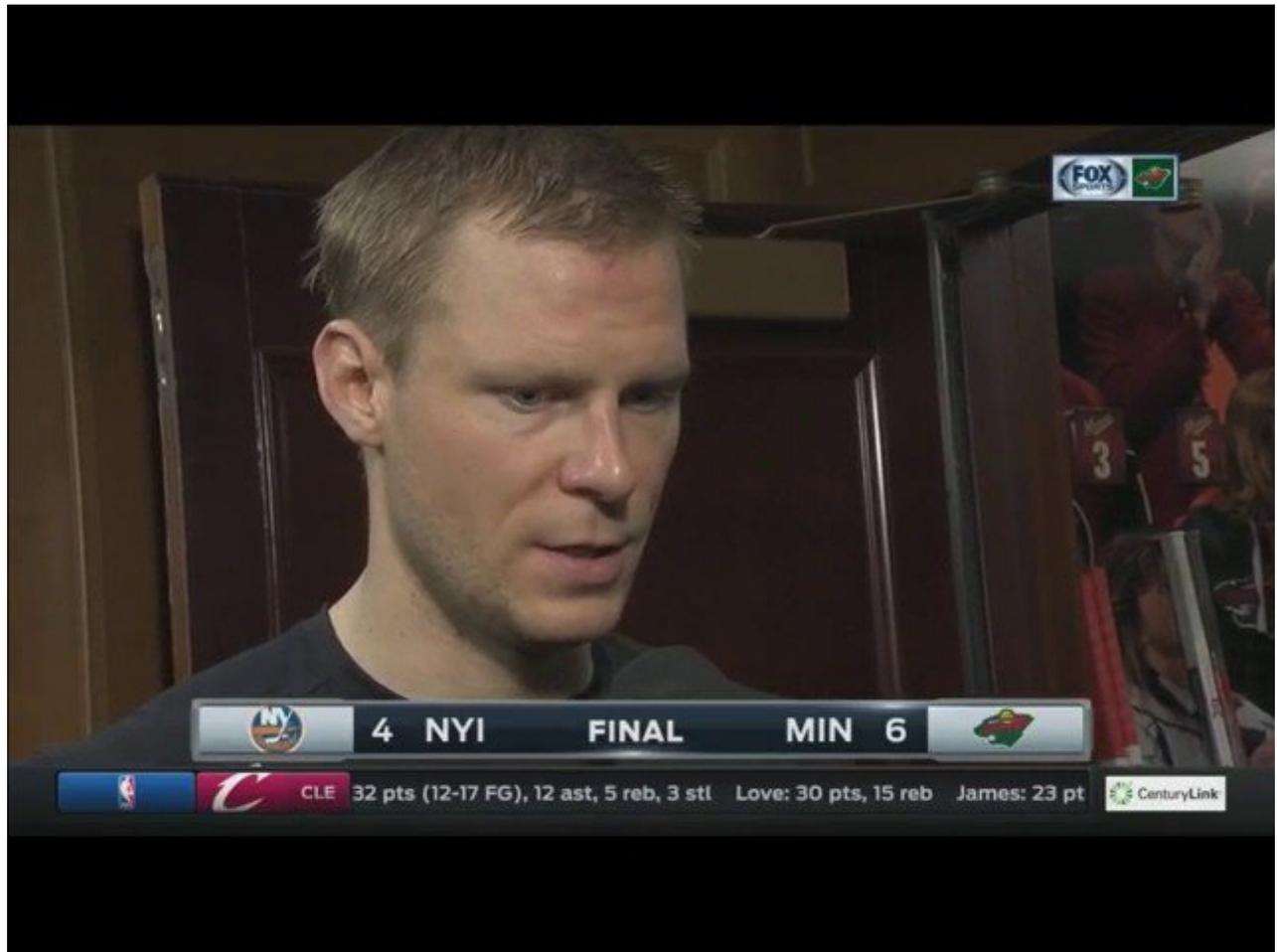
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WILD

# Big Picture: Wild Season Already a Success



By [Heather Rule](#) - April 3, 2017

It's the final week of the regular season for the Wild. This is a season that should go down as a success, based on the play so far. Maybe the most refreshing – and overlooked – tidbit about this fact is a playoff berth isn't contingent on the last couple of games. Sneaking in on the last day isn't necessary.

That's great in itself.

Right now, though, fans are left with an anxious and bad taste in their mouths after the Wild's awful month of March in a slump which arrived a little later than usual. An early playoff exit would be disappointing and wipe out one of the best regular seasons in franchise history.

The Wild reached the 100-point mark for just the third time ever with a 5-2 victory over the abysmal Colorado Avalanche on Sunday. They're 46-25-8, tying their second-highest win total. Their best season was a 48-26-8 (104 points) campaign a decade ago in 2006-07.

They have the No. 2 seed in the Western Conference all but locked up. The numbers also point to a first-round matchup with the St. Louis Blues. The obvious storyline there is former Wild coach Mike Yeo behind the Blues bench. The prospect of a series loss to Yeo's Blues would just be a little bitter to swallow for Minnesota faithful.

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That's getting ahead of things. Playoffs aside, this season is a good one for the Wild. Here's why:

### **Bruce Boudreau**

The biggest knock on Boudreau when he was named the Wild's new head coach was his Game 7 record. Not exactly a huge worry considering he led plenty of Anaheim and Washington teams to extraordinary regular seasons. In a one-game situation like Game 7, it's tough to blame the coach for that. The Wild went with a veteran coach who's not afraid to get blunt in his pressers when things get tough. Even a fresh new face can sometimes have a bigger effect on a team than one would think. The Wild took a little while to get going, but once they adapted, the offensive production showed.

### **Twelve-game winning streak**

This season saw a new franchise-record winning streak. The Wild beat Edmonton 2-1 in overtime on Dec. 4 and didn't lose again until New Year's Eve in a very rare battle of 12-game winning streak teams; Columbus won 4-2. The streak included a pair of overtime victories, a shootout win over Edmonton and plenty of excitement in between. They scored five or more goals in four of those games. Around the holidays, especially that first game after Christmas, is typically the time the Wild

teams of the past would falter with the impending swoon. This time, fans were treated to nothing but wins.

### **Goals, goals, goals**

It's not just a bunch of 2-1 games with the very rare five-goal outburst anymore. The Wild have scored five-or-more goals in 21 games this season. That nearly doubles the 11 games from last season. Players like Jason Zucker, Charlie Coyle and Mikael Granlund stepped up their games this year. Eric Staal proved his doubters wrong by sitting near the top of the team's score sheet; he leads the Wild with 27 goals. It hasn't been just one or two guys carrying the team this year, which has been one of the most impressive things.

### **Devan Dubnyk**

Again, think big picture here. Dubnyk hasn't been at his sharpest lately, making shaky saves at times and giving up a few soft goals. Just remember how well he played early on. He was at the top of his game and one of the NHL leaders in the stats column. Sunday, he was back in net and won his 38th game of the season, a career-high and a single-season wins record for a Wild netminder. He's currently sitting with a 2.23 goals-against-average and a .924 save percentage.

### **Playing near the top**

The Wild will enter the playoffs with home-ice advantage in the first round. That's an unfamiliar position as of the past few years. It's a reward for playing near the top of the league throughout the season and earning the (probable) No. 2 seed. For much of the season, the Wild actually held the top spot in the always-competitive Central Division in the West. Division foes like Nashville, St. Louis and of course the Chicago Blackhawks make it perhaps the toughest division in hockey. For once, the Wild put themselves in a good position to allow for a slump. They didn't dig themselves a hole too deep to climb out of by the time April rolled around.

So, sports success is often measured in what teams can do after the regular season ends. The first-place team all year doesn't mean much if they get bounced in the first round. The San Jose Sharks ran into that problem for a few years, for instance. People often various definitions for what they think would be a success come playoff time. Winning two playoff series to get to the Western Conference Finals is probably a common benchmark in order for the Wild's season to be considered a success.

Still, this season has already been one for the books. It's important to enjoy that 82-game ride, too.

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## **HEATHER RULE**

