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In Their Own Words

By Heather Rule

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The Grand Rapids Thunderhawks skated off with the 2017 Class 2A state championship trophy. (MHM Photo / Jeff Wegge)

Former and current participants share their state tournament memories

It's obvious that the Minnesota state boys' high school hockey tournament is one of the best – or *the* best – in the nation. Even if that's the Minnesota bias talking, it's remarkable to have one event that unites and excites so many people in the hockey community and beyond.

Throughout this season, I asked about the state tournament when talking with players and coaches (past and present) about their experiences or thoughts on the state tournament. Here are some of their thoughts about Minnesota hockey's big event, in no particular order.

Tom Kurvers. 1980 state tournament participant for Bloomington Jefferson, 1986 Stanley Cup champion, current Minnesota Wild assistant general manager:

“The state tournament is a big deal, and it's a great memory. And it goes by in the snap of a finger. We made it my senior year, so I had one crack at it. It was an awesome experience. The thing I remember is that when we made the tournament, the region final was on a Saturday, and we didn't play until Thursday in the tournament. And those five days were just awesome.

“That was a kid's dream come true. Couldn't wait for that game, but for five days, you hadn't lost either. You had a chance to win the state championship. We did win our first game but lost the semis. So you were thinking about that for five days. You're at school, and it's a big deal. It was

ABOUT HEATHER RULE



Heather's love for watching hockey started when the Minnesota Wild came to town in 2000. Before that, she caught a few Minnesota Moose games as a youngster, and more recently she's kept up with the Austin Bruins and Fargo Force. She's a writer, freelance journalist and blogger who previously worked as a news reporter in Austin and Fergus Falls, Minn. She enjoys watching sports and closely follows the Wild, Minnesota Twins, IndyCar Series, tennis and prep sports. Heather keeps up her sports blog [Thoughts from the Stands](#). You can follow her on Twitter [@hlrule](#).

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Casey Mittelstadt. 2015, 2016 (runner-up), 2017 state tournament participant for Eden Prairie, current Buffalo Sabres player.



Casey Mittelstaedt on the attack against Wayzata in the 2016 Class 2A state championship game against Wayzata (MHM Photo / Jonny Watkins).

"I think it all starts when you're a young kid. My dad always pulled me out of school. Get to spend the whole day there. I think those high school hockey players kind of become celebrities for the young guys and you look up to them. You always want to be the guy who gets to go to the state tournament and win a state tournament. Once you get there, you kind of remember it was you a few years back when you see the little kids running around.

"I think it definitely starts when you're young, the fascination for it. And then once you get there, it's only a four-or-five day weekend, but it's the best weekend of your life. I think once you make it there, and then get to have that weekend, you definitely want to keep going back."

On his decision to return in 2016-17 for his senior year with Eden Prairie:

"I think it just kind of came down to, if I left, I felt like I would've regretted it. Going back to play with friends and try to win a state championship. Obviously that was the goal, and that's what we wanted to do. It was more about going back and getting to play with my friends and go to the rink every day and get to see them. For me, I think that was definitely the right decision for me. Looking back on it, I would do the same thing."

On not winning a state title:

"I think that'll probably haunt me for a little while. But I guess the sun comes up the next day, and I'm happy where I'm at now."

Kyle Rau. 2009, 2011 state champion for Eden Prairie. Currently playing within the Minnesota Wild organization.

"(The state tournament) meant everything. I think growing up, you turn on 45 or My 45 or whatever it's called now, you watch the games all day because they have the Class 1A, they have the Class 2A, and they're going on. So there's hockey on all day. When you're young, you'll look at that and you think: 'Wow. These guys are so good. I want to be like them.' They're playing in front of 18,000 people. And then when you get there, obviously it's unreal. 18,000 people, you're on TV, you're staying in a hotel. It's just a huge deal. The atmosphere is awesome.

"You just grow up wanting to do it, and then once you get to high school and being able to be there and play in it, you're very fortunate, and it's a great experience."

Lee Smith. 26th season as Eden Prairie boys' hockey coach, 10 state tournaments.

"Having a chance to win a state tournament I think is a big bonus for the kids to come back and a big carrot for them to want to come back, because they can do something special and have that

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Kyle Rau and his Eagles teammates celebrate a goal against Duluth East in the 2011 Class 2A state championship game (Photo by Tim Kolehmainen – Breakdown Sports USA).

Paul Ranheim. 1984 state champion for Edina. Current assistant coach with Eden Prairie boys' hockey, former NHL player.

"You grow up playing and watching it, first of all. So you've got this great coverage. You got the thrill of a packed stadium in St. Paul, and everybody playing to be the best team in the state. So, you are watching this, growing up and you want to be there. Then when you get there, just the excitement of not playing in front of 2,000 people but playing in front of 20,000 people. So that's super exciting.

"I mean it's just a great experience. It's something every kid in Minnesota watches

when they're young and wants to get there. That's your first experience with the big-time. You feel like you've reached the big time. No matter what you do. It's just a super-fun experience. I talk to people all the time that go there and they watch it and it's the greatest experience that they have. It's great hockey. It's exciting. It's just fun for Minnesota."

Joel Otto. Former Elk River boys' hockey player and former Calgary Flames player.

"Everybody grows up wanting to be in the state tournament. It's a spectacle that I went to watch when I was a kid. Almost every year we were always driving down regardless if we were in it or not. It's become such a great sporting event for the state. Wasn't real close to getting there as a player from our teams. We had some decent clubs. Fell short in the section tournaments my three years that I played high school. We all wanted to get there for sure. I don't think we were probably there at the time. Elk River's come a long way."

Blane Comstock. 1965, 1966 (runner-up), 1967 state tournament participant for Roseau. 1987, 1988, 1989 state tournament participant as Warroad assistant coach.

"It's small-town boy getting to the cities. Just awesome experience. It's hard to explain. It'll be real special if any of our grandkids would be fortunate enough to play in the state tournament."

A game that sticks out from state? Warroad played Edina in a few overtimes in the 1988 semifinals, losing 2-1.

"Unfortunately they beat us, but it was kind of a David-and-Goliath story. Most of the fans, fortunately, were cheering for us, the underdogs. A lot of people don't like Edina. Anybody that was on either side of the fence, they were cheering for the Warriors."

Alex Stalock. 2004 state tournament participant for South St. Paul. Current Minnesota Wild goaltender.

"It was really cool. That's what you dream of as a kid: 'Am I ever going to play in the state tournament?' You get that chance, and a lot of kids are like, 'whoa, my hockey career is set.' And at that time, it was. But at that stage of my life, the first time I strapped on my gear to going down to our rink to watch the high school team, it's like, 'whoa, this is amazing.' To get that chance..."

tournament and have that much fun and see everybody's faces. Still to this day when we, that group, runs into each other, six or seven of us... tell funny stories from the tournament."

Where does the tournament rank in your hockey career?

"It's up there. Especially being able to play with my brother, that's a really

cool deal and obviously some of my closest friends still to this day. It's top-10 I'd say for my hockey career. It's up there for sure."



Former South St. Paul goaltender Alex Stalock, now a backup goalie for the Minnesota Wild, played for the Packers in the 2004 state tournament (MHM Photo / Jonny Watkins)

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