



NEAR PERFECTION

ROB MCCLANAHAN REFLECTS ON CLOSE-TO-PERFECT 1976 MOUNDS VIEW SEASON

It's no doubt that a perfect season is special and often hard to accomplish.

In 1976, the Mounds View boys' hockey team came close to perfection, taking a 24-0 record into the state tournament. It was a team that heavily outscored opponents throughout the season. It must have looked good on paper for the Mustangs to go all the way.

Then, they lost.

The blemish came in the quarterfinals of the state tournament, which was then held at the St. Paul Civic Center. A 4-3 loss to Richfield (20-3 coming into the tournament) ended Mounds View's run and sent the team into the consolation bracket.

Forty years later, Rob McClanahan – a star forward and co-captain for the Mustangs – perfectly remembered one tidbit about that state quarterfinal.

"We outshot them 21-2 in the first period, and it's 1-1," he said. "And we end up losing.

"That one hurt a lot."

The next two periods of that game weren't as lopsided, McClanahan recalled. He also remembers that Richfield senior center Steve Christoff—McClanahan's future Gopher and Olympic teammate—had two goals and two assists in that game.

McClanahan also gave a ton of credit to Richfield goaltender, Steve Paszkiewicz.

"He stood on his head," McClanahan said. "There's

no question. He was just unbelievable. You'd think you'd be able to slip a shot or two by him, and he stonewalled us."

Richfield lost the state championship game to Grand Rapids, a team with a guy named Don Lucia on the roster.

As for Mounds View, it beat Henry Sibley 5-1 in the consolation bracket before losing the consolation final to Bloomington Kennedy, 4-3 in overtime on "a very soft goal" that occurred on a dump-in and went through the goaltender's legs.

"He just dumped the puck in, and it happened to take a bad bounce," McClanahan said. "It happens more often than you think."

McClanahan scored 40 goals and 66 points in 27 games in his senior season with Mounds View.

After graduation, McClanahan played three years at the University of Minnesota (1976-79), scoring 45 goals, 63 assists for 108 points in 121 WCHA games. He noted how choosing a college was different back then – he didn't even start looking until his senior season with Mounds View was complete.

He was part of the "Miracle on Ice" 1980 USA Olympic team that beat the Russians and then took home the gold medal. He put up five goals and three assists in those Olympics.

His career extended into the NHL as well, as he was drafted by the Buffalo Sabres 49th overall in the third round in the 1978 NHL Amateur Draft. He

played for the Sabres, Hartford Whalers and New York Rangers in his NHL career (1979-84), spanning 224 games in which he scored 38 goals and 63 assists for 101 points.

"I've been very, very lucky in my life," he said. "I've just been very, very fortunate."

McClanahan wouldn't classify his high-school senior season with the Mustangs as preparation for the years to come, but it did provide one boost.

"It gave me a lot of confidence that my game was developing," he said. "Whenever you're playing on a good team, your confidence is going to be higher."

He described the 1976 Mustangs as a fast, very unselfish team with a lot of depth.

Safe to say they were an offensive team, too. They outscored opponents 149-38 during 20 regular season games, seven of which they took their goal total into double digits. They also had a 30-4 goal advantage in four Section 2 tournament games.

McClanahan doesn't remember too much about the regular season, except that there was a little bit of pressure on them as they continued to play that year.

"I don't remember anything specifically that stood out," he said.

Well, it was 40 years ago, after all.

The Mustangs had a couple close calls with overtime games. They needed double overtime to beat Hill-Murray 3-2 and three extra sessions to beat Columbia Heights 4-3.

He has seen high school hockey change over the past 40 years, from expanding to a two-class state tournament to the differences in goalie equipment.

Perhaps the biggest difference is the equipment players, not just the goaltenders, wear.

"No question about it," he said. "The gear was so heavy. In terms of equipment, you see far more shots blocked today than were blocked when I played and partly because the gear is so much more protective."

He doesn't necessarily think players today are smarter on the ice, but they are certainly bigger, faster and stronger. And who doesn't like playing in the state tourney?

"For sure there's a lot of pride," he said. "There's no question. We just didn't accomplish one of the goals that we had."

"We had a heck of a year."

The Minnesota boys' state high school hockey tournament remains a prestigious event, even 40 years later. Getting to the tourney seems to be high on the priority list for high school athletes.

"It's every kid's dream to play in the high school state hockey tournament," he said. "My goal was to make it to the championship game. We just hit a little road block in that first game."

"I look back on it fondly. As I said, we had a helluva team. You'd always like to have another shot at it."

McClanahan knows what it's like to be there, and he encourages kids to enjoy the process.

"Don't be so focused on the end result," he said. "It's great to have goals that you want to try to achieve ... you can't let that be the driving force. You have to live in the moment."

— HEATHER RULE



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