



TWO GOALS FROM KUKKONEN HELPS MAPLE GROVE TO DEFEAT OF ANDOVER

Kyle Kukkonen, the state's No. 2 points producer with 55 of them this year, powered the Crimson past the rival Huskies.

Heather Rule, SportsEngine03/04/21, 5:45PM CST



Maple Grove's Kyle Kukkonen (9) scored two goals in a 3-2 defeat of Andover on Thursday night in Andover, helping the Crimson remain undefeated this season. Photo by Earl J. Ebensteiner, SportsEngine

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 Full Box Score
 Thu Mar 04, 2021 @ 7:00p Andover Arena

The last time Kyle Kukkonen stepped on the ice at Andover Arena, he left with a season-ending leg injury in December 2019. Now recovered and leading the way for Maple Grove, Kukkonen made what he called an emotional return to the same rink Thursday night.

"You don't forget something like that," Kukkonen said. "So that's something I'll always remember. It was a lot of motivation coming into this one, and it felt good to pop a few in early."

Not only did Kukkonen, a senior center who is the state leader in assists (32) and is second in points (55), return to the rink where he broke his leg, but he scored two first-period goals to help Maple Grove beat Andover 3-2 to remain undefeated. The Crimson, ranked No. 1 in the Class 2A coaches' poll, improved to 14-0-0 with the victory over their Northwest Suburban Conference foe.

Already up 1-0 in the first thanks to Kukkonen, he found the net again 13 seconds into the game's first power play when a rebound sailed perfectly to his tape in the circle. He didn't miss his mark for his 23rd goal of the season, which he celebrated by going to one knee and pumping his arm.

With the game hanging over his head for more than a year, Kukkonen was mentally prepared for it, according to Maple Grove coach Todd Bergland.

"He is stronger now than he ever has been," Bergland said, adding that Kukkonen is relentless.

For Kukkonen, who's committed to Michigan Tech, the improvement in his game comes with getting better from time in the gym and at the rink. It doesn't have to do with him getting injured, he said.

Kukkonen had six goals and 18 points in only seven games last season before his injury.

Oddly, the game against No. 6-2A Andover was the first matchup this season where Kukkonen didn't record a helper. But scoring two goals is a good reason for that.

He's scored a pair of goals in each of his last three games, has recorded at least two points in every game this season and leads the team with four power-play goals. His 23 goals are tied for fifth-most in the state.

"If you work hard, it's going to show on the ice," Kukkonen said.



Photo Gallery: Maple Grove vs. Andover

As Kukkonen left his mark in Thursday's game early, Andover didn't go quietly in what was a fast-paced, competitive hockey game.

The Huskies (13-2-0) responded with a pair of goals 25 seconds apart in the final 1 minute, 10 seconds of the first period to make it 2-2. Junior defenseman Weston Knox found the back of the net with his quick shot for his fourth goal of the season to cut the deficit to one only 15 seconds into the man advantage. It was only the fourth goal Maple Grove has allowed on its penalty kill this year.

"That game could've gotten away from us," said Andover coach Mark Manney. "But I thought we were playing pretty good.

"When we got that power play and got that goal, you could see it change the whole game. We were back in it again."

Not long after, Andover sophomore Gavyn Thoreson was sprung for a breakaway in the final minute of the first period. He skated toward the net, deked Crimson senior goaltender Jack Wieneke and tied the game with 45.9 ticks remaining in the period.

Those two goals were only the third and fourth allowed in the first period by the Crimson this season.

In the second period, Andover had a scoring chance less than 30 seconds into the period when senior Garrett Schifsky took the puck behind the Crimson net and passed it to a waiting Thoreson in front. But the point-blank shot just missed finding the net.

Maple Grove responded when junior Bennett Glad scored his fifth goal of the season only 58 seconds into the middle period to put the Crimson back in front. The 3-2 lead held until the final buzzer.

"We knew it was going to be a battle," Bergland said. "I think we've been pressing so hard offensively that we told the kids coming in that we're going to have to play defense against these guys, because they can scoot.

"But we responded. We had good puck possession time. The kids responded well. It was a fun hockey game."

Wieneke made a season-high 33 saves. His previous best was 27 saves, coming in the first meeting against Andover on Feb. 4, which resulted in a 5-1 Maple Grove victory.

While Andover put up a lot of shots, a lot of them were kept to the outside, Wieneke said.

"I felt like every time I would make a save, they were always there for me to clear it out, so I didn't really have to face too many second chances, which is always nice," Wieneke said.

He played so well in net that at a point during the game, Bergland said he wasn't concerned at all because of how well Wieneke was seeing the puck, tracking it and making nice saves. Kukkonen called Wieneke's compete level unmatched in the game, crediting the goalie for some big saves late to help get the victory.

For Kukkonen, the return and scoring goals were nice, but the team win was awesome, too.

"I think that was the first time we've won at this place," Kukkonen said. "It was unbelievable."



Maple Grove goalie Jack Wieneke deflects a second-period shot taken by Andover's Gavyn Thoreson on Thursday night. The Crimson beat Andover 3-2, dealing the Huskies just their second loss of the season. Photo by Earl J. Ebensteiner SportsEngine

First Report

Maple Grove kept its undefeated season going with a 3-2 win over Northwest Suburban Conference foe Andover on Thursday at Andover Arena.

Senior center Kyle Kukkonen scored a pair of goals in the first period to give Maple Grove (14-0-0) a 2-0 lead. The state's leader in assists (32) who is second in points (55), Kukkonen has recorded at least two points in every game this season and he's scored two goals in each of his last three games.

The Huskies, ranked No. 6 in the Class 2A coaches' poll, responded with a pair of goals 25 seconds apart in the final 1 minute, 10 seconds of the first period to tie the game 2-2, but No. 1-2A Maple Grove regained the lead for good 52 seconds into the second period on a goal from junior Bennett Glad.

Andover's goals came from Weston Knox and Gavyn Thoreson, the team's No. 2 points producer this winter behind Garrett Schifsky (41 points) with nine goals and 29 assists. Schifsky recorded an assist on Thoreson's tally.

Senior goaltender Jack Wieneke stopped 33 shots for Maple Grove while Andover senior goalie Will Larson made 37 saves.

The only losses for Andover (13-2-0) this season have come against Maple Grove. The Crimson won the first meeting 5-1 on Feb. 4.



The Huskies' Garrett Schifsky looks to take a shot and tie the game late in the third period. The Huskies lost to the Crimson 3-2 at home. Photo by Earl J. Ebensteiner, SportsEngine

Which team will win?

- **Maple Grove**
61%
- **Andover**
39%
- **Total Votes: 49**

The MN Hockey Hub poll is for entertainment purposes only.

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