



FIRE AND ICE

Mavs Eager for First Season in WCHA

by Brandon Vogel

Listen to hockey talk around Omaha and you're sure to hear the letters WCHA. They've been whispered around rinks and debated over beers for more than a year by pure hockey fans.

"The Mavs are going to the WCHA." Part reverence, part disbelief, the statement is no longer a promise, it's reality. The University of Nebraska-Omaha plays in the most prestigious hockey conference in the country.

It is a giant step for a program that played its first Division I hockey game 13 years ago this month. The Western Collegiate Hockey Association is to hockey in the northern plains what the Southeastern Conference is to football in the south.

Since the conference was founded in 1951 the WCHA produced the men's hockey national champion 36 times, the runner-up 27 times. Of the six schools to have won at least five national titles, four of them skate in the WCHA. In the USA Today preseason poll, seven of the top 15 are WCHA teams. No longer just a model for what the young UNO hockey program hopes to become, the Minnesotas, North Dakotas, Wisconsin and Denvers of the world are now rivals for an even younger Maverick team that features 10 true freshmen.

At least the coaching staff will know what to expect in their first year of conference play. New assistant coach Mike Guentzel spent 15 years coaching in the WCHA at Minnesota and Colorado College after finishing his playing career at Minnesota. Associate head coach Mike Hastings also coached the Golden Gophers for a year. He played his college hockey at St. Cloud State. Both Guentzel and Hastings know Omaha too, having served as two of the most successful Lancers coaches in the club's history.

And then there's Dean Blais, already an established WCHA legend when he stepped onto the UNO campus last year. Blais played for Minnesota in the early 1970s and won

two national titles in 10 seasons at the University of North Dakota. This staff has been there before and Blais hopes some of that experience will help his young team as they take to the road for 12 of their first 20 games this season.

“We’re entering a very, very tough league. We’re playing in huge buildings. Year in and year out it’s North Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin that are the top three teams in the country in terms of attendance. You have to be a little bit more mentally tough to go into those tough environments. It’s like going into Ann Arbor every weekend,” Blais says.

Ann Arbor is home to the University of Michigan and the most collegiate hockey titles in the country. UNO has been there. Fairbanks, Alaska and Miami, Ohio too. While the WCHA’s reputation is unparalleled, the Mavericks aren’t arriving out of an over-40 rec league either.

Their former conference, the Central Collegiate Hockey Association, has its own set of national powers. And in their first season under Blais the Mavs showed they can play with the best in the country. Two home wins over Michigan and tough road victories over Alaska and then top-ranked Miami were program-building victories last year. To do that in the WCHA, Blais says he’ll lean heavily on the experience he does have returning.

“Certainly it starts in goal. You don’t do anything without good goalkeeping. We’ve got big, mobile defensemen. We’re good size-wise on defense and our forwards can move, we’ve got fast forwards.”

Blais will look to sophomore John Faulkner to anchor the Mavs defense in his second season in goal. Faulkner started 26 games last season, leading the team in goals against average and save percentage. A year of game experience should help him in a season defined by change.

“It is nice to get a full year of game situations under your belt. Learning how to deal with the college game is the big step initially, how to deal with every season’s ups and downs,” says Faulkner.

Defensively, UNO will look to three returning seniors to improve a unit that finished seventh in the CCHA last year in scoring defense. Eric Olimb is the top returning scorer defensively while Nick Von Bokern and Pasko Skarcia appeared in 28 games each last season.

Up front the Mavericks will have to replace three of their top five forwards but have plenty of goal scoring potential. Seniors Rich Purslow and Joey Martin are back after combining for 24 goals last season. Junior Alex Hudson is also back following a

successful 2009-2010 campaign that saw him score 14 goals in 38 games.

While UNO will rely heavily on their large crop of freshmen, Blais sees a group that might not be as green as you might think.

“This year’s freshmen are experienced. They’re not 18-year-old kids right out of high school. A lot of them have played at least one or two years of junior (hockey),” Blais says.

That showed in the Mavs’ first exhibition game Saturday, a 6-1 win over the University of British Columbia. Freshman forward Matt White, fresh off a stellar year for the Omaha Lancers, showed he’s ready to be a factor, scoring two second-period goals. Zahn Raubenheimer, a 47-goal scorer in the Alberta Junior Hockey League last season, also scored for UNO.

This season is another beginning for UNO hockey; but if things go according to plan, it might be the last for a while. UNO has their dream coach. They have their dream league. All that’s left is to compete.

To welcome the Mavericks and fellow newcomer Bemidji State, the WCHA released a new campaign slogan for this season: “Just Got Tougher.” But don’t think it’s a warning just for UNO. The Mavs have plans to make things plenty tough on the hockey heavyweights they now skate against.

They might even be one someday.

UNO opens its regular season with the Mutual of Omaha Maverick Stampede Oct. 8-9, at the Qwest Center. The Mavs face Clarkson Friday at 7:37 p.m. and RIT Saturday at 7:07 p.m. For tickets or more information visit omavs.com.

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