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UMD NEWS SERVICE
RA 4-8801 Ext 210
December 10, 1962

DULUTH--UMD's improving Bulldogs resume their hockey rivalry with the Minnesota Gophers Dec. 15(Saturday) at Williams Arena after a two-week layoff and a break for quarter exams.

Bulldog coach Ralph Romano welcomed the chance to ease the practice routine, work in two new wings with center Mike Mithrush and talk about his club after four games against Western Collegiate Hockey Association sixes.

"Our real problem in losses to Michigan Tech (3-0, 5-2) and North Dakota (4-1, 7-1) was a lack of depth at forward as indicated by fading stamina in the final periods of the games.

"Still we're encouraged when we compare our performances with last year's showing," Romano explained. "It appears we are doing better against a stronger lineup of WCHA clubs. With the additional depth we will have as the year progresses, we'll be able to give anyone a good run."

There is obvious concern over the loss of senior wing Ron Johnson for four to six weeks with a shoulder separation. Johnson, Marv Zilkie and Mithrush had formed one line.

Now Romano has placed Dave Stepnes and Bob Lund with Mithrush. Both become eligible the day before the first Minnesota game. "Our primary task in preparing for Minnesota is seeing that the three of them are working well together," remarked Romano.

Johnson's availability and three other player additions by January should make the Bulldogs much stronger. "Johnson's separation

isn't serious enough to warrant an operation," explained Romano, "but the shoulder needs complete rest. He's lost until at least the St. Thomas game Jan. 8."

Two more games with Minnesota(Dec.21 there, Dec.22 here) and a home series(Dec.18,19) with North Dakota fill out the Bulldog's pre-holiday schedule.

"Obviously Minnesota is a contender for the WCHA title because of their victory over Michigan Tech," said Romano. "And North Dakota looked strong in our two losses to them a week ago. We realize they're both fine hockey teams and it'll take everything we have to beat them."

Romano looks for forechecking and hustle to pay off against Minnesota as it has in the Tech and Dakota games. "I've been particularly pleased with the work of Mithrush and (defenseman Bill) McGann and the solid performances from our new kids(freshmen Mike Tok, Gary Harker and Bob Hill)," said Romano.

Mithrush leads team scoring with three goals and no assists. Captain Bill Lenardon owns two assists and his right wing Jay Beasley has the only other Bulldog goal thus far.