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Playoff preview: women's hockey embraces underdog role

FEBRUARY 26, 2016 BY JIMMY GILLIGAN

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BY SAM GAZZOLA | The Statesman

The Bulldog women's hockey team ended their regular season on a high note by defeating St. Cloud State University 3-2 last Saturday. The win improved their record to 13-20-1 overall and 10-17-1 in the Western Collegiate Hockey Association. It also gave them the momentum that they will need heading into the playoffs this weekend.

UMD will travel to Bemidji this weekend for a best-of-three series with the Beavers. BSU was ranked the seventh best team in the country in this week's USCHO.com poll. Bemidji won the regular season battle between the two teams, beating the Bulldogs four times.

Despite the lack of success, UMD head coach Maura Crowell is looking forward to the upcoming series.

"We're excited, it's a new season," Crowell said. "We're the underdogs in this fight so for us to have a new season where it is 0-0, it's a good thing."

Her optimism is not as farfetched as it may seem. In UMD's four losses against BSU this season, two games were decided by two goals, while the other two were decided by just one goal.

"We've had a bunch of close games with Bemidji," Crowell said. "I think for them it's tough to beat us a fifth, sixth time. So advantage goes to the 'Dogs.'"

These two teams met in the first round of the WCHA playoffs last season as well, however, their roles were reversed. UMD earned home ice advantage and was ranked No. 9 in the country. Unfortunately, the Beavers ended UMD's season, winning the series in three games. UMD is hoping to return the favor this weekend.

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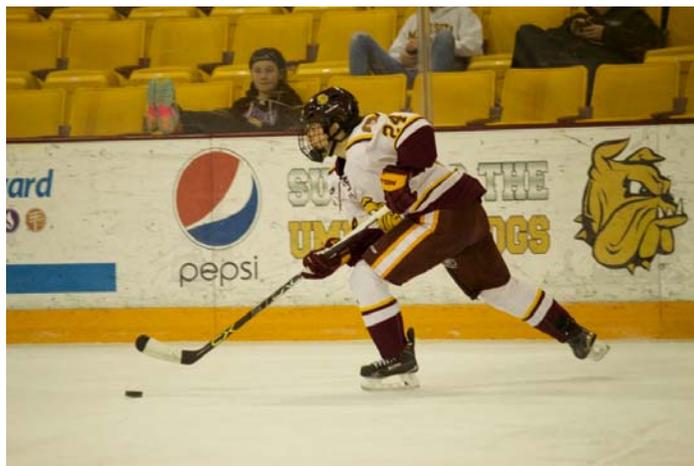
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After rallying six points last season, senior forward Michela Cava has 18 goals and 17 assists heading into the first round of the WCHA playoffs. BRAD EISCHENS/STATESMAN

"I know the older kids haven't forgotten last year and the way their season ended," Crowell said. "There's plenty of motivation and also belief that we can beat these guys. We have been so close with them. It's a now or never type of attitude."

Senior forward Michela Cava will be a player to watch as the only non-goalie senior on the team. This could be her last weekend of college hockey. Skating with Ashleigh Brykaliuk and Lara Stalder, the team's two leading scorers on the top line, has helped her become more productive than ever before.

"I think she's the greatest compliment to that line," Crowell said. "She puts the puck in the net, has great vision, works hard and plays with a lot of passion."

Cava has had 18 goals and 17 assists in 34 games this season. Last season she tallied just six points in 32 games.

Bemidji will be coming into the series with their own momentum, riding a five-game winning streak and going unbeaten in eight of their last ten contests. This weekend's series will be the first ever playoff series hosted by Bemidji.

- The winner of the series will advance to the semifinals at Ridder Arena in Minneapolis as part of the Western Collegiate Hockey Conference Final Face-off.

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