

Lynx playoff run and Gophers women's basketball season preview

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Alex Karwowski and Andrew Cornelius discuss the Gophers football team's slow starts, the Gophers women's basketball team's potential for an NCAA tournament run and break down the Minnesota Lynx's playoff journey.

ALEX KARWOWSKI: How's it going, everyone? And welcome back to The Gold Standard, where we bring you the latest on all things Minnesota sports. I'm Alex Karwowski alongside Andrew Cornelius, and Andrew, man, it has been quite the week for Gopher sports.

ANDREW CORNELIUS: Yeah, the Gopher football team got a really big win. I know you were there on the sidelines getting to watch the game yourself, but from back home point of view, it was really the same thing that I've witnessed all season.

The first quarter just sucks for the Gopher football team. They've scored three points now in their five games against power four opponents in the first quarter. So, very tough starts. They went scoreless once again against UCLA.

KARWOWSKI: Yeah. I mean, in that first quarter, it was just, it was so painful to watch. It just seemed like UCLA's defense was just dominating every aspect of the Gophers offense.

CORNELIUS: Yeah. And then the opposite side of the ball, the defense, which was number one in the country in pass defense, just allowing passing yards per game. They get their entire total yards per game, over 114 in that first quarter, I believe, threw the air with Ethan Garbers for UCLA. They had no identity, they kind of lost it there in that first quarter.

And then we talked about it in the story that we wrote for the Daily. Very inspiring and very “get after ‘em” kind of speech from Coach Fleck at halftime kind of spurred the team on.

KARWOWSKI: Right, I mean, it seems like that this team is kind of very similar to last year’s basketball team where they play one half really really solid, the other half not so great. And it just kind of hurts them. But, you know in this case it didn’t hurt them, which is always a good thing. But you know, it could be dangerous heading down the line.

CORNELIUS: Well it’s kind of the same thing, just staying on that kind of comparison. Like they have the talent kind of that last year’s team for men’s basketball had. This team now 4-3 really could be 6-1 or 5-2 with the way they’ve played this season. Just kind of lost there in the third quarter against Iowa, the Michigan game, everyone knows the rule change the Big Ten had to make because the onside kick. Missed call you want to say or called incorrectly.

And then the UNC game Dragan Kesich, who’s now really struggling, but struggled to start the season at UNC. He missed the game winning field goal and has now missed six out of his 13 kicks.

KARWOWSKI: Right, yeah, and I remember seeing Kesich and being like, oh, Big Ten kicker of the year, like he’s got this. But then he missed and I was like, how did, I mean, it was probably just a fluke, it was the first game. But now he’s six for 14 or something?

CORNELIUS: No, seven for 13.

KARWOWSKI: Seven for 13. Wow.

CORNELIUS: Yeah. And he missed a few gimme’s too, which have really cost the team in some crucial areas. And that’s only going to get harder. They just announced the game this morning for Maryland. The homecoming game is at 2:30 p.m., so kind of a perfect time for students to come and attend that one. But students haven’t been the problem in terms of the attendance this year. There was over 8,500 students per game in that student section. It’s just the rest of that bowl needing to get some excitement and energy to wanna watch this team. And I think there will be that after this bye week, having won two straight games against Big Ten opponents.

KARWOWSKI: Yeah and you know, you mentioned, obviously they’re playing Maryland for the next home game, but you know, the Gophers volleyball team just played Maryland this past weekend. They swept them in three sets and it was kind of interesting to see because the Gophers volleyball team, you know, they’ve been having a lot of games where they go to five sets.

Specifically against ranked opponents, but I don’t think Maryland’s ranked. But you know, they played Indiana and they played Maryland, both pretty solid volleyball teams across the Big Ten. But you know, it was good to see that they kind of were able to make an adjustment to playing pretty strong and get just to three sets.

CORNELIUS: Well, I know. And it's kind of without Mckenna Wucherer for a big stretch here. She's been injured and still Lydia Grote and Julia Hanson kind of taking the reign on the outside for Keegan Cook's squad. And then Alex Acevedo at the service line has been kind of a revelation for Cook this year.

They talked about it earlier in the season. He's kind of a wizard when it comes to serving and he's really helped his team develop in that area over his time at Minnesota and they've become one of the better teams in the conference.

KARWOWSKI: Yeah. And it's been great to see kind of Julia just take off. I think right now she leads the team in kills. And I was looking at the stat sheet the other day and I was like, "Wow, Mckenna Wucherer's so low," but then I remember like, "Oh, she's injured." So I mean, it's, it hasn't hurt the team like as much as I would have thought. But you know, still great to see some other players step up.

CORNELIUS: Yeah. And that's a credit to Keegan Cook and what he's building here with the program. After a rough couple of years, you can lose a person that key to your squad, like Mckenna Wucherer and then have the depth and the ability to continue to win games, and win games dominantly without one of your star players.

KARWOWSKI: Right. But I think it's going to be really interesting to see how they kind of fare against some of these more ranked, or at least higher ranked Big Ten teams. I think they play Northwestern at home next, which will, you know, it should be a good game.

CORNELIUS: They play Rutgers next in Piscataway.

KARWOWSKI: Right.

CORNELIUS: Then number three, Penn State in College Park. And then they return for Northwestern here at home on the 23rd.

KARWOWSKI: I mean, they got some games, a couple of Big Ten games they should hopefully get under their belt as just some solid wins. But, how about the Lynx?

CORNELIUS: I mean, an incredible start to this series and then a tough game yesterday. But just going back to that first game, I remember turning it on in like the second half and I'm just like, they're down double digits.

Is this just going to be kind of the same old, same old for Minnesota sports? They get you all excited after a great win against the Connecticut Sun, a dominant one at that. But then you see how they played against the Connecticut Sun in game five and they bring it over into that second half.

Out scoring them, I believe it was, like 48-40 in that second half. Going on a run, getting it tied and going ahead on that, Courtney Williams had one three. I mean, I haven't been more hyped for a Minnesota sports shot like that in a while because man.

Hitting that while Ionescu is running through your body, basically, is kind of insane. And then Napheesa Collier, kind of like the iconic turnaround J in overtime to kind of seal that win. Just an incredible moment, but then, you gotta, you gotta talk about the game yesterday. They just got steam-rolled on the road.

KARWOWSKI: Right, yeah, I mean, once New York was like, "Oh shoot, this team means business." They kind of brought their A game. I mean, they had a bit more of a break than the Lynx did. So that probably kind of played into some of their first game, like, just kind of mishaps. But, you know, once they were able to kind of, like, re-center and refocus, I think then they were able to, you know, kind of steamroll over the Lynx.

CORNELIUS: A massive play in that game too, I believe it was the third quarter, kind of midway through it. Napheesa Collier gets shoved into a screen, I think it was set by Stewart, and it was Ionescu who shoved her. But she shoves her directly into the screen, Stewart falls over and they call her for her fourth foul.

And once Collier has to leave the game with four fouls, the game kind of changed and the Liberty really grabbed control and never handed it back to the Lynx.

KARWOWSKI: What were your, kind of some takeaways that you kind of had just watching the Lynx in their first couple games of the season. Do you think they'll go all the way?

CORNELIUS: I do think they will. I've watched them play now because we got coverage earlier this season when they played Caitlin Clark and the Indiana Fever, and they won a gritty game.

Now talking about these first two games of the finals, I think that's bound to happen. Like, I'm a Celtics fan, so I attribute it to the Celtics when they went down to Dallas. And got beat by 40 points after winning the first three games.

I think the Lynx, now 1-1, they did their job. They got one on the road through a fight in that first game. And that's the championship caliber team. When you're able to win gritty games like that, it'll set you up during the later stretches of this series. You now got two at home, I believe. So, if you can close it out here, great.

But, once again, you've already shown that you can go into a hostile territory and get a win. So I think this team has all the confidence in the world and they have one of the best coaches of all time in the WNBA in Cheryl Reeve. So I'm definitely confident that they can get the job done.

KARWOWSKI: And then a little bit closer to home. We've got the Gophers women's team starting their season in, I think it's early November. They play Connecticut State in their first match. And the storyline is that this team wants to be an NCAA tournament team. And I have full faith that they can do it.

Mara Braun getting injured last season was certainly not ideal for their scenario, but I think that gave a chance for other players to step up like Amaya Battle. She kind of had that career high night the first game of a Big Ten tournament, which is really cool to see and then obviously going on that run and the WNIT was just incredible.

CORNELIUS: Yeah. And then it ended the Minnesota way where they get to the championship game. If there was betting odds, I bet they would have been like a minus 10, minus 11 against that team. But you know, they just kind of crumbled there late in that game.

But, on the more positive side this season, I really liked the additions that they made. Annika Stewart, former teammate of Mara Braun in high school. I think Kennedy Klick coming back will give them a boost at the guard position. And then Taylor Woodson, another player experienced, coming back home after playing at Michigan to start her career.

And then you add more defense. That's kind of the thing I kind of looked at last year with this team. They didn't have as much on the defensive end. They had scores with Battle, Braun and Grocholski, but they needed more of a solid defense when it got later in the conference play.

And Tori McKinney, the freshman, out of Minnetonka, Minnesota, is going to bring that on both sides of the ball. She can score. I feel like she's more of a mid range scorer than a three point shooter, but that's kind of what they need more complimentary players.

And then you bring in McKenna Johnson is another pure scorer. But I think this team added perfectly what they needed and they fit all of their needs. Then you add another experienced guard in Alexsia Rose to this backcourt as well. So like I really like what Dawn Plitzuweit did through the portal and through her recruiting to add to this team because I believe she hit all the areas she needed.

KARWOWSKI: Right? I think Dawn Plitzuweit's a really smart coach. I think one of the biggest threats, Champ and I talked about this at the last podcast, we said, what's really going to help is Caitlin Clark being gone, and Gabbie Marshall being gone, and Kate Martin being gone. Iowa isn't much of a threat anymore.

But USC is, JuJu Watkins is going to be a force to be reckoned with USC's team. I'm interested to see how the Gophers kind of fair up against that. But you know, going back to what you were saying about kind of this new restructured team.

I really like that, Annika Stewart, just her being an older girl. She's a fifth year. She's playing the Big Ten last four years with Nebraska, so it'll be really cool. And then, as you mentioned, former teammate with Mara Braun, is going to be a pretty cool connection that those two have.

Well, you know, I'm starting to get a little hungry, so I think it's about time we, you know, head out. As always, this is Alex Karwowski alongside Andrew Cornelius, and this episode was produced by Ceci Heinen.

Thanks for giving us a listen, and if you liked what we said; if you disagree with us; if you want to send us, you know, a nasty email, or just chat about Gopher sports. Whatever, you know, I'm totally an open book, so you can just drop me an email at akarwowski@mndaily.com with any questions, comments, concerns, hot takes or disagreements. Once again, I'm Alex Karwowski with Andrew Cornelius, and this has been the Gold Standard.