

ACHA national tourney provides first-rate action

By Josh Moyer

BENSENVILLE, Ill. SOME WOULD CALL it a second-rate league, a poor man's NCAA.

But for anyone who attended an ACHA game this past season, that person probably reached a far different conclusion: the ACHA may not have the same talent, but it's just as exciting.

I attended the ACHA National Championship Tournament near Chicago last weekend. And while Penn State came up short in the title game, I still didn't go home disappointed.

I witnessed some of the best hockey games I've ever seen.

No. 1-seeded Rhode Island overcame No. 9 Weber State, 3-2, in overtime and was then upset by Illinois in the final period of the next round.

Penn State also defeated Ohio in the last 75 seconds, and virtually every game went down to the wire.

What more could you ask for?

Well, for some fans, that answer was still the NCAA. One conversation I had with a local went something like this:

Local [excited]: Is this game really for the national championship?

Me: Yeah. But it's the ACHA, not the NCAA.

Local [disappointed]: Oh ... what's that?

Don't make the same mistake — that may be club hockey, but it's no second-class association.

NCAA Division I talent is all-around: take Penn State's Joe Maglaque and Michael McMullen, for instance. Both played for Division I Fairfield until the team disbanded. Instead of going to a different NCAA school, they both

opted for Penn State of the ACHA.

The Icers' Kevin Jaeger is another example. NCAA schools didn't take a gamble on him because they believed the 5-foot-8 forward was too small — 130-plus career goals later, I think it's safe to say they were wrong.

But just how good are these guys?

For that answer, go back to January when the ACHA represented Team USA at the World University Games. The ACHA competed against teams with NHL players and squads with Olympic athletes. Still, it managed a respectable 3-3 record.

Not too bad — club players vs. NHL skaters.

It's hard to compare the ACHA to existing leagues. But think of it this way: the ACHA simply recruits players who fall through the cracks in the NCAA.

For you football fans and quarterback aficionados out there, think Kurt Warner with the Arena Football League or Tommy Maddox with the XFL or even Doug Flutie with the CFL.

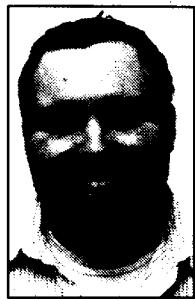
What we have with the ACHA is a collection of Warners, Maddoxes and Fluties — good players in a not-so-recognized league.

Trust me, I wouldn't have taken the trip to Chicago and stayed in a place surrounded by cop cars and "gentleman's clubs" if I thought otherwise — and even if our "clean" towels were matted with the previous guest's body hair, our luggage was lost, our first flight was cancelled and our second flight was twice delayed.

I'd still do it all over again. And even though I won't have the Icers' beat next season, I'll still make the trip to the national championship tournament.

Of course, next year, I'll just drive to a relative's house.

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MY OPINION

Icers

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"This is his second goal of the tournament, and obviously the biggest one."

Arcobello, the sweat pouring off his face, played down his significance in the deciding score and said, "To put all the glory or honor on one person is not right."

"It's just another day at work," he added with a half-smile.

Arcobello wasn't the only rookie to contribute, though.

Scanning the locker room, red-headed freshman defender Keith Jordan — one of the Rookie of the Year favorites — easily stuck out.

While his team competed against tournament host Robert Morris the night before, Jordan was in the emergency room.

"I was really pissed off that I didn't play yesterday, but it felt really good to get on the ice," he said, pausing between coughs.

Jordan came down with a viral infection and couldn't even walk, according to Battista. Jordan wound up playing sick the entire four-day stretch.

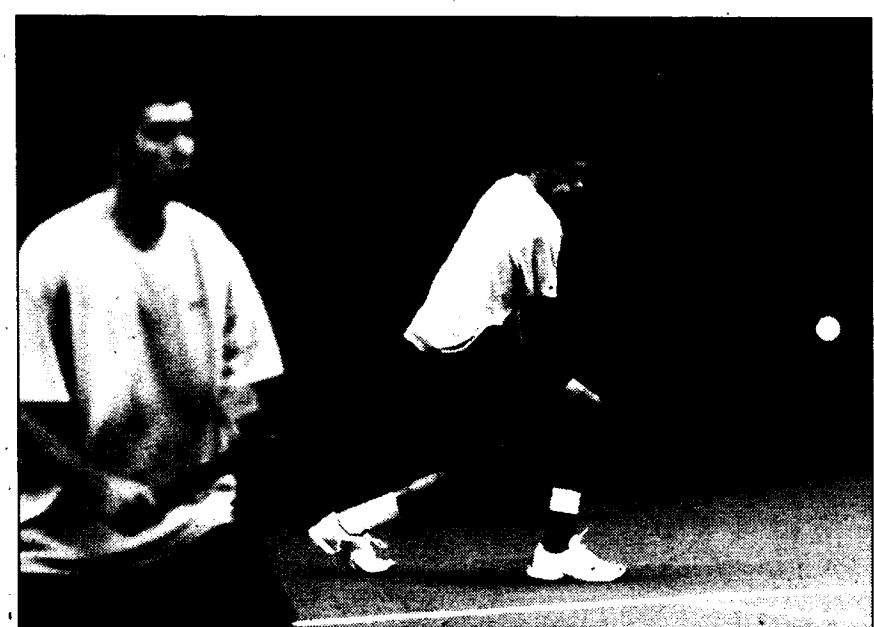
The State College native was hooked up to an IV the evening before — and was also forced to take an ample amount of Motrin, Pedialite, Gatorade and vitamins.

Still, the soft-spoken rookie played. "What a difference it made having Keith Jordan back in the lineup — even if he's not 100 percent," Battista said.

Michael McMullen also finished with a pair of goals, including the game-winning goal against Ohio. And Paul Zodtner recorded a score after playing with the Icers' red line, opposite seniors Kevin Jaeger and Mike Carrano, a majority of the time.

"They all grew up — Zodtner, Arcobello, Jordan, McMullen," Battista said. "A lot of these guys, they're gonna be the nucleus of our team for a long time to come."

"And I'd like to think they're all going to wanna get back here right away."



Malcolm Scatliffe returns the volley during a doubles match against Illinois with Mark Barry. Scatliffe and Barry lost, 7-6, in a tie break.

Tennis

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who is getting to every ball and we're just doing a good job putting opponents away," Sherman said.

Part of their success may partially be due to the effort that Sherman is able to put toward doubles play. The freshman is not in the singles lineup at this stage of the season, and has been devoted to making the most of his time in doubles.

"With not playing singles, I have to be more focused on doubles — I like to know that I'm helping the team by playing well," he said. "I know my biggest impact is in the doubles, so I try to do as much as I can for the team."

At this point, Sherman and James are certainly doing a great deal for their team.

In their victories, many times they will finish their match first, thus giving the other doubles pairings some momentum with which to work. And the momentum only builds for the rest of the Lions, as a win at doubles, played first, can take pressure off of all the singles players.

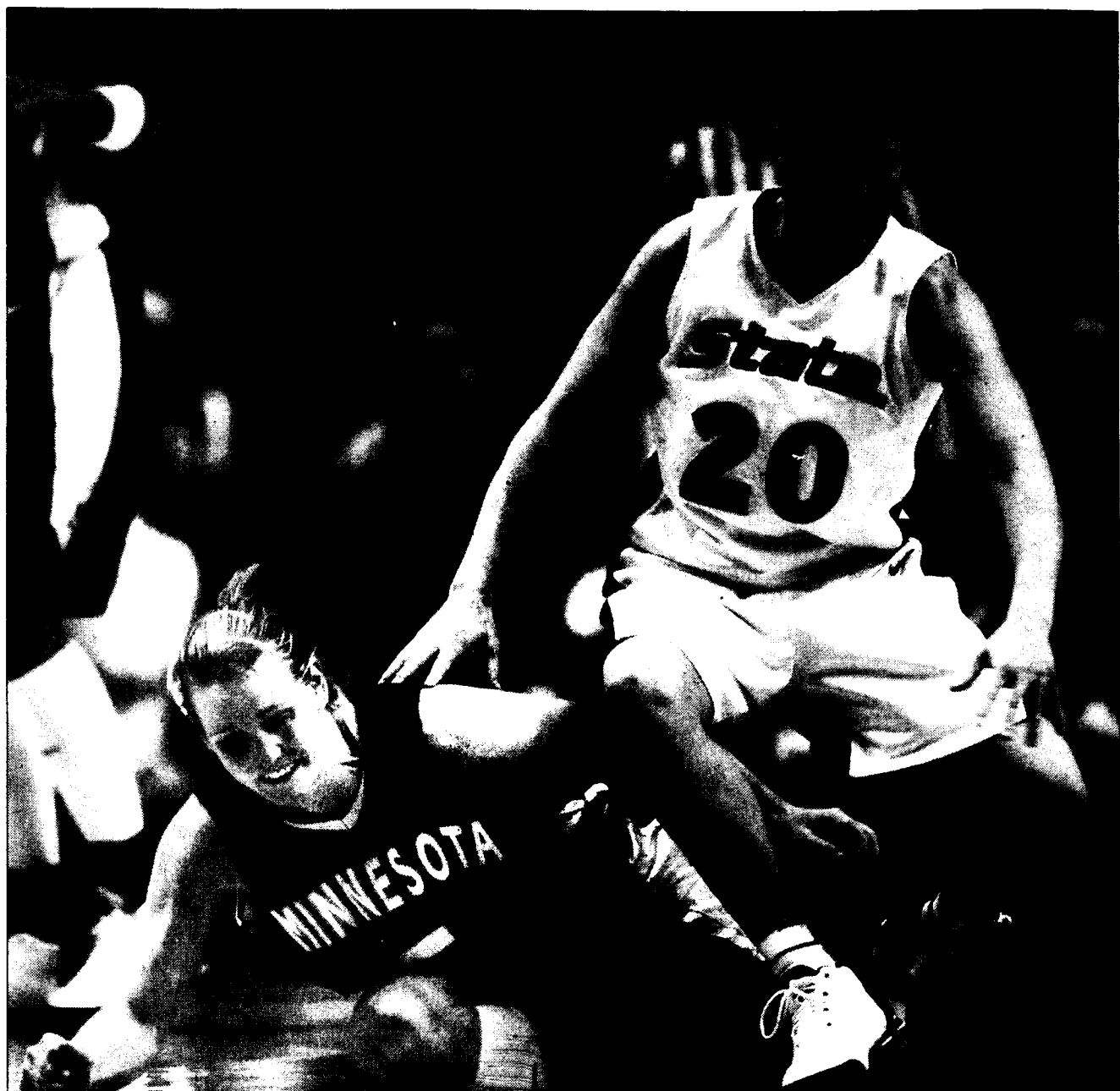
Recently the duo has struggled, going 0-2 during the Lions' road matches during spring break, in contests with No. 65 Indiana and Villanova.

"They're freshmen being freshmen," Bortner said. "They have to realize that at this level, no matter who you're playing, you have to be ready. Hopefully they'll learn from it [the Villanova loss]."

Even with their success so far, James said, as freshmen they are not at the top of their games yet. Sherman said that the duo can still work on hitting its second or third balls better, keeping those shots out of the net. If they can keep long volleys going, the extended play prevents opponents from getting easy points off of Penn State's mistakes.

"When we play aggressive, that's our best stuff," Sherman said. "At the same time, when we can make our opponents have to play our shots, we're playing our best doubles."

A controlled aggression, as Bortner describes it, is the key to doubles, and once the two freshmen can master that, the Lions could find themselves with 1-point cushion at the start of singles play every weekend for the remainder of the season.



Michigan State's Lindsay Bowen (20) goes over Minnesota's April Calhoun as they scramble for a loose ball during the Big Ten tournament final.

Spartans: A scrappy club

Aggressive play and a never-say-die attitude helped lift Michigan State to a Big Ten championship.

By Nate Heckenberger

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INDIANAPOLIS — It took just three words for Michigan State's Kristin Haynie to explain what her team had more of than any other team in the Big Ten tournament.

"It's a scrappy heart," said Haynie, the most Outstanding Player of the tournament, after her team had just won its first-ever Big Ten tournament title.

Cast into the tournament sharing the regular season title with No. 1 seed Ohio State, the Spartans won their three games in determined fashion.

Mashed with a roster full of good-but-not-great players, No. 2-seed Michigan State won the tournament by beating teams that were led by stars.

"Basketball is meant to be played that way," Michigan State coach Joanne McCallie said of her team's effort against Penn State. "If you have four or five people that can really bite you any night, you're really tough to defend."

What also stuck out even more than the fact that four Spartans averaged double figures was their ability to

adapt. All three games were won in different ways, and all three came down to the wire.

Game one was the shocker of the bunch, maybe even the wake-up call that sparked the run. As the No. 7 seed, Illinois led by two with two minutes left in regulation.

It was then that senior guard Lindsay Bowen stripped Illinois guard Tiffanie Guthrie and scored to force overtime. From there, all MSU did was shutout the Fighting Illini 11-0 in overtime.

Then it was Penn State's turn to take a shot, and the Lady Lions decided to bring some serious offense.

No problem, thanks for coming.

Four Spartans — Haynie, Bowen, Liz Shimek and Kelli Roehrig — combined for 65 of the 83 points, leaving the Lady Lions wondering how 76 wasn't enough in a tournament game.

"It definitely helps them out because they have a lot of people scoring," Penn State senior guard Tanisha Wright said after the loss.

When the Spartans finally got to the main event last Monday, No. 4 seed Minnesota had knocked out Ohio State to set up a match-up between the conference's best remaining team and arguably the best remaining post player, Minnesota's Janel McCarville.

Instead of a shootout, Michigan State played in and won the lowest-scoring title game in the history of Big Ten

tournament title games. The scoring was down, along with the 56 percent shooting percentage that Michigan State had against Penn State.

So with the offense down, the defense was up, starting with McCarville. Just a day after one of the tournament's best individual performances, in which she scored 21 points, amassed 15 rebounds and held Big Ten Player of the Year Jessica Davenport to just 12 points, "Lady Shaq" had nothing left in the final.

McCarville made 1-of-17 shots for two points, and her team did not fare much better, finishing with a 26.8 shooting percentage. Despite the shooting woes, the Golden Gophers led by two with 4:17 left in the game.

Like they had all tournament long, the Spartans dominated the final stretch, scoring the last eight points of the game and winning their 12th straight game, dating back to Jan. 23, at Penn State.

"We have a balanced team of attackers," McCallie said. "... There was lots of times where that game could have gone either way. It was close. You just can't care. You just want to give your very best. I think I saw my team turn that corner. There was a part there where it was back and forth, and I just saw them turn that corner. They're a special group."

Special in a way the other 10 Big Ten teams could envy.

Lady Lions lack necessary balance

By Nate Heckenberger

INDIANAPOLIS

LEVEN TEAMS. Ten games.

Four days. One champion.

And one glaring necessity that is all the more important in March.

If it wasn't obvious enough throughout the regular season,

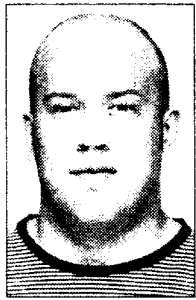
with Ohio State's 6-foot-5 Jessica Davenport winning Big Ten Player of the Year honors, having a dominant post player to go with solid guard play is the recipe for success in the conference.

The tournament champion, Michigan State, was a pure example of what that inside-outside balance means. The Spartans' guards did everything that was asked of them — handle the basketball, make clutch shots and get the ball to the post.

In the final minutes of last Monday's championship game, when Michigan State scored the final eight points to win its first tournament championship, forward Liz Shimek scored the first four and 6-foot-4 Kelli Roehrig was there for the final rebound and the icing on the foul line.

"It's tremendously important to have people who can command in the paint and play with confidence," Michigan State coach Joanne McCallie said the day before her team dismissed Penn State. "The Big Ten has excellent post players. It's just a big part of the game. You have to be able to get the paint scores. A lot is made of 3-point shooting and outside play, but I would just say the guard play, handling the basketball and making sure the ball gets to those post players inside-out will be the determining factor, particularly in March."

Boy, was she right.



MY OPINION

But it's that kind of philosophy that Penn State hasn't practiced lately, which may explain the drought of tournament championships since 1996. Rather, the Lady Lions program is built around guards. It's not as if basing a team around the best backcourt in the conference is a bad thing, but for those who never saw or heard of a game outside the Bryce Jordan Center, Penn State does lose. And a lot of that can be contributed to not having any other options besides Tanisha Wright and Jess Strom.

Earlier in the season when Strom was home with an illness as her team traveled to Northwestern, Wright was forced to take on the entire scoring load with no other legitimate scoring option — and Penn State lost. When Wright got in foul trouble this season at Purdue, Strom wasn't enough to carry her team to a win.

If Penn State can learn anything from the most recent tournament, it should be that balance is the key. Wisconsin coach Lisa Stone used Michigan State as an example even before the Spartans were Big Ten champs.

"They have solid guard play and a dominant post presence," she said. "If you take the guards away, you go inside. If you go inside and they double, you kick out to the shooters and drivers."

Sounds easy enough. Minnesota, the No. 4 seed, upset top-seeded Ohio State thanks to its center Janel McCarville and her 21 points, 15 rebounds and her ability to hold Davenport to 12 points and 12 rebounds in 43 minutes. McCarville and her sidekick down on the block, Jamie Broback, who would have been the tournament's Most Outstanding Player had the Golden Gophers pulled out a win, were the reasons they were even in the championship.

Penn State, on the other hand, was some late game heroics from Wright and Strom away from losing to Iowa in

the quarterfinals, and was handcuffed against Michigan State.

Iowa center Jamie Cavey and teammate forward Johanna Solverson combined for 41 points and 13 rebounds against the Lady Lions; both were a serious matchup problem all night, especially with Amanda Brown in foul trouble.

Then, two days later with Strom missing five minutes in the first half with a turned ankle and Wright sitting out seven-plus minutes because of fouls, Penn State could get neither a defensive stop nor establish a strong enough inside presence to take the focus off of either of the seniors.

Shimek and Roehrig, meanwhile, lit up the Lady Lions for 37 combined points and got to the free throw line 16 times. Penn State got there just nine times as a team.

The blame should not go to Brown or Ashli Schwab or whoever had the responsibility in the paint. Brown and Schwab do a good job fulfilling their roles on the supporting cast, getting rebounds and taking turns scoring every-so-often.

It's the system that is flawed. Instead of bringing in a post player to use as that yin to the guards' yang, the Lady Lions' posts are simply there to hopefully take away the opponents' beast in the middle, while the guards win it.

It seems all well and good, and Wright and Strom certainly are an exciting pair to watch lead a team.

So Coach Portland, if you can hear this: For the next Tanisha Wright's sake. Or the next Jess Strom, or Kelly Mazzante or whomever's sake. Take notice of the Spartans, or even the Gophers and Buckeyes, and get someone who scares people inside.

And if it ever happens, get that woman the ball and watch out, success in March just might follow.

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