

EMILY MARQUIS/CHRONICLE

Men's ice hockey's season ends at the hands of North Dakota in a 5-0 NCAA Regional Final blowout

By ALEXANDRA MARTINAKOVA
Editor-in-Chief

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. — With about seven seconds left in regulation, North Dakota senior defender and captain Bennett Zmolek skated the puck behind his own net into the corner, his back turned to the players around him, his movement slow.

He wasn’t in any rush to create any plays or anything like that. He was waiting for the clock to run out and send his team to its first Frozen Four in 10 years with a decisive 5-0 victory over the Quinnipiac Bobcats in the Sioux Falls Regional Finals of the NCAA Tournament Saturday night.

On the other side of the ice, Quinnipiac forwards senior Anthony Cipollone and junior Matthew McGroarty embraced with tears in their eyes, for what was Cipollone’s — and five more graduating Bobcats’ — last appearance in the navy and gold.

“We were younger than we normally are,” head coach Rand Pecknold said in the post-game press conference. “We’re a young team, immature at times. I got caught off guard by that.”

It is true that Quinnipiac is full of young talent. Rostering one of the more talented freshmen classes, this year’s squad looked full of promise heading into the NCAA Tournament, especially in the regional semifinals.

“It’s just perplexing,” Pecknold said. “We were so awesome on Thursday, confident, passionate.”

That team was nowhere to be found Saturday night. Instead, the Bobcats resembled more of a punching bag for the Fighting Hawks.

Barely three minutes into the game, North Dakota was outshooting Quinnipiac seven to one. This intense offensive pressure would follow the Bobcats the entire game as the Fighting Hawks barely gave them any opportunity to create any sort of plays or set up any scoring opportunities.

North Dakota’s defense had Quinnipiac’s number Saturday, and it delivered a phenomenal performance at it.

Its offense didn’t want to be forgotten either. Six minutes into the first, North Dakota’s freshman center Jack Kernan sniped a shot through Quinnipiac’s junior netminder Dylan Silverstein and started an avalanche.

Two and a half minutes later, his linemate, sophomore Cody Croal, found the back of the net behind Silverstein too. A few minutes later, Kernan found a shot from the right side and gave North Dakota a three goal lead halfway into the first period.

Usually even that wouldn’t be an automatic loss. Hockey is a sport where things can change in a matter of seconds, not minutes. Wisconsin’s overtime win over Michigan State in the Worcester Regional Final Saturday serves as a great example.

But there was no coming back from this for the Bobcats.

It’s not that they didn’t try everything they could. It isn’t very often that Pecknold chooses to switch out goaltenders, no matter the score.



EMILY MARQUIS/CHRONICLE

But after a month of not seeing a minute on the ice, junior goaltender Matej Marinov got his moment to shine, and he took it, to a certain degree.

Yes, he let in two goals in the second period, as senior forward Dylan James sniped one in through the traffic in front of the net and freshman center Cole Reschny slid one in between his pads. But he also stood and survived a four on one battle against the Fighting Hawks when Quinnipiac’s defense was nowhere to be found.

“I don’t know,” was Pecknold’s answer about Marinov’s performance tonight. “Let’s leave it at that.”

To give some credit where credit is due, the Bobcats battled. Despite the slow and morale-killing start, they managed to climb and almost match North Dakota’s shots-on-goal, 29 versus 22. None of that mattered though, as North Dakota had the regional’s MVP in its crease.

Freshman goaltender Jan Spunar was the kryptonite for both Merrimack and Quinnipiac, as he shut out both eastern teams in his first NCAA Tournament appearance.

“Having confidence that he’s behind us and he can stop pucks gives us the assurance that we’re able to play with confidence,” North Dakota’s junior defender Abram Wiebe said. “It’s just so special to have a guy like that on our team.”

“He was ahead of the play the entire night,” Pecknold said of the Czech native. “He was locked in. We didn’t do enough to get bodies in front of him. He overchallenges, which is fine at this level, but that creates rebounds and they’re in trouble for that. We didn’t generate those first shots.”

Quinnipiac generated barely anything. North Dakota used its size and power to block the Bobcats from any sort of hope of walking away from this meeting as the winning team and it succeeded in its goal.

“We watched a lot of video on them,” North Dakota’s head coach Dane Jackson said. “We talked to some people that played against them more often. And it’s one thing to give guys a game plan, but they had to execute and to commit to it and it was impressive and I’m proud of the guys for doing that.”

So while the Fighting Hawks celebrated with the entire Denny Sanford PREMIER Center that was filled to the brim with North Dakota fans, the Bobcats left the ice with their heads low and tearful expressions.

It is a rough ending to a season and a rough ending to some collegiate careers. Cipollone, defenders Charlie Leddy and Wil Gilson and forwards Jeremy Wilmer, Alex Power and captain Victor Czerneckianair will never skate as Bobcats again.

“I mean, these guys are the epitome of winners and they set the standard for this program,” sophomore forward Tyler Borgula said. “Every single one of those guys impacted me in being a leader. They inspired me and they definitely inspired this team and obviously the community around us. From the bottom of my heart and from everyone else’s heart, these guys mean the world to us and we look up to them and wish them nothing but the best in the future.”

Czerneckianair, Cipollone and Power are the last remnants of the historic 2023 NCAA Championship team, and with their exit the team goes back to players who never saw the grounds of Frozen Four hockey.

Still, despite the grim outcome of this game, they can hold their heads a little higher, knowing what impact they left at the program.

“It’s been everything,” Cipollone said, tearing up. “All my best friends are from Quinnipiac and I’m just very grateful that Rand gave me the opportunity to come and play here.”

“They won a national championship,” Pecknold said, having to take a second to compose himself in the press conference whispering, ‘Sorry, I get emotional at times.’ “So we’ll miss them.”

It is not the ending that anyone on the team or the players wanted. But it is the one it got. And while the seniors will always have that as their last memory of college hockey, the remainder of the roster should take it as a lesson and come back from it wiser and stronger next year.

Maybe they will be the team that breaks back into the Frozen Four, or at least wins a Whitelaw Cup.