

Is The National Championship A Dream For Missouri State?

By Steve Casson, WebSports Radio.com

SPRINGFIELD, MO - As the 2007 Mid-America Collegiate Hockey Association Champions, the Missouri State Ice Bears still have a long way to go according to six year Head Coach Benjamin Alexander, who says he'd like to have the Ice Bears capture the American Collegiate Hockey Association Division II National crown some day.

That's my impression of a conversation with Alexander before the Ice Bears mini-camp July 29th at Jordan Valley Ice Park, in Springfield.

"I wouldn't mind having to play in Florida twice this season," said Alexander. The Ice Bears will travel January 11th and 12th, 2008 to play Florida Gulf Coast University, who will also host the ACHA Nationals in March.

Missouri State is now considered a significant college hockey program in the Midwest. Under Alexander's leadership the team has progressed from a small club team with a few friends and ice rink staff watching, to several (1,100 seat) sell-outs in the past two seasons and high caliber player recruitment for the Ice Bears hockey program.

I remember mentioning during a broadcast on WebSportsRadio.com last year a defenseman from the visiting Bradley Braves looked up into the overflowing stands then mouthed the words "Do you believe this?" to his teammate as the Ice Bears were being introduced before the start of the game. Something that happens frequently now at JVIP.

The east rink ice is freshly painted with a huge bear head as large as the center ice circle and I ask forward John Odenwald (Jr) if he's looked at the logo. "It's absolutely huge," he replied. "Unbelievable!"

For several returning Ice Bears players; Captain Dan Odenwald (Sr), Bobby Saitta (Sr), Clayton Baker (Jr), and Joel Livingston (Sr), this weekend was not the first time to lace up their skates.

"I have been playing over a month," said Livingston as he walked past me before heading into the locker room mentioning that he also played in several tournaments. "I believe I've played more hockey this summer than anyone else returning or incoming."

The Senior forward and a compliment of 54 other hockey players packed the Springfield ice rink on the final day with hopes of being invited to team tryouts in late August.

Most players attended a preview of what Missouri State Ice Hockey is all about while some, still in high school, will be left with a huge impression – and may be persuaded – when it comes to making a choice of where to play college hockey.

"We had 55 plus prospective players come to the camps this year and I believe there will be several forwards to replace some players we lost from last year," said Alexander. Graduating Seniors Andy Hellwig, Jon Baeten and goaltender Kevin Rekowski along with other players, who either left to concentrate on school or transferred, has lead to some sizeable skates to fill.

Defensively, coach Alexander is not worried. "We are going to have a great defensive unit," he explained. "Last year was one of the best defensive teams we've ever had, and this year looks even better." Baker (12G, 31A) and David Ellis (Sr) (12G, 15A) lead the team in defensive scoring during the 2006-2007 season.

Even goaltending got a boost with 8 net minders attending the mini camp. "With (Michael) Poepping back and me fighting for the starting role," said goaltender Michael Brown (Sr). "Another goaltender in the mix would push both of us, and be a positive influence."

Scheduling games is a little different this season. Shying away from the hefty assortment of D1 level teams, the Ice Bears will drop games with the University of Oklahoma and only play two with the University of Central Oklahoma. They'll add St. Louis University on their schedule after a two season absence, and the two road games with FGCU.

Another change is hosting two teams in two nights over a weekend. "Playing one team on one night and another the next night makes that single game very important," says Alexander. "Not that every game is not important, but knowing you are playing the same team again the next night means there might not be the sense of urgency to win."

Those games are scheduled for the end of the season on weekends when Missouri comes in Friday, January 25th and Southern Illinois – Edwardsville plays on Saturday. The schedule repeats February 8th with Grand Valley State and February 9th with the University of Nebraska.

"We re also trying to fit in a preseason game with Lindenwood University the week before we start the season on the road with Central Oklahoma," said Alexander.

Missouri State's success has also affected their rival, the Missouri Tigers. Three of the four games between the two teams will be played at JVIP this year. "Since the ice park attracts more fans, both teams have agreed to move the games to Springfield," said Ice Bears General Manager Stan Melton.

October 5th (which will be the home opener) and 6th is when the Ice Bears and Tigers will first meet. "It's going to be a fantastic atmosphere," explains Melton. "We have several alumni events scheduled, and it's a traditional rivalry that has become even more exciting over the past few seasons."

Both teams will play a neutral site game in Webster Groves, Missouri during Thanksgiving weekend, which is sure to pack in the rink since much of the team is from the St. Louis area.

August 30th will be one date that will be exciting for both players and fans. That's when the 2007-2008 Varsity team will be announced. Both prospects and returning players will be heading to a week long tryout beginning August 22nd.

I'm just wondering if I should tell Coach Alexander about the dream I had the other day of announcing Missouri State as the 2008 ACHA Division II National Champions? I'm sure that's his dream too.