

Missouri State Ice Bears Top Mizzou for MACHA Championship!

By Steve Casson, *WebSports Radio staff*

EAST ALTON, IL - Championship hockey games are meant to be exciting but nothing could have prepared those who witnessed the Missouri State Ice Bears' 3-2 overtime win against the Missouri Tigers at the 2008 MACHA Gold Division Championship for one of the most thrilling and intense moments in league history.

It was a game that included two disallowed goals, fantastic goaltending, denied break-a-ways, and was capped by an overtime goal (scored 6 on 4 during a delayed penalty) with players sprawled on the ice.

Missouri State went into Sunday's tilt at East Alton Ice Arena knowing they had to fill three tall orders: Beat the Missouri Tigers for the fifth time this year, become the first top seed to win it in four years, and repeat as back-to-back champions. No small task against the Tigers, who saved their best hockey for the end of the season and who gained a berth in the finals by knocking off the number two seed (Southern Illinois-Edwardsville) 4 - 1 the previous night.

Tied at two after three periods, the Ice Bears received the last big break when the Tigers' Dave Bauer (2A) was sent to the sin bin with 4:24 left in the 10 minute sudden death period.

Then while working the power play, Dan Odenwald caught a vicious high stick to the chin that nearly took his helmet off, drawing a delayed penalty to the Tigers. Odenwald could have let the helmet come off completely, which would have stopped play and started a two-man advantage for Missouri State. Odenwald, visibly shaken and down on the ice, fought to keep it on and play continued.

The Ice Bears (23-9-0) pulled goaltender Michael Brown for the extra skater and a 6 on 4 man advantage. Five seconds later Salman Shah picked up the puck and found Joe Combs alone at the top of the slot. Combs let loose a cannon that grazed the shoulder of Van Gels before stretching the twine for the game winner.

"I just wanted to get the puck at the net so we could get a whistle and start the five-on-three," said Combs. "I took the shot....got a good bounce (off Van Gels), and it went right in."

Odenwald, still reeling from the hit, never saw the shot as he struggled to his feet just four feet away. "I just saw it bounce back out of the net," said Odenwald. "I didn't see the shot. I got up and someone shouted 'Joe scored! Joe scored!' I thought they were talking about Joe Cero and I thought, 'Wow, Joe shot it that hard?' but then I found out it was Combs."

The Ice Bears started effectively 9:49 into the first period when Danny Bethmann (2G) scored on a rebound off of Bryan Beaman's shot to give Missouri State a 1-0 lead, but Missouri goaltender Keith Van Gels (53 saves) closed the vault for the next 40 minutes of hockey, giving his team a chance to come back.

Christian Waters tied the game with 2:57 remaining in the second period on a backhanded shot over Brown's shoulder through traffic, and then Daniel Kootman (who had a goal disallowed earlier in the game) put Mizzou ahead 2-1. The goal 6:41 into the third came after Brown did the splits to make a save on Waters but Kootman put home the rebound.

Things looked even bleaker for Missouri State when Paul Moellenburg was whistled into the penalty box a minute later, but Anthony Trupiano turned the game around while working short handed. Trupiano stepped in front of a pass and raced to the Mizzou corner, taking the lone defenseman with him. He spotted Bethmann coming down the slot and put a perfect feed right on his stick. Bethmann made no mistake putting the puck past Van Gels on the wide side, and the Ice Bears were back in business with 9:31 left in regulation.

Brown (who had 28 saves and was voted the Tournament MVP) made sure the Ice Bears would not have to play catch-up again as he made one spectacular save after another, frustrating a relentless Tiger attack. His astounding play thwarted several great chances for Mizzou (17-13-1) down the stretch and in overtime, where the Tigers took the early momentum but could not capitalize.

"The team defense was incredible," deflected Brown. "Dan Odenwald played one of the best games I've ever seen him play. His back-checking was MVP. The whole team played incredible."

The Ice Bears converted on two of six power play chances while the Tigers could not take advantage of five opportunities.

Head coach Benjamin Alexander credited both teams with putting on a great show.

"They (the Ice Bears) deserved it. They worked hard at the end." said Alexander. "But I gotta give it to Mizzou. They really deserved to win that game. They put in a lot (of hard work) and they took it to us. We gutted it out and got the win. It was a great game; a good one to see."