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Big Ten hockey knows it has work to do after Year 1

Article by: [JASON GONZALEZ](#) and [CHIP SCOGGINS](#), Star Tribune staff writers | Updated: April 13, 2014 - 7:56 AM

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Fans of the Minnesota Gophers hockey team took over the PBR Bar & Grill at Xfinity Live in Philadelphia during the Frozen Four tournament.

Photo: Chris Szagola • Associated Press, [Star Tribune photo galleries](#) » [view larger](#) »

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PHILADELPHIA – The moderator at the NCAA’s Frozen Four opened a news conference with an observation that he meant as both a joke and statement of fact.

“This is the Big Ten’s first appearance in the national title game,” he said.

Fans of the WCHA probably didn’t appreciate the humor. The birth of

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Big Ten hockey remains a sore subject among college hockey fans as Year 1 of this new reality comes to a close.

The Gophers gave the Big Ten a welcoming gift by advancing to Saturday's national championship game against Union at [Wells Fargo Center](#).

The Big Ten's associate commissioner, **Jennifer Heppel**, said the conference is pleased with its first year of hockey but acknowledged the league still has to win over many fans who long for the old days.

Heppel said the conference will conduct its year-end review soon and discuss possible changes or tweaks. Specifically, attendance for the inaugural conference tournament held at Xcel Energy Center was disappointing and a significant dropoff from the WCHA's Final Five.

"It takes a long time to build an event," Heppel said. "Sure, I'd be lying if I didn't say that I would have loved to see 18,000 people, but that's unrealistic and it was unrealistic when we started selling tickets. I feel very, very good about the approach that we took in marketing to fans and as part of the respect of what the WCHA had built."

Gophers go on autopilot

A motivational speaker wasn't necessary for the Gophers. They were expected to be on autopilot this deep into the season, coach **Don Lucia** said.

Countless e-mails and text messages are the only thing the Gophers relied on for inspiration heading into Saturday night's national championship game against Union.

"Really at this point, you hope your team is on autopilot, because if we have to push and prod at this time of the year as coaches [it's not good]. ... That's all been done in October, November and December," Lucia said. "We tell our guys all year long that sometimes we're critical of them after a win, but we're coaching for the end of the year."

Target on Union

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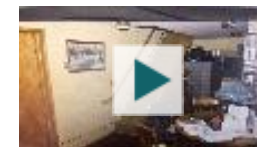
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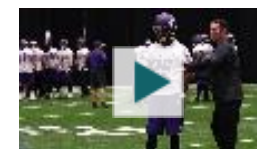
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The Gophers were the lower-ranked team on the ice for the first time this season.

Union assumed the No. 1 ranking in USCHO's final poll of the regular season after the Gophers were upset by Ohio State in the Big Ten semifinals.

USA Hockey maintained the Gophers' No. 1 ranking and the the NCAA tournament awarded them with the overall No. 1 seed. Union was seeded No. 3.

Union was the only Frozen Four qualifier to win its conference tournament and finished the season with a 17-game unbeaten streak (16-0-1) with Saturday's 7-4 victory.

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