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GIRLS BASKETBALL, PAGE D3

Jensen leads Martin
County West past
Maple River

Sports

Clock ticking down on Mavericks' season

Maybe I've been watching a little too much TV lately, but I keep hearing the beeps and ticks of a clock in my head.

They're reminding me that time is running out.

Running out for Jack Bauer on the show, "24."

Running out for the Minnesota State men's hockey team.

One is fiction. The other is real. Both seem to involve some kind of torture.

Mavericks senior captain Mick Berge looked like he had just undergone one of Jack's interrogations after Saturday's 7-4 loss to

Minnesota Duluth at the DECC.

While equipment was being lugged out of the Mavericks' locker room and onto an awaiting bus bound for Mankato, an exhausted Berge was still dressed in full gear, including his sweat-soaked purple jersey, and wondering what information he had that could possibly help shed some light on a disastrous third period.

"I don't know right now," he said. "I'm pretty speechless."

The Bulldogs scored five unanswered goals — includ-

ing three in a span of 2 minutes, 32 seconds of the third — to turn a 4-2 deficit into a 7-4 victory and series sweep of the Mavericks.

The beeping of the clock is only amplified when you look at what's left for the Mavericks.

They play against Minnesota, North Dakota, Wisconsin and St. Cloud State over the next six weeks as they try to snap out of their slump and put themselves into the best playoff position possible.

Two months ago, they had their sights set on first place in the Western Collegiate Hockey Association but didn't get there. Currently, they sit in eighth place in the

standings with a two-point edge over ninth-place Alaska-Anchorage, which has played two fewer league games than Minnesota State so far.

Few expected the Mavericks would be in this position at the end of January.

Sure, there was the 8-3-3 start to the season (MSU has gone 3-10-0 since), but the intrigue really began last March when they played that unforgettable WCHA playoff series against the Gophers. After Minnesota took two of the three overtime games in Mankato, the drama continued as people all watched Minnesota State teeter on the NCAA tournament bubble until, at the last second,

it popped, and left fans clamoring for more.

It was the ultimate season-ending cliffhanger, not unlike the end of a season of a great TV series.

Fall couldn't come fast enough for area hockey fans.

As the new season approached, there was excitement and hope for greatness. Virtually, the same cast was back. Nobody even considered that this team might "jump the shark."

As it turns out, there have been some unexpected plot twists. Injuries thinned out the lineup. Once-great goaltending started to slip. Consistent goal scorers have not stepped forward.

On Friday night, the

Gophers, who are ranked fifth in the nation, will be back in Mankato for the first time since last year's playoff series. A sold-out crowd is expected.

What will the Mavericks try to do to diffuse their plight this time around? Coach Troy Jutting has switched up his goaltenders, shuffled around his lines and even benched some veterans over the last few weeks, only to get inconsistent results.

The clock is counting down.

Beep ... beep ... beep.

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