

The Free Press



Tuesday,
February 10, 2009
www.mankatofreepress.com

SHANE FREDERICK, PAGE D2

Tightening college
hockey season would
benefit the game

Sports

Tightening hockey season would benefit game

It was 70 degrees on Oct. 10, the day the Minnesota State men's hockey team played its first game of this season.

On such a beautiful autumn day, it hardly seemed like hockey season. Still, more than 4,100 people showed up to the Alltel Center that night to witness the Mavericks' 5-2 victory over Bemidji State.

Now, it's mid-February — prime puck weather — and Minnesota State is gearing up for an important series at Western Collegiate Hockey Association-rival North Dakota.

The upcoming series, however, is sandwiched between a pair of idle weekends.

"You need some time off during the season," Mavericks coach Troy Jutting said after Monday afternoon's practice. "Ideally, you don't want two of three weeks off, but hopefully, we'll be good and rested for the end of the season."

Indeed, Minnesota State likely will find itself involved in a couple of physical games against the Sioux this weekend. Besides being a notoriously hard-hitting matchup, both teams are involved in the tight WCHA race that has 10 points separating first place from ninth and just

five points separating third place North Dakota from eighth-place Minnesota State. The outcome could mean a major shift in the league standings, so the guess is that neither team is going to go down without a fight.



**SHANE
FREDERICK**
Free Press

So perhaps a week off afterward won't be such a bad thing for the Mavericks, who will play two more WCHA series — a home weekend against Wisconsin and a home-and-home series against St. Cloud State — to close out the regular season.

"We want to get ourselves ready to be in a

groove," Jutting said.

In the meantime, however, the fans are losing out.

This is the time of year everybody should be playing. This is crunch time, when college hockey's faithful starts scoreboard watching and trying to decipher those impossible Pairwise Rankings after every result comes in.

Fans want results, not weekends when nothing happens.

"I don't know how it's going to affect us," Jutting said of this three-week stretch. "We had a great practice today."

The college-hockey season is long. Teams were allowed to practice for the first time on Oct. 4 — for

the Mavericks and many others, six days before their first game — and the NCAA Frozen Four championship game is on April 11. That's more than six months — longer than college football and college basketball.

But there is plenty of idle time along the way. In this season's 22 weeks, Minnesota State has four off, including two of the final five weeks of the regular season.

Then there's Alaska-Anchorage, which had a 34-day — yes, 34! — break between games, going from Dec. 6 to Jan. 9 without putting on a uniform.

That's the middle of the season, for crying out loud.

Imagine if the Minnesota Vikings had their bye week in the last couple of weeks of the regular season or if the Minnesota Twins had to take the month of July off before resuming the season.

The NCAA and college hockey's powers need to take a long look at their long season and shorten it up by a couple of weeks.

Make sure it's cold outside when the season starts, and, more importantly, make sure everybody's playing come February.

Shane Frederick is a Free Press staff writer. Read his blog at www.mankatofreepress.com/hockeyblog.