



MSU goalie Mike Zacharias has started every home game this season for the Mavericks.

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# Sports

## Mavs set sights on home ice

MSU sweep would lock up fourth in WCHA

By Shane Frederick  
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**MANKATO** — Not-so-sunny Grand Forks, N.D., is not exactly at the top of the list of best spring break destinations.

But for the last two years, that's exactly where members of the Minnesota State men's hockey team have had to go in mid-March for the first round of the Western Collegiate Hockey Association playoffs.

"Going into (Ralph) Engelstad Arena is a disadvantage for everyone," junior forward Jon Kalinski said.

This year, however, the ninth-ranked Mavericks are on the brink of earning home ice for the playoffs for the first time in five years.

A win over Michigan Tech tonight at the Alltel Center will lock up an upper-division (top five) finish in the WCHA standings. Two wins will put Minnesota State in fourth place.

"A couple more wins and people will have to come to our barn," Kalinski said, "and deal with our crowds."

That has happened twice since the Mavericks joined the WCHA in 1999-2000. That first season, they took fourth place, and in 2002-03, they finished in a tie for second.

Both years, they won their first-round playoff series and advanced to the Final Five.

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## MSU: Mavs 9-3-2 at Alltel Center this season

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Since 2003, MSU has finished ninth, eighth, seventh and eighth in the 10-team conference.

"This rink hasn't seen (the playoffs) very often," junior goaltender Mike Zacharias said. "This town hasn't seen that very often. ... It would be huge for us. We've always been good at home."

Minnesota State is 9-3-2 (.714) at the Alltel Center this season, its best winning percentage since 2002-03. The Mavericks have drawn 4,233 fans per game, marking the first time in their history that they've been over the 4,000 mark. They're drawing 430 more than last season and 668 more than two years ago.

Student tickets are distributed at noon on Thursdays before each home series, and the 1,100 seats for each game are regularly gobbled up in about

an hour.

"If we get home ice," I like our chances a lot to get to the Final Five," said Zacharias, who has started every home game this year.

First things first: a series against the Huskies, a team that swept the Mavericks five months ago, during MSU's opening weekend, and is trying to improve its own playoff position.

"We've come a long way as a team this year," Kalinski said. "That was a big wake-up call for us."

Zacharias agreed, but added that there's something different about this year's team than the ones that had to go on the road for the playoffs.

"I think we're a more structured team, a more well-rounded team and a deeper team overall," he said. "This team has more confidence than in the past. We don't seem to shake when the big boys come to town or when we go there."