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# Sports

## Mavs hope win sparks late-season playoff run

The Minnesota State men's hockey team's loss on Friday night at Michigan Tech was such a low spot for this season that the Mavericks had no choice but to hit their virtual reset button.

That was the talk, anyway, in the bowels of the MacInnes Student Ice Center on Saturday night in Houghton, Mich., after Minnesota State won 3-2 to break a five-game losing streak and salvage a series split against the Huskies.

That button can't erase the first four months of the

college-hockey season from the record books, but it can attempt to change the focus — and maybe even the identity — of a team that's wondering how it ended up near the bottom of the Western Collegiate Hockey Association standings.

"We're starting from scratch," Kael Mouillierat said.

"We're wiping the slate clean," Rylan Galiardi added.

"We're oh and oh (0-0)," coach Troy Jutting said.

What the Mavericks seem to be doing is all but

conceding a top-five finish in the WCHA standings to the teams still in the hunt for home ice.

Currently, just three points separate the first five teams in the conference, and that group is starting to break away from the rest of the pack.

Minnesota State is 6-13-1 in league play and 12 points out of fifth place. The Mavericks are currently in ninth place with eight games to play before the first round of the conference playoffs begins in March.

After getting this weekend off, they will go to Wisconsin, the nation's



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third-ranked team, and then host eighth-place Alaska-Anchorage and national No. 2 Denver before closing out with a home-and-home series against No. 4 St. Cloud State.

"We want to be firing on all cylinders by the time we get to the playoffs," said Mouillierat, who scored his third game-winning goal of the season on Saturday night.

If the Mavericks aren't shooting for fifth place or better anymore, they are shooting for a strong finish and some momentum going into a tournament that gives even Michigan Tech a

chance. Minnesota Duluth did that last year, finishing seventh in the league before pulling off a string of upsets en route to an improbable run to a Final Five championship and a berth into the NCAA tournament.

"I told the guys (before Saturday's game), 'We're oh and oh and have nine games to play. Then we've got the playoffs after that,'" Jutting said. "Our goal is to play in Game 13. Game 13 gets us to the (Final Five)."

Can the Mavericks just flip a switch and become something they haven't been?

They're a veteran team

that, more often than not, plays hard and has gotten solid goaltending and defensive play. But they're also a team that can't seem to score, even with wide-open nets to tap into. Even in Saturday's victory, scoring those goals remained such an issue, as the Mavericks fired a season-high total of 45 shots on goal.

"We know we have a good team," Galiardi said. "We've got to start proving it."

*Shane Frederick is a Free Press staff writer. Read his blog at [www.mankatofreepress.com/hockeyblog](http://www.mankatofreepress.com/hockeyblog).*