

Ohio State Reflects On WCHA Final Faceoff Win, Looks Forward To NCAAs



Ohio State women's ice hockey squares off with Quinnipiac in the quarterfinals of the NCAA Tournament on Saturday at the OSU Ice Rink.

The No. 1-seeded Buckeyes will host the No. 7 Bobcats in Columbus for the city's first-ever NCAA women's hockey tournament game after winning its second WCHA Final Faceoff trophy in program history last weekend.

Ohio State head coach Nadine Muzerall, defender Sophie Jacques, forward Gabby Rosenthal and goaltender Amanda Thiele spoke with Buckeye Sports Bulletin on Friday afternoon to reflect on their conference tournament title and preview the team's matchup with Quinnipiac.

Muzerall said this year's team is unlike the Ohio State women's hockey teams of old, claiming that the current collection of players reveals no blemishes or faults against their opponents.

"I don't think we have a weakness," Muzerall said. "In years past, we were dominant, but we weren't consistent. This year, we check off all the boxes. We are the best offensive team in the country with 4.96 goals per game and the best defensive team with fewer than two goals allowed per game. We always talk about getting to three goals. That's our mindset.

"Our time-to-kill and our power play are also the best in the nation. Thiele has been sensational in the net these past few weeks, too. I don't think we have a flaw. If I were an opposing coach, I think it'd be tough to find a weakness. We're a 200-foot hockey team, and I think this is the first time we have a true Patty Kazmaier recipient. I think there's a lot of firsts, and if I were a gambling gal, I would say this is our year."

The Buckeyes put their strength to the test against then-No. 1 Minnesota in the WCHA Final Faceoff championships. Ohio State showed toughness and grit to overcome a two-goal deficit versus the Golden Gophers, who handed them one of their six losses earlier in the season.

With 20 minutes remaining, forward Sara Saekkinen put the Buckeyes on the board at 3:34 into the final frame. Lauren Bernard and Rosenthal assisted the goal, helping cut the Minnesota lead in half. Jacques scored her first goal at 10:26 when she slid into the slot and one-timed a Clair DeGeorge pass

into the net, which tied the game at two-all and sent it to overtime.

Jacques, the 2022 WCHA Player of the Year, became a hero in the extra period when she provided Ohio State with a game-winning goal. She took a shot on Minnesota goaltender Lauren Bench that the Gopher initially saved but collected her rebound and buried the second attempt in the top left corner of the net. The goal happened just 23 seconds after the puck dropped.

"I don't really remember it," Jacques said of the goal. "It was really exciting. I just shot it at the net and saw the rebound sitting there, so I went for it. I don't really remember much more than that."

Rosenthal praised Jacques for her efforts but noted that Ohio State wouldn't have been in a position to win the game without a group effort. She pointed to Thiele's 31 saves as evidence of that fact, reminding her coaches and teammates that a game isn't won with one play.

"I think that win speaks a lot about our character and our desire to win," Rosenthal said. "I think that definitely helps us moving forward. We can get in situations where we might not be up, but we know that we can come back and win the game. It comes down to all the little details."

Quinnipiac shut out Syracuse, 4-0, to reach its quarterfinals matchup with the Buckeyes. Lexie Adzija, Jess Schryver, Taylor House and Sadie Peart scored goals for the Bobcats, while goaltender Corinne Schroeder stopped 16 shots.

Muzerall showed tremendous respect for Quinnipiac and thinks the northeastern program will provide a significant challenge for her team on Saturday.

"I think Quinnipiac is well-coached," Muzerall said. "I know their coaches from Hockey Canada. I think that they're a disciplined defensive team, and they have some offensive power and size. They're big, so we'll have to stay out of the box. They have a good power play, and we'll need to move our feet."

Ohio State senior forward Gabby Rosenthal laughed when her coach made the final comment, claiming that Muzerall was likely referring to her when addressing the need to stay out of the penalty box.

"I need to stay out of there," Rosenthal said. "That's something we've talked about, and I know I'll need to do if we want to win."

Muzerall shifted focus to Ohio State's power-play opportunities against the Bobcats, who have committed 93 penalties (186 minutes) in 38 games this season — an average of 2.4 calls a game.

"I think if we can get our power play on the ice as much as possible, that's obviously in our favor," Muzerall said. "When you play really close teams (in skill), it often comes down to one or two-goal games at the end. It comes down to special teams. That's where I have a lot of faith in our team."

The fifth-year head coach also pointed to home ice as a significant advantage for her team in the quarterfinals matchup. While Ohio State has never hosted an NCAA Tournament game in Columbus, they are familiar with the OSU Ice Rink, its atmosphere and its conditions.

"It's a tough rink to play in," Muzerall said. "I was a former player at Minnesota, and I played here. Then I was a former coach at Minnesota coaching against Ohio State. It's a tough rink. It's a tough rink to play in and coach in, but for us, we're in it every day. That's all we know. We have a really good crowd — they're right on the glass — they're very loud. They bring a lot of energy, and I think our team

feeds off of that, knowing the support that they have.”

The OSU Ice Rink provides NHL dimensions for the women’s hockey team with an official capacity of 1,415 spectators. However, when Ohio State hosted Wisconsin in mid-February, athletic department officials stopped selling tickets when the arena reached 791 stubs sold. The small venue creates a unique environment where only a tiny layer of plexiglass separates skaters from hundreds of fans.

“It’s helpful having a bunch of fans cheering for you,” Rosenthal said. “It creates a home-field advantage. We love it. We love our rink, all that it brings and the advantage it brings us.”

As with any postseason tournament, momentum will play a factor in Ohio State’s game with Quinnipiac. Still, Muzerall believes that her team is well-equipped to handle any adversity or challenge that comes their way on Saturday. Her skaters and goaltender are battle-tested, and with a home crowd, that momentum is already in their favor.

“The challenge always with being No. 1 is that you can only go down,” Muzerall said. “It’s really the mental side of things. We have to be sharp in this game because it is anyone’s game. That’s all it is. It’s not about who’s No. 1 and who’s not. As long as our team understands that and appreciates and respects their opponent, we will have a good chance.”