

FRIDAY FOCUS

Whom to watch:

A HOBEY BAKER CANDIDATE?



Shawn Horcoff

Ten goals may not set him apart. But 40 assists have made Shawn Horcoff one of the prime candidates for this year's Hobey Baker Memorial Trophy awarded to college hockey's best player.

Quietly and effectively, the Michigan State senior center has moved into third place on the country's total points list.

Horcoff anchors the Spartans' top line that will square off against Michigan's young but talented first unit that unites freshmen Jed Ortmeyer and Andy Hilbert with star center Mike Comrie.

Against Michigan this year, Horcoff has had success. In the championship game of the Great Lakes Invitational tournament, Horcoff assisted on two of Michigan State's three goals — earning himself GLI MVP honors.

COMMENDED HERO

Only a sophomore, Mike Comrie is touted as one of the nations' top players.

In fact, Comrie's name is consistently mentioned in Hobey Baker conversation.

Night in and night out opposing defenses key in on the prolific playmaker, looking to shut him down — but they've had little success.

Comrie leads the Wolverines with 47 points on the season — 17 goals and 30 assists.

In Michigan's 2-0 victory over the Spartans at Munn Ice Arena, Comrie fed the puck to linemate Hilbert on the Wolverines' second goal to put the Spartans away for good.



Mike Comrie

THE DYNAMIC DUO



Ryan Miller

Last season Joe Blackburn rewrote Michigan State's hockey history books, recording a .928 save percentage and a nation-leading 1.55 goals against average — the lowest total any collegiate goaltender posted in the '90s.

Blackburn had an impressive season. Yet that was not enough to guarantee him the starting job this year.

Instead, even with a 10-5-1 record, he has been splitting time in net with freshman Ryan Miller.

So what does that say about Miller?

Having amassed a 12-4-1 overall record thus far in an impressive debut season, the freshman has silenced all doubters.

With two stellar netminders, Michigan State coach Ron Mason is in an enviable position — he can and does alternate them night after night. Mason has yet to announce who will start in goal against the Wolverines, though all indicators point to Blackburn.

THE LAST LINE OF DEFENSE

A 2-0 shutout at Munn Ice Arena in his first game back from injury gave Josh Blackburn his starting job back.

In the Wolverines dominating victory, Blackburn made the key saves, stopping 23 shots.

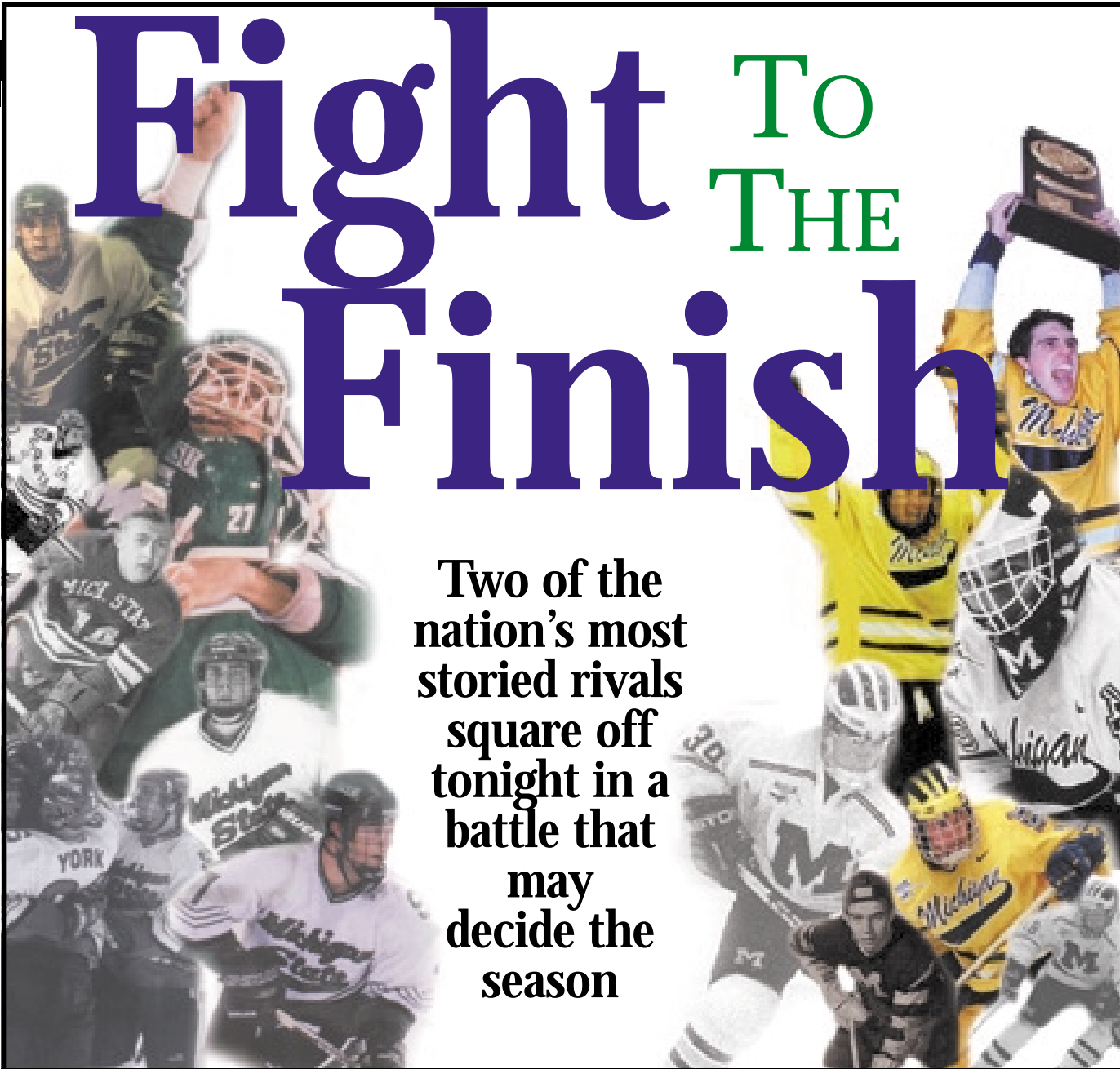
In early January, his return to the lineup and immediate immersion gave Michigan added momentum, which the Wolverines are still riding.

Heading into tonight's contest, Blackburn carries a 9-3-1 record with a 1.91 goals against average.

For here on out, in order for the Wolverines to have a shot at any titles, Blackburn must play his best hockey — a fact he himself has acknowledged.



Josh Blackburn



Two of the nation's most storied rivals square off tonight in a battle that may decide the season

The scenario for the weekend:

IF MICHIGAN WINS

The Wolverines are calling this the biggest game of the season.

And no one can argue with them. If the Wolverines win, they are guaranteed at least a tie atop the regular season conference standings.

With 37 points, Michigan is only two league points ahead of Michigan State.

Because tomorrow's game at Joe Louis Arena does not count toward these all-important conference standings, if the Wolverines win tonight, they would need only one point the following weekend to clinch sole possession of the regular season conference championship.

Michigan would also receive an automatic bid to the NCAA tournament. A victory tonight would mean that the Wolverines will go into the final weekend of conference play four points ahead of the Spartans.

The tournament invites the top 10 out of the 12 conference teams. Each team has also secured home ice advantage for the first round of the conference tournament. The CCHA first round will take place March 10-12 at campus sites. The semi-finals and finals will take place at the Joe on March 17-18.



IF MICHIGAN LOSES

A loss would not only strip the Wolverines of their pride, but it could possibly cost them the regular season conference championship.

With a victory, Michigan State would tie the Wolverines in the CCHA standings heading into the final weekend of conference play.

This would mean that both teams would set all their marbles on the table in their last weekend of the season. The team that comes out of the final weekend of play with the most points would clinch the regular-season conference championship and the automatic berth to the NCAA tournament.

Michigan's opponent, Bowling Green, has already caused trouble for the Wolverines this season. The ninth-place Falcons defeated Michigan once this season, and the Wolverines don't want to give them the opportunity to do it again.

The Spartans face Notre Dame in their last two conference matchups. The Fighting Irish, ranked fifth in the CCHA, have also taken one from Michigan State this season.

With a Michigan loss, Northern Michigan would also have a chance to make its way back into the race.

The Wildcats have 32 points going into this weekend with four games remaining.

If Northern can capture two victories at Miami this weekend, it would place the Wildcats only one point behind the two conference leaders going into the final weekend of conference play.

Last time:

Jan. 7, 2000 — For the first time in five years, No. 6 Michigan left Munn Ice Arena with a victory over the fifth-ranked Spartans.

Michigan goalie Josh Blackburn returned to the ice for the first time since he suffered an injury and shut-out the Spartans 2-0.

The bad blood came out — literally — as the game ended with a bench-clearing brawl and game disqualifications of Michigan's Bob Gassoff and The Spartans' Damon Whitten.



IF MICHIGAN TIES

If last weekend was any indication of what's to come for the Wolverines, another tie would be in Michigan's future.

The Wolverines returned from Northern Michigan securing neither a win or a loss, but two ties.

It was these two ties that lessened the Wolverines' conference lead over the Spartans, who swept Alaska-Fairbanks to climb in the standings.

Three weeks ago, the Spartans had been struggling and falling fast through the ranks. In fact, at that time they didn't think they'd finish higher than fifth place.

Even though the Wolverines wouldn't lose any ground to the Spartans if the teams tie, that result may be damaging anyway.

The two teams would remain only two points apart heading into the final weekend of play.

If that scenario arises, the CCHA champion will be decided through those final games.

This weekend, lower Michigan hockey fans will be captivated by the Michigan-Michigan State rivalry.

But Upper Peninsula natives will watch another decisive conference rivalry play out when Northern Michigan faces Lake Superior State in a matchup that could have far-reaching implications.

What they say:

"Offensively, Michigan has the potential to destroy you. Hopefully we'll have our wits about us in our zone."

— Joe Blackburn
Michigan State junior goalie

"The first thing they tell you when you come here is that you hate green. It's a rivalry from day one."

— Mike Cammalleri
Michigan freshman forward

"Years from now, all people will remember is how well your team did. We're excited for this game."

— Shawn Horcoff
Michigan State senior center

"If you're not ready to play this game, you shouldn't come to school — or come to school here. This is why you come to Michigan."

— Red Berenson
Michigan hockey coach

"It's a big game. Neither team's going to leave anything off the ice. We'll be ready."

— Brad Hodgins
Michigan State senior defenseman

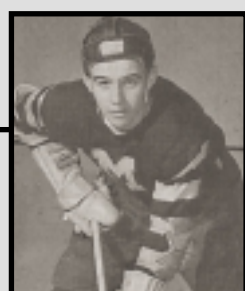
"We know what to expect and they know what to expect. There's a lot of pride and a lot of meaning to these games."

— Mike Comrie
Michigan sophomore center

The rivalry through the years

Its first meeting, Michigan beats Michigan State 6-3

Jan. 24, 1925



Led by the likes of All-American Wally Grant in 1950, Michigan beats Michigan State 10-4 and 17-1. The wins help Michigan tally a 38-1 mark its first 39 meetings with the Spartans from 1929-1958.

Michigan rolled past Michigan State 8-3 in the Championship Final of the Big Ten Tournament in Madison.

Dec. 28, 1968

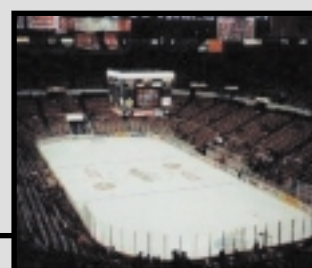
May 22, 1980



Michigan withdraws from the WCHA to join the CCHA — a month later Michigan State follows suit.

In front of a record 18,126 fans at Joe Louis Arena, Michigan State downs Michigan 4-3 to win the CCHA crown.

March 10, 1990



Michigan State ends Michigan's longest winning streak of 15 games with a 5-4 victory over the Wolverines. The streak was started eight months earlier with a 3-0 shut-out of the Spartans.

Nov. 2, 1996

In their only meeting in a CCHA Championship game, Michigan knocks off Michigan State 3-1 to win the CCHA title.

March 15, 1997

