

Michigan Ice Hockey: Celebrating the All-Time Greats and Most Memorable Moments

Greg Nelson

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Q&A with Greg Nelson, author of *Michigan Ice Hockey: Celebrating the All-Time Greats and Most Memorable Moments*

College ice hockey is one of the fastest, most entertaining sports on earth. Ann Arbor is home of the University of Michigan, the program that has won more collegiate hockey championships than any other.

Michigan Ice Hockey is a fan's ultimate guide, telling the story of the program from its

first, humble days of skating outdoors on the frozen Huron River, to today's competitions on the best rinks in the nation. It covers everything from leading scores to tournament results to NHL player alumni. It's a love story for those conquering heroes on skates, the traditions and trivia that surround them, and the fans that drive them.



Greg Nelson is a professional writer and author of *M is for Michigan Football* published by the University of Michigan Press in 2009.

The University of Michigan Press: What makes the Michigan hockey program so successful?

Greg Nelson: Like any sports program, success is the result of hard work and effort at so many levels of the organization. Obviously, it all begins at the top with Coach Berenson. With more than 700 wins in his career, there's no question that he knows how to coach at a very high level. But he has also built the program's infrastructure to help ensure that ongoing success.

From the facilities, to the people behind the scenes to the young men he recruits, Coach Berenson has established a top notch team that believes in itself and one that continues to function at a high level year after year.

But at Michigan, the success goes even deeper. It goes directly to the fans and followers of Michigan hockey. It goes directly to the staunch supporters and even the former

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players. There is an overwhelming degree of support that resounds throughout the program.

For example, the Dekers Club offers year-round support and financial assistance while giving former players and alumni an opportunity to stay close to the program. Yet almost everyone will agree that much of the success of the program comes back to the loud and boisterous crowd that files into Yost Arena for game after game.

There's no question that a Michigan hockey crowd is second to none. The crowd is an added dimension, a wild and crazy "extra man" that can be an intimidating factor to the opposition while motivating the Wolverines. And with the close confines of Yost Arena, there are few places in sports where a crowd can have such a direct impact on play. Want proof... just look at a stretch in the mid 90s where UM put together a 36 game home unbeaten streak – going 33-0-3 over the course of 3 seasons.

UMP: Which team won the most games, and why?

GN: The 1996 and 1998 Michigan teams both won National Championships. But oddly enough, it was the 1996-1997 team that put together the highest single season win total in school history.

Led by superstars Brendan Morrison and goalie Marty Turco, plus the likes of John Madden, Mike Legg, Bill Muckult, Matt Herr and Jason Botterill, the 96-97 Wolverines were loaded with talent from top to bottom and they bulldozed everything in their way en route to an amazing 35-4-4 record.

They breezed to the CCHA championship and rolled to the NCAA Frozen Four. But as luck would have it, a national title wasn't in the cards that year as Michigan fell to Boston University, 3-2, in the national semifinal game.

After the title in 1996, expectations were high for a repeat since the Wolverines were bringing back such a strong nucleus of talent to go along with the big stars like Morrison and Turco. The team definitely lived up to those expectations with the 35 wins. But hockey can be a funny game and that one game against Boston University dashed their title dreams. But it was still a Michigan team that lived up to virtually all expectations but just came up a little bit short in the end.

UMP: What makes Michigan such a fearsome opponent on the ice?

GN: The biggest thing Michigan brings to the ice game after game is a history and a long tradition of winning. When Michigan straps on the winged helmet, they are hitting the ice with the knowledge that decades of Wolverines have been upholding that tradition of winning. They come to Michigan to win and they expect to win every game.

Coach Berenson has built a program that combines exceptional talent with that will to win. It's a program where every player determines his own playing time by his performance. It's also a program where every player is expected and relied on to step up. If they lose a player to the NHL draft, the underclassmen have an opportunity to step up and make a difference. And with Berenson and seniors leading the way, more often than not, the younger players do come in and make a difference. They have to uphold the image of that winged helmet – the same helmet that lets opponents know immediately what they are up against... Michigan.

UMP: What role does the crowd play?

GN: I'm not sure it's even possible to truly describe a Michigan hockey crowd. Yost arena fans are definitely hockey fans first and foremost. But they also recognize the value and importance they play in creating one of the most amazing home ice advantages in hockey.

They are knowledgeable – they know the game. They know when to cheer and when to cheer even louder.

They do their homework – they know the opposition all too well and they come to the rink with their own special game plan, ready to exploit any little opening the opposition provides.

They are funny – I dare even the most serious among us not to crack a smile or laugh out loud at some of the antics, chants and activities that crop up during the course of a game.

They are loud – Michigan crowds can be deafening, especially in the quaint confines of Yost Arena. They know it, and they are ready to bring that noise at the appropriate times.

They are intimidating – Michigan hockey crowds are ready to lay their wrath on anyone... opposing players, opposing coaches, opposing fans. If there's an opportunity

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to get in a shot, Michigan's crowd will find a way to heckle, annoy or otherwise demoralize the enemy.

They are energizing – a Michigan crowd arrives at Yost Arena wound up and ready to go. They expect to be a part of the action, like an extra man throughout the game.

They are unpredictable – while the Yost Arena crowd has more than its share of well documented chants and antics that are regularly performed on cue, every game also brings the unexpected. You can bet that they will break out something new every night.

To read more about Greg Nelson's *Michigan Ice Hockey*, visit the University of Michigan Press at: www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=3076510

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