

Michigan Agricultural College/Michigan State College Ice Hockey 1922-1931 Transformations

By Daniel T. Mares

During 1922, ice hockey began as an official sport at Michigan Agricultural College, playing their first games on the Red Cedar River that winds through the campus. This is the beginning of a historic program, that has had many accomplishments, and it is now one of the elite college hockey programs in the United States.

On 10 January 1922, M.A.C. had their first official ice hockey meeting, setting out to found the team and take to the ice in competition. The first competition would take place the very next evening, with a selection of interested students traveling south to Ann Arbor, Michigan to face-off against the University of Michigan on 11 January 1922. This initial loss began the program at M.A.C.¹ The first seasons were especially difficult, but as time would go on, the situation would get better.

The initial rink for the M.A.C. ice hockey program was located on the Red Cedar River, which made things very interesting. The Red Cedar River rink was outlined in an article published on 13 January 1922, discussing the freezing of posts and boards into the ice, the suspension of lights over the skating surface, and installing a pump to flood the ice after it has been used. The rink was located just above the dam on the Red Cedar River.² The dam was located behind what is now Wells Hall on the southern shore of the river and the John Hannah Administration Building and Computer Center on the north shore. This was only the rink for a few seasons, as in 1924, the skating surface was moved off of the river.

This Red Cedar River rink would host the first M.A.C. home ice hockey contest on 18 January 1922. This contest would be against the University of Notre Dame and would be a 3-1 loss, with sloppy ice conditions reported.³

In 1924, the season was beginning and the rink was to be moved. The rink was going to have a new location on College Field, which was the former site of the football stadium. The football stadium had moved for the 1923 season to the present location of Spartan Stadium, at the intersection of Red Cedar Rd. and Shaw Lane. With the football program being moved off of the field, it allowed the hockey program to move its rink off of the river and onto land. This would allow for better viewing for the fans as well as allowing the ice to freeze faster as there would be no moving water. The interesting thing about this rink is that there were student volunteers to help get the rink up.⁴ On 23 January 1924, this rink was completed on College Field with lights suspended and play was to begin. This is the second “facility” the M.A.C. hockey program used as its home ice.⁵ In 1925, the athletic director at the recently renamed Michigan State College, would try to improve the program even more.

In December of 1925, Athletic Director Ralph Young was trying to enter M.S.C. into the Western League, which was a consortium of midwestern universities and colleges looking into a possible hockey league. This league would include the University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, the University of Notre Dame, and the University of Wisconsin. This was going to increase the marketable attributes of the program as well as provide a higher quality of hockey.⁶ Although it was discussed in December of 1925, the actual admittance did not occur until mid-February of 1926. While pursuing official admittance into the Western League, Athletic Director Young called for a new

rink to be built. This rink was to be constructed to the east of the tennis courts that were on the east side of Morrill Hall near Grand River Avenue. Due to the proximity to Grand River Avenue, this rink was known as the Grand River Rink.⁷ In the 16 February 1926 *Michigan State News* headline reads “State Officially in Hockey League.”⁸ This is great news and a huge transformation for the program. The season of 1927 would be the first season the Michigan State College is in its first hockey league. This hockey league would only be one of a few leagues that the Michigan Agricultural College/Michigan State College/Michigan State University would join.

The year of 1928 saw one of the biggest milestones a team at Michigan State College could accomplish which is still a measuring mark in all sport to this day, defeating the University of Michigan. On 1 February 1928, Michigan State College handed the University of Michigan a two to one defeat. This is the first victory of the ice hockey team at the University of Michigan.⁹ This victory would have to last as the Michigan State College ice hockey team would not defeat the University of Michigan on the ice again until the 1950s but the team was not active from 1931 to 1948.

Beating the University of Michigan in 1928 was not the only accomplishment that the Michigan State College hockey team put under their belt, but they also finished their first season with an even record of three wins and three losses.¹⁰ The season of 1928 was a season that showed the team moving forward with great progress, not losing every game and being blown out like the previous years. The program seemed to be on the verge of turning around.

The season of 1929 was also promising as the team finished with another equal win and loss record, but this was a short lived success. As the program was climbing up

into the competitive ranks of college hockey at the time, the program was also battling ice issues. Michigan State College had no available indoor ice facility, with this being the case the games were left up to Mother Nature. Over the years, many a games were cancelled or postponed due to the lack of available ice on the various rinks on campus.

Mother Nature claimed many games over the short period of activity at Michigan Agricultural College/Michigan State College. The first games that were postponed date back to inaugural season. In the article in 13 January 1922 about the first meeting, there is a mention of the same plans being in place for the winter of 1921 but the plans never gained any momentum as the winter was too warm.¹¹ The winter of 1922 was no exception, as *The Holcad* mentions that the ice conditions hindered the efforts of both teams in the first ever home contest against the University of Notre Dame.¹² The first season was not the only plagued by the weather. The next few seasons have a majority of the games cancelled due to the lack of ice in the winter. The weather claimed games in every season, not always with a flat out cancellation, but occasionally with sloppy ice conditions. This is the case with the 1930 season. In mid-December, the ice was nearly ready, looking to have a good season with good ice for the majority. According to a snippet published on 10 January 1930, games were to begin 13 January 1930. This did not happen, the first game of the 1930 season was not played until 25 January 1930, which was a loss to the University of Michigan.¹³ The weather had again taken affect of the season which made Coach Kobs bewildered.

The weather was such an issue that *The Michigan State News* published an article about the local weather man and how Coach Kobs was having a tough time with them. The article was published on 25 February 1930 and the headline reads “Local

Weatherman Can't Get John Kobs Acclimated at State.” This article discusses the weather trend at this time, which was a thaw during the ice hockey season and freezing cold for the baseball season, both sports that he coached.¹⁴ This shows some of the struggles that the early ice hockey program went through.

With this in mind, the ice hockey program took a long hiatus from 1931 until 1948 when indoor facilities were available in Demonstration Hall. There are many reasons that this occurred, including the lack of facilities and the dependence on the unreliable Michigan weather. The hockey team would return in the late 1940s and would continue until present day, winning three NCAA National Championships in the process. Michigan State coaches are in the lead for all time wins in the NCAA as well, with former coach Ron Mason in first and current coach Rick Comley in second. This is an indication of how far the program has come from the early days skating on the Red Cedar River to a national powerhouse in the sport of ice hockey, leaving hope for all the perennial basement dwellers in sport.

¹ *The Holcad* 1922. Ice Hockey Meets with Approval at M.A.C. 13 January.

² *The Holcad* 1922. Ice Hockey Meets with Approval at M.A.C. 13 January.

³ *The Holcad* 1922. Aggie Hockey Squad Defeated by the Irish. 20 January.

⁴ *The Holcad* 1924. To Use Athletic Field for Hockey Rink. 11 January.

⁵ *The Holcad* 1924. To Use Athletic Field for Hockey Rink. 11 January.

⁶ *The Michigan State News*. 1925. State May Enter Puck Circuit. 11 December.

⁷ *The Michigan State News*. 1925. State May Enter Puck Circuit. 11 December.

⁸ *The Michigan State News*. 1926. State Officially in Hockey League. 16 February.

⁹ *The Michigan State News*. 1928. Pucksters win from Michigan. 3 February.

¹⁰ *The Wolverine*. 1928. Varsity Hockey 1928. East Lansing, MI.

¹¹ *The Holcad* 1922. Ice Hockey Meets with Approval at M.A.C. 13 January.

¹² *The Holcad* 1922. Aggie Hockey Squad Defeated by the Irish. 20 January.

¹³ *The Michigan State News*. Winter Sports Cards. 10 January. ; *The Michigan State News*. Varsity Puckmen Meet Wolverines. 28 January.

¹⁴ *The Michigan State News*. Local Weather Man Can't Get John Kobs Acclimated. 25 February.

