

Des Moines Oak Leafs finish 2nd at USA National Championship

Alyssa Hertel

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The Des Moines Oak Leafs' third-period comeback in the USA Hockey Division II National Championship fell short Monday as Prep Hockey (Illinois) raised the title trophy after a 6-3 win in Plymouth, Minn.

It was the second time the Oak Leafs qualified for the national tournament, and the first time Des Moines was in the Division II championship game. The Leafs roster is comprised of Des Moines-area high school students.

"This group was just resilient," coach Scott Long said. "Driven by our senior class, our leaders, who battled through adversity and never wavered. This was a unique experience but this is a group that every game, every practice, came to battle and work their hardest."

The title matchup was closer than the final score shows, with Des Moines holding the 28-23 advantage in shots on goal. Prep Hockey took advantage of two early penalties by the Oak Leafs, a bad bounce, and Des Moines pulling goalie Aidan Zimmermann in the final minute of play.

Des Moines found itself in a hole after the first two periods. Prep Hockey scored two even-strength goals in the first frame and added two power play

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The Des Moines Oak Leafs hockey team poses with its second-place trophy at the Division II USA Hockey Championship. Des Moines dropped the title game, 6-3, to Illinois' Prep Hockey. SCOTT LONG/SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Oak Leafs

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goals in the second. Des Moines trailed 4-0 after two periods but, on the power play to start the third, something changed for the Oak Leafs.

"Our message was just believe," Long said. "We've believed in each other all year, so there's no need to change the script right now. Even though we're down, anything was possible."

Jakub Tomecek tapped in a cross-ice feed from Carson Clemmensen at 15:10 in the third period to give Des Moines its first goal of the game.

Prep Hockey responded with a goal of its own, but the Oak Leafs weren't ready to give up.

Jackson Krier skated into the zone and let off a shot from the top of the circle that found its way past Prep goalie Michael Delea. After five scoreless minutes on both ends, Clemmensen took advantage of a 5-on-3 power play opportunity.

The Oak Leafs - who pulled off a late comeback and beat East Islip (New York) in the quarterfinals - were down 5-3 with about five minutes to play.

But Prep Hockey didn't slow down, and Des Moines' turnovers did not allow the Oak Leafs a chance to pull Zimmer-

man for an extra attacker until the final minute.

Almost immediately after Zimmermann got to the bench, Prep Hockey's Nicholas Lamberg collected a loose puck and put it in the empty net to secure the championship.

Des Moines finished second in Division II of the USA Hockey National Championship. Division II consists of combined high school hockey teams.

The Oak Leafs made it to the championship game by posting a perfect 5-0 record leading up to the title matchup. The Oak Leafs defeated the Dayton Stealth (Ohio), Keller (Texas) and the Faith Lutheran Crusaders (Nevada) in pool play.

Des Moines defeated East Islip in the quarterfinals and the Omaha Junior Lancers (Nebraska) in overtime of the semifinals on Sunday.

Despite the loss in the championship game, Long still views this as a positive for Des Moines ice hockey.

"I cannot tell you the amount of calls and messages that I received, just wishing us luck," Long said. "Maybe it's put us on the map a little bit. We have youth hockey players supporting us, we have alumni supporting us."

"Obviously, the result wasn't the one that we wanted, but a lot of people are proud of what we did and I think that's so special."