

Men's hockey: Gophers get innovative in attempt to remedy slump

[Roman Augustoviz](#), Star Tribune

Gophers men's hockey coach Don Lucia is making moves to jump-start his struggling team. He juggled lines and power-play units at practices this week. And, on Tuesday, he invited Shaun Goodsell of Mental Edge to talk to his players. "It's another tool," Lucia said. "We still have to find answers in our [locker] room." Lucia hopes that starts tonight in Mankato. Minnesota, 0-4 for the first time in WCHA play, plays a home-and-home conference series with Minnesota State Mankato. So what was Goodsell's message? "To try to stay positive," freshman defenseman Cade Fairchild said, "positive on the bench, positive reinforcement to each other. It makes you feel better when you actually start thinking about things or, in some cases, not thinking about things too much." Minnesota is 4-4 overall, but the two-time defending WCHA regular-season champions have really had to work hard for goals. The Gophers are 0-for-30 on the power play the past seven games. Here are five reasons for their slow start:

1 Lack of mental toughness: "We might be a little mentally weak right now," said Blake Wheeler, a junior center with a team-high four goals. "[The Denver Pioneers] throw a punch at us -- they score two goals [on Sunday] and for another 25 minutes we kind of shut it down a little bit. We've got to get better at taking punches. It's hockey. Guys are going to score goals on us." Said Lucia, "We have some guys early in games, if they make a couple mistakes, they are not getting themselves out of it. They let it affect them the rest of the game or for too long a stretch."

2 The players are pressing: Several Gophers and Lucia have said that, and Denver coach George Gwozdecky did, too, after his team's sweep last weekend. "There is no reason to panic," Gophers senior forward Ben Gordon said. "I am sure the fans are saying, 'Oh man, they are 0-4.' And everybody is thinking this team is no good. That is not the case. We are all good hockey players and we are going to be a good team."

3 The team's scoring woes: This problem has been well-documented: one goal in each game while being swept at Colorado College on the road and the Pioneers at home.

"[Our players] can't worry about whether it is going to go in." Lucia said, "They just have to continue to get some great chances. And we need to get into some of those areas where we take some punishment to score goals, too." Said Wheeler, "You don't see too many tic-tac, pretty little goals anymore. ... Get the puck to the point, have them hammer it and you get a tip or a rebound in. We haven't gotten any goals like that this year."

4 Strong opponents: Colorado College has sensational freshman goalie Richard Bachman, and Denver has senior goalie Peter Mannino, a four-year veteran. They are second (.950) and fourth (.940), respectively, in save

percentage in the WCHA. Bachman's Tigers were picked to finish third in the conference in a preseason coaches' poll, the Pioneers fourth.

"We've played two good teams in the league," Lucia said, "and we have been close but have not been able to get over the hump."

5 Few early breaks: "This team has not caught any breaks so far," Lucia said, "but over the course of the year that will even itself out."

Denver, for instance, scored one goal after the puck hit the stick of a Gophers player trying for a block. Instead, the shot changed direction. Another goal came after a Pioneers player whiffed on a shot, faking the goalie down. He had a much more open net on his second swing at the puck.

Lucia, whose Gophers have dropped from a high of No. 3 to 14 in the national rankings, remains optimistic. "We have to coach better," he said, "get them to understand better what we are trying to do. Sometimes that's what makes it fun and rewarding when, all of a sudden, they start to get it and some guys start playing up to their potential."