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MINNESOTA STATE HIGH SCHOOL LEAGUE

Seventy-ninth state tournament played in 2023

Although the first state hockey tournament was not conducted until 1945, high school hockey was played in approximately 25 schools in the 1930s. Most of the schools were in the northern part of the state and in the Twin Cities area. Inter-school games were very limited in number, and coaching was done in most schools by male faculty members who had hockey experience or by individuals in the community who had a special interest and training in the sport.

The state hockey tournament was conceived by the late Gene Aldrich, St. Paul athletic director who thought it was time for an event of its kind because St. Paul was drawing many fans for its games. With the enthusiastic approval of the Minnesota State High School League Board of Directors and backing for expenses from the late Elmer Englebert, Aldrich went ahead with planning the details for the first tournament. The event produced sufficient revenue to pay expenses and leave a modest balance.

In 1945 the Minnesota State High School League, in cooperation with interested citizens in St. Paul, offered the schools an opportunity to participate in the first State High School Hockey Tournament. It marked the very first state-sponsored high school hockey tournament in the United States. There were 26 high schools registered for the sport at the time and Eveleth's Golden Bears went home with the first of its five state championships. The first field - including Thief River Falls, White Bear Lake, St. Cloud, Staples, Rochester, St. Paul Washington, and Granite Falls - played before a total of 8,434 spectators.

The first-round games during the initial tournament produced many lopsided scores, but the championship affair between Eveleth and Thief River Falls (Eveleth won 4-3) was a fine exhibition of skills and abilities which today are expected of Minnesota high school hockey players. The first tournament proved the merits of this activity for high school competition, and the next year the Minnesota State High School League took full control of the tournament series and assumed complete responsibility for its finances.

By 1947, attendance had more than doubled. It reached the 30,000 plateau in 1956, topped 40,000 in 1961, and leveled off at the three-day auditorium capacity of 46,000 its last three years in the St. Paul Auditorium. For 23 years the tournament was conducted in the Auditorium before leaving in 1969 for the more spacious Met Center in Bloomington. At the bigger Met Center, attendance nearly doubled.

In 1976 the Minnesota State High School Hockey Tournament returned to the city where it had been groomed 31 years earlier. The tournament site became the St. Paul Civic Center Arena, a sports venue with a 15,706 seating capacity for hockey and which was adjacent to the Auditorium where the tournament was nursed through its infancy. The event returned to St. Paul as the biggest high school hockey tournament in the nation. In 1985 an all-time attendance mark of 103,096 was established at the St. Paul Civic Center Arena.

From this meager beginning, high school hockey has grown in programs throughout the state by leaps and bounds. There were 146 high school teams which participated during 1993-94. The rapid development of indoor facilities, improved coaching in schools, and development of youth programs have all been contributing factors.

In 1992 the first two-tier Minnesota State High School Tournament was conducted. Following the recommendations of the state's high school hockey coaches association, the Minnesota State High School League Board of Directors established a two-year experiment of conducting the hockey tournament in two tiers.

Instead of dividing the participating schools based on enrollment, as is the case with all other activities, the coaches suggested the division be based on performance and ability. Thus, following the regular season, coaches in each section ranked all the teams based on their season performance. The top-eight teams were placed in Tier I to play off to send a representative to the state tournament. The remaining teams then played off to determine the Tier II representative to the tournament.

The expansion of the tournament required an additional day of playing time, so the Tier II teams played their quarterfinal games at the St. Paul Civic Center on Wednesday. The Tier I teams played their quarterfinals on Thursday. On Friday and Saturday, the Tier II tournament concluded its schedule at Target Center in Minneapolis. It was the first time hockey had been played at the arena which is home to the NBA's Minnesota Timberwolves. The Tier I tournament was concluded at the Civic Center.

In 1994, the tournament was reformatted once again. The League's Board of Directors chose to classify participating schools by enrollment, as it is for every other activity, instead of by performance. The change was reviewed and extended after a two-year experiment. More than 23,000 fans paid to watch the Class A schools, while nearly 83,000 fans paid to watch the Class AA schools.

In 1999 and 2000 the championship round games for both classes were played at Target Center.

In 2001 the tournament returned to St. Paul and the new Xcel Energy Center, which is the home of the Minnesota Wild NHL hockey team. The new arena has a seating capacity of 18,539. In 2008, a new attendance record was set when 129,643 fans attended the four-day tournament.

The COVID-19 virus forced the removal of consolation and third-place games in 2021. Spectators were also limited due to restrictions associated with the virus. The tournament returned to its complete two-class format at the Xcel Energy Center in 2022.