UNH Men’s Hockey: Border Battle Sweep

Brianna Williams, Sports Editor

DURHAM, N.H.- By 5:30 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 16 and Saturday, Feb. 17 college hockey fans were already lining up within the Whittemore Center at Key Auto Group Complex for the annual Border Battle between University of New Hampshire (UNH) men’s hockey team (16-11-1, 9-8-1 Hockey East) and the University of Maine’s (UMaine) program (18-8-2, 10-7-1 HE).

For UNH this series was a chance to prove the doubters wrong and celebrate the White Out the Whitt tradition properly. For UMaine winning this series was an opportunity to shut down any comparison between the two teams this season. Regardless, the weekend truly showed the rivalry is alive and well in the north.

The Friday night game started off tense, everyone was waiting for the first goal to see which team would assert their dominance.

Just under 15 minutes into the game, UNH would have the puck in their offensive zone. First-year forward J.P. Turner was fighting on the boards with a UMaine defender, trying to keep the puck in. Junior defenseman Colton Huard became an outlet for Turner at the blue line.

Once Huard received the puck he quickly passed it forward to senior forward and alternate captain Harrison Blaisdell. Blaisdell beat two Maine defensemen in the slot and scored through the five-hole on the Black Bears net-minder, Albin Boija.

This would give the Wildcats the 1-0 lead going into the second period.

It would not take long after the second period puck drop for the Black Bears to show their talents. Their junior forward, Cole Hanson would score two minutes into the period, assisted by graduate student forward Ben Poisson.

With six minutes and 30 seconds left in the period, UNH’s defense would gain control of the puck. Junior defenseman Luis Lindner threw the puck across ice to first-year forward Ryan Conny. Conny did not hold on to the puck long before he passed the puck to junior forward Liam Devlin across the goalie.

Devlin pulled Boija one way, then quickly shot the puck off his backhand to give the Wildcats the lead back.

UMaine received a boarding penalty that looked like it was going to be ineffective for UNH. But with 30 seconds left in the power play Conny was able to grab his second point of the night when he scored a shot on the top right corner of the net. First-year forward Nick Ring and sophomore forward Kristaps Skrastins were credited with the assists.

The penalties continued throughout the game when UNH received a major, resulting in junior forward Conor Lovett serving five minutes in the box.
UNH would play a man down for the first 2:43 of the third period but were successful in their penalty kill.

The period would consist of UNH trying to increase their lead and UMaine trying to regain momentum.

With under nine minutes left in the game Black Bear sophomore defenseman Brandon Chabrier shot the puck from the blue line. Junior goalie Jakob Hellsten was able to block the shot but not cover the puck.

Both teams began screaming in front of the net, trying to gain possession of the puck. First-year forward for UMaine Anthony Calafiori was the one able to do so, resulting in him scoring on the bottom left corner of Hellsten.

Time was winding down, UNH needed to secure their lead but the puck was in their defensive zone. Junior defenseman captain Alex Gagne took the puck and quickly whipped it up the ice.

Devlin grabbed on to it to create a breakaway. With a UMaine defender coming from his right side, Devlin made a wrist shot from the hash marks to give the Wildcats a 4-2 lead.

Shortly after, a UNH player would score a hat trick for the first time since 2022.

Devlin received a pass from senior alternate captain Nikolai Jenson, then scored off an empty net. This was the first hat trick of Devlin's career.

Sophomore forward Stiven Sardarian would put the nail in the coffin when he directed a shot from Lovett into UMaine's net. The game favored UNH 6-2.

Head coach Mike Souza was pleased with what he saw from his players and believed it was a solid effort all around.

“I thought we were really detailed away from the puck tonight, I thought we checked well, transitioned well,” said Souza. “...when we are detailed with what we do through the middle of the rink we make the game easier on ourselves and so I thought that set the tone. I thought we were physical when we needed to be and it was a good team win”.

Souza individually called out some players for their performance, one of course being Devlin.

“I was really pleased for him. He had the chance a couple of weeks ago against Merrimack that didn't go his way so we got to razz him about that for a few days, so we knew for sure he was going to shoot that one,” said Souza. “His second goal was a great goal. He's got great speed, he plays with pace... it's always exciting to see a kid get one, two, three goals, so it was certainly fun to see that for him tonight”.

Devlin, himself, was happy about the accomplishment but didn't fail to credit his team for the performance.

“That was nice but I thought we had one of our best, if not our best, games over all from the goalie out. I couldn't be more proud of the guys in there and how we played,” said Devlin.

The excitement continued into the second night when the score ended very similarly to the first night, 5-2 in favor of the ‘Cats.

However, this time around, the Black Bears struck first when Donavan Villeneuve-Houle sent the puck glove side of Hellsten. This would be the only goal of the period.

During the first intermission fans were surprised with current Bruins and former UNH player James van Riemsdyk. Appropriately dressed in all white van Riemsdyk waved a UNH flag as the crowd roared.

The second period began and the whole building was on edge wondering what was going to happen during the next 20 minutes.

UMaine received a major penalty for a hit to the head. Houle was sent out of the game, and Parker Lindauer had to serve the penalty for five minutes.
During that crucial time period Lindner sent a shot towards the net that was deflected by Blaisdell. This power play goal would tie the game up.

Just about 10 minutes later Skrastins sent a puck off the boards that was controlled by Winters. Winters sent a wrist shot through the back of the net.

UMaine received another major penalty, this time for boarding. Bodie Nodes was sent out of the game, Lindauer served the five minutes again.

During the power play Conny sent a shot wide that ricocheted to the other side of the net. Huard one-timed the rebound to give the Wildcats 3-1 lead.

Maine retaliated six minutes later with a goal from Harrison Scott, assisted by Thomas Freel and Nolan Renwick.

24 seconds later Conny would pass the puck to Conny in front of the net, who sent the puck glove side of Maine goalie, Victor Ostman, to give the Wildcats back their two point lead.

Energy stayed high for the ‘Cats through the remaining minutes of the game, so much so that Devlin scored his fourth and final goal of the weekend.

Due to these two wins, UNH broke Maine’s series win streak of three games. This was also one of the many times UNH has beaten a highly national ranked team. The current 16-11-1 record is the best start UNH has had in 11 years.

UMaine’s head coach Ben Barr credited his team for playing better the second night but still was disappointed with how the series went for the Black Bears.

“We were actually better tonight than we were last night as far as our effort. But right now... we’re a very immature hockey team,” said Barr.

Souza recognized how good Maine’s team is, proving how much this series win means for the program.

“The atmosphere makes it even more special for our guys, for the program. That’s a good hockey team that we beat twice, a really good NCAA tournament team,” said Souza.

Souza highlighted some individual players that he felt made their mark during the series.

“He (Lindner) can transport the puck with his feet really well. He’s not the biggest guy. But when he moves the puck, he’s very effective for us... he can get himself out of trouble with his feet,” said Souza. “He’s (Lavins) unbelievable, kid’s a warrior... Tonight, I’ve never seen anything like it, the guy blocks three shots, but he’s done it before. He did it last night, he blocked three on one shift. That’s what you need to win, guys like that”.

Winters, who was out during this series last year due to injury, was proud of his team and the crowd for showing up that weekend.

“Big weekend for us, beating Maine here. It’s always a good crowd...I just thought our team stuck to things that made us best, just being smart, simple and disciplined, and it ended up working out for us,” said Winters.

UNH’s next opponent is the UMass Minutemen away on Friday, Feb. 23 and home on Saturday, Feb. 24. Both games have a 7 p.m. start time and can be watched on ESPN+.