

# Women's hockey wins first-ever national championship title

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Once again, the Middlebury women's ice hockey team has made history. Already the owners of a 94-game unbeaten streak in the ECAC league, winners of five straight regular season and conference championships, and the consensus number one team in national polls for half a decade, the Panther women finally were able to claim the title National Champions. For the first time ever, a Division III women's national champion has been crowned, in a weekend series sponsored by the American Women's College Hockey Alliance on March 24-25 at Northeastern University's Matthews Arena. To no one's surprise, Middlebury's women took home the trophy in a dominating performance, routing number-two ranked Augsburg, the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference winner, in a two game series.

Going into the weekend, Middlebury was focused on playing well and bringing home the title—all year long, the Panthers have been determined to put themselves in position to play in the national championship series. According to Nico Kieves '02, "Having the opportunity to win the first ever Division III national title is a thought that everyone on our team has kept in the back of their mind since the first day of preseason practice. It is an opportunity that has never been presented to us, and it has been one that we wished to capitalize on from the start of the year. Looking back at the year, we broke the season down into smaller pieces, but always with the goal in mind that this is where



Sophomore Catherine Elkins out-maneuvers a sprawling Augsburg defender during Middlebury's victory in the first-ever Division III national championship. Trent Campbell, *The Addison Independent*

we wanted to be at the end of the year." Said Kelly Hase '00 on the team's mindset, "I think everyone was really excited for the games and just the opportunity to play in the tournament. ...We had been practicing for three weeks and were completely ready to play—mentally and physically."

In the first game of the series, Middlebury's Sarah Carpenter '01 received a pass from Erin Neil '03 and drilled a slap shot from the point past Augsburg's goalie Meg Schmidt, giving the Panthers a quick 1-0 lead just a minute into the game. Said Carpenter on her goal, "It was my first shift on the ice, and I was only thinking about getting

the shot on net. I never imagined it would actually go in. I've never been as excited for a goal in my life."

After getting the quick lead, Middlebury and Augsburg began to feel each other out, adjusting to being back in a game after several weeks off, while trying to figure out the other team's style of play. Since East-West crossover games are rare, the teams have only faced once before, as Middlebury earned a 4-0 win early in the 1998-1999 season. According to Carpenter, "Playing after three weeks of just practice made the first period of the first game tough. We pushed through it and continued to improve as the game went on."

According to Coach Bill Mandigo, "Having three weeks off is difficult, but we did the best we could. We knew we would be rusty, and our goal was to improve with each period. [Scoring early] was tremendously important, it broke the ice and it was a relief because we knew then that we could score on their goalie."

As the first period continued, Middlebury began to get into its offensive flow, dominating play and earning several quality scoring chances. Approximately nine minutes into the game, Schmidt shut down Kelly Hase '00 as she tried to hit a shot right in front of the net. Two minutes later, Middlebury's

goalie, Megan Hutchinson '02, did the same to an Augsburg player heading to the net with the puck. With seven minutes left, Schmidt again robbed Middlebury, this time stopping Michelle Labbe '01 on a breakaway.

With just under five minutes left in the first period, Christa McDougall '00 had a breakaway opportunity, and while Schmidt made the initial save, Erin Neil was there to put back the rebound to give Middlebury a 2-0 lead. With just eight seconds left in the first period, the Auggies' Angie Rieger '01, the MIAC Player of the Year, took a hard shot from the top of the face-off circle (see *Women's hockey*, page 23)