

St. Joseph Griffons' Watkins to show talent at IHSHL tourney



ERIC WELCH/St. Joseph News-Press

St. Joseph Griffons defenseman Michael Watkins (right) slaps at the puck in a game last week. Watkins, a senior at Benton, will probably play in his first hockey game this weekend in the IHSHL Varsity Tournament at Bode Ice Arena.

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Michael Watkins and his St. Joseph Griffons teammates can wipe out a frustrating season with one good weekend — maybe even one good hour — in the Iowa High School Hockey League Varsity Tournament.

The Griffons start the tournament today against the Des Moines Capitals, the team that finished with best record in the IHSHL. St. Joseph lost two games to the Capitals this season, 16-0 and 8-1. The Griffons finished the regular season with a 2-24 record, but a win today makes all that easy to forget.

"All you've got to do is play good hockey for 45 minutes," St. Joseph coach Richard Creal said. "You win your first game and you can't finish lower than fourth."

To win in the tournament, the

Griffons will need continued good play from Watkins, their senior defenseman and lone representative at the league's all-star game played last weekend.

Watkins has scored five goals and recorded four assists this season.

He's been playing hockey for 15 years and also provides the good example Creal needs in a leader.

"He makes every practice," Creal said. "He works hard. He doesn't get many penalties and that means he's playing it right."

Watkins, who dished out an

assist last weekend as his West team defeated the all-stars from the East, 7-4, is also looking at this weekend as a chance to shine up the season.

"We're concentrating on getting this first game done," Watkins said. "We've got to really concentrate on the first game."

St. Joseph's two wins are over Lincoln (Neb.), which didn't qualify for the tournament. But the Griffons did take West Division champion Omaha to overtime before losing, 4-3.

"We scored early," Watkins said. "If we score early and shut them down early, our momentum keeps going the whole game."

They also dropped a 3-2 decision to West runner-up Kansas City. Those kind of performances give the Griffons some hope.

"They've proven through and through they can do it," Creal said. "Do they want to go out and play the game or do they want to

go out and watch the game?"

Watkins, a senior at Benton, is most likely playing his last weekend of hockey. He may attend either Missouri or Northwest Missouri State after graduation and is interested in computer science.

He started playing hockey at age 4, along with his brother, Brett. It's been part of his life since. The best memories, he said, came from trips to Colorado and Minnesota.

"It's something different — not too many kids can say they played 15 years of hockey," Watkins, who also plays baseball for Benton said. "I've gotten to go to a lot of fun places."



Michael Watkins:
Chosen for all-star game.

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