

Defending champions

Metros hockey team starts season tonight

By Terry Hersom
Journal sports editor

They'll hoist another championship banner tonight at the IBP Ice Center.

A few minutes after that, the Sioux City Metros high school hockey team will forget all about last season and start the long road toward trying to do it all over again.

Co-coaches Jeff Gray and Jim Peck have been around youth hockey long enough to know the importance of staying in the present.

The 7 o'clock season opener against the Omaha Junior Lancers should be enough to capture everyone's attention.

Before slipping to third last season in the Iowa High School Hockey League's 12-team regular season race, the Junior Lancers swept the league's regular season and tournament titles two years in a row.

"We want to play one game at a time and we expect to be at the state tournament at the end of the year," said Gray.

Indeed, they do.

In the last 14 years, the Metros have played in the IHSHL's post-season championship game nine times, winning the crown six times.

Last year, the Sioux City-area squad pulled off one of their biggest surprises ever, winning that title after a modest fifth-place finish during the season.

"We come to play when the cookies are down," said Gray.

Still, the Metros wouldn't mind establishing a little more momentum during the 30 games that precede the league tournament. Just two of their six post-season championship teams have also won the regular season championship.

"I don't want to jinx it, but that is one of our goals this year," said Gray.

There are several good reasons to believe it could happen.

On offense, the Metros return their top three scorers — Kevin Lohry, a junior from West; Alex Lukehart, a senior from Hinton;

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Co-coaches Jeff Gray (left) and Jim Peck (right) lead a Sioux City Metros squad that includes veterans (from Gray's left to Peck's right) Beau Erickson, Kevin Lohry, Alex Lukehart, Chase Kinchen and Brett Swanson. (Staff photo by Jim Lee)

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and Chase Kinchen, a senior from Sergeant Bluff-Luton.

On defense, Gray cites a solid corps of defencemen to help out the IHSHL's top goalie of last season, Beau Erickson, a senior from Hinton.

"We actually have about six forwards who can score goals," said Peck. "We should be able to score and go up and down the ice pretty good. That's exciting. It's better than playing defensive hockey all the time."

"We always try to prevent goals. It's always prevent, prevent, prevent. That doesn't give the kids a chance to just kind of fly around a bit."

Lohry was the state tournament MVP and finished an outstanding sophomore year with a team-leading 46 points, accounting for 25 of the team's 111 goals.

Lukehart had 40 points with a team-high 28 assists and Kinchen came into his own with a 35-point season.

Erickson, meanwhile, was in the nets for 24 of the team's 33 games and posted a nifty .915 save percentage. That ranked a close second to Mason City's Brandon Lind (.916), but Lind's team backed him up with a league-leading 194 goals and a flashy 31-1-1 record. So, when IHSHL coaches voted on their six-player league all-star team, Erickson was their goalie.

The Metros went 18-15 for the regular season, suffering four of those losses in overtime

games, each of which was worth an additional point in the standings. They followed that up, though, by knocking off fourth-place Waterloo (21-12) and then heavily favored Mason City to reach the tournament final against the sixth-place Des Moines Oak Leafs, another upstart.

The final was a three-overtime thriller won by Sioux City, 5-4.

Despite losing some top performers on defense, Gray is impressed with his leading blueliners. That group includes senior Brett Swanson (North), juniors Tyler Hansen (North) and Scott Marsh (East), and sophomores Kyle Bennett (Heelan) and Spenser Harp (MOC-Floyd Valley).

Lohry and Lukehart will skate on one line with Ben Held, a junior from Hinton, while Kinchen is teamed up with juniors Daniel Limoges (West) and Ben Kambach (Heelan). Limoges led the JV team last season with 31 points.

Backing up Erickson are junior Eric Hoffmeyer (North) and sophomore Adam Suing (East).

A 30-game schedule spreads out over 17 weekends with 16 home dates before the league tournament Feb. 27-29 in Des Moines.

■ **METROS NOTES:** Mason City graduated Lind and three top defencemen, but the Mohawks are again among the favorites, returning the league's top two scorers in Cole Despenas (26-50-76) and Mike Murtagh (39-35-74)....

The league now consists of 11 teams with the disbanding of the Omaha Gladiators, who finished last in the 2002-03 standings, winning just three games....

Dubuque, next-to-last with nine points to the Gladiators' seven, has beefed up a small roster by adding players from Cedar Rapids, which is preparing to put its own team on the ice in the near future....

The Metros have submitted a list of 42 eligible players to the IHSHL. They represent 13 area schools and include eight seniors, 15 juniors, nine sophomores and 10 freshmen....

The team has elected to start wearing their dark sweaters, previously the road jerseys, for home games.

METROS ROSTER

The 2003-04 Sioux City Metros with positions and schools:

Seniors: Beau Erickson, G. Hinton, Brett Swanson, D. North, Andrew Galsinsky, D. North, Eddie Navarrette, F. East, Chase Kinchen, F. Sergeant Bluff-Luton, Alex Lukehart, F. Hinton, Devin Foster, F. West, Brett Roberts, F. East.

Juniors: Daniel Limoges, F. West, Ben Kambach, F. Heelan, Chaz Bergin, F. Vermillion, S.D.; Tyler Hansen, D. North, Kevin Lohry, F. West, Chase Peterson, F. Dakota Valley, Brandon Vetro, D. Dakota Valley, Scott Marsh, D. East, Casey Colvert, F. Sergeant Bluff-Luton, Ben Held, F. Hinton, Kyle Eyer, F. East, Ryan Gulleridge, F. Aonika, Eric Hoffmeyer, G. North, Josh Withey, D. Sweet Creek, Neb., Tyler Van Buskirk, F. West.

Sophomores: Kyle Bennett, D. Heelan, Brody McCabe, F. Hinton, Mark Young, D. East, Adam Suing, G. East, Spenser Harp, D. MOC-Floyd Valley, Corey Richman, F. West, Monahan, Chad Corbett, F. North, David Hansen, D. East, Nick Baker, F. West.

Freshmen: Brian Dalke, D. East, Jonathan Reinert, F. North, Seth Pinney, F. Heelan, Darrin Rudnick, F. South, Sioux City, John Adam, F. Heelan, Donovan Conroy, G. East, Marshall Tuttle, D. East, Kenny Wheeler, F. Sergeant Bluff-Luton, Tyler Noren, F. East, Joey Lund, F. Heelan.

METROS SCHEDULE

November: 1 - Omaha Junior Lancers, 5:30 JV, 7:00 varsity, 8 - at Quad Cities, 6:30-8:15, 9 - at Quad Cities, 10:30-Noon, 14 - Waterloo, 5:30-7:00, 15 - Waterloo, 1:00-2:30, 21 - Mason City, 5:30-7:00, 22 - Des Moines Capitals, 1:00-2:30, 23 - Des Moines Capitals, 10:30-Noon.

December: 5 - Kansas City, 5:30-7:00, 6 - Quad Cities, 1:00-2:30, 12 - Des Moines Oak Leafs, 5:30-7:00, 13 - Des Moines Oak Leafs, 1:00-2:30, 14 - Ames, 10:30-Noon, 20 - at Ames, 6:30-8:00, 21 - at Ames, 9:00-10:30 a.m.

January: 2 - Lincoln, 5:30-7:00, 16 - at Kansas City, 6:00-7:45, 11 - at Kansas City, 9:30-11:00 a.m., 16 - at Mason City, 6:15-8:00, 17 - at Mason City, 5:30-7:15, 23 - at Omaha Junior Lancers, 9:30-10:50 a.m., 24 - Omaha Junior Lancers, 2:30-4:00, 30 - at Lincoln, 6:30-8:30.

February: 6 - at Waterloo, 6:00-7:30, 7 - at Dubuque/Cedar Rapids, 9:00-10:50 a.m., 8 - Lincoln, 10:30-Noon, 14 - at Des Moines Capitals, 6:00-7:45, 15 - at Des Moines Oak Leafs, 9:00-10:45 a.m., 21 - Dubuque/Cedar Rapids, 1:00-2:30, 22 - Dubuque/Cedar Rapids, 10:30-Noon.