



AUSTIN HANSON PHOTOS, GLOBE GAZETTE

Mason City hockey player Kellen Kantaris prepares for a faceoff with Sioux City's Ryan Hedquist during a game on Jan. 21.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Mohawks open state tournament today in Des Moines

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The Mason City Mohawks aren't feeling any pressure as they prepare for the Midwest High School Hockey League's season-end tournament. Mason City is the six seed in the eight-team bracket.

The Mohawks will take on the third-seeded Omaha Junior Lancers in the first round of the single elimination event. Mason City and Omaha finished the regular season with 34 and 53 standings points, respectively.

"We have no pressure," Mason City head coach P.K. O'Handley said. "Like, the other teams have some pressure because they're supposed to win. We're just the small-town Mason City guys. We've just got to knock them off. If we can do that or not, we'll see. We're definitely going to go try."

Mason City is one of the two smallest towns to host an MHSHL team. Fremont, Nebraska, which has a population of about 28,000, also has a squad. But the Flyers placed last in the league and didn't qualify for the



The Mason City Mohawks and Sioux City Metros fight for the puck during a game on Jan. 21.

2022-23 postseason.

The Mohawks bested a number of teams from larger markets on their way to the playoffs. Mason City finished ahead of the Cedar Rapids RoughRiders, Quad City Blues, Waterloo Warriors, Ames Cyclones and Des Moines Capitals.

The top three seeds in this year's tournament are from the three largest markets in the MHSHL — Kansas City, Des Moines and Omaha.

"You know, we're trying to grow our program here from the little guys on up," O'Handley

said. "But it's going to take some time for numbers and skill to catch up with some of the other markets. But I believe we're laying a foundation that, perhaps, there's a direction and belief that we can get there."

O'Handley's squad spent much of the season in the hunt for the playoffs, teetering between fourth and eighth place. Five of the MHSHL's 15 teams don't receive postseason berths.

The Mohawks found a way to make it to the season-end tournament without many theatrics. Mason City finished seven points

clear of the ninth-place Blues — a team that missed out on the playoffs by two points.

"It's extremely prideful," O'Handley said. "You know, I think the group should be extremely prideful. I believe, you know, anything can happen. But I think they feel really good about themselves going into this. They know that our swings were, at times, large. We'd play really well and then have kind of a stinker. Perhaps, we're at a point where maybe we've found a little more consistency."

Mason City has played Omaha twice this season and suffered losses both times. The Mohawks played a two-game series against the Junior Lancers and were outscored, 9-5.

Mason City faced Omaha just over two weeks ago. The Mohawks are hoping to use their familiarity with the Junior Lancers to their advantage.

"They have a good team," O'Handley said. "They're fast, they have a big team, play a physical game. We went over there, and I would say there were moments in both games where our players felt we played well enough to win. But maybe our Achilles' heel is we didn't play

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long enough with them, and for whatever reason, got derailed."

O'Handley added the top teams in the MHSHL set themselves apart from the others with top-tier goaltending, and the Junior Lancer are no exception.

Omaha has let up just over two goals per game and registered two shutouts this year.

Mason City has put up 3.6 goals per contest this season. Omaha has put the puck in the back of the net 135 times in 2022-23.

The Mohawks' goalkeepers have struggled, at times, this year.

Chandler Radcliffe and Zane Redfern have a combined

16-15 record. Radcliffe is 12-4 with a 90 save percentage, and Redfern went 4-7, blocking 81% of the shots he faced.

The Mohawks' quarterfinal game against the Lancers will begin at 1:45 p.m. in the MidAmerican Energy Rec-Plex in Des Moines.

With a win over Omaha, Mason City would play either No. 2 Des Moines or No. 7 Dubuque in the semifinals

at 1:30 p.m. Saturday.

"They've earned the right to be in the three spot, and we've earned the right to be in the six spot," O'Handley said of Friday's game. "So, we're going in as the underdog, and rightfully so. But you know, anything can happen now. Hopefully, our guys are in a good spot that we have a better understanding of what's needed."