

Blues survive opening-round test

Overtime thriller goes Quad-Cities' way in tourney

By **Brian Heinemann**
FOR THE TIMES

The Midwest High School Hockey League Championship Tournament was supposed to provide the host Quad-City Blues with a home-ice advantage.

Playing on the bigger ice at the Quad-City Sports Center for the first time this season left the Blues with a much tighter contest than anticipated against Mason City.

They needed overtime to take down the seventh-seeded Mohawks 3-2, a win that advances Quad-Cities to a second-round meeting with Waterloo today at 1:30.

The two teams were playing for the fourth time this

season, with the Blues winning the previous three meetings easily. Not this time, though.

"That was a cat-and-mouse chess game out there," Blues coach Paul O'Dacre said. "(Mason City coach Mark) Hicks had a great plan of attack against us."

By taking away the inside and forcing the Blues to work harder than usual for scoring chances, the Mohawks stayed with the same Quad-City team that upended them by a combined score of 16-4 this season.

The Blues player that made the most of his scoring opportunities was leading scorer Jake Hemmen, who scored just 6 seconds into the third period and then put home the game-winner in overtime.

"A lot of the credit has to

go to Bennett (Welsler) for seeing me," Hemmen said of the overtime winner. "I was falling down and knew I had to shoot left and probably high and I just let it go."

Although Hemmen was quick to credit his teammates on each of his goals and his goalie for doing "an amazing job," his coach placed the victory squarely on the shoulders of the 6-foot-4 right-winger instead.

"Jake took the entire team on his back and carried us to victory," O'Dacre said. "He's a stud of a hockey player."

With the offense struggling more than usual against Mason City, the Blues' defense picked up the slack and kept under control a game that could have gotten away.

"I told the guys before the game that good defense would create the offense for

us," O'Dacre said. "I'm thrilled with the way the defense played tonight."

That kind of defensive performance likely will be needed again today against a Waterloo team that has played Quad-Cities down to the final buzzer in all three meetings this season.

"Every game with them has been a 4-3 score," said winning goalie Reed Festing-Smith, who will watch the team's other goaltender, Matt Truninger, take his turn in net against the Warriors.

"They have one of the top goalies in the league and one of the best scorers in the league."

The Quad-Cities/Waterloo winner will move on to the championship game to take on the winner of the Des Moines Oak Leafs/Kansas City Jr. Stars on Sunday at 2 p.m.