

Warriors ready for rush at tournament crown

Regular-season champs open at 6 p.m. Friday in Ames

By NICK PETAROS

nick.petaros@wvcourier.com

WATERLOO — Doug Dietz is quick to mention that it was a different era of hockey when he was a defenseman for the 1982-83 Waterloo Warriors team that captured the Iowa High School Hockey League regular-season and tournament titles.

Dietz's vantage point has shifted from the ice to the bench, but the Waterloo Warriors' second-year head coach shares one thing in common with his youth hockey coach, Dave Swick.

"What it comes down to is puck possession," Dietz said. "Dave Swick always talked about having puck possession and that's what I've strived to have this team do is not play slap hockey, but possess the puck."

"The more times you have the puck on your stick, the more opportunities you have to make plays and have teams try to out-work you to get the puck back."

With an impressive 31-1-0 record, Waterloo has been in control throughout the 2011-12 season. The Warriors are hoping to become the first Waterloo team to win regular-season and tournament titles in the same season since the 1982-83 squad.

That quest will begin against Lincoln at 6 p.m. Friday in Ames as Midwest High School Hockey League postseason play gets under way. The tournament runs through Sunday.

"What they have done has not been done since," Warriors senior captain Jake Lichty said, addressing the 1982-83 championship teams. "If we could pull this off, it would be great and it would earn a lot of respect."

A handful of players on the Warriors' current roster have fathers who played alongside Dietz in the early 80s.

"That's neat as a player

to be in an organization like that and now getting to be on the coaching side of it," the Warriors' coach said.

Dietz and Lichty are quick to point out the success of this year's Warriors team starts in net and extends through the defensemen and forwards. Goalie Chance Kremer of Hudson has been in net for all 32 MHS HL games, accumulating a league-best 1.54 goals-allowed average with a .917 save percentage.

"Coming out of gate, some of the guys were apprehensive about Kremer playing in net because he was at a place other than Waterloo last year," Dietz said of the goalie who played AAA hockey in Des Moines. "Once he came here and guys figured out he was a good kid and a good goaltender, then they rallied behind him."

Lichty believes Kremer has been a difference-maker.

"When we started out, we never planned on doing this well," Lichty said. "Our team played outstanding this year and it all started with Chance. I never expected Chance to come in as a sophomore and play this well."

"There was so many games where if he wouldn't have been standing on his head, we probably would have lost."

In addition to strong net play, the Warriors possess a tall, physical defensive line capable of generating offense, while the forwards have had no trouble putting the puck in the net. Waterloo has scored 165 goals this season, 33 more than any other team in the league, while allowing the second-fewest at 49.

In a league in which opponents can run into each other as many as four times, Dietz has been impressed with how his team has managed to navigate the schedule to the tune of just one loss. He says the group got complacent in its Feb. 10, 3-2 loss to Cedar Rapids.

Since then, the Warriors have returned to their winning ways.

"The last three games I've

MHS HL tourney

At Ames

GAMES FRIDAY

First round

Noon — Des Moines Capitals (15-13-2) vs. Quad Cities (18-11-1)

2 p.m. — Cedar Rapids (17-10-5) vs. Des Moines Oak Leafs (24-6-2)

4 p.m. — Ames (14-16-2) vs. Kansas City (24-4-0)

6 p.m. — Waterloo (31-1-0) vs. Lincoln (13-14-2)

been kind of irritable with the kids because I want this thing to be building and I want us to be peaking and have the gas down at the right time," Dietz said. "Then I sat back and I thought about it and thought these kids have done a great job all year."

"They're hungry for a different challenge. They're excited to start the second half of the season and that's the playoffs."

Down the stretch, Warriors home games generated energetic crowds inside Young Arena. Players and coaches alike have treasured the newfound support that has extended beyond friends and family to some members of the USHL Waterloo Black Hawks' fan base.

Now the Warriors are determined to handle the lofty expectations that accompany their status as tournament favorites.

"We've got a lot of expectations on us," Lichty said. "We kinda just want to end the year on a good note. We want to put a stamp on something that was really great this year. ... We're a tight-knit group and we're like brothers now."

ON TO NATIONALS: Following the state tournament, the Warriors have one more hockey competition on their schedule. Their regular-season title guarantees them a slot in USA Hockey's national high school tournament that will be held in Salt Lake City, Utah. The team is a non-profit organization seeking donations to help cover the expenses of the trip. Those interested in contributing can contact team representative Staci Jackson at stacij64@gmail.com.