

# Blues look to cap strong season

Q-C enters league  
tournament play  
Friday as No. 5 seed

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For the Quad-City Blues, an entire season comes down to this weekend.

The Blues are getting ready to open up the Midwest High School Hockey League tournament at noon Friday at the Ames/ISU Ice Arena, looking to cap a successful 21-11-0 season with a league title.

Head coach Nick White wasn't sure what kind of season the Blues would have at the beginning of the year, but the team came roaring out of the gates, winning 17 of its first 20 games, including a 12-game winning streak.

"Regardless of what happens in the tournament, this group has far exceeded our expectations," White said. "If you had told us at the beginning of the year we'd

win over 20 games, I would have said I wasn't sure that was going to happen. So I've been pleasantly surprised although our kids have shown potential at the end of last year that they could have success like they had so far this year."

Now it's all about winning three more games as the Blues open up the tournament as the No. 5 seed against the fourth-seeded Omaha Jr. Lancers, with whom the Blues split their only two games of the year, both one-goal contests.

"Omaha is an extremely fast team and they like to fore-check so we need to be really good in our zone, beating that fore-check with the first pass. If we can do that, we can catch them with some odd-man situations," White said. "The key in our first two games against them was our defensive zone coverage. We played really well in our zone and capitalized when we had opportunities in the offensive zone so we're going to need to do the same thing this weekend."

The Blues were playing their best hockey during that 12-game win streak, which lasted from Nov. 20 to Jan. 12, when the Blues lost a pair of games to the Waterloo Warriors, who enter the tournament as the top-seeded team.

"We played a lot better defensively during that streak and got a lot of timely goaltending," White said. "I think that's what we need to get back to, and I think we can. We've played against some teams that are a little high-powered, and we tried to match up with offensive firepower, and we're really not that type of team. We need to play good in our zone first."

White thinks his team is getting close to returning to that style of play, his opinion backed up by the last few games. Despite winning just one of their last three, the Blues hung with the Warriors, losing 3-2 and 4-0 to close out the season.

"We didn't come out on the good end of either one, but we played some of the better hockey

we've played in the last month so I'm confident we can continue to play that way and have some success," White said.

The Blues have been led by a potent first line of Stone Patten, Peyton Watkins and Andrew Kramer. That trio has combined for 130 of the team's 242 points on the season. Patten, a junior from Pleasant Valley, leads the team with 22 goals and 24 assists in 32 games.

"They've been our offensive glue all year long," White said. "We've kept them together, and they've pretty much provided the bulk of our offensive explosiveness when they're out there. We go as they go offensively. If they're kicking it into high gear and rolling offensively, that kind of rolls back through our entire lineup."

Defensively, the Blues are led by Noah Hichborn, a senior from Bettendorf. Hichborn has scored two goals and added 12 assists this season for Quad-City.

"He's our best puck-carrying defenseman, and he needs to

be out there as much as he can," White said. "We're going to rely on him a little bit more in the tournament than we have during the regular season because he's our go-to guy. When he's out there, we get the puck out of our end. He's a very good defender, and he helps us move the puck."

The Blues feature a strong duo in net in Wilton junior Samuel Nelson, who is 11-6-0 with a 2.44 goals against average and a .907 save percentage, as well as Assumption sophomore Evan Lystiuk, who boasts a 10-5-0 record with a 2.14 goals against average and a .921 save percentage.

If the Blues beat Omaha, they would face either Waterloo or Kansas City in a semifinal at 2 p.m. Saturday. The championship is at 11 a.m. Sunday.

"The kids understand that every shift out there makes a difference, and we can't make any mistakes," White said. "Because in a one-and-done, every mistake gets magnified a little more."