

# Metros set to begin new campaign

**JERRY GIESE**  
jgiese@siouxcityjournal.com

**SIOUX CITY** — Blake Beller is a great competitor to build a hockey team around.

Last season, Beller was an all-star goaltender, turning in a 25-2-1 record, five shutouts, a .926 save percentage and a 1.75 goals-against-average while helping the Sioux City Metros win both the Midwest High School Hockey League's regular-season and tournament championships for the first time in program history.

Oh, but there was so much more that the Metros accomplished. Beller was solid between the pipes for a team that captured the USA Hockey High School Division 2 national championship in Plymouth, Minnesota, as the Metros,

then coached by Dave LeGree, rallied from a 2-0 deficit to edge Monarch, Colo., 3-2 in the title game.

"Blake will provide tremendous leadership," said Metros' first-year head coach Jesse Monell, who served as an assistant under LeGree, working primarily with defense and special teams.

"He's a tremendous competitor. He's the type of guy that if you need a big save at a big moment, he'll make that save. Go back to last year in the state title game, he made a huge backdoor save. In the national title game there was about a minute and a half left and he jolted into action. He sprung across the net and made a save or (Monarch) would have tied it up."

Beller is one of 10 returning skaters for a Metros squad that will open the 28-game season with a weekend series against the Des Moines Capitals Saturday and Sunday at the IBP Ice Center.

The Metros lost several key players to graduation, including the high-scoring line of James Page (31 goals, 26 assists), Drake Beller (26, 43) and Connor Sand (13, 20) along with defenseman Grant Newman (5, 19), who like the Bellers and Page, earned MSHSL all-star honors.

Monell hopes this weekend, his squad can duplicate their performance from last weekend's MSHSL Fall Classic Showcase in Omaha, where they took first place, posting a 3-1-1 record. There, they established their identity of goaltending and defense which Monell said will set the tone for the season.

"I want to play the game within the game, a good team game," said Monell. "We had four games at the Omaha Fall Classic and as the weekend got on, we played our game. It was fun to watch. Our identity has been heavily focused on goaltending and defense. We'll

move up from there."

Max Beller (8 goals, 5 assists), Alec Nieman (3 assists) and Ethan Burge (2 assists) return as defenseman from the title team which led the MSHSL, allowing just 42 goals, a stingy average of 1.5 per game.

Monell likes the partnerships that have developed between Max Beller and Burge, while brothers Alec and Colby Nieman will also team up. The blue line will also feature, from time to time, Tyler Ownby, who doubles as a left wing.

"On the blue line, we really stress our defensemen pairing up to be there for each other and support each other on and off the ice," said Monell. "Your first instinct is to help your partner in any situation. We took that approach last year. They have to protect the goaltender. Those four defensemen have to communicate when they battle the corners. They're also there with their partner on puck support."

Center Reece McDonald (8, 7) is one of six returning forwards and will serve as the Metros' captain. McDonald plays with a tenacious first line that also includes left wing Cale Bricker (2, 3) and right wing Easton Ransford (1, 2).

"They're all very tenacious, all vining to be the first guy on the puck," said Monell. "All three are very skilled. They all play for each other. They will be a very fun line to watch to start the season."

Ownby (1, 6) plays on the speedy, skilled second line along with center Taylor Frerichs (2 assists) and Nick Bradshaw (3, 1). Frerichs led the 13-11-4 junior varsity team with 13 goals and 10 assists, while the third line, consisted of left wing Dayson Tucker, center Smith Archer and right wing Chandler Pithan combined for 14 goals on the squad that finished ninth in the final MSHSL JV standings and missed a playoff berth by two points.



**Beller**