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SPORTS

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PREPS BOYS' HOCKEY STATE TOURNAMENT PREVIEW



Lakers' comeback kids

Prior Lake turned its fortunes around behind three who started season in juniors

By HEATHER RULE • Special to the Star Tribune

Doubt crept into Alex Bump's mind. He started the season playing junior hockey in Omaha, then returned for his senior year with Prior Lake. But the Lakers had a rough start. They were 4-7 following a four-game losing streak across holiday tournament time.

"When we were under 500, I had a little doubt in myself," Bump said. "I like, Timm, was this not the right idea?"

Prior Lake won a few more games, getting to 500 before a snowy 7-1 victory over East Grand Forks on Hockey Day Minnesota in Mankato. The Lakers kept up the momentum to win 14 of 17 games, the latest 7-1 victory over Chaska for the Class 2A, Section 1, championship that sent Prior Lake to its first state tournament. The Lakers open state tournament play Thursday against Cretin-Desham Hall.

Things came together in an overtime loss to Lakeville South a few days before Hockey Day.

"It was a game where our players looked and said, 'We've got the team that can win our section, go to the state tournament and do some damage,'" coach Joe Puskacz said. "And then they just all really started playing together, and the chemistry came together."

"So we had the talent mixed with the chemistry."

"That mix starts with the senior top line of Bump, center Rice and Will Schumacher. All three returned from juniors this season, following the careers of Hockey Day Minnesota stars Alex Bump and Will Schumacher.

Bump sets the tone with his 41 goals and 75 points. Schumacher, who said he has enjoyed seeing Bump's growth as a player from last season, compared watching Bump to watching the Minnesota Oilers' Connor McDavid.

"He does stuff at practice every day that people are like, 'Holy cow, what did I just watch?' I swear, it's insane."

Rice, called the "motor" of the top line by Bump, has 18 goals and 40 points, but he missed a few games to start the season first with injury and then with COVID-19. He's usually the first guy to pick on the ice, Bump said.

While Rice was out early, Schumacher also struggled. He had only three goals and three assists during that 47-game stretch, but turned his game around, too, coming in with 21 goals and 22 points, and he's second on the team behind Bump. It might have been easy for Schumacher to doubt returning from junior as he had, but he didn't want that regret.

"Excuse even when I was struggling back



Alex Bump (left), with 41 goals and 75 points, says "it's nice to be at home" with Prior Lake.

here that I'd end up working myself out in the end, and I wasn't going to let myself drop all year," Schumacher said.

As an enforcer, the decision to stay or go from high school hockey, Puskacz has his own perspective. He was part of the first of the Bloomington Jefferson three-year-of-state titles as a sophomore in 1992. Like Bump, Puskacz played junior hockey in Omaha. Unlike Bump, Puskacz departed high school hockey as a sophomore.

"I could do it all over again now that I'm 46, I would have stayed and won three titles," Puskacz said.

Head coach Joe Puskacz said he didn't push Bump, Rice or Schumacher in any direction, letting them make up their own minds.

Achieving goals like a Hockey Day Minnesota victory is a section championship and a chance to be named Mr. Hockey affirmed to Bump that he made the right decision to come back and play with his childhood buddies over an away time at Prior Lake.

"You play high school hockey for three or four years," Bump said. "And you can't get it back."

"I'm really happy I made this decision. It's nice to be at home."

GAME CAPSULES

THURSDAY'S GAMES

Prior Lake (28-10) vs. No. 2 seed Cretin-Desham Hall (24-3), 11 a.m.

SCOUTING THE LAKERS State tournament triple: first. Top three scorers: Alex Bump, senior, 41 goals, 75 assists; Will Schumacher, senior, 21 goals, 22 assists; Sam Rice, senior, 18 goals, 40 assists. In goal: Trevor Bocher, senior - 16-5-2, 40 goals per game, 89% saves. Three shutouts. Did you know? Bump is Mr. Hockey finalist, ranks No. 69 in the NHL 2022 draft prospect rankings.

SCOUTING THE PIONEERS State tournament triple: fourth. Top three scorers: Drew Fisher, senior, 17 goals, 11 assists; Mike Fisher, junior, 1 (23-20); Luke McCarthy, senior, 1 (20-20). In goal: Matty Bekal, senior - 23-9-0, 1.57 goals per game, 94% saves. Three shutouts. Did you know? The Raiders are riding an 18-game winning streak; their last loss was Dec. 28, 9-1 to tournament fifth seed Andover.

Edina (20-8) vs. No. 3 seed Maple Grove (24-3), 1 p.m.

SCOUTING THE HORNETS State tournament triple: fifth (counting five Edina last and one by Edina West). Top three scorers: Trey Fackio, junior, 27 goals, 20 assists; Jeremy Clark, junior, 13 (35-21); Willy Johnson, senior, 12 (23-23). In goal: Robbie Claskowski, junior - 19-8-0, 1.74 goals per game, 95% saves, eight shutouts. Did you know? Go back five games for the last goal Claskowski and Edina allowed, a shutout streak spanning 244-59.

SCOUTING THE CITRIMON State tournament triple: fifth. Top three scorers: Landon Gunderson, junior, 22 goals, 53 assists; Finn Birtz, junior, 1 (26-26); Joshua Gustafson, senior, 1 (21-28). In goal: Toby Hopp, senior - 15-6-1, 2.34 goals per game, 91% saves, four shutouts. Did you know? The Citrimon has a 15-0 power play percentage, the best of any Class 2A state tournament team.

Lakeville South (23-9) vs. No. 1 seed Hill-Murray (23-6-2), 6 p.m.

SCOUTING THE PIONEERS State tournament triple: seventh. Top three scorers: Tanner Ludtke, junior, 22 goals, 36 assists; Arden Wells, junior, 11 (21-21); Ashton Dahm, junior, 1 (25-16). In goal: Scott Kocher, junior - 21-9-0, 1.35 goals per game, 95% saves, seven shutouts. Did you know? Ludtke leads the state with 16 power play assists.

SCOUTING THE PIONEERS State tournament triple: third. Top three scorers: Dylan Godbout, senior, 19 goals, 24 assists; Axel Lagley, senior, 1 (15-15); Matt Gruba, senior, 0 (11-21). In goal: Matt Erickson, junior - 16-1-1, 1.39 goals per game, 93% saves, six shutouts. Did you know? Hill-Murray is the only program with two Mr. Hockey finalists: Godbout and Gruba.

No. 4 seed Andover (23-5) vs. No. 6 seed Moorhead (21-6-1), 8 p.m.

SCOUTING THE HUSKIES State tournament triple: third. Top three scorers: Carlyn Casey, junior, 12 goals, 46 assists; Gavyn Thomson, junior, 1 (25-41); Weston Knox, senior, 0 (20-24). In goal: Justin Bruner, senior - 19-5-1, 1.72 goals per game, 95% saves, five shutouts. Did you know? Bruner is one of three finalists for the Frans Branksek Award.

SCOUTING THE SPIRITS State tournament triple: 19. Top three scorers: Gavin Lindberg, senior, 22 goals, 43 assists; Harper Berts, junior, 1 (17-17); Carson Trigg, senior, 1 (23-32). In goal: Gus Vogel, sophomore - 19-5-1, 2.37 goals per game, 90% saves, four shutouts. Did you know? Moorhead defeated Class 2A state tournament team Andover Edina and Prior Lake during the regular season.

BOYS' HOCKEY STORY LINES

ANDOVER, MOORHEAD CONNECTED

By HEATHER RULE • Special to the Star Tribune

Andover coach Mark Manny played high school hockey in a Spuds uniform and considered Moorhead his hometown. So the quarterfinal matchup Thursday in the Class 2A quarterfinals of the boys' hockey state tournament pitting his Huskies and the Spuds will be tough, he said.

Besides Manny's connection with Moorhead, Andover assistant coach Brett Berts and Moorhead head coach Jon Annemman grew up best friends and defensive partners playing for the Spuds, finishing as Class 2A runners-up in 2004 and 2005. Manny said Annemman chafed on the phone a couple of times a week during hockey season, Manny said.

"The kids honor the connection between us and Moorhead, and they kind of relish the chance to maybe give it to the Spuds, just to help us out," Manny said. "On the other side... you, I'm sure, says, 'These guys will be bringing riches for a year on me, so don't let them take that.'"

Moorhead, seeded fourth, defeated fifth seed Andover in its rivalry December, a game that Manny described as lighter than the score indicated.



Andover coach Mark Manny left, and others on his staff have ties to Moorhead, the Huskie's first tournament opponent.

he's progressed and become the leading force behind this team."

The Citrimon opened the season in a Thanksgiving-overnight tournament with a 6-5 overtime loss to Edina. The victory for the Hornets jump-started their season with a six-game winning streak. Edina is familiar with the rest of the Class 2A tournament field, having faced every other team except Andover. The Hornets are 4-3 against the rest of the field this season, splitting two games with Hill-Murray in February.

PRIOR LAKE IS THE NEWCOMER

Only one program is brand new to the state tournament stage: unseeded Prior Lake. The Lakers were seeded fourth in Section 2 and knocked off defending Class 2A state champion Eden Prairie before beating Chaska 7-4 in the final. Prior Lake senior Alex Bump scored four goals against Chaska in a packed Bremer Arena with a large contingent of Prior Lake fans.

The feeling of knowing he and his teammates made the state tournament was an "amazing feeling," Bump said.

"To make history, it's a pretty cool feeling," Bump said. "I was just lucky."

Coach Joe Puskacz said he wasn't happy with the four seed in the section tournament, but the team used that as motivation, pushing "No. 4 seed" on the dry-erase board for the players to rally around. They love the underdog role headed into state, too, he said.

"If somebody wants to overlook us, I think we'll be able to surprise them a little bit," Puskacz said.

While Prior Lake has played good hockey over its past 17 games, its seeded opponent, Cretin-Desham Hall, has an 18-game winning streak. The Lakers are making a tournament debut as a program, but the Raiders haven't been to the state in a while either, since 2009. Players on both teams, each with a Mr. Hockey finalist, will need to manage the big stage.

2020 CHAMP HILL-MURRAY IS BACK WITH MAPLE GROVE

This marks Hill-Murray's 13rd state tournament berth, only a couple steps of Benson's 14 state trips for most in the state. But Hill-Murray will actually play in its 13th state tournament this year.

Hill-Murray didn't get the chance to defend its Class 2A title in last year's tournament, instead forfeiting its quarterfinal game against Weyburn. The Pioneers were exposed to COVID-19 during their section final against White Bear Lake. Some Hill-Murray players even filed a lawsuit against the Minnesota State High School League seeking to be allowed to play but were unsuccessful.

The Pioneers came back this year, though, with a No. 1 seed next to their name. They face last year's 2A runner-up, Lakeville South, in its fourth straight state trip, this time with new coach Josh Steen.

GUNDERSON FINDS HIS ROLE WITH MAPLE GROVE

Junior Landon Gunderson obviously stands out on the state stage as Maple Grove's leading scorer with 19 goals and 72 points on the top line. But in his third year on the team and third state tournament, his excitement revolves around playing a much bigger role than in his freshman year.

"I think it's a lot more fun being able to control your team and lead your team through it," Gunderson said.

Citrimon coach Bob Bergland recalls Gunderson meaning that leadership role as a freshman and seeing how far he's come.

"It's the guy that's commanding and wants it," Bergland said. "It's finally here for him. He's responded so well. He's become an incredible leader. I just can't say enough about how much