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HIGH SCHOOLS

COVID exposure hits top-seed Hermantown hockey; team will use mostly JV players in state tournament opener

Defending Class 2A champion Hill-Murray also is looking into whether its team will be able to play at all.

By Loren Nelson, Special to the Star Tribune MARCH 30, 2021 — 6:11AM

The No. 1 seed in the Class 1A boys' hockey tournament plans to suit up mostly junior varsity players. The defending champion in Class 2A is seeking guidance to determine if it can play at all.

Minnesota's marquee state tournament, which barely escaped the onset of the pandemic a year ago, begins Tuesday at Xcel Energy Center with 1A favorite Hermantown planning to suit up 15 junior varsity players for its game. All but three of the Hawks' varsity members are quarantined for COVID-19 exposure.

At Hill-Murray, a positive COVID test from a recent opponent has the Maplewood school checking with the Minnesota State High School League to see whether it can open defense of its 2020 state title on Wednesday against Wayzata.

"We hope our boys will be playing in the state tournament this week," Hill-Murray posted Monday on its school Twitter account.

The uncertainty comes after COVID exposure knocked the Centennial girls' hockey team out of the state tournament before it began last week. The Lakeville North girls' basketball team was poised to play for a bid in Tuesday's state tournament quarterfinals, but had to forfeit its section final last Thursday owing to a positive COVID test.

"We are obviously disappointed some of our student-athletes are missing out on this opportunity," Hermantown activities director Beth Clark said in a statement.

Earlier Monday Hermantown school superintendent Wayne Whitwam said the team would have just 11 players — 10 skaters and a goaltender — for its game against unseeded Dodge County at 6 p.m. at Xcel Energy Center.

Reached Monday evening, Hawks coach Pat Andrews said the team will have 16 skaters and two goaltenders. The roster grew once the team determined the whereabouts of players thought to be on spring break. One player is flying back from vacation in Florida for the game, he said.

The Hawks' roster is expected to include three varsity players who were injured and sat out the Section 7 semifinal against Virginia.

One of them is team scoring leader Zann Plante, who was injured in a game on March 8 against Duluth East. Plante, who sat out the Hawks' past four games, ranks sixth in the state with 58 points (30 goals, 28 assists).

Backup goaltender Cole Thorsvik, a junior who saw action in five games this season, also didn't play against the Blue Devils and is expected to be the starter against Dodge County.



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Hermantown is the No. 1-seeded team in the Class 1A boys' tournament and finished second in the state last year.

Depending on COVID test results, other members of the varsity could be cleared to play if the team wins Tuesday and advances to the semifinals on Friday, Whitwam said.

Andrews said, "This day has been like no other day in my life, to have to talk to my seniors and tell them this is happening. It was pretty devastating. At the same time to have those guys rally around our JV and say it's not over. If you can tell us we have a chance, we'll take it."

By comparison, when Centennial dropped out of the Class 2A girls' hockey state tournament last week, the high school league said it "considered options for a replacement team, but was unable to implement a plan."

Hermantown's opponent on Tuesday now finds itself adjusting to playing a much different team than the one it was preparing for.

Dodge County coach Nick Worden said his team shut down practice on Monday to talk to players about the situation. "We can't help but feel for those (Hermantown) kids and the whole program," he said.

His team, making its first state tournament appearance, now finds "the table just kind of got flipped a little bit," he said, with the depleted Hawks no longer considered to be the favorites.

"We have to be ready for that and go out and set the tone," Worden said.

Hermantown, criticized in hockey circles by those who believe it should be competing with the state's bigger programs, is adjusting, too.

"There is no pressure on us for the first time in ... ever," Andrews said. "Our guys have never been there. Their guys have never been there. So in that respect it's even."

Last March boys' hockey was the last winter state tournament completed before the pandemic shut down high school sports for the rest of the school year. During the fall the high school league opted against holding state tournaments, only to see football and volleyball seasons cut short in November by a surge in virus activity that sidelined winter sports until January.

Staff writers David La Vaque and Paul Klauđa contributed to this report.



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Always loquacious Ted Chesebrough, veteran high school hockey coach of the Sibley boys' team, dishes on what he's earned from the coaches who'll be behind the bench.