

2007-08 Men's Hockey Season Preview

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EAU CLAIRE, Wis. - The UW-Eau Claire men's hockey team will look to build on what it accomplished last season under former head coach Luke Strand. Interim head coach Matt Loen will provide great continuity for that building, having served as an assistant to Strand the past two years.

Loen will have 17 returning letterwinners, including last season's top four point scorers, and eight newcomers with whom to work. After a disappointing 2-21-4 record during the 2005-06 season, the Blugolds improved to 9-14-4 in 2006-07, and will look to improve even more this season.

In the tough Northern Collegiate Hockey Association (NCHA), the Blugolds are predicted to finish sixth in the preseason coaches' poll. This year in the USCHO.com preseason poll, four NCHA teams are ranked in the top 15 in the nation, while two other teams received votes.

The 2007-08 Blugolds will be led by four captains, defenseman **Greg Petersen** (*Jr.-Maple Grove, MN/Totino-Grace*), last year's team MVP, left wing **Sean Garrity** (*Sr.-North St. Paul, MN*), right wing **Andrew Johnson** (*Jr.-Andover, MN/Anoka*) and center **Dan Fina** (*Jr.-Fontana, WI/Glenbard South, IL*). Garrity, an All-NCHA and All-Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (WIAC) first team selection, led the Blugolds in points last season with 27, which included 13 goals and 14 assists. Peterson finished second on the team last season with 24 points (7 goals, 17 assists) and also received All-NCHA honors and was an All-WIAC honorable mention selection. Johnson and Fina also played an important role on last year's team, finishing fourth and ninth, respectively, on the team in total points.

Left wing **Jesse Vesel** (*Jr.-Hibbing, MN*) played in all 27 games last year and was the third leading scorer on the team with 22 points (4 G, 18 A). Vesel was also an All-WIAC honorable mention selection last season.

Nicholas Kuqali (*So.-Pittsburgh, PA/Mt. Lebanon*) and last year's rookie of the year **Tyler Trudell** (*So.-Waukesha, WI/South*) will help bring experience to the defense. Last season Kuqali played in 26 games, and Trudell played in 23. Goalies **Tyler Brigl** (*So.-Eagan, MN*) and **Mike Gatzke** (*Sr.-White Bear Lake, MN/Hill-Murray*), who saw limited action last season due to an injury, also return for the Blugolds. Both have seen little playing time in college, with Brigl playing in five games in 2006-07 and Gatzke playing in two in 2005-06, but will have to assume a bigger role this season.

Other returning letterwinners include center **Nate Smith** (*So.-Clayton, WI*), right wing **Jeremiah Weber** (*Sr.-Hayward, WI*), left wing **Tyler Weigel** (*So.-Madison, WI/Oregon*), wing **Brendan Gray** (*So.-Appleton, WI*), right wing **Ben Bosworth** (*Jr.-Hudson, WI*), center **Mike Schneider** (*Sr.-Owatonna, MN*), right wing **Peter Bracker** (*Jr.-Albert Lea, MN*) and left wing **Sam Bauler** (*Jr.-Apple Valley, MN/Eastview*).

In addition to the head coaching change, Erik Strand will join the team as an assistant coach, while Bob Thorp will begin his third year as the goalie coach. Strand is a 2002 graduate of UW-Eau Claire and played hockey for the Blugolds from 1998-2002. He played in 104 games and was an All-NCHA honorable mention selection in 2002.

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