



Players from the men's hockey team huddle and pray at the center of the rink after a loss against St. Scholastica. "We're all here for more than just hockey," said Jory McWilliams. | Photo by Toby Ryberg



# Breaking the cycle

After 14 years of losing seasons, the men's hockey team turns things around.

By Kaden Lamb | Design by Spencer Vang

Cold skates carve long lines in the ice at the Blaine Super Rink. The coaches glide around the rink, setting up the nets on either end and dumping a bucket of pucks at center ice. They toss pucks into the rafters of the arena and try to catch them in the air cleanly with their sticks. Little by little, the team filters out of the locker room and onto the ice.

A sharp whistle forces the team into collective motion. The men circle the ice, collecting the pucks that have drifted off and piling them back in the middle. The players gather around the coaches for a quick word, then break to form drills. The vibrant energy from warmups transforms to an attentive focus. It's time to go to work.

The last winning season for Bethel men's hockey was 14 years ago, finishing the 2007-2008 season with a record of 17 wins, seven losses and two ties. The year before that, Bethel won the conference championship and took a trip to the NCAA playoffs for the first and only time in program history. The last time Bethel had a winning season, Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston were still alive. The first Iron Man hadn't been released yet, and since then, three different U.S. presidents have been elected and sworn into office. Even within the team itself, a handful of head coaches have cycled through without much success.

The team had gone 3-19-3 the season before Head Coach Chris McKelvie took over in the spring of 2018. His first two seasons showed little improvement, going 11-33-6 before COVID-19 took away most of his third season. Now finishing his fourth season as Head Coach, McKelvie has led his squad to its first winning season in more than a decade. With the regular season finished as of Feb. 20, the Royals are 14-10-1, exceeding the win total for their last three seasons combined. Rather than being satisfied with the upturn in success, McKelvie has bigger goals on his

mind.

"We believe we have a really strong team, but we also believe we're positioning ourselves to be strong for years to come," McKelvie said.

A culture change is in the works, and this year's team is setting the foundation. A tightly knit group of seniors leads by example, building relationships with the underclassmen and welcoming them into the hockey family. Jory McWilliams, Ridge Gerads, Nick Ketola and Brandon Baker have been coached by McKelvie since his first season at Bethel.

"I honestly [get] a little emotional. [Those guys] have been here for four years, and they were with this program at one of its lowest points," McKelvie said. "Now they're the ones leading the charge to bring the program to new heights."

The players reciprocate that same attitude of appreciation toward their coach, who laughs and plays games with them before practice. They recall the ways that McKelvie has challenged them to grow as a player and as a person. Time and time again, he shows his care for their character off the ice as well as their productivity on it.

"He really emphasizes that we're all here for more than just hockey," senior Jory McWilliams said.

If the way they play together signifies anything, it's that these players have friendships that stretch beyond the glass encasing the ice rink. From the goofing around in practice to inside-joke fun, this team has learned that in order to be successful on the ice, they need to get along off the ice. Seniors and freshmen often play on the same lines, and some even live in the same houses together.

"It's a lot more of a close group than we've had in the past. We have good guys from a lot of different [backgrounds] and we all just mesh well together," junior Jarrett Cammarata said. Cammarata is the leading scorer on the



The team leans over the divider as they watch their teammates on the ice. | Photo by Toby Ryberg

team with 21 points this season.

The more technical side of the team's success this year has revolved around defense. It was emphasized for the returning players in the off-season, and the freshman class was recruited with defensive skills in mind. In 2020, the Royals' last full season, the team was outscored by opponents 92-51. They also gave up 17 goals to the power play. So far this year, the team has outscored opponents 73-65 and given up only nine power play goals. A solid team defense is the mark of a winning hockey team, and the Royals' improvement is noteworthy.

"We made tremendous strides ... with our team defense and our penalty kill," McKelvie said. "Our guys take pride in defending really well."

That solid defense comes on the heels of some outstanding goaltending. The three goalies on the team have a combined 749 saves this season, a save percentage of 92.1%. Gerads has 396 saves on the season, the fifth best in the MIAC. Sophomore Travis Allen is right behind him with 336 saves, ranking seventh in the MIAC.

Goaltending isn't the only position that's deep with dexterity. Players and coaches

agree that this year's success has a lot to do with the multitude of talent at every position. Whether the first or fifth lineup of players is on the ice, each man down the bench believes

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Braeden Bartoo, freshman

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that they will take care of business.

"What sets this team apart [from last year] is just the depth of our team. Anyone could play anywhere [on] any given night," McWilliams said.

Assistant Coach Trevor Tollette played hockey for Bethel in 2009, at the beginning of their cold streak. His head coach at the time was Joel Johnson, who recently won the silver medal coaching team U.S.A. Women's Hockey at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Bei-

jing. Tollette noted that this year's team is building a championship culture, emphasizing the family aspect of the team, similar to the one he was a part of more than a decade ago.

"It's a credit to our guys, just building a great locker room [atmosphere] that guys want to hang out in. After practice, they'll probably be here for another half hour playing ping pong and goofing around," Tollette said.

About a dozen players remain on the ice at the close of practice, standing in a big circle, zipping a little black puck between them as if they have been doing it together for their whole lives. The puck never bounces astray off a stick or a skate. The coaches didn't ask them to stay after practice to put in extra work, but these guys have big dreams on their minds. Four seniors are gearing up for their final run in the conference playoffs, and the whole team has a strong vision for the rest of the season.

"We have a lot of heart. We want to prove to people exactly who we are and what we can do," freshman Braeden Bartoo said. **C**

Travis Allen's save  
percentage:

**92.8%**

(third in MIAC) 246 saves

Ridge Gerads' save  
percentage:

**92.5%**

(fifth in MIAC) 396 saves

Junior Jarrett Cammarata skates forward with the puck on an offensive turn for the Royals. Cammarata has the most points on the team, with five goals and 16 assists on the season. He is hopeful about the team's commitment to work hard, and sees it paying off. "I think we're taking the right steps to create a great program here, and everybody's bought in," Cammarata said. | Photo by Toby Ryberg

