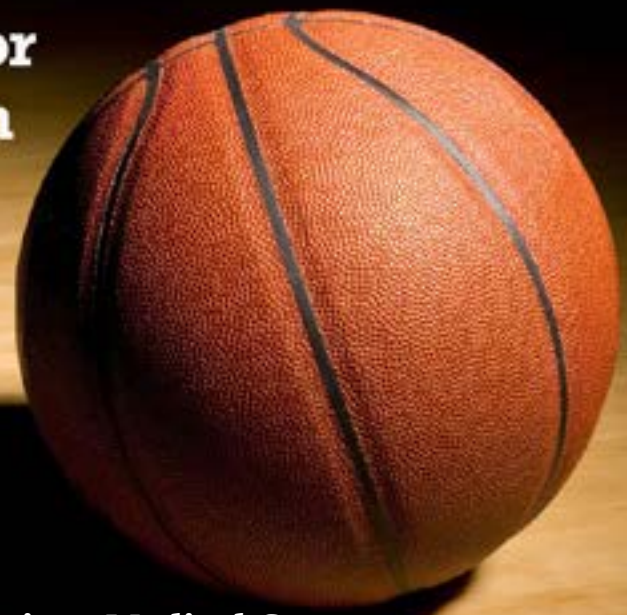


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Passion for rivalry allows Showcase to return

Let's do it again. As the lights went out and we prepared to leave the Student Activity Center following an eventful day, John Wood Community College athletic director Brad Hoyt and I looked at each, smiled and nodded in agreement.

Let's do it again, we both said. After watching the basketball community come together to support the inaugural Muddy River Showcase and seeing the effort and enthusiasm of the players, to not bring the game back would be a crime.

So mark your calendars now — the second Muddy River Showcase will take place June 17 on the JWCC campus featuring the top seniors from Illinois and Missouri going head-to-head for bragging rights.

“When you think about it, there’s no doubt we want to be a part of this and continue to see it grow and prosper,” Hoyt said. “Last year was fun, wasn’t it? We saw some great performances, saw the passion for the game and saw what it means to the community.

“That’s our goal here — to serve the community. This game gives everyone a reason to come together and celebrate the basketball community. We’re excited to be a part of it again.”

What made it clear this game needs to be played was in the days after the Illinois squads swept the inaugural doubleheader coaches and fans began asking who was going to be invited to

play next June. That’s entirely up to the players. The invitations are there to be earned. There will be 10 seniors from each state on both the boys and girls sides invited to participate. Some have already created a legacy that cannot be denied, while others have the opportunity to step into the spotlight and showcase their offseason training and commitment.

That’s why invitations don’t go out until the season ends. Every senior has the chance to play their way into the game, and not just by scoring the most points or grabbing the most rebounds.

Intangibles play a part, too. Leadership, tenacity, determination all matter.

That’s why the game is called a “Showcase.” The intent is to showcase what makes basketball in this area special, why gyms get filled to the rafters on Tuesday and Friday nights, why the Student Activity Center was filled on a Saturday in June.

It matters to the players. It matters to the coaches. It matter to the fans.

This is their game. “And it truly is,” Hoyt said. “The passion we saw from everyone last year was incredible. They ran with the idea of a bragging rights game and made it special. The credit goes to those who played, coached and supported it. What a great event.”

So let’s do it again.

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Led by the reigning Class 2A state player of the year in senior Abbey Schrecke, right, the Quincy Notre Dame girls basketball team will look to defend its state championship. | *Matt Schuckman photo*

Target acquired

Being defending Class 2A state champion puts QND in position where it will no longer be able to surprise anyone

By **MATT SCHUCKMAN**

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

QUINCY — Arguably the toughest and most demanding early-season schedule Quincy Notre Dame girls basketball coach Eric Orne has designed in his 22-year tenure will answer a pivotal question.

Do the Raiders have championship resolve?

“We have a big target on our back and everybody is going to be coming at us harder,” senior guard Abbey Schrecke said. “So we have to be twice as tough as last year. It gives us more

motivation. We know we’re never going to be the underdogs.

“With this schedule we have, there might be nights that’s where we are or where we should be the underdogs, but it won’t seem like it. People will still see us as the team to beat.”

As the Class 2A defending state champion with the state player of the year at the helm, the Raiders won’t be overlooked or taken lightly by anyone.

“You have to embrace the pressure,” Orne said. “There will be certain nights we embrace it better than others. That’s part of the grind and the longevity of the journey. The biggest thing I’ve stressed is being steady and balanced, especially early on.



Quincy Notre Dame senior guard Blair Eftink averaged 14.5 points last season while making 59 3-pointers and shooting better than 80 percent from the free-throw line. | *Matt Schuckman photo*

We will know what kind of team we are in late January and early February.”

First, the Raiders have to survive December.

Three of their first four games are at The Pit before the gauntlet begins. The first weekend of December features a home game against Unity, which played for a Class 1A sectional title last season, on a Saturday morning and a trip to Columbia, Mo., the following day to face Columbia Rock Bridge in the Sophie Cunningham Invitational at Columbia College’s Southwell Complex.

A stretch of five games in six days all on the road follows with back-to-back-to-back days playing at Springfield Sacred Heart-Griffin, Belleville Althoff and Breese Mater Dei. Trips to Havana and Palmyra follow.

All told, the Raiders are scheduled to play 13 games in the first 21 days of December.

“We play more games in December than any time in my coaching career here at Notre Dame,” Orne said. “A lot of those challenges are going to come quickly without a lot of practice time in between. Those challenges are something we’re going to evaluate after Christmas time, see where we’re at and what changes we need to make.”

Some changes may be necessary considering the Raiders open the season with a mix of experienced players and fresh faces.

The anchor is Schrecke, a 6-foot guard who has signed with the University of Missouri. She averaged 26.2 points, 8.7 rebounds and 3.2 assists. She was a first-team all-state selection by both the Associated Press and the Illinois Basketball

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Coaches Association and was the leading vote-getter on the AP all-state team.

The Champaign News-Gazette named her the Player of the Year for its all-state team.

Senior guard Blair Eftink is the Robin to Schrecke's Batman, averaging 14.5 points, 3.3 rebounds and 2.6 assists, while knocking down 59 3-pointers and shooting better than 80 percent from the field. Stratton averaged 7.2 points, 3.6 rebounds and 2.4 assists.

Lia Quintero, a two-year starter, will miss her senior season after suffering a torn ACL at the end of soccer season last spring.

"She'll still be on the bench for us and part of this," Schrecke said.

And Quintero, like the others, can bend Orne's ear when necessary to keep this group on track.

"Hopefully some experience and knowing when to lay off the gas in practice and understanding where we're at will help us," Orne said. "What I've found with this group of seniors, I can listen to them. They have good stuff to say. It's a good balance."

Their basketball IQ and experience should help bring the younger players along.

Stratton knows how that is. She averaged 7.2 points, 3.6 rebounds and 2.4 assists as a freshman, soaking in every piece of advice from the upperclassmen. She's able to help impart some of that now, too.

"I still have those moments where it's like, 'Whoa, I'm a sophomore. I'm not like the little freshman anymore. I know what I'm doing,'" Stratton said. "I have a bigger role of being a leader this year. I have girls in the freshmen class who I



Quincy Notre Dame girls basketball coach Eric Orne has led the Raiders to 486 victories and four state championships in 20 seasons on the bench. | *Matt Schuckman photo*

have to help, just the same way the girls above me helped me as a freshman."

Two freshmen — Ari Buehler and Jenna Durst — will have an opportunity to contribute substantially. Buehler will fill a guard role, while Durst provides a presence in the post.

"Being able to incorporate them and get them learning quickly will have a big impact," Schrecke said.

All they have to do is follow the leaders, the same way Schrecke, Eftink and others did when they stepped into the program.

"That's part of our culture," Schrecke said. "The idea of being good leaders for everybody is something we've passed down. Having a good senior class this

year will be good for these freshmen."

So will the pressure of expectations because they already see the upperclassmen embracing it.

The Raiders are determined to repeat as state champions.

"We all want to be there again," Schrecke said. "We've all been there. We all want it."

The motivation constantly hits them in the face.

"Everyday, I walk into school and I see our trophy and I say, 'I want to play for another one. I want to make another mark and just keep going,'" Stratton said. "It doesn't stop."

"I still have a ways to go, and I just want to keep adding to it."

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Defensive mindset

Blue Devils believe experience, quickness, size will contribute to defense being 'top tier' and providing shot at WB6 title

By **MATT SCHUCKMAN**

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor



A second-team All-Western Big 6 Conference selection a year ago, Quincy High School junior forward Taylor Fohey will be a centerpiece of the attack this season. | *Muddy River Sports file photo*

QUINCY — The collective experience the Quincy High School girls basketball players possess can be a two-edged sword.

On one side, it has the Blue Devils primed to be a factor in the Western Big 6 Conference championship race.

On the other, the league's coaches know what to prepare for and what to expect.

"Our girls know what it takes going into it," QHS coach Brad Dance said. "They know what a Thursday night in the Western Big 6 is like. They know what a Saturday afternoon in the Big 6 is like. They've been through that. They understand. They know there isn't an easy game.

"And we're not the new kids on the block. We have kids who all played last year, so everyone knows them and what they can do."

Above all else, that's defend.

The Blue Devils went into the final week of the regular season last winter leading the WB6 in scoring defense and finished the year allowing just 38 points per game. Stingy defense once again needs to be this team's backbone.

"Our defense needs to be top tier," junior forward Taylor Fohey said. "Defense is what is going to hold us together this year, and the offense will come from that."

Dance is convinced the offense will improve. The Blue Devils averaged 42 points per game last season, getting 12.4 points per game from Fohey and 9.5 points from senior forward Asia Seangmany. The challenge will be to get additional scoring from other avenues and improve the team's field-goal percentage.

The Blue Devils shot 42 percent from the field overall and just 21 percent from 3-point range.

"We're shooting the ball a heck of a lot better," Dance said. "A lot of that is coming from kids learning where they can find their shots from being on the court more and that year of experience."

Junior guard Laela Dade has impressed Dance with her presence, court vision and ability to handle pressure. Her growth as a leader and playmaker is part of the maturing process of this entire team. Every player in the starting five will have varsity experience.

"We're upperclassmen now, so we're not as young," Fohey said. "It still feels like we're young, but I feel like we all get along really well and have that camaraderie that comes from playing together."

There are a couple of new faces in the mix, too. Bri Lannerd,

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a junior guard, and Haley Schertel, a senior guard, expect to see playing time.

Lannerd is an all-sectional soccer player whose quickness and footwork gives her an edge.

“She can drive and get to the rim,” Dance said.

Schertel transferred from Quincy Notre Dame, where she came off the bench for the Class 2A state champions.

“She can shoot it,” Dance said. “And she’s working hard.”

Even with the athletes and the guards on the perimeter, the offense will revolve around Fohey.

“It has to go through her, even if she’s not going to score,” Dance said. “We have to work inside out.”

Fohey has to be a central part of the defense, too, even though Dance plans to employ more man-to-man this season. And he backs Fohey’s assessment the defense needs to be top tier.

“I agree,” Dance said. “We’re getting there. We have some more athletes this year, and we’re doing a really good job of getting out and guarding man-to-man. We’re getting out and guarding people. We can throw in the 1-3-1 and it’s a really good mix.”

There’s something else that has Dance encouraged.

“The effort,” he said. “This group is getting after it. It feels more like a traditional WB6 because we have 10 or 12 kids who can practice and really go against each other and beat on each other. We haven’t had that since I’ve been here. They’re realizing they have to compete every night. They haven’t had to do that.”

The depth should help the Blue Devils avoid fatigue, too.



With the experience of being a full-time starter last season under her belt, Quincy High School junior point guard Laela Dade is running the Blue Devils’ offense with confidence and quickness that is tough to match. | Muddy River Sports file photo

“Even if it’s a two- or three-minute break leading into the half, that’s going to pay off later in the game,” Dance said.

It should be a benefit later in the season as well, another reason the Blue Dev-

ils believe this could be a special group.

“I’m trying to keep everybody together, keep their heads high, come out with confidence,” Fohey said. “Right out of the gate, we just need to play our game.”



Central-Southeastern girls basketball coach Matt Long, right, led the Panthers to a 21-11 record last season and returns most of his lineup intact. | *Matt Schuckman photo*

Depth and experience give Panthers chance to rewrite season's ending

By **MATT SCHUCKMAN**

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

CAMP POINT, Ill. — The extra week of practice the Central-Southeastern girls basketball team takes prior to playing its season opener tends to make the Panthers a little antsy.

The practices end up becoming a little sluggish, too.

“We’re one of the few teams that takes three weeks in the preseason,” C-SE coach Matt Long said. “I think they’re ready to play. That’s a part of it.”

They’re ready to rewrite the script as well.

The Panthers were seconds away from winning a Class 2A regional championship last winter before Illini West’s Reagan Reed made a game-tying 3-pointer at the buzzer and the Chargers won by three points in overtime.

“This is our chance at a healing process,” Long said. “We felt

like we let one get away from us. This is our opportunity to get back in the gym and get better and get that out of the back of our minds.”

With a wealth of talent and experience, the Panthers are primed to change the ending.

“The main thing is we have some depth, more depth than we’ve had in recent years,” Long said. “That’s going to help us. That’s No. 1. No. 2 is we bring back a lot of experience. Every kid on our varsity roster got quality minutes last year.”

It means a relatively young roster isn’t as young as it appears.

“We have a really strong group of sophomores, and at some point, they all started on the varsity last year,” Long said. “I’ve told them all preseason, ‘You know you’re not traditional sophomores. We expect you to play at the level a junior or senior would be playing at. You have the experience and you’ve played in the big games before.’”

“They know how to prepare and they know what we do to prepare. I think that’s really important.”

Two seniors — Tori Fessler and Abbey McMillen — provide stability and add to C-SE’s ability to score on the perimeter. Last season, McMillen set the single-game program record with seven 3-pointers against Pleasant Hill.

Sophomore forward Amanda Stephens provides size and the ability to play inside and out, while sophomore guard Lauren Miller can score from a variety of spots on the floor and might be one of the toughest players in the area to guard 1-on-1.

“We have some kids who can get to the basket and some who can get out in transition,” Long said. “We feel like we have some weapons. I’m not going to say we’re going to have that 20 points per game scorer, but we have four or five kids on any given night that could come out and

get 20. That works to our advantage.”

Defensively, the Panthers should be just as salty. Last season, they allowed just 33.6 points per game.

“I think they’re going to be really, really good defensively by the end of the year if they buy in to what we’re trying to do,” Long said. “And I think they will.”

They will need to in order to survive a

loaded schedule. Long has added Warrenton, Mo., and West Burlington, Iowa, to the schedule, along with Cissna Park and Alton Marquette. Toss in traditional rivals such as Quincy Notre Dame, Illini West and Brown County and there won’t be many easy nights.

“It’s probably the toughest schedule we’ve had since the 2016-17 teams that




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Each week, Muddy River Sports Editor Matt Schuckman and a guest sit on the tailgate of his truck and talk sports. Check out the video interviews at MuddyRiverSports.com



The Unity girls basketball team, along with senior Kyra Carothers, reached the Class 1A sectional championship game last season and return a bulk of that team. | *Matt Schuckman photo*

Mustangs' potential creates optimism, has them 'ready for the challenge'

By **STEVE EIGHINGER**

MuddyRiverSports.com Correspondent

MENDON, Ill. — The optimism oozes from Brad Begeman's voice when he talks about this season's Unity girls basketball team.

"It looks good," said Begeman, beginning his 15th year as Mustangs coach. "I think this team is similar to our one that went to state (in 2017, finishing second). I'm excited as I have ever been."

Unity finished 28-6 a year ago and won its fifth regional title since 2012 -- and the cupboard is anything but bare.

"We have four seniors back and have a great nucleus," said the 51-year-old Begeman, who is 244-107 at Unity. "We're also



coming off one of our best summers. We played 12 to 16 games against some tough competition.”

Four-year veteran Ashlynn Arnsman, a 6-foot- junior, will be one of the integral pieces to the Mustangs’ expected success. Arnsman, a key player on the successful Unity volleyball team, will likely improve on the 14.5 points and 10 rebounds a game she averaged a year ago.

“We’ll be able to create a lot of mismatches with Ashlynn,” Begeman said.

Kyra Carothers’ senior season should see her bolster the 10 points, 3 steals and 3 rebounds a game she averaged as a junior. The 5-11 Carothers is also a “nightmare” on defense. She normally plays the point on the harassing Unity press.

“Kyra will always guard our opponent’s best player,” Begeman said.

A year ago, Kylee Barry came off the bench. This year she’ll be another of the senior starters. Begeman says the 5-8 Barry “possesses a great vertical game.”

The fourth senior, Caroline Knows, will be one of the area’s better overall guards, according to Begeman.

“We have four seniors back and have a great nucleus. We’re also coming off one of our best summers. We played 12 to 16 games against some tough competition..”

— Unity coach Brad Begeman

Junior Sophia Shaffer has started since she was a freshman and is an excellent outside shooter, plus a hard-nosed defender.

“Sophia is a great 3-point shooter,” Begeman said.

“I think (opponents) will have to defend all five of our girls on the court,” Begeman said.

Key substitutes will be juniors Hayden Frankel and Lauren Cornwell.

Unity opens Nov. 16 at Rushville. A key early season matchup will be Dec. 3 at defending Class 2A state champ Quincy Notre Dame. The two schools have developed a competitive rivalry over the years, and two seasons ago Begeman recorded his 200th career coaching victory against

QND.

Begeman said playing a strong West-Central Illinois schedule is an intangible that always helps the Unity program.

“This area is loaded with talent,” Begeman said.

And?

“I think we’re ready for the challenge,” he said.

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Schuette to help guide Eagles through another rebuilding season

By MUDDY RIVER SPORTS STAFF

LIBERTY, Ill. — Second-year Liberty girls basketball coach Paul Fessler shouldn't have anyone complaining about playing time this winter. With just eight players on the roster, everyone should see plenty of court time.

"We have to get in shape because we don't have a deep bench," Fessler said.

Fessler's first season finished with a 4-24 record and a first-round exit in the Class 1 regionals. There is just one senior on his roster this winter, which means the Eagles are building for the future while trying to get better in the present.

"We're still in rebuilding mode," he said.

The team's lone senior, Cora Schuette, also happens to be the team's top returning player. She averaged nine points per game last winter and will direct the offense as the team's starting point guard for the third straight season.

"She is going to have to run the team," Fessler said of Schuette, a four-year member of the Liberty varsity.

Schuette is one of three returning starters. Rejoining her in the starting lineup are juniors Makenna Zanger, who will play

one of the other guard spots, and Anna Wheelock, who is back at forward. Fessler expects junior Jacie Blair to also provide experience after having played varsity minutes last year.

Varsity minutes will be the only ones available to Liberty players this year as the school will not field a junior varsity program. The road will not be an easy one for Liberty as it will face some of the top programs in West-Central Illinois, including defending Class 2A state champion Quincy Notre Dame. The Eagles also will have to tangle with powerful programs from Central-Southeastern, Brown County and Unity.

"We're going to see a lot of good players," said Fessler, who has coached junior high basketball in the past and is an assistant coach for the Liberty softball program.

Fessler said his team, which features no one taller than 5-foot-9, will have to be physical on defense and try to score in transition on offense.

Liberty once again will test itself in three quality tournaments. The Eagles will play at Brown County at Thanksgiving and at Beardstown during the Christmas holidays. After the New Year, the Eagles will participate in the Central Tournament.





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Despite their inexperience, Chargers determined to remain competitive

By **MATT SCHUCKMAN**

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

CARTHAGE, Ill. — Grant Surprenant's track record as the Illini West girls basketball coach shows one thing above all else.

The Chargers consistently compete.

Even though graduation losses were significant and this will be one of the more inexperienced teams Surprenant has coached, he won't let that be an excuse, not for a program that has won 45 of its last 49 games.

"Competing in practice is what we strive for every single day," said Surprenant, entering his 11th season with a career winning percentage of .775 but has to replace all-state point guard Caydee Kirkham. "Understanding what we do in practice will carry over to the games is pivotal.

"Our expectations don't change. We adapt to the players we have in our program, but the girls understand every day we step on the court is an opportunity to compete."

When the Chargers commit to competing, incredible things are possible.

Just ask sophomore Reagan Reed.

Her 3-pointer at the buzzer against Brown County during the Central Lady Panther Classic lifted the Chargers to a 45-44 victory. In the regional championship against Central-Southeastern, the Chargers trailed by three points with 5.8 seconds remaining, but Reed made a 3-pointer at the buzzer to force overtime. Illini West eventually won 33-30.

Having her and her older sister, senior forward Rylee Reed, on the floor together gives Illini West a foundation of experience and stability.

"Those two played in a lot of big games for us and in championship moments," Surprenant said.

Rylee Reed's leadership is vital, too.

"She is growing more vocally and leading by example," Surprenant said. "It's her opportunity to go out with a bang."

“Our expectations don't change. We adapt to the players we have in our program, but the girls understand every day we step on the court is an opportunity to compete.”

— Illini West coach
Grant Surprenant

Junior guard Ellie Krieg moves into the starting lineup, but she is no stranger to big moments. A multi-sport athlete, Krieg was part of a West-Central Illinois all-star softball team that reached the Senior League World Series over the summer.

Hailey Eyring, a senior who transferred to Illini West from Colorado, ran cross country in the fall and adds quickness and athleticism to the attack. Allison Icenogle will figure into the mix as well, and

Surprenant expects contributions from throughout the lineup.

"I really like the chemistry we have so far," Surprenant said. "When you graduate five seniors, you're basically starting from scratch in regards to new chemistry. Players get older, which is great, but more importantly, the chemistry at the beginning of the season dictates how the rest of the season is going to go. I think the chemistry has been building really well for us."

That should allow the Chargers to withstand any early-season adversity brought on by the lack of experience.

"This is a team that I think will surprise a lot of teams," Surprenant said. "We won a lot of games last year, but we've gotten younger while a lot of area teams have gotten older.

"We're not going to back down and we're going to compete night in and night out."



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With foundation for success set, Hornets ready to chase sectional title

By MUDDY RIVER SPORTS STAFF

MOUNT STERLING, Ill. — It took the eventual state champions to knock the Brown County girls basketball team out of the playoffs last season.

Brown County coach Dave Phelps hopes his team takes lessons learned from that sectional semifinal setback with them into their 2022-23 campaign.

“You want them to believe we have the talent to get back and the foundation is there,” said Phelps, who enters his 10th season.

The Hornets, coming off a 27-6 campaign, return their top two scorers in twin sisters Klare and Katey Flynn, who are entering their senior seasons. Klare Flynn was the Hornets’ top scorer last season at 15 points per game, while Katey chipped in around 12 per night.

“They are kind of our centerpiece of what we do,” Phelps said of the Flynn sisters. “They have so much experience and will lean on them for leadership especially.”

Phelps said the Hornets likely won’t be as deep as they were last year when they captured the fourth regional title in program history. Phelps expects senior Gracie Hedden, a 5-10 forward, to move from first off the bench into the starting lineup for her senior season. Ashley Markert, a 6-1 sophomore center, also should play a bigger role for Brown County this winter, Phelps said.

“We have some younger girls who are stepping up, too,” Phelps said.

Phelps said the path to top last year’s season won’t be easy. They’ll open the season with their own season-opening tournament. During the season, they’ll face tough fields at Beardstown at Christmas and at Central after the New Year.

The Hornets finished third at Beardstown and Central last season.

He would love to get another chance to play in the sectional



Brown County senior Klare Flynn averaged 15 points per game last season as the Hornets went 27-6. | Muddy River Sports file photo

after seeing his team get a taste of what a deep postseason run looks like last year. He said the Hornets weren’t quite at 100 percent going into the sectional and playing Brimfield on its own floor made a difference.

Phelps said that Mendon Unity will once again be one of the top Class 1A teams in the area this season and will be a likely postseason foe.



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Saukees see freedom, ability to 'just play basketball' as boon

By **MATT SCHUCKMAN**

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

PITTSFIELD, Ill. — Matt Henry's success coaching the Pikeland seventh grade girls basketball team to the state championship game last season and his knowledge of the program made him the right choice to lead the Pittsfield varsity program.

And at the end of the day, it's still basketball no matter the level at which it's played.

"It's still basketball," Henry said. "That is right."

The commitment of the Saukees, their willingness to adapt and their drive to succeed is making basketball more fun.

"They've picked things up quicker than I thought," Henry said. "I kind of had a mark on my list in our playbook where I thought I wanted to get to, and we've gone a little past that. I've been very happy. They've been very receptive and have worked hard from it. We've had some fun and we've pushed each other."

The Saukees are even learning to "just play basketball."

That's a freedom they will come to appreciate.

"They're going to grow in their decision making," Henry said. "We're going to put them in some situations to challenge that. They don't like it sometimes when I say, 'You're just going to have to play basketball. You come off this screen, you look at your options and you're just going to have to play basketball. You're going to have to decide which one is open.'"

"When it starts to click — and it has the last few practices — and they see the secondary options and

the backdoors and the pick-and-rolls, they're starting to open their eyes and see that this is going to be fun."

So is the fact Henry has experienced players to help with the transition. The Saukees return four starters — senior Ellie Ten Eyck, senior Tori Waters, junior Ali Stambaugh and junior Lainie Marable.

"That's a positive," Henry said. "That's a strength for us."

So is the Saukees' ability to push the pace.

"On the defensive side, I think we're going to be able to pressure the ball," Henry said. "We have the speed and athleticism to do it. We're a little on the small side, but we can use our speed. On the offensive side, it's the same way. I think we're going to be able to get up and down the floor."

Everyone will be asked to and have the ability to score from almost anywhere on the floor.

"We are a little more position-less on the offensive end than we've been in the past," Henry said.

The lack of size isn't as much of an issue as some might assume.

"You have to adapt and use it as a strength and not a weakness," Henry said. "We'll have to change our technique or our approach and use our speed."

Starting the season in the loaded Brown County Tournament could be the catapult the Saukees if they just play basketball.

"That's a tough tournament," Henry said. "If we can go there and have a solid showing, that would be huge to propel us into December and right on into Christmas."

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Payson Seymour revives program, will build around underclassmen

By MUDDY RIVER STAFF

PAYSON, Ill. — Varsity girls basketball is back at Payson Seymour after being dormant since last fielding a varsity unit in the 2016-17 season.

Bert Koehler's first-ever varsity head coaching job will be leading a group that only has players who have seen junior varsity action in the past. Payson's roster features four freshmen, seven sophomores and a junior. While those players may be new to varsity basketball, they'll have some level of familiarity when they hit the court later this month.

"I've coached a lot of these girls since they were in second or third grade," said Koehler, a Unity graduate who has taught all of them in his position as a math teacher at the junior high school. "They know my way of doing things."

Koehler conceded that it would be nice to have some more experienced players for the Indians' re-entry to the varsity scene. However, what he lacks in experience, he said the team makes up for in girls who love to hoop.

Sophomores Thea Koehler and Grace Klitz will serve as co-captains for Payson.

"Those two are joined at the hip and both of them love basketball," Koehler said of his captains.

Payson won't have a lot of size as freshman Madilyn O'Dear checks in as the team's tallest player at 5-foot-10. Mckenzie Brown is the lone junior.

Bert Koehler also pointed to sophomores Ella Archer and Sam Hugenberg as two players who have played a lot of basketball during grade school and junior high.

"They are just hungry and wanting to

learn the game of basketball even more," Koehler said of his squad.

With a team a bit smaller in stature, Koehler said he hopes the Indians can play an up-tempo style. He wants them to be unique on the defensive end of the floor and is teaching them a pack-line defense made famous by Syracuse's men's basketball program.

Payson will play about 20 games this season. The Indians are slated to play in just one tournament when they head to the Alwood Thanksgiving Tournament. They'll face teams in the Pike County and West Central Conferences.

Koehler knows there will be some tough sledding on some nights.

"I want to gauge where we are now and where we are at the end of the season," he said. "Our focus is to get them better for their junior and senior seasons."



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Nine is enough for Wolves to put up fight, improve defensively

By **MATT SCHUCKMAN**

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

PLEASANT HILL, Ill. — The numbers might seem slight, but the effort continues to be mighty.

That has Pleasant Hill/Western girls basketball coach Shea O'Brien encouraged, despite just nine players on the roster.

"It's nine girls that want to be here, that like basketball, that step on the floor and know what to do," O'Brien said. "We should be able to compete."

It's a group that thrives on competition.

Senior guard Skylar Bainter, an honorable mention All-West Central Conference selection last season, was a second-team all-state softball player last spring. Ava Wombles, another honorable mention all-conference hoopster, played on an all-star softball team that reached the Senior League World Series last summer.

Up and down the roster, there are multi-sport athletes.

"They're just hard workers," said O'Brien, now in her second season at the helm. "I don't have anyone who doesn't want to come in and work hard. When they're playing multi-sports, it just transitions from one sport to another. It helps develop their mental capacity to work hard."

"They are willing to work hard and

“It's nine girls that want to be here, that like basketball, that step on the floor and know what to do.”

— Pleasant Hill/Western coach Shea O'Brien

listen.”

The hope is that pays off in improved scoring and better defense.

"We're attacking the basket and have a lot of people looking to score, which will help us out a lot," O'Brien said. "We were a little tentative last year."

The Wolves averaged 30 points per game, while allowing 46 per game. It led to a 3-20 record.

"One area I know we have to continue to work hard is our defensive stamina,

knowing where to be, wanting the ball and seeing the ball," O'Brien said. "I've been trying to tell them how much it will pay off in the long run."

The improvements defensively O'Brien has seen already will allow the Wolves to play more man-to-man defense and rely less on a zone.

"They're seeing the ball and moving with the ball instead of just watching the game go by, which we get caught up in sometimes," O'Brien said. "So I see them moving a little faster."

Bainter will be asked to score, as will sophomore Rachel McMullen who "really understands the offense," O'Brien said. Paige Wombles, who hasn't played since her freshman year, is back with the team and pairs well with Ava Wombles to provide quickness and defensive pressure.

It all adds up to a chance for marked improvement.

"We're working to improve, and the girls are working hard at that," O'Brien said.

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Bombers ready to build on success of Macomb's other programs

By **MATT SCHUCKMAN**

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

MACOMB, Ill. — Why not us?

With the success building across the board at Macomb High School throughout the 2022 calendar year, Bombers girls basketball coach Jackson Kane has wondered aloud if his crew will be the next to enjoy a breakthrough and overwhelm opponents in the same way the softball, baseball, football and volleyball teams have.

“Why can’t we dominate on the basketball court too?” Kane said. “Macomb sports are really ascending right now, and I know our group can be a part of that. I’ve tried to push that narrative as much as I can recently, and I’m hoping the girls are really buying in to that idea.”

Having a solid base of seniors to run with that narrative helps. Five of the 12 players dressing for the Macomb varsity are seniors, and a backcourt featuring Kaitlyn Robinson, Sarah Stufflebeam and Ainsley Holthaus gives the Bombers an advantage in experience and tenacity.

“They’ve been integral parts in establishing this new culture we’ve started building since I got here last year,” Kane said. “Our seniors are really strong leaders and high-character kids. They lead the way. It’s resulted in a tangible excitement around here. I think the younger girls are feeding off that, and I’m hoping it just keeps growing.”

Adding a talented corps of underclassmen provides the Bombers with depth to be able to play at a quicker pace.

“Last year, we didn’t have that depth and it kind of showed at times,” Kane said. “We got fatigued. So I think depth-wise we’re pretty strong. This is a very quick group. I wish we could balance that with some height, but that’s not really up to me.

“So I’d say speed and depth are our strengths.”

It’s suited to a new offensive scheme.

“We’re getting comfortable with it, but it’s taking time,” Kane said. “Getting familiar with the offense and how it works is something we’re working at.”

Seeing his team go on a 13-0 run in the second half of a victory over Illini Bluffs the first week of the season gave Kane confidence it will come together.

“I’m feeling really good about where we’re at and hopefully the momentum can carry us,” Kane said.

It helps to have a year under his belt, too.

“There’s a lot more continuity because they know my philosophies now, my defensive principles and offensively we’re going to be a team that shares the ball and trusts each other,” Kane said.

Youthful squad with potential gives Titans opportunity to develop

By **STEVE EIGHINGER**

MuddyRiverSports.com Correspondent

HAMILTON, Ill. — Jacey Hartweg approaches her second season as West Hancock girls basketball coach in a realistic fashion.

Noting that five of the Titans' players are freshmen, coupled with a brutal early part of the schedule, Hartweg refers to the coming campaign as a "developmental" year.

"I'm excited about the season, but it will be a challenge," said Hartweg, a Hamilton native and former standout player at West Hancock who returned home a year ago after teaching and coaching for three years in the Milwaukee, Wis., area.

West Hancock is coming off a 10-18 season, a mark that realistically may be difficult to duplicate this season.

"We're a very small team," Hartweg said.

Hartweg feels much of the preseason and early part of the schedule will see a concentration on improving the team's shooting and fine-tuning its fast break. Complicating those hopes will be the West Hancock schedule, which will include a strong field in the season-opening Brown County tournament and ensuing matchups with Illini West and defending Class 2A state champion Quincy Notre Dame.

"And I'm OK with that," she said. "This will be a learning opportunity."

Anchoring West Hancock's lineup will likely be junior Lillie Woodworth, who has experience at shooting guard, small forward and power forward.

Woodworth is coming off a second-team all-West Central Conference North Division selection as a sophomore. Woodworth averaged 11 points, 6 rebounds and 3 steals a game while

providing both strength along the baseline and the ability to drop in a 3-pointer.

"Lillie (already) has a lot of varsity experience for us," Hartweg said. "She's a great overall player."

Alexa Gray is penciled in at point guard. The team's lone senior is expected to be the floor leader and the epitome of a perfect "role player," according to Hartweg.

Two more juniors are expected to accent West Hancock's hustling approach at both ends of the floor. Mehra Morrison will be looked at to supply some muscle in the paint, while Alexis Lucie is a "scrappy player who likes to mix it up," according to Hartweg.

Lakinn Larson is a sophomore who should benefit from the playing time she earned as a freshman.

A newcomer expected to help will be junior Georgia Seabold, who played last year at Illini West.

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Check out the video interviews at MuddyRiverSports.com

Pirates feed off Gaines' enthusiasm, look to be dynamic defensively

By **MATT SCHUCKMAN**

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

HANNIBAL, Mo. — Shawn Gaines understands success in summer tournaments and camps doesn't guarantee victories on winter's coldest nights.

Yet, seeing the Hannibal girls basketball players enjoy a handful of offseason triumphs gave the first-year Pirates coach some needed good vibes.

"That really helped with the buyin, being able to see that improvement," said Gaines, whose troops won eight summer games after winning five total games in the previous two varsity seasons. "That inspired a lot of confidence coming into the season."

His energy is doing the same.

Since being hired to replace Evan Cerven, Gaines has promoted and publicized his program across social media, including doing a countdown to the day practice began, and showcasing his enthusiasm while staying locked in with the football program as well.

Gaines is a linebackers and running backs coach with the Pirates, who are headed to West Plains this week for the Class 4 state quarterfinals. He also teaches seventh grade math.

"This is what I dreamed of whenever I made the decision to get into this field," Gaines said. "Being in the position I am in with a highly successful football program, to take what I've learned there and lead a basketball program, that's really been my dream.

"I'm just very excited to finally live that out."

The Pirates haven't struggled to follow his lead.

"The girls have adjusted with the change," said Gaines, who served as an assistant coach with the girls program the previous three seasons. "It's not a major change, but it's a new face and a little bit of different schemes here and there. The girls are really buying in to what we're trying to do. They're showing up every day.

"We have more girls staying after practice to get shots up. That's a sign we're trending in the right direction."

With a number of talented underclassmen, the trend points to upward trajectory.

Nora Hark, a three-year starter and three-sport athlete, will be the team's lone senior on the floor, with senior Gracie Martin out for the season after suffering an ACL injury. Gaines expects to rely heavily on Hark for leadership.

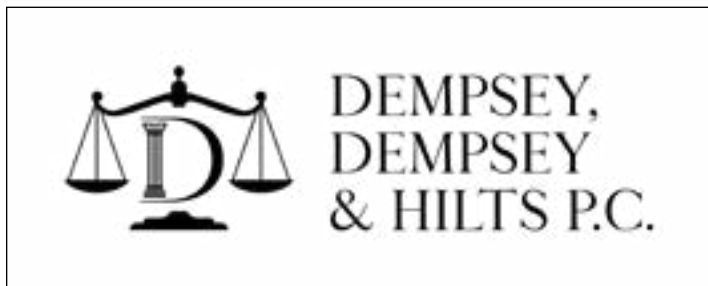
Sophomore Mariah Mayfield was the Pirates' lone All-North Central Missouri Conference and all-district selection a year ago, and the 5-foot-6 guard continues to improve.

"I think she is going to grow into a phenomenal basketball player," Gaines said. "She is already showing that with the talent and ability that she has."

Three junior guards — Kyliah French, McKenna Hull and Baylee Pugh — all figure into the mix, giving Gaines an athletic, quick lineup no matter which combination he uses.

"Defense and using our athleticism will be our strengths," Gaines said. "The thing I looked at first whenever I got the job was we are extremely athletic. I want to use that athleticism, especially at the defensive end.

"We're going to be an aggressive, defensive team. That's my plan."



Tigers' experienced, deep lineup with no plans to pump brakes

By **MATT SCHUCKMAN**

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

CANTON, Mo. — The more Canton girls basketball coach Danielle Baker talked about her team, the more she realized she has players with similar attributes.

“We have a lot of lengthy guards,” Baker said. “It seems like we’re all the same size.”

It should lead to the Tigers playing one way as well — fast.

“If I tell them to slow down, they’re going to freak out on me,” Baker said. “They’re not going to want to do that. They’re going to want to go 100 miles per hour, which is fine. I’m fine with that. We have the numbers to do it, and we don’t have the size to slow us down. So we might as well play to our strength.”

Experience and depth are two other strengths.

The Tigers return all five starters and have an influx of youth with nine freshmen on the roster. There are 19 players total in the program.

“We have a really deep team, so the practices have been competitive,” Baker said.

Two seniors — Nariah Clay and Brooke Brewer — set the competitive tone. Clay averaged 15.6 points, 7.4 rebounds and 4.5 assists, while Brewer is a defensive dynamo who is part of the heart and soul of this team.

Add three other returning starters in junior Macie Fisher, junior Emma Hultz and junior Kendall Weathers, along with key contributors such as Macy Glasgow and Allie Ruffcorn, and Baker finds both the offense and defense ahead of the game.

Fisher averaged 11.1 points and Glasgow averaged 8.5 points.

“We will run some of the same stuff and we can build off what we did last year,” Baker said. “You just pick up right where you left off. Everyone is more mature mentally and a little bit more mature



Canton junior Macie Fisher, who averaged 11.1 points per game last season, is part of an experienced group capable of chasing a district championship. | *Photo courtesy Mathew Kirby*

physically, too. The kids who toward the end of last season were starting to hit shots consistently have really taken off and are hitting shots at a higher level.”

A year of growth is proving substantial.

“They’re getting a little bit bigger and more confident,” Baker said. “One year makes a big difference.”

This also is a group that knows how to win. Multiple players were starters on the Canton softball team, which won the Class 1 state championship less than a month ago.

“Mentally, there were things they had

to overcome during softball that they did overcome,” Baker said. “They are able to fight through some things and perform.”

More importantly, they stayed steady, something Baker expects to be the case this winter.

“I don’t think this is a team that is going to be rattled,” Baker said. “They are a team that is going to stick together, and they are going to find a way to get stronger and stronger as the season goes on. They just keep finding ways to improve and get better because that’s their natural mentality.”



The camaraderie and enthusiasm the Palmyra girls basketball players shared last season is carrying over to this season, only it's being enhanced by their experience and growth. | *Photo courtesy Mathew Kirby*

Panthers hungry to win district championship, chase state glory

By **MATT SCHUCKMAN**

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

PALMYRA, Mo. — It became apparent, long before Tim Southers took over as the Palmyra girls basketball coach, that he was invested in the Panthers' success.

In fact, the previous coaching staff highlighted Southers during team film sessions for the passion he showed during Palmyra's game last season. And that was while serving as an assistant for the boys program.

"It really helped to have that relationship from the start," Southers said. "They knew I was in their corner and rooting for them. The chance to coach them takes that to another level."

Above all else, he wants to see them improve in every facet.

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“When I came in, my whole thing was we’re just going to get better every day,” Southers said. “We’re not going to worry about one team on our schedule. We’re going to try to be the best we can be every single day and every single game we play. These young girls have gravitated toward that in a great way.”

Any step toward success is a step in the right direction.

With four starters who were freshmen or sophomores last season, the Panthers went 19-8 and lost 59-55 to South Shelby in the Class 3 District 6 championship game. The Lady Birds went on to finish second at the state tournament.

“This group is hungry to win,” Southers said. “I feel like they all came away from last season with the thought process that we just missed out on a great chance by losing the way they did in close fashion to South Shelby.”

Knowing how to win seems to be in their DNA — from state track medals to state fair ribbons.

“They know success, and they know it doesn’t come easy,” Southers said. “You have to work to get better. You have to work to win. They want to be at the highest level.

“They want to be standing and receiving that medal at the end, and it takes hard work to get there.”

It also takes a defensive presence.

The Panthers allowed 40.9 points per game last season, giving up 40 or fewer points in five of their final 10 games against high-level Clarence Cannon Conference competition.

“Our primary emphasis is we want to shut teams down and make it very difficult for teams on the offensive end,” Southers said. “The girls have really taken to it. I think it’s going to show.”

“The defensive pressure we’ve been able to create and their approach to defense has been tremendous.”

Offensively, the weapons abound.

“They know success and they know it doesn’t come easy. You have to work to get better. They want to be at the highest level. They want to be standing and receiving that medal at the end, and it takes hard work to get there.”

— Palmyra coach Tim Southers

Three players — junior forward Candra King and sophomore guards Clare Williams and Sydney Compton — averaged in double figures last season, and junior guard Taytum White could be a double-digit scorer this season.

King averaged 13.4 points and 8.8 rebounds, followed by Williams at 11.6 points and Compton at 10.8. White averaged 6.4 points to go with two assists and two steals and slides into the starting lineup this season.

“We’re going to be able to pour it in,” Southers said. “It’s going to be someone different every night.”

It’ll start with King getting touches in the post.

“She has gotten quicker. Her post moves have gotten better,” Southers said. “If you come to our games, you’ll hear us

say, ‘BBQ chicken,’ because we’re going to feed her as much as possible. She’s BBQ chicken all day long. She knows what that means and has taken a liking to it. And she’s a very unselfish player. If it goes into her, she’s going to kick it back out to shooters. And we have shooters to knock it down.”

The key is getting the ball to the right spot without turning it over.

“Valuing the basketball is going to be one of the things we stress,” Southers said. “We play really fast, but sometimes that looks really sloppy. Valuing the basketball is going to be really important.”

That takes trust and faith in each other.

“We want to be one team, one unit going after one goal,” Southers said.



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After year of growth, experienced Cougars ready to challenge CCC foes

By **RON KINSCHERF**

MuddyRiverSports.com Correspondent

EWING, Mo. — Highland girls basketball coach Ashton Jaco took over the program three years ago, which happened to coincide with the coronavirus pandemic.

It meant a young team didn't have a lot of time to acclimate to her system. That is why last year was such a huge year for growth.

"There was definitely some inexperience last year," Jaco said. "But you know, now this year, they've got a year under their belt. They know our system a lot better, and that should definitely help."

The Cougars return four starters from a team that finished 14-13, but . 2021-22 created a foundation for more success.

"It's something to build on," Jaco said. "It's coming more natural to them, it's coming easier for them. So that's a huge help. And then we've got three freshmen to throw in the mix that are extremely talented and can bring a lot to the table, too.

"So, you add all that together — the experience, a few young faces with some good talent and you know, you can get really excited about what you see."

The added depth will let the Cougars get out in transition a bit more according to Jaco.

"I knew on paper, we should be fast, but then seeing (over

the summer) that we can really get up and down pretty well, so that's exciting," Jaco said. "That's something that's got to be our first look, getting out and running."

And Jaco will implement some man-to-man principles defensively after playing a lot of zone last season.

"I can definitely see us get out and pressure a little bit more," she said. "We have some length at our guard positions specifically. We're not super big. But you know, one through four, we can get out and pressure and use our length and athleticism ... hopefully to cause some problems."

Highland returns one of the area's best scorers in senior Ansley Bringer. She averaged 19 points and nearly 10 rebounds per game last season, earning first-team All-Clarence Cannon Conference honors.. Jaco feels Bringer's teammates are eager to carry more of the load.

"Now we've got some more experience," Jaco said. "Kids are just better and more talented now. If they focus in on her, I think we can make them pay with other key pieces around her."

One of those pieces is junior forward Dallas Dare.

"She's done a lot of work with her back to the basket," Jaco said. "She has gotten a lot better with some post moves."

Junior Ali Reed will be a key contributor. Jaco likes her flexibility.

"She's one of those people with length," the coach said. "I can have her as a guard or I can throw her out at the four position."

Jaco believes the Cougars are ready to take the next step.

"The expectations are high, but again, our philosophy with our program is you give your best energy, effort and attitude," Jaco said. "And if you do those three things, usually the wins and losses take care of themselves in a lot of ways."

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Tigers expect every experience to be 'foundational and building'

By **RON KINSCHERF**

MuddyRiverSports.com Correspondent

CENTER, Mo. — The evolution of the Mark Twain girls basketball program is happening sooner than Tigers coach Matt Boswell originally expected.

Two All-Eastern Missouri Conference players graduated and the lone returning senior — Audrey Ross — will miss the entire season after suffering a torn ACL. It leaves the Tigers with a youthful look and plenty of growth potential.

"There's positives and negatives to this new group," Boswell said. "We're going to really show ourselves and what we're capable of (early on), but then keeping in mind that after the season, we're bringing the entire group back. So everything can just be foundational and building."

"We can learn from every victory, every defeat, whether it's close or not so close. There's gonna be a lot of growth this year, which I'm excited about."

Boswell says defensive effort will again be emphasized. The Tigers finished 8-15 last season while giving up just 38 points per game. Not much will change defensively.

Offensively, the Tigers will look quite a bit different.

"We're gonna try and implement a little bit more transition," Boswell said. "We're not going away totally from our half-court philosophy and those plays that kind of were successful last year, but of course, it's a brand new group this year. So we are modifying things looking for what our new strengths are."

Running things from the point guard position will be junior Madison Boleach.

"I'm excited to see her growth and her development this year," Boswell said. "Knowing that she's going to need to take on a little bit bigger role. Last year, she was very much pass first. She's just that kind of girl that you can put on the other team's best player and know that she'll give it all defensively."

"And that's kind of what we expect from her. But we're hoping that she can make a bit more of an impact looking to score the ball."

Then there is a talented group of youngsters Boswell is hoping will mesh successfully with the older players.

"Freshman Adelyne Means is somebody who can do a lot of things offensively," he

said. "I haven't had somebody with her skill set. She can attack inside, but has the touch to score around the perimeter. She can be a pretty special player when she kind of puts it together for us."

Freshman Marin Mallory also will help fill the void from the perimeter.

"It's really exciting for me to have something fresh and something new to work with," Boswell said. "A new batch of girls where I can challenge myself with getting out of my way of how I coached the last couple of years. I'm looking forward to it."



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GUIDING YOU TO BETTER
Hannibal Regional

Young but experienced corps gives Panthers opportunity to compete

By **MATT SCHUCKMAN**

MuddyRiverSports.com Editor

MONROE CITY, Mo. — Adam Rung's challenge when he took over the Monroe City girls basketball program was to lay a foundation for future success.

Now he gets to see how sturdy that foundation is.

The Panthers return three starters and seven of their top nine players from a year ago, giving the second-year head

coach a more experienced group and the depth needed to compete in the Clarence Cannon Conference.

"We're still building on the foundation we laid last year," Rung said. "And we have some younger kids who are hopefully going to step in and push for some minutes and contribute."

It means the Panthers will seem inexperienced based on age.

"We're going to be young again," Rung said.

But he expects this group to come along quickly. Two juniors — guards Lucy Pratt and Mari Gares — join sophomore Audri Youngblood as the returning starters. Junior guard Taylor Pfaff and sophomore guard Chalin Chapman saw extensive time last season.

Senior guard Alivia Chinn and sophomore guard Meghan Hays also have varsity experience.

"It's a group where the kids really enjoy each other and are really good teammates," Rung said. "They are buying in to what we're trying to do. It's a team you're going to see make big strides from early in the year to late in the year."

A vast number of the returnees had breakthrough moments last season, which means they are all capable of contributing and excelling.

"That's exciting as a coach," Rung said. "They have all had success and they can all go back to that. It also gives them confidence going forward knowing, 'Hey, we can do this.' Also, knowing we don't have to rely on just one person is significant."

"The idea we're trying to build is we're going to do this together. It's we above me. As we continue to evolve that culture, these kids are proof we can do this. If everybody does their part, we will see success."

Although the Panthers appear short on size, Rung believes it plays well into the idea of being aggressive.

"Defensively, we have the ability to get after some people," Rung said. "We're deeper, so we can play more like we want to play and get after you and create some tempo and create some chaos with our defense first and foremost."

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GUIDING YOU TO BETTER

Hannibal Regional



New faces create new excitement as Mustangs look to reload

By **RON KINSCHERF**

MuddyRiverSports.com Correspondent

PHILADELPHIA, Mo. — The Marion County girls basketball team loses a core group of seniors who enjoyed a great run of success during their time playing for Mustangs coach Reed Plunkett.

But after finishing 21-6 last year and reaching the Class 1 state quarterfinals, the Mustangs must replace five of their top six players and 90 percent of their scoring.

Plunkett is counting on the lone returning starter, Tristan Holt, to fill some of the void.

“She’s our only senior this year. She was really a big defender and rebounder for us, and she’s looking to take more of an offensive role this year,” Plunkett said. “She understands what my expectations are, and you know this summer she did a really good job of helping relay that to the new faces we have.”

But the cupboard is hardly bare. Plunkett is expecting a group of underclassmen to step up.

Holt’s younger sister, Riley, along with freshman Kennedy Hathaway will provide ball handling. Sophomore Grace Jensen, a 6-foot forward, spent much of last year injured but will provide an inside presence. Picking up some of the slack offensively will be sophomore, Sam Kindhart.

Plunkett can’t wait to see freshman Ayla Pollard in action.

“She was one of our leading scorers this summer and she’s left-handed,” he said. “She’s really strong. She finishes well around the basket.”

After the recent success of the Mustangs, Plunkett knows patience will be in order.

“We are going to have our growing pains early in the season. Our schedule’s a little bit tougher earlier,” Plunkett said. “We

go play in a bigger school tournament (the Monroe City Tournament). We play some good teams right off the bat, but I do expect as we get going to get better and better.”

After losing all-stater Delaney Straus and the other seniors, the pace of play may be slower with a focus on using their size, but Plunkett cannot wait to see the finished product.

“I understand that expectations probably aren’t quite what they were, but I’m excited about the group,” he said. “I really do think that come January and February we can surprise some people with how well we could play.”



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A photograph of a basketball court. In the foreground, a basketball is shown in a low-angle shot, resting on the wooden floor. In the background, a basketball hoop and backboard are visible against a dark wall. The entire image is framed by a thick yellow border.

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