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FINDING HIS WAY

Orchard View big-scorer Ke'Ontae Barnes hasn't had much structure in his life, but thanks to his own self-discipline, basketball dreams, and the help of a caring coach, he's on the verge of big things.

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

Ke'Ontae Barnes could have easily taken a wrong turn in life. He has spent his teen years moving around, living with his mother, an aunt and uncle, and now his father and grandmother.

He's had to direct himself through the challenges of adolescence, and be careful to avoid the pitfalls that so often plague teens who lack structure at home.

And there was not a lot of structure for Barnes. He explained it in a paper he wrote two years ago, and shared with LocalSportsJournal.com.



"I lived with my single mother and my little sister my whole life until I was 14, and it wasn't easy," he wrote. "My mom was struggling trying to get a job, but it wasn't going so good, so it made it hard for her to provide for me and my sister.

"But my getaway was always basketball. When I would go to the gym I would forget about everything in my home life till I got home. And

my grandpa was a good motivator for me also. He always told me God don't put you in situations you can't overcome.

"But at 14 I didn't think my life could get any worse. My grandpa had passed away in 2016 and on the same day me and my little sister got taken away from our mother by CPS, and that killed me because she was the only one we had. But I couldn't show my little sister that I was scared for her sake, so I had to be tough.

"My little sister had to go stay with her dad in Atlanta and my dad wasn't much in my life, so my uncle and aunt took me in and I'm so thankful for that because without them I don't know where I would be."

There were temptations and potential pitfalls along the way.

He said he knew troubled kids who tried to talk him into doing a lot of things on the other side of the law, like selling drugs, smoking pot, and shoplifting.

Luckily Barnes has always been good at navigating challenges. He has a clear understanding of his life and situation, and has been mature enough to understand the right way and wrong way to go.

"You don't have to go to the streets," said Barnes, 18, an All-State guard for the Orchard View basketball team. "There are lots of ways to make money without doing things illegal. Everybody is trying to make money the wrong way. I know a lot of them. I had a whole lot of friends who were cut out of my life because of it."

His basketball dreams helped Barnes continue to move forward. He grew up around older basketball players, started playing organized ball himself in elementary school, and has been laser-focused on the game since then.

Barnes had some help along the way from a coach who wasn't even his coach when they met.

When Barnes was in middle school, Nick Bronsema, then the assistant varsity boys basketball coach at Orchard View, got word that there was a potential standout coming up through the OV system.

Bronsema met Barnes and watched him play, and started inviting him to practice with the varsity, when his own team practices were done for the day.

It was a pretty tough challenge for a middle school kid. Barnes would practice every afternoon with his middle school team from 2-4 p.m., then join the varsity practice that went as late as 7:30 p.m. He said it was an exhausting experience, but well worth it.

He reflected on that in the paper he wrote when he was 16:

"From 7th and 8th grade (Bronsema) let me practice with the varsity until I was big enough to be in high school, and I knew every time I stepped in the gym I was going to have to work my butt off, so I did, from shooting over 300 shoots a day to all the sprints and a lot more.

"I always had the mindset that if you work hard it will pay off. That's why I practice like I'm in a game. And I'm trying to get better because I know I'm not nearly as good as I could be, so that's why I try to be a gym rat all the time."

Bronsema said it was obvious from the get-go that Barnes was a kid with a ton of potential.

"I know they didn't have the greatest success in middle school as far as wins or losses, but he was always scoring points," Bronsema said about Barnes. "You could see how good he could be in the way he handled himself, the confidence. You could see other guys on the middle school team deferring to him."

Bronsema has become more than just a coach to Barnes. The two of them have spent a lot of time together in recent years, working out on the court, and just talking about basketball and life in general.

For a kid who has been largely finding his own way for years, having a trusted adult



Orchard View All-Stater Ke'Ontae Barnes averaged nearly 30 points per game last season. Photo/Tim Reilly

to turn to has been priceless.

"He's a person I can come to and talk to and clear my mind," Barnes said. "Whenever I need to get something off my mind I can call him."

"He will tell me what's on his mind," Bronsema said. "I try to help him figure things out, where he and the team can go this season, but more importantly, where he can go in his life. My next goal is to put him in a good situation so he can be successful in college, and be successful as an adult down the road. I see him as being a leader in life. He's not going to be a follower."

That 'it' thing

Barnes joined the Orchard View varsity as a freshman, the same year that Bronsema was promoted to head coach of the team, after the retirement of the former coach, his father-in-law, Russ Doane.

In Doane's last season, OV won only six games, and it had been quite some time since the team had posted double-digit wins.

But with the talented freshman on the roster, things started to improve rapidly. The Cardinals won 10 games in his freshman year, 15 and a Division 2 district championship his sophomore year, and 13 last season.

Every year Barnes' skill set improved, and his confidence soared. The more confidence he had, the more points he scored.

As a freshman he was streaky and averaged 10 points per game.

He took off in his sophomore season, averaging 22 points per game.

By that point he felt fully comfortable in the varsity environment, and started believing that he could dominate games with his scoring ability.

The highlight of that season was winning a Division 2 district championship in a nail-

Key players are back on roster for Fremont boys



FR: Chase Rassmussen, Joshua Zerfas, Elijah Shears, Blake Hanshue. MR: Logan Nelson, Joey DeLong, Martin Curiel, Lane Converse, Johnny Rodriguez, Waden Woods. BR: Coach Kit Powell, Braiden McDonald, Payton Mansfield, Tegan Reichert-Slater, Jordan McDonald, Coach Peter Zerfas.

Packer girls will have experience on their side



FR: Carly Zimmerman, Mia Witte, Abby Vandenberg, Bri Webber, Jeanelle Scharphorn. MR: Calla Miller, Kennedy Christoffersen, Carley Witteveen, Haley Zerlaut. BR: Coach Wes Zerlaut, Jessica Bennett, Carle Bruggema, Kaitlynn Bennett, Assistant Coach Shelly DeGeer.

COACHES: Head Coach Peter Zerfas. Assistants Kit Powell, Steven Palmer.

2019-20 RECORD: 17-5 overall and 11-3 in CSAA Gold (third place).

RETURNING STARTERS:

Senior 5-11 guard Joshua Zerfas (7.5 points, 7 assists, 5 rebounds), senior 6-2 forward Braiden McDonald (three-year starter, 19.8 points 7 rebounds, first team All-State).

OTHER KEY RETURNEES:

Senior 5-7 guard Lane Converse, senior 5-9 guard Martin Curiel, senior 5-9 guard Johnny Rodriguez.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Sophomore 6-3 forward Jordan McDonald, junior 5-10 guard Logan Nelson, senior 6-3 center Payton Mansfield.

PLAYERS TO WATCH:

Braiden McDonald is a hard worker who is motivated to play at the next level after his high school career. He has worked on his outside shot recently and finished last season strong. Zerfas has great court vision in transition, and he makes his teammates better. He is a great playmaker with a winning pedigree.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Packers are an athletic team with players who have the ability to shoot the ball well. The team can drive to the basket as well as stretch the floor. The team has many players who are eager to step up to challenges.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Size will be an issue for the Packers, as well as team depth, with not as many players who have experience at the varsity level.

COACH QUOTE: "Without being able to scrimmage or have team practices, it is important that the players worked on their game from home. The amount of time these players put in on their own will determine if we can start the season off strong." - Pete Zerfas

COACHES: Head Coach Wes Zerlaut. Assistants Shelly DeGeer, Katie Smith, Chris Bruggema.

2019-20 RECORD: 15-6 overall record, 13-1 in CSAA Gold, clinching a share of a league title for first time since 1980.

RETURNING STARTERS:

Senior 5-5 guard Calla Miller (fourth-year varsity, 10 points, 2 assists, 3 steals, first team All-Conference), junior 5-5 guard Haley Zerlaut (third-year varsity).

OTHER KEY RETURNEES:

Junior 6-0 center Kaitlynn Bennett, senior 5-7 guard Jeanelle Scharphorn, senior 5-7 guard Addy Vandenberg, senior 5-7 forward Bri Weber, senior 5-2 guard Carley Witteveen.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Junior 5-5 guard Kennedy Christoffersen, junior 5-6 guard Mia Witte, junior 5-9 center Carly Zimmerman, junior 5-8 forward Ashlyn Hoppa, sophomore 5-9 forward Carle

Bruggema, freshman 5-10 forward Jessica Bennett.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Senior Calla Miller plays strong on both the offensive and defensive ends of the court. She refuses to quit and proves she can face challenges head on. Miller is an ultra-competitor, according to her coach. Haley Zerlaut and Kaitlynn Bennett are experienced and are expected to have solid seasons.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Packers have a lot of depth and are a great conditioned team. Fremont also has team speed and will move well in transition.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Packers lost a lot of size last spring to graduation.

COACH QUOTE: "Play today like it is your last game. Some teams didn't get to finish last season, so we must be grateful for the opportunities we have to get to play the game of basketball." - Wes Zerlaut



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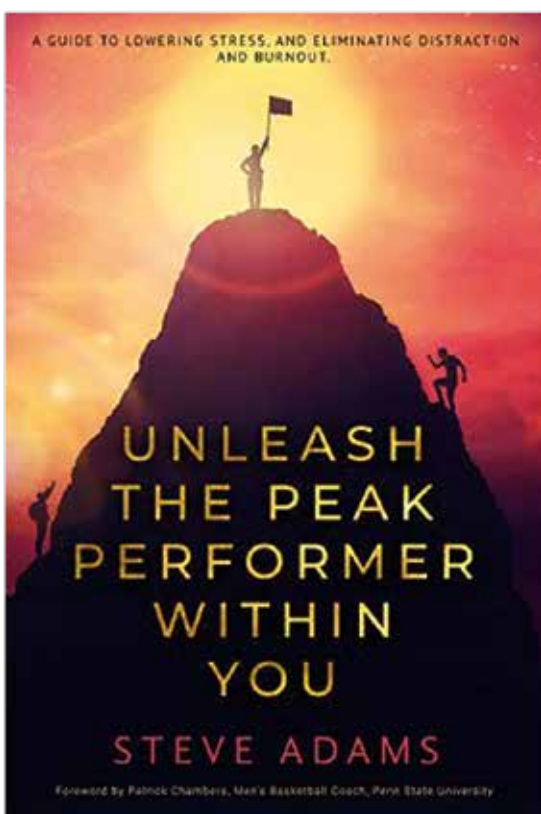
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Fruitport boys will be replacing all 5 starters



FR: Gavin Reames, Camden Farrell, Carter Golden, Bode Anspach, Tyler Zimmerman, Collin Jolman. BR: Andrew Spyke, Parker Wood, Ryan Laus, Tyrone Rule, Cade Powell, Ryan Wagner, Andrew Spyke. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Steve Erny. Assistant Aaron Veihl.

2019-20 RECORD: 12-10 overall, 5-7 in O-K Black Conference play.

RETURNING STARTERS:

None.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS:

6-3 senior forward Tyrone Rule, 6-5 senior forward/center Ryan Wagner, 5-11 senior guard Parker Wood.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Junior guard Camden Farrell, junior guard Gavin Reames, junior forward Ryan Laus, sophomore guard Bode Anspach.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: The guard combination of Wood, Farrell, Reames and Anspach will have to step up quickly and be prepared to lead the Trojans, who lost almost all of their offensive production from last season to graduation. All four are good athletes and are expected to help lead the team along with Rule, who has stepped up and improved over the summer.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Trojans will be a quick and athletic team this season. They should defend really well and be versatile in how they defend. Overall, the Trojans will use their athleticism and quickness to get after it on the defensive end of the court.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Fruitport will be challenged in finding a consistent scorer at the varsity level. The Trojans lost over 90 percent of their scoring from last season and will need someone to step up and be a go-to offensive player.

COACH QUOTE: "We'll kind of work through how to discover who can lead us offensively. But I think once we get players to buy into certain roles, I think we'll have a pretty good offensive team. It just may take some time." – Steve Erny

Trojan girls will rely heavily on two senior starters



FR: Manager Savanna Lopez-Woirol, Kylie Pate, Willo Staal, Sabi Meil, Makenzie Wessels, Hailee Benderman. BR: Coach German, Anna Bol, Mikayla Belasco, Sadie Norwood, Auebre Johnson, Kristen Lord, Kylie Rudolph, Asst Coach Packard. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Bob German. Assistants Brian Packard, Mike Veltman.

2019-20 RECORD: 6-15 overall, 1-11 in O-K Black Conference play.

RETURNING STARTERS:

5-5 senior guard Willo Staal, 5-7 senior forward Kristen Lord.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS:

5-9 junior forward Anna Bol.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 5-6 junior guard Sabi Meil, 5-6 junior guard Kylie Tate, 5-9 junior forward Kylie Rudolph, 5-11 sophomore forward Sadie Norwood, 5-9 sophomore forward Auebre Johnson.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Seniors Staal and Lord will provide the team's leadership. Lord returns to the court after injuring herself in the opening game last

season and will be a key starter following a strong 2019 summer. Bol will also be expected to lead as a returning junior who is vocal and energetic on the court. Meil, a transfer student, brings some good basketball experience after playing in Indiana last year before moving to the area.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Trojans will be more well-rounded this season with plenty of players who can see the court at various positions.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Fruitport will likely have some growing pains to overcome as most of the team has yet to play at the varsity level. In a shortened season, the Trojans will need to grow and mature on the court quickly.

COACH QUOTE: "I'm going to be putting a lot on them (Staal and Lord) as my only two seniors. It'll be a big jump for most of these girls to go from freshman or junior varsity to varsity. It'll be a work in progress for sure." – Bob German



Calvary boys have Coach Richards leading the way



FR: Quinn Swanson, Joel Walker, Karsten Sutherland, Jacob May, Luke Assaad, Garrett Tyler, Kendon Sutherland. BR: HC Brad Richards, Bradley Richards, Braden Cohea, Braden Swanson, Ethan Cammenga, Asst. Sam Berry, Head Assistant Jim Warren. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Brad Richards. Assistants Jim Warren, Sam Berry, Bill Mann.

2019-20 RECORD: 2-19 overall and 2-7 in Alliance League play. Lost in Division 4 district quarterfinals to Muskegon Catholic Central.

RETURNING STARTERS: 6-3 senior center Jacob Schuitema, 6-2 junior forward Ethan Cammenga.

OTHER KEY RETURNEES: 5-7 guard Jacob May, 6-0 forward Luke Assaad, 5-10 guard Karston Sutherland.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Senior Braden Cohea, senior Braden Swanson, eighth-grader Brad Richards.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Cohea and Schuitema are expected to be the senior leaders. They are going to lead by example to help change the culture of the program. May will use his quickness to create opportunities for himself and his teammates.

TEAM STRENGTHS: Having Coach Richards, a big winner with the Calvary girls team for years, will be a big plus for the boys. A staple of a Brad Richards-led team is work ethic. This team will be no different. The Eagles roster is full of high character, hard-working players. The Eagles will look to use their overall team speed this year.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Eagles do not have a lot of experience in winning games, and Richards will begin to address that problem from Day 1. Every rebound will have to be earned, because the Eagles are not a very big team.

COACH QUOTE: "I can be a demanding coach, and it's on the older, more skilled kids to lead by example. We need to become a close-knit group. Our team needs to keep God first, family second, and basketball third. If we can keep those priorities, then we will have come a long way as a team."

- Brad Richards

Eagle girls hope to carry on their winning tradition



FR: Avneet Cheema, Kyra Hamilton, Tresa Dykstra, Kamea Sutherland, McKena Wilson. BR: AC Brendan Hamilton, Kara Baas, Emily Beals, Reagan Payton, Cate Anhalt, HC Matt Payton. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head coach Matt Payton. Assistant Brendan Hamilton.

2019-20 RECORD: 18-4 overall and 7-0 in Alliance League. Won seventh straight Division 4 district title and eighth straight league title.

RETURNING STARTERS: 5-2 sophomore guard McKena Wilson, 5-9 junior forward Cate Anhalt, 5-7 senior forward Kyra Hamilton.

OTHER KEY RETURNEES: 5-6 junior guard/forward Avneet Cheema, 5-6 junior forward Reagan Payton, 5-5 sophomore guard Cammea Sutherland.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Senior Rynne Wilczak.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: As a freshman last season, point guard McKena Wilson facilitated the Eagles' offense. As a sophomore, she will have a bigger role. Cate Anhalt is the Eagles' defensive ace and will expand her role on offense. Kyra Hamilton is expected to be the team's senior leader. She can rebound well, and is looking to have a big offensive season.

TEAM STRENGTHS: Winning is something that the Eagles know how to do, and they have a lot of returners to carry on the tradition. The Eagles also have a very strong work ethic and will look to continue their recent success with the new coaching staff.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Replacing two graduated All-State caliber players is going to be tough. The returning starters have big shoes to fill. They also lack size, and this will change the way the Eagles play this season.

COACH QUOTE: "So far they have been a joy to be around, they have been great kids and worked really hard in the practices we did have. They are open to learning things about the game." – Matt Payton



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Bucs will lean heavily on two returning starters



Charlie Gretzinger, Owen Worthington, Landon Vanbeek, Sam Stevens, Cole Lachmann, Tucker Kooi, Bashir Neely, Jack Bewalda, Gaven Strong, Nic Stump. Photos/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head coach Greg Immink. Assistant Ron Peters.

2019-20 RECORD: 15-7 overall, 5-7 in O-K Red.

RETURNING STARTERS: 6-5 sophomore guard Harrison Sorrelle (6 points per game), 6-3 junior guard Owen Worthington (6 points).

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: 6-4 senior center Landon VanBeek (5 points per game), 6-2 junior guard Bashir Neely, 6-4 junior forward Nic Stump.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 6-7 junior center Tucker Kooi.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Sorrelle, Worthington and VanBeek will all be looked upon for leadership in the upcoming season. They'll be expected to replace three senior starters from last year's squad, which was playing well at the end of the season before COVID brought an end to the state tournament. All three know what it takes to help the team play at its best.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The quality of guys on the team will be a strength for the Buccaneers. They'll have a mix of returning players with varsity experience while also adding a few newcomers to the varsity level.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The uncertainty of the season and what to expect going into the year will be a problem for Grand Haven, just like other area teams. Grand Haven will also have to fill the roles of two all-conference players from last year who have since graduated. The Bucs are also relatively inexperienced, with many of the key players being juniors and sophomores.

COACH QUOTE: "Teams who will be successful this season are the ones that deal with adversity the best and focus on basketball. I'm excited about the new season and watching our guys grow." - Greg Immink

Grand Haven girls have lots of talent and depth



FR: Skyler Covelli, Emily Walcott, Alyssa Hatzel, Avery Keefe, Caydee Constant, Grace Harrison and Taya Andrzejewski. BR: Sammi Campbell, Mariah Hornak, Molly Long, Zoe Spoelman, Heidi Berkey, Veda Vargas, Claire Stevens. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Katie Kowalczyk-Fulmer. Assistants Katie Erickson, Norm Greene, Amanda Merz.

2019-20 RECORD: 10-11 overall, 3-9 in O-K Red Conference play.

RETURNING STARTERS: 5-9 senior guard/forward Avery Keefe, 6-2 junior center Zoe Spoelman, 6-1 junior forward/center Molly Long, 5-4 junior guard Caydee Constant, 5-6 junior guard Alyssa Hatzel.

OTHER KEY RETURNNEES: 5-11 sophomore forward Heidi Berkey.
KEY NEWCOMERS: 5-4 sophomore guard Grace Harrison.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Keefe is the lone senior, and will use her size to finish in the post while also having the ability to hit the outside shot. Spoelman is tough in the post and will adjust a lot of shots on defense, averaging nearly three blocks a game. Long is similar to Spoelman, and will use her size and athleticism. Constant will lead on defense while Hatzel is one of the best passers on the team.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Bucs return five players who started at least part of last season, while also returning most of their bench that saw significant playing time. Grand Haven will have a deep bench with 14 players on its roster.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Grand Haven will play in a very deep and tough O-K Red Conference, and could pick up some losses despite playing some of their best basketball. While returning a lot of depth, Grand Haven will only have one senior and will look to the junior class to help with leadership.

COACH QUOTE: "We have a lot. We have a good returning core and I think we have a deep team. This may be the deepest we've ever been, and all 14 kids really bring something different to the table for us." - Katie Kowalczyk-Fulmer



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Pirate boys have the tools to win more games



FR: Tony Rayo, zach Bitely, Delfino Hernandez, Chris Clark-Smith, Logan Purdy. BR: Kellen Kimes, Parker Hovey, Jake VanderWilk, Kory Charron, Kody Charron, Mason Contreras. Photo/Leo Valdez

COACHES: Head Coach Adam Jerry. Assistant Coach Michael Giddings.

2019-20 RECORD: 5-16 overall, 0-14 in West Michigan Conference.

RETURNING STARTERS: Senior 5-11 point guard Zach Bitely, senior 5-10 shooting guard Delfino Hernandez.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 5-9 junior guard Kohen Porter, 6-2 junior small forward Jake VanderWilk, 6-4 junior forward Kody Charron, 6-3 sophomore forward Parker Hovey, 5-11 sophomore guard Tony Rayo, 6-1 junior forward Kellen Kimes.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Junior Center Kody Charron, at 6-4, can cause matchup problems for opponents. Sophomore Tony Rayo, a guard, and forwards Parker Hovey and Kellen Kimes, will also play key roles.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Pirates have a lot of team chemistry, they play good team ball, they know each other well and have spent extra time together practicing during COVID. Plenty of the underclassmen have experience on varsity from last season. With so many players back, fans should be able to count on more victories this season.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Overcoming youth with a lack of seniors, keep letting their game mature throughout the season, getting used to the physicality of the game and be better defensively, and turning team chemistry into more wins. Developing confidence and a winning attitude will be huge.

COACH QUOTE: "What we need as a program builder is to be competitive with the teams we play against. A lot of our losses last year were good lessons to learn from. They know how to play with each other, and now the next step is to turn it into closer games and, eventually, wins." - Adam Jerry

Hart girls could contend for league title



FR: Jayd Hovey, Emma Weesies, Rylee Noggle, Cassidy Copenhaver, Kendall Williamson. BR: Addison Hain, AC Ron Williamson, Aspen Boutell, Marianna VanAgtmael, Audrey Aerts, Skylar Smith, Lauren VanderLaan, Audry Swihart, Morgan Marvin, HC Travis Rosema, AC Doug Pretty.

COACHES: Head Coach Travis Rosema. Assistants Ron Williamson, Doug Pretty.

2019-20 RECORD: 19-5 overall, 11-3 in West Michigan Conference, finished second in conference behind Montague after losing to the Wildcats in triple overtime. Won second straight district championship.

RETURNING STARTERS: Senior Rylee Noggle, junior Jayd Hovey (15 points, 3 rebounds, 3 assists per game, honorable mention All-State), junior Kendall Williamson (8 points, 8 rebounds, 3 assists, 3 steals), sophomore Aspen Boutell.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 5-11 junior Morgan Marvin, sophomore Marianna VanAgtmael.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Hovey is a two-time All-Conference and All-Area player.

She should be one of the top players in the area and will take on a big leadership role as a junior. Williamson was honorable mention All-Conference despite missing seven games with injury, and she is typically tasked with defending the opposing team's best player.

TEAM STRENGTHS: Returning four out of five starters and experience from last year's district title team. Most of the team has already played winning basketball, and there's plenty of depth on top of the returning four starters. The team is very focused and communicates very well on and off the court.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Dealing with the COVID restrictions, making sure everyone is still communicating and keeping up with themselves, despite being unable to practice together on a regular basis.

COACH QUOTE: "I feel that our staff has done a great job with reminding the girls that each day is a new opportunity to improve. Once the season starts back up it will be easy to tell which girls and teams took advantage of the opportunities they had." - Travis Rosema



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Panther boys focused on entering the win column



FR: Nathan Martinez, Allistir Arnold, Logan Hernandez, Kile Pomeroy, Armando Escobedo. BR: Coach Andrew Worcester, Hunter Gudyka, River Montague, Maddox Mosely, Gabriel Prado, Riley Taylor. Photo/Leo Valdez

COACHES: Head Coach Andrew Worcester. Assistant Jason Niblibe.

2019-20 RECORD: 0-20, 0-11 in CSAA Silver Division conference play.

RETURNING STARTER: Senior shooting guard River Montague.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS:

Sophomore point guard Armando Escobedo, junior guard Hunter Gudyka.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: River Montague, who led the team in scoring last season. He improved a lot in the offseason, working on quickness and footwork.

TEAM STRENGTHS: Despite their struggles last season, the Panthers are determined to improve and want to work toward turning their program around. The players have a great work ethic and get along well with each other, and their basketball fundamentals have improved, both offensively and defensively. Team passing has been crisp in practice, and the players are accustomed to each other.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Getting through the season healthy, staying focused on the task at hand despite COVID restrictions, and communicating consistently both on and off the court, will be important factors for the Panthers. They will also have to adjust their mindset, and gain some confidence, to overcome a winless season in 2019-20. When that first victory comes, the Panthers will realize they have the tools to win some games, and more will likely follow.

COACH QUOTE: "If we're able to improve from last year and establish our way to play, while also keeping players, coaches, families, and everyone healthy, that alone would be a successful season." - Andrew Worcester

Hesperia girls have all five starters back



FR: Samantha Bieri, Caitlyn Frees, Allison Homfeld, Natalie Merrill, Adriana Slater. BR: Keagan Hornsby, Rachel Romero, Emily Bayle, Emmii Tinkham, Emma Joppich, Coach Vince Grodus. Photo/Leo Valdez

COACHES: Head Coach Vince Grodus. Assistant Jeff Saari.

2019-20 RECORD: 8-13 overall, 4-6 in CSAA Silver Division play.

RETURNING STARTERS: 5-8 point guard Emily Bayle, 5-5 guard Becci Castillo, 5-7 guard/forward Rachel Romero, 5-10 forward Emmi Tinkham, 5-11 center DaeLynn McKinnon.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Guard Emily Bayle, who is well known for her volleyball exploits in the fall, is also a big point producer in basketball, averaging 20 points per game last season as a junior. Emmi Tinkham averaged an impressive 10 rebounds per game, and guard Rachel Romero is a defensive specialist.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Bayle is

a multipurpose player with over 600 career points going into her junior season. The multifaceted player is a skilled ball handler and great shooter inside and outside the paint. Castillo is quick, a good ball-handler and sees the floor well. Homfeld can both shoot and pass and do a little of everything. Romero, a very good shooter, sees the floor well and glues the team together.

TEAM STRENGTHS: A lot of returning players, including all five returning starters, bring back experience, chemistry and good team speed, are very well-conditioned and should be able to keep up defensively. The team expects to have about five more players on the roster than last season, so depth will be much improved.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Keeping everyone in good health, and converting that chemistry and experience into victories.

COACH QUOTE: "I think we have a real chance to build from last year, we are returning a lot of starters and will have more players and depth in general. The team knows each other well." - Vince Grodus



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Good luck from Jayhawk Athletics

Poling will play a big role on an inexperienced team



FR: Kevin Erickson, Aidan Poling, Joseph McLean and Carter Brant. BR: Assistant Coach Trygstad, Austin Fowler, Wyatt Monette, Coach Keith Swanson. Photo/Beth Olson

Red Devil girls have more skill and depth this year



FR: Mikayla Burns, Kennedy Greene, Madison Bosset, Jasmine Vriesman, and Leah Fox. MR: June Newell, Ava Crowell, Zoey Carty, Shelby Bayne, Layla Cannady. BR: May Newell, Abigail Fowler, Courtney Boes, Ryann Robins, Madison Jager, Kyleigh Jager, Gianna Reed. Photo/Beth Olson

COACHES: Head Coach Luke Houseman. Assistants Dawn Monette, Rick Trygstad.

2019-20 RECORD: 13-8 overall.

RETURNING STARTERS:

Senior 6-0 point guard Aidan Poling, junior 6-1 forward Wyatt Monette.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS:

Junior 6-0 guard Austin Fowler, senior 6-0 forward Joseph Mclean.

KEY NEWCOMERS:

Sophomore 6-1 forward Brodrick Fialek, freshman 5-11 guard Carter Brant.

PLAYERS TO WATCH:

Poling is the leader of the team and he uses his experience and unselfish style to help lift his teammates around him. For Coach Houseman, he is a dream player to have, and he expects him to have a big season.

TEAM STRENGTHS:

The Red Devils core group of players will look to use their on-court intelligence to execute and not turn the ball over.

TEAM CHALLENGES:

The Red Devils only return two starters, so they will be breaking in several new players to the lineup. Developing depth will be another challenge for the Red Devils throughout the season. The young team also lacks height, which may hurt against teams with bigger players.

COACH QUOTE: "For a team that loses five of their seven starters we have a lot of talent. I'm excited that (Poling) is going to be able to spread his wings and show people what he can do, because I think people are going to be surprised."

- Luke Houseman

COACHES: Head coach Joey Mason. Assistants Wesley Russell, Marcus Newell.

2019-20 RECORD: 5-15 overall.

RETURNING STARTERS:

Senior point guard and power forward Madison Bosset, senior shooting guard Kennedy Greene.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS:

Junior small forward Gianna Reed, senior point guard Jasmine Vriesman.

KEY NEWCOMERS:

Sophomore small forward Courtney Boes, junior point guard Leah Fox.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Senior Madison Bosset is the captain and the heart and soul of the Red Devils heading into the season.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Red Devils are a young group, but they are very willing to work and are mentally tough, which will help them grow together as a team. The return of two starters and several other experienced players will give the team the foundation it needs to increase its win total this season.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Getting everyone ready to go for the season and adjusting to the speed of the game will be one of the main challenges the Red Devils will face. That challenge will be compounded by the length of time it has taken to begin the season, and the fact that the Red Devils have not had the chance to face competition from other schools yet. Learning to win will have to be a crash course for Holton on such a short schedule.

COACH QUOTE: "We have a really positive group of girls who are eager to win and learn the game. I'm excited to see how they go from game one to the end of the season."

- Joey Mason.



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KC boys are young but have skilled players



FR: Adrian Arechiga, Jaret Jaramillo, Kyler Larson. MR: Carter Magoon, Bryan Fahling, Casen Armstrong, Hayden Carlson. BR: Coach Ingles, Thomas Swanson, Webb Longcore, Chase Mareno, Coach Lopez.

COACHES: Head Coach David Ingles. Assistants Gabe Hall, Josh Lopez.

2019-20 RECORD: 13-8, 7-3 in CSAA Silver.

RETURNING STARTERS: Junior guard Hayden Carlson (started two games last season).

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: Senior 5-10 guard Casen Armstrong; 6-0 sophomore guard Kyler Larson.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 6-3 junior forward Thomas Swanson, 6-2 sophomore forward Webb Longcore, 5-9 sophomore guard Jaret Jaramillo, 6-3 sophomore forward Chase Moreno.

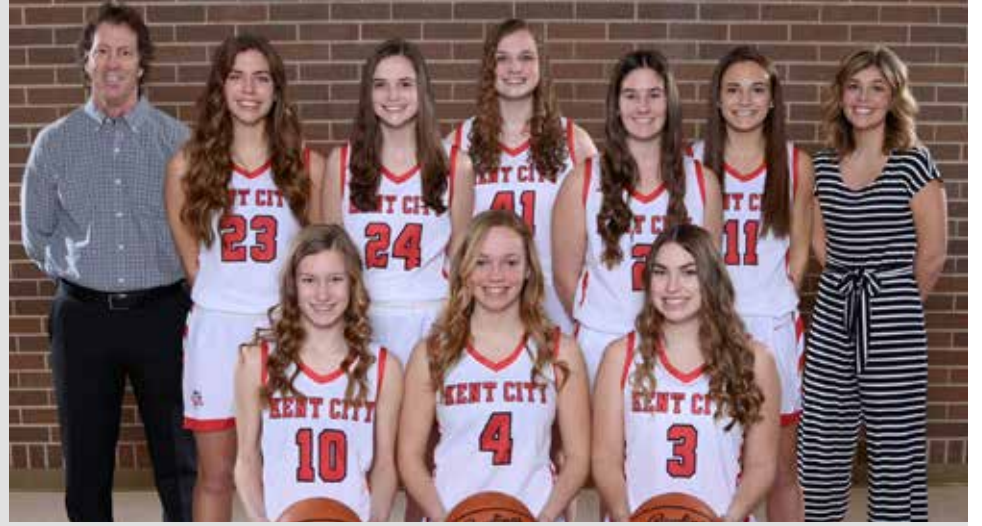
PLAYERS TO WATCH: Armstrong spent a lot of time this summer working on his 3-point shot and has gained an edge on defense. Carlson will play the point for the Eagles. The junior sees the floor well, and is a very good leader as an underclassman. Larson is the most athletic player on the team and gets to the rim. Swanson's post moves have improved and will be counted on down low for the Eagles.

TEAM STRENGTHS: Defense will be the Eagles' strength. The team will be extra motivated, because it is dedicating the season to Coach Ingles, in honor of his brother Lee Ingles, who was killed in a car accident in October. Lee's name is printed on the back of the team's warm-ups, which include the motto "Leave everything, elevate everything we leave."

TEAM CHALLENGES: Inexperience will be tough in big games for the Eagles. There is no definite scoring leader and that will be a concern.

COACH QUOTE: "We've been in communication since October through group messages and leadership questions, and it's been really good for our chemistry. Practices have been energetic and focused, they are ready to go and compete."
- David Ingles

Eagle girls are loaded and ready for a big season



FR: Kierra Flegel, Jenna Harrison, Lexie Bowers. BR: Coach Scott Carlson, Kenzie Bowers, Maddie Geers, Emma Geers, Alyssa Larson, Taryn Preston, Assistant Coach Kendal Carlson.

COACHES: Head Coach Scott Carlson. Assistants Rick Stoll, Aleah Holcombe, Stan Thomas, Kendal Carlson.

2019-20 RECORD: 22-2, 10-0 in CSAA Silver.

RETURNING STARTERS: 5-9 senior guard Kenzie Bowers (20 points, 9 rebounds, 5.3 assist, 4 steals, Division 3 All-State, BCAM's Best of Best), 5-8 senior guard Jenna Harrison (15 points, 4 rebounds, 3 assists, 2 steals), 5-9 junior forward Taryn Preston (6 points, 4 rebounds), 5-11 junior center Emma Geers.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: 5-6 sophomore guard Lexi Bowers (8 points, 3 rebounds), senior Alyssa Larson.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 5-9 freshman forward Maddie Geers, 5-6 junior guard Kierra Flegel.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Kenzie Bowers is a prolific scorer who has averaged 20 points per game all three years on varsity. Harrison, in her fourth year on varsity, can score from anywhere. She has great court sense, makes good choices, and is another coach on the floor. Lexi Bowers shoots well, scores well, and passes well. Preston started as a sophomore and brings hustle, defense and offense.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The team is a smart group of girls and a tight knit group with great chemistry. In any category, this team is strong. Shooting, ball handling, court presence, defending, they have it all.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The start of the season might make this team a little too excited in the beginning, because they get a chance to be back on the court.

COACH QUOTE: "I was worried my seniors might not get a chance to play. But they get a chance to show what they can do in their senior year, which is so important in a high school career." – Scott Carlson



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Montague boys will rely on several new starters



FR: Christian Bihler, Colton Blankstrom, Tate Stine. MR: Conner Raeth, Andrew Kooi, Aidan Buchberger, Tugg Nichols. BR: Coach Dave Osborne, Braeden Johnston, Hayden McDonald, Isaiah Atchison, Drew Colins, Lance Grattafiori, AC Randy Lindquist. Photo/Le Valdez

COACHES: Head Coach Dave Osborne. Assistants Randy Lindquist, Bob Peterson, Mark Unger.

2019-20 RECORD: 10-11 overall, 7-7 in West Michigan Conference play.

RETURNING STARTERS: 5-10 junior guard Tate Stine (7 points per game).

OTHER KEY RETURNERS:

5-10 junior guard Tugg Nichols, 5-10 junior guard Aidan Buchberger, 6-2 senior forward Lance Grattafiori, 6-1 junior forward Colton Blankstrom.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 5-7 junior guard Conner Raeth.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Stine is an ultra-aggressive player for the Wildcats who can handle the ball well and run the offense. His role increases significantly being the only starter returning.

TEAM STRENGTHS: While the Wildcats are young, they do have a number of players who have varsity experience. The Wildcats will know what's expected of them at the varsity level and will know what to expect under Osborne's system.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The young players of the Montague team missed out on getting a true offseason due to COVID-19 restrictions. While most of the players do have varsity experience, they weren't given the offseason camp and training time that they could've had to help better understand their individual roles. The Wildcats will need to mature quickly as they no longer will have the senior leadership they enjoyed last season.

COACH QUOTE: "Since these kids know the system that we run and kind of what to expect, we should be okay. It's almost an advantage for us in a weird way. But the kids' conditioning will need to be improved quickly, whenever we get started." – Dave Osborne

Four senior starters are back to lead the Wildcats



FR: Braquelle Osborne, Hanna Metcalf, Brooke Stark, Emma Dyer, Emma Flynn. BR: Andie Zamojcin, Kendall Osborne, Maddie Meacham, Ally Hall, Janae Koetje, Claire Meacham. Photo/Leo Valdez

COACHES: Head Coach Cody Kater. Assistants Bill O'Connell, Amy Meyers.

2019-20 RECORD: 18-5 overall, 12-2 in West Michigan Conference, won league championship.

RETURNING STARTERS: 5-6 senior guard Braquelle Osborne (All-Conference, 12 points, 4 assists), 5-4 senior guard Emma Flynn (All-Conference honorable mention), 5-9 senior forward Andie Zamojcin (All-Conference honorable mention), 5-11 senior center Ally Hall (All-Conference, 10 points, 7.5 rebounds).

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: 5-10 junior forward Claire Meacham, 5-10 junior forward Emma Beach.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 5-10 freshmen guard Kendall Osborne, 5-6 junior guard Hanna Metcalf.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Returning point guard Osborne will keep Montague's offense sharp while Hall is a threat on the inside and has improved her outside shot. Flynn is a four-year varsity player who is defensive standout. Zamojcin is a third year starter and remains an offensive threat in the paint.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Wildcats return four starting seniors and have an abundance of proven talent on the roster. Each have gone through almost everything a basketball season can bring, and will be ready to lead their teammates into the West Michigan Conference title fight.

TEAM CHALLENGES: As one of the preseason favorites in the league, the Wildcats will have a target on their backs as each conference team will be looking to take them down.

COACH QUOTE: "We'll have to make sure to have our end goal in sight. We're on the peak of the mountain in our conference, and everyone will be coming after us." – Cody Kater



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A familiar face is now in charge of the boys team



FR: Keontae Richards, JT Johnson, Corey Chapman, Benny Payne, Terrell Johnson, Demetri Roberson. BR: Coach Brad Kurth, Drew Southland, Keegan DeKuiper, Ethan Krueger, Donovan Russell, Parker Swartz, KeShawn Brown & Coach Doug Burse. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Brad Kurth. Assistant Doug Burse.

2019-20 RECORD: 3-18 overall, 1-11 in O-K Black Conference play.

RETURNING STARTERS: 6-1 senior guard Drew Southland.

OTHER KEY RETURNEES: 6-5 junior forward Ethan Krueger, 6-7 junior center Donovan Russell.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 6-4 sophomore forward Parker Swartz, 5-10 junior guard Keontae Richards, 6-2 junior guard Demetri Roberson, 6-2 senior forward Keegan DeKuiper, 5-9 junior guard Benny Payne, 6-0 senior guard Corey Chapman, 5-9 junior guard JT Johnson, 6-9 junior guard Da'veon Davis.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Southland will be counted on to lead the Sailors as they implement an entirely new system under first-year coach Kurth. Southland is a veteran who has a hunger to get the job done. Russell will be a force inside with his 6-7, 230-pound frame.

TEAM STRENGTHS: Size and depth. The Sailors will also play with a passion to help turn the Mona Shores boys basketball program into a winner.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The delayed season will be tough on the Sailors as they implement a new system. The Sailors haven't had the chance to spend much time in the gym to work with Kurth, the successful former Shores girls coach.

COACH QUOTE: "We have got kids who won in other programs and we'll turn this thing around at some point. I'm excited about getting started, but I feel like we're so far behind learning our new system right now. We'll just need time to put in our system, and I'm excited to see the guys get after it and start playing." - Brad Kurth.

Shores girls could be on the brink of a big year



FR: Olivia Sobczak, Jenna Baker, Jenna Tierman. MR: Anabeth Hylland, Mia Brown, Ali Phillips, Olivia Kasher. BR: Bri Wade, Brooke LeRoux, Brooklyn McLemore, Riley Rosenthal and Lily Miller. Photo/Joe Lane

COACHES: Head Coach Mike Phillips. Assistants Melissa Koziak, Steve DeLonge, Sean Sobczak.

2019-20 RECORD: 11-10 overall, 8-4 in O-K Black.

RETURNING STARTERS: 5-10 senior forward Riley Rosenthal (All-Conference, 8.7 points, 5.4 rebounds), 5-7 junior guard Olivia Sobczak (All-Conference, 8.6 points, 4.2 rebounds, 2.1 assists), 5-9 senior guard Brooke LeRoux (All-Conference honorable mention), 6-0 senior center Bri Wade (All-Conference honorable mention).

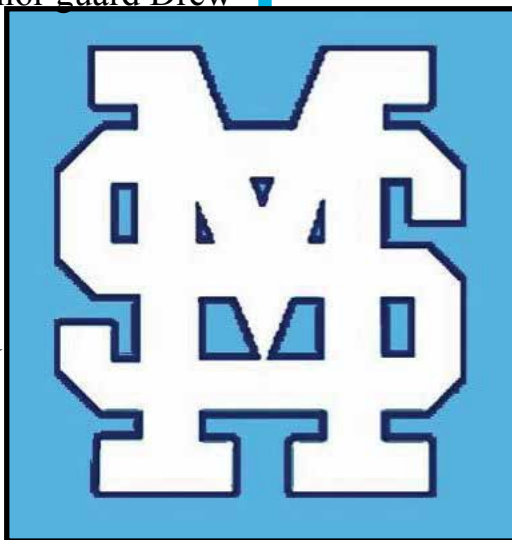
OTHER KEY RETURNEES: 5-7 junior guard Jenna Tierman, 5-4 junior guard Mia Brown, 6-2 sophomore center Brooklyn McLemore.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Rosenthal can score from anywhere while Sobczak led in 3's last year and will be looked to for her ability to get to the rim. LeRoux improved her shot in the offseason and will leverage her athleticism to get by defenders. Wade was the top shot blocker last year, and will anchor the defense while also having the ability to run the floor and get out in transition for easy baskets.

TEAM STRENGTHS: With four returning starters, the Sailors will eye first place in the new O-K Green. Last year the team came on late with a few upset victories, and will look to carry that momentum forward with higher expectations.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Sailors are unlikely to be the surprise underdog they were last year. With a condensed season and high expectations, Mona Shores will have to come out ready at the first tip-off.

COACH QUOTE: "Every game will matter. We won't have a night off. We probably won't have non-conference games to really get a feel for who we are as a team. Those things will have to happen at the beginning of the season." - Mike Phillips



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THE BRADS ARE NOW

For years Brad Kurth was the wildly successful girls coach at Mona Shores. Now after 3 years away, he's back to rescue the boys program.

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

Sometimes timing dictates everything.

For the past three years, former Mona Shores girls basketball coach Brad Kurth served as a part-time assistant coach with the women's basketball team at Ferris State University, and he loved it.

He helped with recruiting, game planning and strategy, and was on the bench for many games. He was part of a successful effort, with the Bulldogs winning the title in the GLIAC North Division in the 2019-20 season.

But after the season, Ferris State head coach Kendra Faustin resigned to become athletic director at Comstock Park High School. As is usually the case when a head college coach moves on, the new coach brings in a new staff and the old staff is sent packing.

At about the same time, Mona Shores discovered that it would need yet another new head coach for its boys basketball team when Justin Johnson, who led the team for one season after coming over from Ravenna, suddenly resigned.

Mona Shores Athletic Director Todd Conrad reached out the Kurth, asking if he might be interested in taking over the boys team, after so many years coaching the girls squad at the school. The offer made sense in several ways, because Kurth remained an American history teacher at Mona Shores High School, and had a great track record in his long stint with the girls team.

Kurth admits that his first choice was to find another college coaching position, because he enjoyed that level of competition so much, but nothing was immediately available that fit his needs.

So he accepted the Mona Shores job, becoming the fourth head coach of the boys team in five years, and the sixth in eight years.

By doing so, he signed up for several professional challenges he had never encountered in his long career – being a varsity boys head coach, and attempting to turn a losing program into a winner.

It also gave him a chance to return to coaching at the high school where he has taught for 23 years now, and has grown to love beyond words.

"This community is special," he said. "This school is a special place. I'm really proud of the people who I work with here, and the community that supports us. It's home. It's like family.

"I never stopped being a Sailor."

Wildly successful girls coach

Kurth has already proven, beyond a doubt, that he can win as a head coach at the varsity level.

After coming to Mona Shores in 2003-04 as a teacher, he served as the assistant girls basketball coach under former head coach Jennifer Bustart for five seasons. Bustart resigned to become principal of the high school, and Kurth took over as head coach in 2007-08.

His tenure was wildly successful. In 11 seasons he posted an overall 172-75 record, with a 92-23 conference mark. His teams won six conference championships and four district titles, and produced three 1,000-point career scorers, two current Division 1 college players, and one Michigan Miss Basketball winner – current University of Tennessee player Jordan Walker.

"There was a family type of feel to our program," Kurth said. "I had a blast. I have a lot of great, great memories. Every year I coached the team, we had at least one academic All-State honorable mention player. We ran a good program.

"We weren't just about winning games. We wanted to give the kids a chance to see what competing in athletics can do for their future. They learned important lessons that they will carry with them throughout their lives."

But following the 2017-18 season, Kurth was ready for a change, so he resigned and took the part-time assistant coach job at Ferris State, while remaining a teacher at Mona Shores.

"When I left (the girls program at Shores) I was burned out," Kurth said. "It's a lot of work, and to do a program right, it takes a toll. I had always wanted to try college. My



Brad Kurth



Kurth guards Mona Shores' Benny Payne during a recent practice. Photo/Jason Goorman

youngest daughter graduated from Mona Shores the year I resigned, and I had promised to see her through. I did that, and then I had to try college.

"I put a lot of miles on my car, but I loved it. I met a lot of amazing people and got to compete at a high level. I did a lot of recruiting. A lot of college coaches hate recruiting, but I loved it. I did a lot of video analysis and game planning and preparation for them. That I could do at home.

"After the season the head coach stepped down, and when college basketball coaches move on, usually the staff goes their different ways. I was looking for different college opportunities after that, and I had a few possibilities, but in the middle of that Todd Conrad called and asked if I would coach the boys team.

"I had to reevaluate what I'm doing, what is my purpose for coaching. I realized it was to try to make a difference in the lives of young people. That's the number one reason why I reached this decision. I knew I could step into this and make a difference for young men."

Building a foundation

Kurth, who coached high school boys as an assistant varsity coach and at lower levels years ago in his home state of Minnesota, admits there are differences between coaching girls and boys.

He said he liked coaching high school girls, and women at the university level, because they tended to be very coachable, unselfish and team-oriented.

On the other hand, he said he recently discovered, during makeshift workouts with the Sailor boys over the summer, that they are extremely hungry to improve.

Because all gyms in the state were closed during the summer, those workouts were all outdoors, at various area parks. Despite the lack of ideal workout conditions, the Sailor boys convinced their new coach they are serious and committed.

"We went Monday through Thursday, at a couple different parks," Kurth said. "We got kicked out of one and had to go to another. Getting out there on the asphalt and in the sunshine, cleaning goose poop off the court, it was kind of nostalgic for me, honestly.

"Seeing the young men this summer showing up every day, so hungry to get better, that's fun to coach."

While those good player attitudes will help, turning the Sailor boys into a winner will be a project. Last year the Sailors were 3-18 overall and 1-11 in conference play. When asked to name the last season that the boys posted a winning record, Kurth said, "I don't want to talk about that. Those are in the past. We are not going to dwell on the past.

"I hate to lose with a passion, but the most important thing is we're going to change the process and the culture. We're going to start to install a winning mindset, and do things the right way."

Kurth is very blunt about how he feels about the recent history of Mona Shores boys basketball.

"It's a fixer-upper, for sure," he said. "But there are some great athletes here. I just don't think they've been led very well. There are championship programs at our school, and these kids can win in basketball. We just need to build a structure and a system and get a coaching staff that will stick around.

"One of the first things I told them is that I will not be leaving next year. They need stability. I felt like this is the direction I needed to go in, and I'm eager to make a difference."

COACHING THE BOYS

Brad Richards had a great girls team at Fruitport Calvary Christian. But now his son is on varsity, and he's coaching the long-struggling boys team.

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

Brad Richards has not purposely sought out daunting new challenges as a high school basketball coach.

He's simply been following his children as they proceed through their own basketball careers.

But as a result, he keeps finding himself coaching teams very much in need of rebuilding, and he attacks each challenge with the intensity and determination that has become his trademark.

Years ago, when his kids were pre-teens, Richards coached varsity boys and girls basketball at Ravenna High School, where he turned a very bad girls team into a consistent winner.

Then in 2010-11, his oldest daughter Taylor Richards reached the eighth grade at tiny Fruitport Calvary Christian. Small Division 4 schools are allowed to have eighth-graders on varsity, Taylor made the team, and her dad became the coach.

In his first year on the bench the team went 10-12, which was significantly better than the 3-17 record they had posted the season before. Then the program took off.

The Eagles went 20-4 in 2011-12, 19-2 in 2012-13, and 20-4 in each of the next two seasons. Over 10 seasons, as each of his three All-State daughters came through the system and starred for the team, the team posted an overall 184-46 record, won eight Alliance League championships, seven district championships and one regional title.

Suddenly little Fruitport Calvary had an elite sports team that was recognized for its excellence across the area, region and state.

Having established a program with such a winning tradition, there would have been little reason for Richards to move to another coaching position. But last winter he ran out of daughters, when his youngest, Kelsey, played her senior year of varsity.

As fate would have it, Richards' only son, Bradley, became an eighth-grader this fall at the school, so he decided to maintain the family tradition and take over the boys varsity.

And as fate would have it, he has another reclamation project on his hands. Last year the Fruitport Calvary boys posted a 2-19, the latest in a long string of losing seasons.

So Coach Richards is back at the drawing board, figuring out ways to turn a bad team into a good one, after 10 seasons of almost constant winning with the girls.

"Let's just say, we're going to take it one game at a time," Richards said. "Sometimes in situations like this, when you try to look at the big picture, it's too big of a mountain to look at. So we're going to fight and scratch and improve. One thing I know for sure is that we're not going to back down to anybody. We're going to come out attacking right away."

Even as he embarks on his new job, Richards can't help but look back on his exciting run with the girls varsity squad, which he bravely put up against many teams from bigger schools over the years.

Just about every season the girls squad was ranked in the top 10 in Michigan in Class D (later changed to Division 4), and the Eagles always had realistic thoughts about competing for a state championship.

His three daughters were always the stars of the team. At least one of them was on the squad every year that he coached, and all three put up some incredible numbers in their varsity careers and became All-Staters.

Taylor Richards, a 2015 graduate, and Kelsey, who graduated last spring, both scored more than 2,000 points in their careers. The middle daughter, Allyson, who graduated in 2017, finished just short of the 2,000-point mark.

Best of all, the team was a total family affair, with everyone, including Richards' wife Joy and young Bradley, involved in one way or the other.

"We have a lot of great memories," the coach said. "But now the girls are all out of the house, and we like to talk about the great accomplishments they had. And we had a boy five years after our youngest daughter was born. Bradley can play varsity basketball now, so here we go!"

Things are about to get serious

Richards does have experience coaching at the boys varsity level – two years at Ravenna and two years at Oakfield Baptist Academy.



Fruitport Calvary Christian Coach Brad Richards watches a drill from the sideline during practice.
Photo/Jason Goorman

He has also been coaching his son's teams since Bradley was in the second or third grade. He has worked with all the boys that his son has played with, but all of them except Bradley will probably be on the junior varsity team this season.

Richards has been getting to know his new players a bit throughout the school year, and much more in practice when they were finally allowed to hit the gym a couple of weeks ago.

The boys are in for an experience. Richards cares very much about his players, but he is known far and wide as a demanding and intense coach.

"They are all very nice kids," Richards said. "They come from good families. I'm not blind to the fact that when you have a losing culture, you have to change some things. It's going to be a process.

"I'm a very poor loser. I really expect to win every time my team steps on the floor. But I've already got a lot of warnings from my wife that I have to temper my expectations. We will have a quick learning curve, hopefully."

Richards will have a lot of quality help with the boys from assistant coaches Jim Warren and Sam Berry.

"We have some work to do," Richards said. "Basic defensive concepts and rebounding are going to be some of the things we focus on right away. Our tallest kid (his 6 foot, 3 inch son Bradley) is an eighth-grader. We don't have much time to become fundamentally strong with rebounding."

Richards said there are definite differences between male and female athletes, but he says he's been prepared for the change by years of working with both genders.

"I think boys are more used to getting attention, and the expectation that people will be more interested in their games," he said. "I think girls, if you show that you are all in and want them to have a great experience, they are very grateful, and they thank you a lot.

"The boys at Calvary this fall, they all said 'yes sir' to me, but as a rule I would say sometimes boys are harder to coach. The ones who watch TV a lot sometimes think they are pretty close to being LeBron, if they are not already there. Each kid is different, but with boys you sometimes have to convince them about what you want them to do.

"They watched me coach the girls. They know things are about to get serious. One thing the boys will always know is that their coaches are trying real hard for them."



Brad Richards

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FR: Devin Bartee, Damari Foster, David Day III, Fred Hull Jr, Jordan Briggs, Anthony Sydnor III, Kalil Stimage. BR: Maurice Sain Jr, Ja'Den Walker, Terrance Davis, Micheal Reed, Ethan Hill, Kayden Smith. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Keith Guy. Assistants Louis Murray, Maurice Sain, Josh Wall.

2019-20 RECORD: 20-2 overall, 12-0 in O-K Black Conference play, conference champions.

RETURNING STARTERS: None.

OTHER KEY RETURNEES: 6-8

senior forward/center Micheal Reed, 5-8 senior guard Fred Hull, 6-5 senior forward Kayden Smith.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 6-8 junior forward/center Kalil Stimage, 6-8 junior forward Ethan Hill, 6-4 junior guard Maurice Sain Jr., 6-0 sophomore guard Jordan Briggs, 6-1 sophomore guard Anthony Sydnor, 6-7 freshman forward Terrance Davis.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Reed, who recently signed with D2 Northern Michigan University, will be expected to step up even more in his senior season. The forward/center can not only play in the post, but also has the ability to step out and shoot. Hull will be scrappy and surprise people with his ability to shoot the ball.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Big Reds will have lots of size coming into the season and are also expected to be a deep team. Like every year, Muskegon will also be expected to be an athletic squad that will showcase its abilities on both ends of the court.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Big Reds will be replacing nine seniors from last season and will need guys to grow up quickly. Without a true spring or summer full team workout, the Big Reds will have to quickly find their roles and create team chemistry.

COACH QUOTE: "I think we got some good young talent and size. It'll take us a minute, but we'll be pretty good before it's all said and done. It'll be a learning experience for some younger guys, but there is nothing like trial by fire and practicing every day. We have a culture and that's the good thing about us." - Keith Guy

Kailyn Nash, new starters will lead Big Red girls



FR: Kamyia Anderson, Aniyah Ford, Kailyn Nash, McKynna Sims, Tanea Keys. BR: Iyana Brooks(11), Laila White(11), Laila Harris (11), MyKeerah Sims-Brown. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Paris Thomas. Assistant Obra Coleman, T.L. Lowe.

2019-20 RECORD: 15-8 overall, 9-3 in O-K Black Conference play.

RETURNING STARTERS: 5-10 senior guard/forward Kailyn Nash (All-Conference, 13 points per game).

OTHER KEY RETURNERS:

5-6 junior guard McKynna Sims (5 points per game), 5-5 junior guard Layla White.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 5-5 sophomore guard Kamyia Anderson.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Nash will be the leader of the Muskegon program in the 2020-2021 season. Nash has a 6-2 wingspan and is an all-around player. She can play point guard through center while being a strong shooter and rebounder. Sims wasn't a starter last season, due to the Big Reds having seniors in front of her, but this year she'll be expected to take another step to help the Big Reds continue their winning ways. White will be expected to contribute as a shooter while Anderson will use her speed to help lead the defensive effort.

TEAM STRENGTHS: Sims and Nash have had plenty of varsity experience and proven leadership, which will help the young Big Reds grow as the season goes on. The Big Reds will have a competitive hunger, especially on the defensive end.

TEAM CHALLENGES: An overall lack of experienced leadership will be something that the Big Reds will have to work through to begin the season. The Big Reds graduated heavy following last season, and will need younger players to step up quickly and find their roles, despite having a limited offseason.

COACH QUOTE: "People can expect a young competitive team. We're still rebounding after losing a lot of seniors over the last two seasons, and we're looking to rebuild our program around our junior class." - Paris Thomas



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Johnson is the lone returning senior for boys



FR: Brayden Gustin, Lucas Carlton, Elliot Riegler, Dane Rutz, Aiden Kalisz. BR: Lamar Jordan, Tommy Kartes, Jaden Johnson, Gabe Johnson, Max Price, JaMicah Cooper, Andre Johnson. Photo/Jason Goorman

Several MCC girls will play bigger roles this year



FR: Julia Drier, Erin LaVigne, Audrey Mey, Katherine Rauch. BR: Grace Staniforth, Claire LaVigne, McKenna Gentry, Madison James, Cara Burkall, Grace DeLong. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Lamar Jordan. Head Assistant Coach Andre Johnson. Assistants Jamicah Cooper, Blake Sanford.

2019-20 RECORD: 10-11 overall.

RETURNING STARTERS: Junior 6-4 center Jaden Johnson.

OTHER KEY RETURNEES: 5-10 senior Lucas Carlton, 5-10 junior Elliot Riegler, 5-8 junior 5-8 Dane Rutz.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 6-2 sophomore Braden Gustin, 5-8 junior Aiden Kalisz, 6-0 senior shooting guard Max Price.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Jaden

Johnson will be the Crusader's post player and he will continue to take big strides coming off of last season. His height alone will give MCC an advantage in rebounding and a presence in the paint on offense. Lucas Carlton will play a very big role as he takes over the key job of point guard.

TEAM STRENGTHS: Speed, athleticism and determination will be characteristics for the Crusaders this season. Those attributes will allow them to throw different things, like zone offenses and pressure defense, against their opponents this year.

TEAM CHALLENGES: With only one returning senior this year, the Crusaders will be very young and inexperienced heading into the new season. They will also have the extra challenge of playing in the tough Lakes 8 Conference, which includes strong teams like Orchard View, Western Michigan Christian and Ludington.

COACH QUOTE: "I just want to be able to play basketball. I just look forward to being able to coach basketball again. I think it'll be a lot of fun for me to be a little more hands on, to make sure the kids are able to do what they need to do in order for us to be successful this year." – Lamar Jordan

COACHES: Head coach Adam Callow. Assistants Ken Callow, Holly Michelli.

2019-20 RECORD: 6-16 overall.

RETURNING STARTERS:

Junior 5-10 forward McKenna Gentry, junior 5-8 guard Erin LaVigne, sophomore 5-9 guard Claire LaVigne.

OTHER KEY RETURNEES:

Senior 5-10 forward Madison James, junior 5-9 forward Katherine Rauch.

KEY NEWCOMERS:

The Crusaders will have a group of five juniors who will all contribute to the team. One is likely to fill a starting role.

STRENGTHS: The Crusaders' strength as a team is their defense, and with the addition of more size this year, they are looking to taking an even bigger step forward. MCC will also benefit from experience, with three returning starters and a few other seasoned players leading the way.

CHALLENGES: The team is without their leading scorer and rebounders from last year, so they will need people to step up to fill the void for lost points. As an overall undersized team, they will also need to battle hard for rebounds against bigger competition. Learning to win on a more consistent basis and gaining confidence as a group will also be important, but tough to do during the shortened season.

COACH QUOTE: "I'm really looking forward to seeing how this team shifts to a lot of girls taking on much bigger roles than they had last year, watching them get used to it and watching them grow. I'm hoping we can pick up where we left off and have more success this year than our program has had in recent times." – Adam Callow



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Work hard, play hard!
- Ken Callow -

Norse boys starting over with new cast of starters



FR: Bo Nedeau, Denny Belmonte, Brandon Rypstra, Brennan Pannucci, Rob Eckheart, Brennen McManus, Quin Kersman. BR: Brady Babcock, Amarkon Dickerson, Troy McManus, Reilly Schotts, Marcellus Rouse, Will Gallo, Chris Erndteman, Jason Bogue, Ethan Tennant, Champ Young.

COACHES: Head Coach Chuck Rypstra.

2019-20 RECORD: 14-6 overall record and 10-4 in West Michigan Conference play. Lost to Ravenna in the first round of Division 3 districts.

RETURNING STARTERS:

None.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS:

Senior 5-9 guard Brennen McManus.

KEY NEWCOMERS:

Senior 5-10 guard Reilly Schotts, senior 6-3 forward Will Gallo, senior 6-1 forward Brennan Pannucci.

PLAYERS TO WATCH:

Brennen McManus will be a tremendous asset to the Norsemen this year. Along with his previous varsity experience, he is a great shooter. The Norse are also excited about Reilly Schotts' skill set. Will Gallo's height will help him play well on the inside.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Norsemen expect to have a good all-around shooting team this year. They are counting on their skill on defense, along with their discipline, to make them a tough team for any opponent to play against. With no returning starters, the team is largely unknown to opponents, which could prove to be an advantage, at least the first time they play conference rivals.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The lack of returning starters also has a downside – court experience. The roster will be very young overall, and the new guys will have to adjust to the varsity game very quickly.

COACH QUOTE: "This season we're going to try and keep doing what North Muskegon has been doing. We're going to battle, play hard-nose basketball, and do our best to get more wins than losses this year." – Chuck Rypstra

Norse girls will have their share of depth, promise



FR: Grace VanderWoude, Mary Gongalski, A'mya Todd, Jena Francis, Jade Velazquez. BR: Noa Bowen, Natalie Pannucci, Josee Cooke, Syann Fairfield, Jasmine Duncan, Molly Stewart, Coach Hankinson. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Ryan Hankinson. Assistants Jason Herbert, Mackenzie Fris.

2019-20 RECORD: 6-16 overall, 4-8 in West Michigan Conference play. Lost to Western Michigan Christian in the second round of Division 3 districts.

RETURNING STARTERS:

Sophomore 5-9 point guard Natalie Pannucci.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS:

Senior 5-3 guard Mary Gongalski, senior 6-0 center Sara Muzzy, junior 6-0 forward Josee Cooke, senior 6-0 forward Syann Fairfield.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Junior 5-7 forward Jena Francis, junior 5-9 forward Molly Stewart, junior 5-6 guard Grace VanderWoude, junior 5-3 point guard Amya Todd.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Pannucci has a year of experience of a starter and will lead. Muzzy shows a lot of promise this year. One of the most improved players in the program, she is capable of playing excellent defense. Gongalski will have a strong presence as a great defensive guard. Fairfield is a solid shooter.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The North Muskegon girls have a lot of depth and talent throughout the roster. Their all-around athleticism should make them a tough team to beat. The Norse will use their size and quickness to their advantage.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The cancellation of summer basketball programs prevented the girls from getting any significant preseason court time so far this year, so it will take time for the Norse to get into their system and routine.

COACH QUOTE: "We are super excited about the team this year, and we hope the girls can come together to represent North Muskegon. This team shows a ton of potential." - Ryan Hankinson



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Former subs will move into bigger roles for boys



Luke Martin, Kimball Hanks, Huter Delora, Matt Danicek, Bryson Foster, Garrett Wever, Ethan Jozsa, Brady Parker, Mikel Cardinal, Gavan Bignall, Seth Plumhoff, Ethan Miller, Bryce Harris. Photo/Sherry Wahr

Former star Giddings is the new girls coach



Leah Lowry, Kyla Stewart, Gena Lundquist, Jasmine Pastor, Kaley Coppedge, Destyni Lane, Lily Blackburn, Destyni Lane, Kaelinn Jozsa, Anna Lundquist. Photo/Sherry Wahr

COACHES: Head Coach Tracy Ruel. Assistant Coaches James Stovall, Red Pastor.

2019-20 RECORD: 13-6 overall, 11-3 in conference. Lost in the Division 2 district quarterfinals to Fruitport.

RETURNING STARTERS: 6-1 senior forward Luke Martin.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: Senior 6-2 forward Ethan Miller, 6-4 junior center Ethan Jozsa, 5-10 junior guard Garrett Wever, 6-1 junior guard Hunter Delora.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 5-9 junior guard Bryson Foster, 5-9 junior guard Gavin Bignall

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Martin is the lone returner from last year's starting lineup for the Eagles. Along with Ethan Miller, Martin will provide the Eagles' senior leadership. Ethan Jozsa and Hunter Delora will be plugged into the lineup and are expected to make big contributions to the team. They played a lot of minutes last year, and will look to use that experience to help them fill bigger roles with this year's team.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Eagles will use their athleticism to press teams and try to create turnovers. The Eagles will have quite a bit of experience, despite losing four starters from last year's squad.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Eagles will lack depth at the beginning of the season. A lot of the Eagles' best bench players from last year will become starters this year. The newcomers will need to step in and make an impact. With an average of three games a week this year, depth will be important.

COACH QUOTE: "We are hoping to use our athleticism to get up and down the floor. We are going to try to throw a bunch of different things at our opponents and make them think while they are on the floor." – Tracy Ruel

COACHES: Head Coach Morgan Giddings. Assistant Coach Kathy Giddings.

2019-20 RECORD: 5-16 overall and 5-9 in West Michigan Conference play. Lost to Whitehall in the Division 2 district quarterfinals.

RETURNING STARTERS: 5-7 senior point guard Leah Lowry, 5-7 senior guard Kyla Stewart.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: 5-5 junior guard Delaney Ruel, 5-5 sophomore point guard Destyni Lane.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 5-10 senior forward Gena Lundquist, 5-4 junior guard Jasmine Pastor, 5-2 junior guard Kaley Coppedge, 4-11 junior guard Fallon Bjurstrom, 5-10 junior guard/forward Saidee Raap, 5-8 sophomore guard/forward Lily Blackburn, 6-0 freshman forward Anna Lundquist, 5-8 freshman forward Kaelinn Jozsa.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: The returning senior duo of Lowry and Stewart are expected to be the leaders of a relatively inexperienced Eagles squad. Blackburn will make her varsity basketball debut and looks to be an impact player for the Eagles.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Eagles have very strong leadership in their returning seniors. They set the example for the other players on the team. No matter how the Eagles' season turns out this year, you can bet that they are going to be one of the hardest working teams in the area.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Eagles will lack experience at the varsity level. They will also have to adjust to their second new coach in two years - Morgan Giddings, a former All-Stater for Oakridge who understands the team's winning history.

COACH QUOTE: "I expect that we're going to work hard, play together, have fun and just play basketball. I liked the fire that our team had, to get better in the week of tryouts that we had." – Morgan Giddings.



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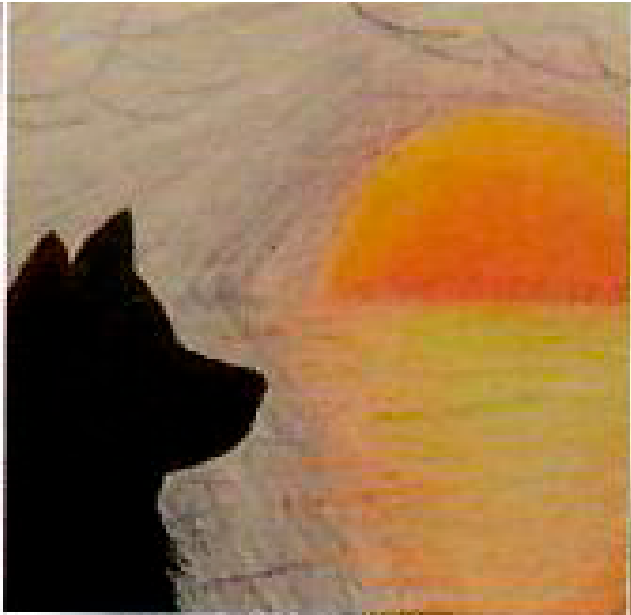
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Big scorer Barnes will lead loaded OV boys team



FR: Eli Luce, Stephon Oakes, Darius Williams, Khi Thomas, Aveon Dye, Tramon Spight. BR: JJ Tunstull, Donovan Daniels, Owen Swanson, Ke'Ontae Barnes, Larry Brewer. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head coach Nick Bronsema. Assistant coaches Joe Tanis, Luis Suarez, Omar Jones, Lotrel Watkins.

2019-20 RECORD: 13-8 overall, 7-3 in Lakes 8. Lost in the Division 2 district quarterfinals to Spring Lake.

RETURNING STARTERS: 6-0 senior guard Ke'Ontae Barnes, 6-4 senior forward Larry Brewer, 6-2 senior forward JJ Tunstull, 5-7 junior guard Darius Williams.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: 6-4 senior forward Donovan Daniels, 6-2 senior forward Owen Swanson, 5'9 senior guard Aveon Dye, 5-7 junior guard Khi Thomas.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 5-11 senior Eli Luce, 6-2 senior Tramon Spight, 5-11 freshman Stephon Oakes.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Barnes, a returning All-Stater with over 1,000 career points, is going into his fourth year on varsity and is on the Mr. Basketball watch list. Tunstull is expected to have a breakout season with his signs of improvement. Swanson can do a little bit of everything for the Cardinals and his senior leadership will be welcomed back after he missed last season with a knee injury.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Cardinals have a wealth of experience to draw from. Of the 11 players expected to be on the team, eight are seniors. Two of the other three players are juniors. The Cardinals have really good team chemistry. The seniors on this team have played together since they were in elementary school. OV will be able to put the ball in the hoop.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Cardinals have decent height, but lack a big presence in the paint. OV will need to figure out how to stop teams on the defensive side of the ball.

COACH QUOTE: "We have been building for a group like this. This group really looks forward to playing this season. They work really hard, play well together, and genuinely enjoy playing together." – Nick Bronsema

Cardinal girls ready to get some wins this season



FR: Mackenzie Filipiak, Ayaka Yamane, Tionne Steward, Cassidy Noordhoek, Cambrie Hardy. Assistant Coach Marshall Morgan, Kyah Mc Gruther, Ambree Ready, Brianna Morrissey, Cyniah Mc Kenzie, Mia Martin, Johnia Heath, Head Coach Ron Gates. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Ron Gates. Assistants Marshall Morgan, Luis Suarez, Morgan Gates.

2019-20 RECORD: 0-21 overall and 0-10 in Lakes 8. Lost to Montague in the Division 2 district quarterfinals.

RETURNING STARTERS: 5-5 junior guard Kyah McGruther, 5-4 junior guard MacKenzie Filipiak, 5-7 junior forward Johnia Heath.

KEY RETURNERS: 5-8 sophomore center/forward Brianna Morrissey, 5-8 sophomore center Mia Martin, 5-9 sophomore forward Cynih McKenzie.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 5-3 senior exchange student guard Ayaka Yamane, 5-3 freshman guard Cambrie Hardy.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Cambrie Hardy is a young player who has raw talent, and a really good feel for the court. MacKenzie Filipiak will be the motor of the team. She goes 100 percent at all times when she is on the floor. Johnia Heath will be a key leader for the younger players. She is solid on both sides of the ball. Ayaka Yamane is super quick, good off the dribble, and makes the right play. Kyah McGruther is expected to be the vocal leader of the team.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Cardinals will be a very athletic team. They have an abundance of team speed, and every player can handle the ball. Despite having no seniors on the team, the Cardinals have seven players with varsity experience.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Cardinals will not be a very big team, so they will earn every rebound. The Cardinals will also have to learn how to win basketball games.

COACH QUOTE: "We have a young team, but not an inexperienced team. I am excited to see what the young girls can bring. I am really excited that our team works hard. We are going to be trending up and I think we have a team that can play. The girls that played last year look more confident." – Ron Gates



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Bulldog boys will try to maintain winning ways



FR: Hunter Hogan, Adam Nutt, Luke Meyers, Owen Scott, Dom Jones. BR: Steven Cook, Travis May, Carter Schullo, Joel Emery, Kyle Beebe, Grant Becklin, Xavier Kidd.

COACHES: Head Coach Courtney Kemp. Assistants Andy May, Tim Jones.

2019-20 RECORD: 21-1 overall record, 14-0 in West Michigan Conference play and conference champions. Lost to Kent City in Division 3 district semifinals.

RETURNING STARTERS: None.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: Senior 6-0 guard Dom Jones, senior 6-3 point guard Joel Emery.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Junior 6-2 guard Kyle Beebe, junior 6-0 forward Grant Becklin, junior 5-11 forward Travis May.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Joel Emery is a strong player on both ends of the court for the Bulldogs. Taking advantage of his height, he can score points in the paint and post up on defense. He could have been a starter last year, according to his coach. Dom Jones also brings a lot to the table. He is an excellent shooter who can hit from just about anywhere on the court.

TEAM STRENGTHS: With a full 12-man roster this year, the Bulldogs will be able to rotate players to keep them from tiring out. The team is well balanced this season, so they'll have strong players on the court at all times. The Bulldogs feel they may be overlooked by opponents this year, due to the loss of all five starters to graduation, and they plan to use that to their advantage.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Height is not on the Bulldogs' side this year, with their point guard being the tallest player at 6-3. With no starters returning this year, the team is fairly new, and the overall lack of varsity experience will be a challenge for the squad.

COACH QUOTE: "These guys practice and play every second like it's our last, especially in times like this, and that's what's going to make us our best." - Courtney Kemp

Ravenna girls return four starters and have depth



FR: Logan Kantola, Madeline Kilbourne, Tori Woodwyk, Haley Lemkie, Emma Wittrock. BR: Olivia Porter, Delaney Mabrito, Emily Crowley, Emma Gillard, Haley Cox. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Jeff Sterken.

2019-20 RECORD: 10-10 overall and 5-5 in West Michigan Conference play. Lost to Kent City in the first round of Division 3 districts.

RETURNING STARTERS: Senior center Delanny Mabrito, sophomore guard Emma Gillard, senior point guard Emily Crowley, senior point guard Haley Lemkie.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: Junior point guard Maddie Kilborne, senior forward Torri Woodwyk, sophomore forward Olivia Porter.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Freshman guard/forward Emma Gillard, sophomore guard/forward Madeline Kilbourne, freshman forward/center Olivia Porter.

PLAYERS TO WATCH:

The Bulldogs have a lineup full of strong shooters, especially Haley Lemkie, Emma Gillard and Maddie Kilbourne. Lemkie is a strong, all-around offensive player who can hit from close range or three-point territory. Gillard has a large wing span to her advantage and is a great long shooter. Kilbourne plays great defense, and is solid at shooting threes. Delanny Mabrito plays very aggressively and is a great rebounder.

TEAM STRENGTHS: Having four starters back gives Ravenna an edge on a lot of opponents. The Bulldogs have a lot of speed, which will help them be very competitive on the court. They expect their strongest point to be their skill on defense.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Due to the circumstances of this year, the team has not had as much time to prepare for what could be a very promising season.

COACH QUOTE: "This year, we want to make sure we're doing our jobs and being patient. We are itching to get started with our season." - Jeff Sterken



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Mitchelson, Smith will lead R-P boys this year



FR: Wyatt Kevern, Marcus Seidell, Kaleb Mitchelson, Kyle Schlaff, Jarren Vanderburg. MR: Jordan Bochenek, Ben Veihl, Jaxson Whitaker, Coby Mitchelson, Ayden Willacker. BR: Logan Brooks, Kendall Smith, Travis Ambrose, Coach Lance Johnson. Photo/Joe Lane

Ross is gone, but R-P girls still have talent



FR: Arrionna Williams, Ariel Walker, Alayna Hussy, Emma Dykema, Brooklynn Tornes. BR: Emmersen Berndt, Billie Tryska, Beth Jordan, Ally Seiber, Kylee Wanerus, Bella Borgeson, Sophia Hekkema. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Lance Johnson. Assistants Darien Burse and Johnny Brown.

2019-20 RECORD: 12-9 overall and 8-4 in O-K Black Conference play. Lost to Grand Haven in opening round of Division 1 districts.

RETURNING STARTERS: Senior 6-0 guard Kaleb Mitchelson (four-year varsity, 1st team All-Conference, 12.5 points and 5.7 assists), senior 6-8 forward/center Kendall Smith (All-Conference honorable mention, 7.5 points and 1.5 blocks).

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: Senior 6-2 wing Ayden Willicker.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Junior 6-7 forward Logan Brooks.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Mitchelson returns to the Rockets for a fourth year at the varsity level. He is a smart player with good vision, passes the ball well and creates plays off the dribble. Smith is skilled for his size and is expected to play a huge role inside. He can also handle the ball well and is a hard worker.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Rockets are expected to be a good shooting team, especially from beyond the three-point line. They also have some taller players on the roster. The returning players bring a lot to the team, and all can score.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Rockets will need to find a player who will bring some physicality to the mix. Reeths-Puffer plays in a very physical conference, and it will be important to find a player or two that can mix it up with opponents. R-P will also be getting used to playing in a new conference – the O-K Green – which includes some new opponents.

COACH QUOTE: “We are going to be a fun team this year, with a good mixture of returning players and newcomers. I am looking forward to seeing what this season brings and how well this group will do.” – Lance Johnson

COACHES: Head Coach Rodney Walker. Assistants Amber Berndt, Sandra Bush and Daejia Hill.

2019-20 RECORD: 21-3 overall; first place in O-K Black Conference with 10-2 record, Division 1 district champions, lost to East Grand Rapids in regional semifinals.

RETURNING STARTERS: Sophomore guard Ariel Walker (7 points), sophomore guard Sophia Hekkema (8 points).

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: Senior 5-10 forward Bella Borgeson (9 points), junior 5-6 guard Arrionna Williams (7 points, 4 rebounds), senior forward Beth Jordan (4 rebounds).

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Senior Beth Jordan is expected to play an important role for the Rockets. She rebounds the ball well, limiting opponents to one shot possessions. Jordan is

also a great mid-range shooter. Bella Borgeson also brings senior leadership to the Rockets. She can play multiple positions and can knock down shots. She also is a great defender and runs the floor well.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Rockets are a well-rounded team offensively with the ability to score by committee. They will concentrate more on defense and will have great team chemistry once the season is up and running. The Rockets expect to surprise some teams who may think they are going to have a down year due to key graduation losses, including All-Stater Lauren Ross.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The pandemic shutdown will slow the development of team chemistry in the first part of the season, and practice is starting late this year. The Rockets will also have some new opponents to adjust to in the new O-K Green conference, which also includes traditional local powers Muskegon and Mona Shores.

COACH QUOTE: “This season it will be an ‘all for one and one for all’ type of season.” – Rodney Walker



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Shelby boys will lean heavily on Claeys, Hayes



FR: Mathew Oberlin, Logan Claeys, Bishop Lee, Joseph Hayes, Oliver Squires. BR: Brandon Rabe, Griffin Fraass, Carson Claeys, Mason Garcia, Isaac Scouten. Photo/Leo Valdez

COACHES: Head coach Rick Zoulek. Assistant Kyle Klotz.

2019-20 RECORD: 4-16, 2-12 in conference.

RETURNING STARTERS: 6-1 junior guard Joseph Hayes (9 points), 6-0 senior forward Logan Claeys (9 points).

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: 6-1 senior forward Matthew Oberlin, 5-8 senior guard Griffin Fraass, 5-11 senior guard Brandon Rabe.

KEY NEWCOMERS: 6-1 sophomore forward Bishop Lee, 5-8 sophomore guard Mason Garcia, 5-8 sophomore guard Carson Claeys.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Both Logan Claeys and Joseph Hayes are playing their third season on varsity for the Tigers. The pair are good leaders in practice and work hard to set examples for everyone else. Both improved their shooting and offensive skills in the offseason. Logan Claeys can go inside and outside, with an improved 3-point shot and post moves. Hayes brings a similar game and can slash to the basket. Both were leading rebounders and the Tigers' top defenders last season.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Tigers will be fundamentally strong defensively, good on rebounding, and the offensive execution will be solid.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Trying to find that chemistry in such a short period of time will be tough. Overall size and depth along with a lack of experience in the post will be issues throughout the season.

COACH QUOTE: "You are going to see success in little things this year. Our newcomers will have to learn after being thrown in the fire." - Rick Zoulek

Tiger girls are loaded, but play in a tough league



FR: Lauren Dean, Aubrey Klotz, Lexi Schultz, Lizzie Strong, Megan Sly. BR: Courtney Brown, Ella Olmstead, Lauren Brown, Kendall Zoulek, Morgan Weirich. Photo/Leo Valdez

COACHES: Head Coach Sarah Wolting. Assistants Abby Rodriguez, Brooklyn Zoulek.

2019-20 RECORD: 12-9, 8-6 in conference play.

RETURNING STARTERS:

5-5 senior guard Lexi Schultz, 5-9 junior forward Kendall Zoulek, 5-5 senior guard Lauren Dean, 5-10 junior forward Ella Olmstead, 5-11 junior forward Lauren Brown.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: 5-6 sophomore point guard Aubrey Klotz; 5-7 sophomore guard Morgan Weirich.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Lexi Schultz and Kendall Zoulek will be the two main scorers for the Tigers. Zoulek is tough, a good rebounder, a great passer, can bang inside, and is Shelby's best all-around shooter. Schultz is in her fourth season on varsity and has run the point for the past three years but will change positions to the wing.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Tigers return all five starters from last year and most of those players are in their second and third seasons on varsity. The players are all friends and get along well but like to practice really hard, are positive with each other but will beat each other up. Shelby is big around the bucket and has good range outside with above average ball-handling skills.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Playing three games per week will not give the Tigers much time to rest. They will also have to battle with several other very good teams in their conference, including Montague, Hart and Whitehall.

COACH QUOTE: "We have 16 practices and 16 games. Because we haven't had much contact, there is not as much stress to win but to go out and have fun. That's the goal for the year and hopefully that turns into wins so I can have fun too!" - Sarah Wolting



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Laker boys have good mix of experience, youth



FR: Hunter Throop, Reid Colquitt, Link Dephouse, Sam Sheridan, Nino Padula, Dylan Lisman, Porter Saunders. BR: Coach Bill Core, Jackson Core, Jaron Little, Sam VanderHeide, Evan McDermott, Callum Saxe, Kaden George, AC Randy White. Photo/Kelly Gates

COACHES: Head Coach Bill Core. Assistants Randy White, Austin Johnson.

2019-20 RECORD: 13-9 overall record, 6-6 and third place in O-K Blue Conference. Was set to face Fruitport in Division 2 district finals before COVID ended season.

RETURNING STARTERS: Senior 5-9 guard Sam Sheridan (three-year varsity player, co-captain, averaged 11.5 points and had an 84.2 free throw percentage, first team All-Conference) and junior 6-2 guard Kaden George (averaged 10.5 points).

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: Senior 5-11 guard Reid Colquitt (battled injuries last season), senior 6-3 forward/guard Callum Saxe (co-captain), senior 6-5 forward Jaron Little.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Sam Sheridan helped the Lakers improve last season by having the ability to finish close games. Sheridan has great ball-handling skills and can knock down his attempts from the free throw line. Kaden George has played a lot of basketball while involved in AAU programs. He can do many things on the court and is expected to help the Lakers with scoring this season.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Lakers have a lot of players with good height. They can also give opposing offenses many different defensive looks. They have some experience, with five players who saw time at the varsity level, combined with JV players from last season who posted a 19-1 record.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Lakers coaching staff believes not having summer or fall workouts could hurt the team, especially with a limited number of returning upperclassmen.

COACH QUOTE: "We are crossing our fingers and taking it one day at a time. We are holding our breaths when the governor or MHSAA comes on the television with announcements about the status of the season. I really hope that these guys get a chance to play." - Bill Core

Inexperienced Laker girls have lineup gaps to fill



FR: Evien Berry, Carly Llewellyn, Anna Bisacky, Eryn Bouwhuis, Meah Bajt, Masen Carey, Kamdyn Burns, Peyton Parsons. BR: Coach Rich Hyde, Kylie Spooner, Jennifer Judge, Zoe Walters, Clair Czadzeck, Lizzy Koratich, Nicole Schmitt, Coach Phil Marshall. Photo/Kelly Gates

COACHES: Head coach Rich Hyde. Assistants Becky Johnson, Melanie Danklefsen, David Parsons, Phil Marshall.

2019-20 RECORD: 8-14 overall record, 5-7 in O-K Blue, fourth place finish. Division 2 district champs, lost to GR West Catholic in regional semifinals.

RETURNING STARTERS: Junior shooting guard Jennifer Judge (averaged 8.5 points and 3.9 rebounds).

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: Junior guard Meah Bajt (4.7 points, 4 rebounds), senior guard Masen Carey, junior guard/post Nicole Schmitt, senior post Zoe Walters and senior wing/post Kylie Spooner.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Junior post Evien Berry, junior guard Anna Bisacky, junior guard Eryn Bouwhuis, junior guard Kamdyn Burns, junior post Clair Czadzeck, junior post Lizzy Koratich, junior guard/post Carly Llewellyn, junior guard Peyton Parsons.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Judge is entering her third season on varsity and will be relied on for more offensive output, with so many seniors lost from last year. She has been working hard during COVID, and is expected to take a huge step forward. Judge can drive to the basket and get to the free throw line.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Lakers can be a gritty team defensively. It will be important for them to be strong on the defensive end because they play in a tough O-K Blue Conference against several teams with great individual players.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Lakers will need to find new leaders to step up offensively, and they are hoping offense will be created by playing great defense. They are also lacking a presence at the post and will have to fill that by committee.

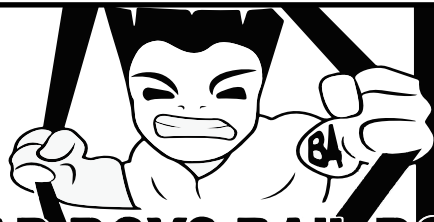
COACH QUOTE: "We don't know what the year is going to bring, but we are going to have fun and play for each other. We will enjoy this time together, whether it's for a couple of months or a couple of weeks." - Rich Hyde



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WMC boys will build around talented Varnado



FR: Jacob Schumm, Jared Olsen, Isaac Parker-Vanbaale, Jaron Childers, Joey prince, Micah Terhaar. BR: Joe Waller, Owen Varnado, Brekken Fairfield, michael Tencate, Sam Liggett. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Kurt Gruppen. Assistants Craig Hoekzema, Tyler VanBeek.

2019-20 RECORD: 17-5 overall record, tied for first place in Lakes 8 with 8-2 record. Was set to play Kent City in district finals before COVID stopped play.

RETURNING STARTERS: Junior 6-4 forward Owen Varnado (12 points, 6 rebounds, first-team All-Conference).

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: Senior 5-10 guard Isaac Parker, senior 6-3 forward Brekken Fairfield, senior 6-5 forward Michael Tencate, senior 5-10 guard Micah Terhaar.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Junior 6-0 guard Sam Liggett, junior 5-11 guard Joe Waller, junior 5-11 guard Jaron Childers, junior 5-11 guard Joey Prince.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Varnado returns for his third season at the varsity level. He has many great qualities, such as being long and athletic. Varnado has a high basketball IQ and is a natural leader, according to his coach. He also is a strong defender with a good motor that keeps on running.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Warriors have good team size and athleticism and they plan on using that to their advantage. The coaching staff also feels the team has great chemistry.

TEAM CHALLENGES: Like every team in the state, the Warriors haven't had a great deal of contact practice to see how the team is developing, and to see what their true weaknesses are. WMC also only has one starter back from last season.

COACH QUOTE: "We need to concentrate on what we can control this year. We have already had a meeting about this season's uncertainties. We spent time trying to stay sharp while staying safe with virtual workouts. We have to play like it is our last game because in these days you never know what will happen." - Kurt Gruppen

WMC girls have good height and experience



FR: Taylor Folkema, Kelcea Waller, Lyndsey Lofquist, Kate Derdowski. BR: Coach Jeremy Goorman, Kyla Wiersema, Libby Mass, Greta VanderHeide, Maddie Wiersema, Assistant Coach Jim Goorman. Photo/Jason Goorman

COACHES: Head Coach Jeremy Goorman. Assistant Coach Jim Goorman.

2019-20 RECORD: 17-7 overall, 8-2 in Lakes 8 Conference. Lost to Ithaca in Division 3 regional semifinals after defeating Saugatuck to win a district title.

RETURNING STARTERS: Senior 5-9 forward Taylor Folkema (averaged 18.2 points, 5 rebounds and 3 steals), junior 5-11 forward Kayla Wiersema (13 points, 7 rebounds) and senior 6-1 center Greta VanderHeide (4 rebounds).

OTHER KEY RETURNERS: Junior 5-11 forward Maddie Wiersema, senior 5-7 point guard Kelsey Waller.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Junior 6-0 forward Libby Mast, junior 5-4 guard Lindsey Lofquist, junior 5-2 guard Haley Brueker.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Senior Taylor Folkema has expanded her game this offseason, working on her shot outside the 3-point line. She plays tenacious defense and does whatever is asked of her. Kayla Wiersema is explosive and can jump up and touch the rim of the basket. She also has a quick first step.

TEAM STRENGTHS: According to Coach Goorman, this year's team will be the tallest girls basketball squad in WMC history. The Warriors have four players who are over six feet tall. The Warriors should be a strong rebounding team with the ability to get second chance points on putbacks.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Warriors may struggle with ballhandling, which can cause too many turnovers.

COACH QUOTE: "With years like this, it makes you appreciate what you have. We have great girls, and we look forward to being together. It's this sense basketball becomes secondary. We just hope to be competitive this season." - Jeremy Goorman



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Whitehall boys appear to be set for big year



FR: Evan Mikkelson, Jackson Stouedt, Red Watson, Addison Bluhm, Caleb Kah. BR: Andrew Durbin, Brodie Fogus, Casey Lownds, Jakarris Wiggers, Dayton Cole, Calvin Larson, Mario Moore. Photo/Leo Valdez

Viking girls will be in the mix for league title



FR: McKena Coron, Greta Hosticka, Makenna Russell, Camryn Evans, Charley Klint, Mngr Megan Leatrea. BR: AC Kristy Becklin, Kenzie Johnson, Karleigh Jeffries, Sarah VanDam, Jade Taylor, Olivia Tjapkes, Coach Derek Westerlund. Photo/Leo Vadez

COACHES Head Coach Nate Aardema. Assistants Nate Baker, Christian Subdon, Brian Milliron, Luc Schemm.

2019-20 RECORD: 10-11 overall and 7-7 in West Michigan Conference play. The Vikings lost to Fruitport in Division 2 district semifinals.

RETURNING STARTERS:

Senior 5-11 guard Evan Mikkelson (9 points 4 rebounds per game), senior 5-10 guard Addison Bluhm, senior 6-2 forward Andrew Durbin, senior 6-6 forward Dayton Cole (All-Conference), junior 5-8 point guard Red Watson (12 points and 7 steals).

OTHER KEY RETURNERS:

Senior 6-2 guard Mario Moore, senior 6-1 forward Casey Lownds.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Junior 6-5 forward Brodie Fogus, junior 5-10 guard Jackson Stouedt.

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Senior Evan Mikkelson is a three-year starter who has great leadership skills. He is experienced, works very hard and is a tough defender. Red Watson is a special type of player, according to the coaching staff. He has the combination of speed and toughness.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Vikings have a group of players who play well together and for each other. Size is also a strong suit this season. Whitehall plans to be a great defensive squad.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Viking coaching staff would like to see the squad push the tempo up and play less half-court offense.

COACH QUOTE: "I am really excited about this season. We have a lot of guys returning and we have added some good JV players as well. I anticipate it being a really great year. Truthfully, just getting in the gym at all is exciting at this point."
– Nate Aardema

COACHES: Head Coach Derek Westerlund. Assistants Brian Normandin, Dean Bates.

2019-20 RECORD: 12-10 overall, 10-4 in West Michigan Conference. Lost to Spring Lake in Division 2 district semifinals.

RETURNING STARTERS: Senior 5-8 guard Greta Hosticka (injured last season), senior 5-8 post player Karleigh Jeffries (10.5 points 5 rebounds), senior 5-4 guard Karina Wade, senior 5-9 guard Camryn Evans.

OTHER KEY RETURNERS:

Senior 5-10 center Jade Taylor, senior 5-9 forward Olivia Tjapkes.

KEY NEWCOMERS: Junior 5-9 guard Charley Klint, junior 5-9 forward Rayne Thompson (will miss the season due to injury).

PLAYERS TO WATCH: Greta Hosticka did not play last season, nursing an ACL injury. She has good basketball instincts, according to her coach. Hosticka is a great shooter who can also distribute the basketball well. Karleigh Jeffries is very tough, especially in the post. She makes moves under the basket that make her difficult to defend.

TEAM STRENGTHS: The Vikings have a group of girls who take the game seriously and strive to improve, according to Coach Westerlund. Whitehall is also expected to be solid defensively. The Vikings are quick and good under the basket.

TEAM CHALLENGES: The Vikings will look to improve their shooting. Like most teams around the state this year, the players haven't had much time in the gym. It will take time to get accustomed to game speed.

COACH QUOTE: "I am really looking forward to even heading to practices these days. We have 10 seniors who have played together for a very long time. I think we can compete for a championship."
– Derek Westerlund



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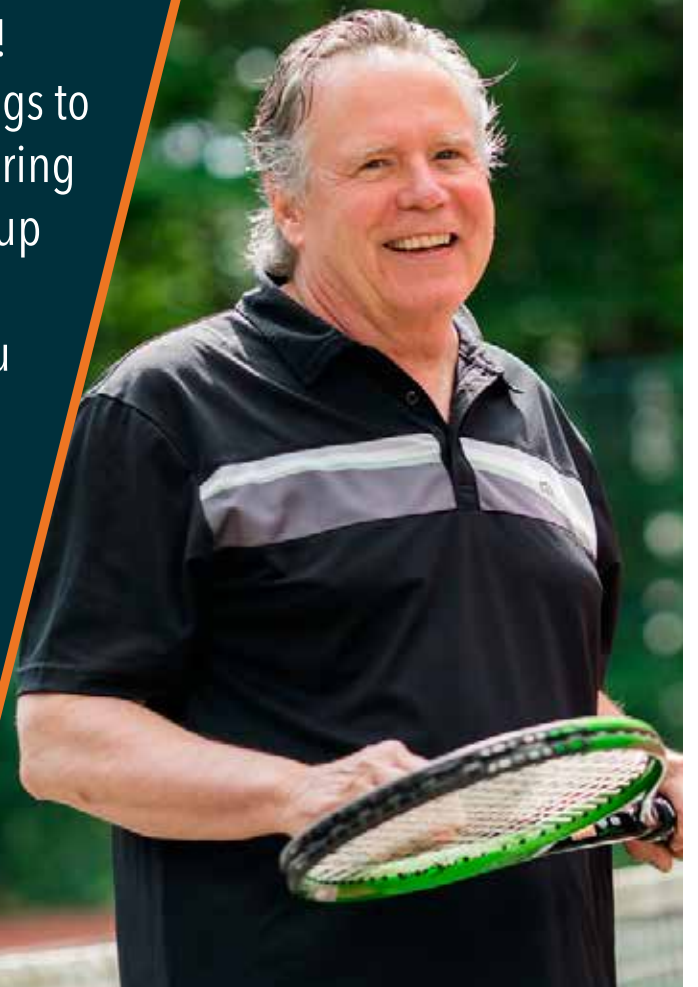
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NO HOOPS AT THE HEIGHTS



Muskegon Heights boys basketball Coach Dalrecus Stewart instructs his team during the 2015-16 season.

By Mitchell Boatman
LocalSportsJournal.com

The Muskegon Heights basketball program has an amazingly rich history, as well as a promising future.

But for the present, the coaches, players and fans will just have to wonder what might have been this season.

Muskegon Heights Academy, which remains in a virtual learning format for all students, opted out of playing winter sports this season amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, after doing the same with fall sports.

The high school is the only one in the area to cancel winter sports, and a Muskegon County high school basketball season without Muskegon Heights competing just won't seem the same.

But there was principled reasoning behind the decision to stay on the sidelines this season, and school officials are not looking back.

"Basically, we're in the same place from the fall, the same reasoning," said Dalrecus Stewart, the school's athletic director and head boys basketball coach. "We're presently operating online. There are still major concerns with COVID and things of that nature, and being indoor poses a challenge of its own."

"The focus became 'Let's look at the best way we can educate kids, and once we get back to school, we'll

look at other dynamics a little more closely to make future decisions concerning sports.'"

When the school announced it was moving fall sports to the spring last September, it cited the alarming fact that the Muskegon Heights community was disproportionately affected by COVID-19, compared to other areas of Muskegon County.

Cases of COVID-19 in Muskegon County grew to more than 10,000 the week of Jan. 25. Of those, 389 have been in the city of Muskegon Heights, according to the county's COVID-19 data dashboard.

State health officials have also cited data showing that predominantly black communities have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, particularly as it relates to death rates compared to percentage of population early in the pandemic.

State data shows that, when broken down by rate per million people, black residents have a higher case rate and death rate than any other race, including a death rate close to double the rate of white people.

In Muskegon County, the death rate for Black and African American people is 1,510 per million, while for white people it is 1,479 per million.

Stewart said that the school has a leadership team, himself included, that meets to discuss issues, including this year's sports seasons, and figure out what is in the best interest of students.

Even as parents and players across the state advocated for the start of the winter sports season, Stewart said that the Muskegon Heights community has been understanding and supportive of the decision not to play, and that no students have transferred to other schools to play sports.

"I have to give all students who are suffering through this a whole a lot of credit," Stewart said. "Young people are some of the most resilient people on the earth. They may not like the situations, but they adjust and they move on."

"They're staying focused academically. Our kids are handling it in a first-class way. I'm hoping that all of these things can change soon so they don't have to continue to miss out on opportunities that sports provide."

While the postponement of fall sports was taken pretty hard in the community, Stewart said the winter season announcement was less stunning for people.

"I don't want to say it was easier, because we'd love to play if it was safe, but I think the impact was lessened," Stewart said of not playing winter sports. "With no precedent (in the fall) I think it was more difficult. Now, everyone has more of an understanding of the dangers of COVID, how to stay safe. At that time in the fall, we were not quite where we are in terms of knowledge."

"Being online (for school) for this amount of time, with not having fall sports, we allowed the families to know in advance if things didn't seem better in a significant way, we couldn't justify moving forward with winter sports. Students got more comfortable with the reasoning and the shock factor wasn't the same."

Stewart said that he received questions from the community regarding the winter season, but they've been supportive of the school's decision.

"Very supportive, as a matter of fact," Stewart said. "Certainly the students wanted to be playing. But I was not overwhelmed by any means with calls and messages of disapproval."

"The coaches are the closest ones to the kids when it comes to the sport and we're all looking at things from the same lens. The kids received things better because we're all in this together. Nobody wanted the kids to miss out, but safety is most important and everyone did understand that."

"The kids received things better because we're all in this together. Nobody wanted the kids to miss out, but safety is most important and everyone did understand that." - MH AD/Coach Dalrecus Stewart

A rich hoops tradition

The Muskegon Heights boys team, more than any other area program, has a tradition of success on the hardwood. The Tiger boys have won six state titles in school history - in 1954, 1956, 1957, 1974, 1978 and 1979 - and finished as state runners-up eight other times.

The Tigers haven't made the state finals since 2011, and last won a championship in 1979, but there have been lots of spurts of success since then. The most recent was in 2017, then the Tiger boys advanced to the regional finals and lost by four points to Calvin-Christian.

The bottom line is that no program in the area has cut down the nets in celebration as many times as the Tigers. Western Michigan Christian has five state boys basketball titles and Muskegon has three, according to Michigan High School Athletic Association records.

When the school deems it safe to do so, Stewart looks forward to renewing the great hoops tradition with the community once again.

“The lovers of that tradition still love it, and there’s still a future for it,” Stewart said. “When we’re next able to come out in that warm-up line, boys and girls, I hope we’re in a position to fill the house up with fans and get back to business.”

Despite a less-than-inspiring 4-14 record last season, the Tiger boys had their eyes on another prize for the school’s trophy case. Muskegon Heights was scheduled to play for a Division 4 district championship on March 13, 2020, but the game never happened, because the remainder of the winter sports season was wiped out in the early stages of the pandemic in Michigan.

“By the end of the season, taking the licks we took, they went through the ringer,” Stewart said. “But we got on a roll playing some decent basketball and ended up in the district final.

“I remember like the back of my hand going home that evening (after winning a semifinal game) to prepare for the district final. I learned they were postponing NBA and college games and I thought ‘Oh my goodness. I think it’s over.’ It was just like a domino effect.”

Like Stewart said, his team definitely took some lumps last season. The team had losing streaks of seven and six games during the regular season. One particularly tough defeat came at the hands of Benton Harbor and standout Scooby Johnson — a 114-36 loss for the Tigers.

“The year was so trying because it was a desire to do it one way, but we needed to be patient, understanding and nurturing because we were so young,” Stewart said of his team, which had four freshman, five sophomores and two or three juniors.

“We had one game where we played Benton Harbor and one of the best players in the state - they couldn’t miss. The kids said ‘Coach, I’m trying,’ and I said ‘It’s okay, we’re gaining from the experience. Have fun and enjoy the moment.’

“I said to them, ‘Isn’t it fun playing in front of all these people?’ They said no,” Stewart continued with a laugh. “It’s those moments where it was a fun experience to just get them to stay confident. Like any other young person, they had to develop.”

What might have been

The potential the Tigers had to build a winner this season isn’t lost on Stewart. He had a team coming back that was ready to apply the lessons it learned last season, and take a step back toward that rich hoops tradition at Muskegon Heights.

“We were going to be something to deal with — boys and girls,” the coach said.

“We would have had everyone coming back. I was very much looking forward to inheriting that same group and picking up with our development. It stung quite a bit.

“But it would be the wrong frame of reference to put that out front. I’m happy they’re all safe and healthy. When we can, we’ll get back in and start developing again. I’m a firm believer that everyone who has something coming to them will get what’s theirs eventually.”

Big things were expected this year for 2020-21 sophomores Jonathan Moore and Jaquan Matthews and junior Ja’Kari Edwards, all of whom stepped into starting roles last season.

“(Moore and Matthews) stepped right in,” Stewart said. “We had a special sophomore last year, Ja’Kari Edwards, who we were expecting big things from this year. Midway through last year he became a starter and was one of our best three-point shooters.”

Stewart said he was looking forward to bringing in former members of a “fantastic” 2019-20 junior varsity team, as well.

“To have an opportunity to bring those young men together, I believe we were going to have some great success and develop something for the future,” he said.

For as much success as he thinks the boys would have had this year, the girls might have been even better, according to Stewart.

“I’ll tell you what, they probably have even more potential than the boys team,” he said. “I’ve gotta say, we have a class of kids that are really special right now.”

Like the boys, the lady Tigers were set to be led by a pair of young guards. Tyvionna Davis and Anita Johnson were the leaders of last year’s team, which finished 6-12.

Stewart said that Davis led the team in scoring, averaging around 20 per game as a freshman. Johnson was the team leader in assists, giving the team a strong backcourt duo.

The squad was set to welcome members of a strong incoming freshman class as well, led by Tanisha Nolan, who averaged 25 points per game as an eighth-grader.

“We had a great eighth-grade girls team last year,” Stewart said. “They’ve been together a long time and they were going to join the ranks with this group. The girls have a really bright future.”

The hope is that the teams will, in the coming months, be able to get together at least for small group workouts to start building for next season. But for now, Stewart said, the focus remains on the classroom and getting back to in-person learning.

“I really think we will (get to team activities) in the future,” Stewart said. “I think everybody is hoping for the best and are willing to make moves as things open up for us. I feel optimistic that we’re going to get there, but at this moment we aren’t there.

“We’re not back in school yet either. That’s the primary focus right now - make a transition back to school to meet the needs of our students.”



Ja’Kari Edwards gets ready to make a pass for Muskegon Heights last season. Photo/Jason Goorman



Deangelo Hollins drives through the lane for Muskegon Heights last season. Photo/Jason Goorman



Jakayla Anderson squares up for a Muskegon Heights free-throw during the 2018 season. Photo/Joe Lane



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