

ketball experience and got a late jump, but every year we've gotten a little bit better."

Johnson said he and his assistants started rebuilding by stressing what the players could control - playing hard all the time, and playing tough, stingy defense.

"The biggest thing coming in was just trying to make basketball fun, and get kids playing more and more," he said. "From there, it was about getting them to play hard defensively. No matter what your skill level is on offense, you can always control your hustle.

"The more the guys played over the last few years, the better they got, and now they are hitting their stride. Their skill level is starting to catch up with their hustle and effort."

One highlight of last year's turnaround season came against defending West Michigan Conference champion Whitehall, when sophomore Josh Cox scored 35 points to lead Ravenna to a 54-49 upset victory.

So far this season, the most impressive win came in December, when the Bulldogs trailed Montague by 18 points in the third quarter, then roared back to win 66-61.

Josh VanderWoude helped seal the deal by scoring all 14 of his points in the fourth quarter.

Even the 61-51 loss earlier this season to powerful North Muskegon, Ravenna's only defeat so far, did not derail the Bulldogs' confidence, according to Johnson.

"I think the guys realized they can not only play with them, but that we made some mistakes that we can correct and give them a good run next time," Johnson said.

Ravenna has a very balanced attack. In their first eight games, the Bulldogs had five different leading scorers.

At the top of the list is Cox at 12.8 points per game. Calvin Schullo is averaging 11.6 while Jacob May is at 11.1. VanderWoude and Jack Emery are averaging 7.5 and 7.4 points, respectively.

## ***Hart finally tasting victory***

In the 2016-17 season, Hart boys basketball coach Adam Jerry included three sophomores on the varsity roster - Alec Kempker, Dustin Klotz and Simon Herrera.

They were very young and green, but the talent on the roster was thin, and they were three of the better players at the school. Kempker started right away, while Klotz and Herrera were the first two players off the bench.

The young trio and their teammates predictably struggled, posting an 8-12 season record. But there were hopeful moments that year.

The Pirates won their first West Michigan Conference game in five seasons, a 42-38 victory over Ravenna, and beat neighboring rival and traditional power Shelby twice in the same season.

But learning to win on a consistent basis took some time. Last season the Pirates regressed a bit, winning only six games.

But this season the experience gained over the past two years is really paying off. Hart entered the 2019 portion of its schedule with a 5-2 record, and seems primed to leave last season's six-victory mark in the dust.

"This year we have a lot of senior leadership," said Jerry, who grew up and played basketball in St. Louis, Michigan. "They started as little kids, and they've been in the program forever. Now they are starting to understand my philosophy and what I expect, and they are a great, hard-working group."



**Hart's Simon Herrera**

The three kids who were called up as sophomores have been a big part of the turnaround.

Kempker and Klotz are averaging 14 and 13.3 points per game, respectively. Herrera is a defensive specialist and a sparkplug for the team.

Point guard Hunter Tubbs, a junior, has also played a big role, averaging 11.6 points per game, while the fifth starter, O'rian Torres, has been the type of player that does everything well and contributes in a lot of different ways.

But developing that lineup took patience and persistence while the Pirates suffered through a lot of losses.

"To say we struggled through the hard times would be an understatement," Jerry said. "It's been hard. But that makes it even more exciting to see the guys have some success and earn some victories. It's been a blast, to put it simply."

Having a winning boys basketball team is a very new thing for Hart.

"It's been over 12 years since we had a winning season," Jerry said. "To us that would be a success. That's what we're shooting for."

"I truly believe it's a mentality thing. I saw that when I started. But we just started to implement a lot of competitive stuff in practice, and our confidence started to build.

"Then two years ago we got our first conference win in five-plus years, we beat Shelby twice and Ravenna twice. It was just a matter of getting those little victories to turn into big victories and even bigger victories, and it's kind of carried over."

In prior seasons, the Hart players would go into a game against a good team and fear the competition. That sort of mentality is in the past, Jerry said.

The Pirates may or may not win, but they finally realize they will be competitive and have a chance to prevail.

"We're going to play our game, and we don't care who you are," Jerry said.

<b>HART</b>
<b>2014-15: 2-19</b>
<b>2015-16: 5-16</b>
<b>2016-17: 8-12</b>
<b>2017-18: 6-15</b>
<b>2018-19: 5-3</b>

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