

Prairie girls look to rebound this season

Written by Jim Ecker

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Josh Bentley was accustomed to success in his previous stops as a head basketball coach, so his initial campaign at Cedar Rapids Prairie last season came as a cold slap in the face.

The Prairie girls lost six games by single digits and finished with a disappointing 4-18 record.

Bentley blames himself as much as anyone.

"It wasn't fun at all," he said Friday. "To be honest, it was a year that humbled me, woke me up, made me reflect on some things that I'd grown accustomed to and I wasn't totally focusing on details. I don't think I did justice to the girls as much as I should have.

"I definitely learned a lot," he said, "and I think that's helped me move forward for this year and hopefully for years in the future. Avoiding another year like that would be great. I don't want to have another one like that ever again."

Neither do his players.

The Hawks lost only one senior from last year's squad and Bentley said all the returning players are determined to take a big step forward.

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He said his hungry players have displayed a great attitude in practice heading into Tuesday's season opener against Muscatine.

"I can't hide it or lie about it," he said. "They're working really hard, they're pushing each other. I think they have a lot to prove to people. I think they've kind of got a chip on their shoulder."

Bentley said the seniors are providing good leadership and deserve some success.

"We're really hopeful we take them out on a high note," he said. "They're putting forth the work and the ethic."

"They're real positive," he said. "They don't have anything to lose. They want to prove what they're capable of doing to themselves more than anybody else."

Olivia Usher, one of the seniors, averaged 8.3 points, 3.7 rebounds and 3.5 assists last season. Halle Person, now a sophomore, averaged 7.2 points and a team-best 5.7 rebounds.

Bentley said Usher has shown great attention to detail in practice. "She's really locked in on the little things to make herself a better basketball player," he remarked.

Bentley thinks Person handled herself well as a freshman in the Mississippi Valley Conference. "I learned a lot going through the MVC and she did, too," he said.

Bentley thinks Makenzie Stoffer has a chance to help the club. She fractured her nose and

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suffered a concussion last January, curtailing her season and forcing her to miss four games.

Bentley also thinks Jenna Wagemester and Lauren Kuch could have good years, among other returning players. He's not sure about the starting lineup for Tuesday, but feels he has lots of good options.

"We tell the kids, the sad thing is we can't start them all," he remarked. "And the tough thing is, they're making it a hard choice. Hopefully that translates into some success for us. It's a good problem to have."

Bentley said the Hawks have not set a lot of specific goals, other than competing for 32 minutes and giving a consistent effort. He said there were too many lapses last season that led to losses in close games.

"We haven't really talked a lot about what we want our record to be," he said. "I think .500 is a good starting point. You never want to set the bar too low.

"If we get beat we get beat, but don't beat ourselves."