

Cedar Valley girls aiming higher

Written by Jim Ecker

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Ron Slagle has been coaching many of the girls in the Cedar Valley Christian basketball program since they were in the fourth grade, either on the AAU circuit or at the school itself.

He's experienced all the growing pains along the way, but now thinks the Huskies are ready to a big step forward and compete for a Tri-Rivers Conference title in the next few years.

"We're shooting to be the Tri-Rivers Conference East champion within the next three years," Slagle said Thursday, "and I think it's very attainable on that side of the conference.

"The girls are tired of losing. They want to be considered a valid opponent for anybody and that's the mindset going forward. We want to make sure Cedar Valley gets put on the map before the next three years are over."

The Huskies nearly made it last year when they began the season with a 7-3 record, but superstar Shelby Hembera got hurt and missed the rest of the year. The team finished with an 8-14 record, going 1-11 without her.

Hembera graduated as one of the top scorers in Metro history after averaging 30.3 points and 13.3 rebounds last season. Slagle is looking for a balanced approach this year with 11 players on the roster, a luxury of riches compared to recent years when Cedar Valley had to scramble at times to put five players on the floor.

Slagle succeeded Craig Foote as head coach this season after seven years as one of Foote's assistants at Cedar Valley. Foote is now coaching the

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boys team at the school after nursing the girls program from a recreational endeavor to a serious pursuit.

"I appreciate what he's done and the girls do, too," Slagle said.

Slagle has two daughters on the team with Megan Slagle, a senior, and Emma Slagle, a sophomore. A few years Megan Slagle traded her cheerleader outfit for a basketball uniform to make sure the team had enough players for a game and now she's here as a 12th grader with her father as head coach and the roster loaded (comparatively speaking) with players.

Ron Slagle began coaching these 10th graders when they were in the fourth grade and had good success with the group. There used to be nine players in the class, but four of them left the Cedar Valley system for public schools.

Even so, Slagle is confident the five remaining sophomores can leave their mark on the program. Molly Hembera, Shelby's younger sister, averaged 11.2 points and 4.9 rebounds last season as a freshman. Maggie Cach averaged 7.1 points and 6.3 rebounds as a ninth grader, and Emma Slagle contributed 5.5 points and 2.3 rebounds. Elisabeth Fields and Candy Mafuta are also part of that sophomore class.

Cedar Valley has three seniors with Candace Wilson, Megan Slagle and Soo Lee. There are two juniors with Emily Masterson and Anna Bogert and one freshman with Jalaah Schmidt.

Cedar Valley relied heavily on Shelby Hembera the last four years, but those days are over.

"Our aspect now is to get back to team basketball," Slagle said. "We're going to get everybody involved. We do have the pieces to get started. We're going to utilize everybody."

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Molly Hembera is a different player than her sister, who stayed neared the basket and scored despite being double-teamed and triple-teamed at times.

Molly Hembera is more of a slasher who starts her offense away from the bucket.

"She's a dynamic player," Slagle said. "She's very athletic, she's strong, she's quick."

Cedar Valley opens the season Tuesday at Alburnett.