

Muhl signs 11 freshmen for Kirkwood hoops

Written by Jim Ecker

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Introductions could be in order when the Kirkwood women's basketball team assembles for practice this fall.

Coach Kim Muhl has signed 11 freshmen and hopes to add a pair of college transfers to the mix as well, giving the Eagles as many as 13 new players on the roster for the 2016-17 campaign.

Only two players - Deleyah Harris and Rylee Voss - plan to return from this year's club as sophomores, giving Muhl a big rebuilding job as he enters his 28th year at Kirkwood.

Junior college coaches have to rebuild their teams every year, since nobody can play for more than two seasons at this level, and Muhl sounds unperturbed by the challenge.

"I think it's the nature of the beast at this level," he said. "The freshmen come in a little bit hungrier. Some figure it out, some don't. It's OK."

Kirkwood had six freshmen on the team this past season, but Amber Lemons, Mesha Wheatly, Ariana Dampier and Dominique Jennings will not be returning from a club that finished 27-6. That leaves Harris, a starting guard, and Voss, a reserve center, as the only two returnees.

Six of the 11 new freshmen are from Iowa, including local products Olivia Usher from Cedar Rapids Prairie and Candace Wilson from Cedar Valley Christian. The other in-state recruits are Awal Ajak of Des Moines East, Ashley Hedges of Burlington Notre Dame, Nyachristmas Puok of Des Moines East and Olivia Schmidt of North Scott.

"I like them," said Muhl. "They're athletic and they're Iowa kids that we could get to like us."

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Usher, who is 5-foot-9, averaged 13.6 points, 4.2 rebounds, 2.9 assists and 1.7 steals for the Prairie Hawks, who finished 11-12.

"She's intelligent and she knows the game," said Muhl. "And she's a strong kid."

Wilson, who is 5-foot-5, averaged 19.2 points, 7.4 rebounds, 3.3 steals and 3.2 assists in her only season at Cedar Valley Christian, which finished with a 10-11 record.

"She's kind of under the radar," said Muhl. "She had big numbers all year. She can pass the ball. And she can hit 3's. She's got some skills."

Ajak and Puok, a pair of 6-footers, helped Des Moines East finish 13-9 last season. Ajak averaged 11.4 points and 5.1 rebounds, while Puok contributed 5.7 points and 4.5 rebounds.

"Awal has a big-time upside," Muhl remarked. "She could be pretty special."

Schmidt, who is 5-foot-8, averaged 12.0 points and 3.0 rebounds at North Scott, helping the Lancers finish 18-5. Hedges, also 5-foot-8, averaged 8.4 points and 5.2 rebounds at Burlington Notre Dame, which finished 24-2.

Muhl also has signed Kelsey Achenbach of Prairie du Chien, Wis., Megan Axcell of Knoxville, Ill., TiRayah Cotton of Omaha, Niaja Taylor from Rockford, Ill., and Tayana Wilson from County Club Hills, Ill.

"We've got a good group," said Muhl.

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There is not great size in the new group, but Muhl likes their athletic ability and long arms. He plans to use more full-court pressure next season to raise the tempo even higher.

"This group is going to be interesting," he said. "It's very competitive right now. All of these kids are pretty darn athletic. And long.

"We guard pretty good, but we're going to guard better with length."

Five of the sophomores on this year's team will continue their basketball careers at four-year schools. Cyerra Hutchins and Addie Oberman are headed to Loras College, Casey Miles has signed with Upper Iowa, A.J. Downs is headed to Indiana Tech and All-American Madison Wood has signed with Eastern Kentucky.

Caitlin Sudduth also wants to play at a four-year school, but had not made a decision as of Wednesday.