

Linn-Mar girls prepare for life after Kiah

Written by Jim Ecker

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Mike Brandt quit eating after Kiah Stokes played her final basketball game at Linn-Mar High School last winter, but it's not like he went on a hunger strike.

He didn't quit eating altogether. He simply quit eating things that weren't good for him. He also started to get more exercise and take better care of his body.

It was simply coincidence that all of this started after Stokes finished her career with the Lions and packed her All-American bags for the University of Connecticut.

Brandt decided he was too heavy and was inviting health problems down the line. "I want to be around for awhile," he said.

Brandt said he's lost more than 100 pounds since the end of the 2010-11 season, which saw the Lions lose to Iowa City West, 65-58, in overtime in the semifinals of the Class 4A state tournament when Stokes fouled out for the only time in her prep career.

Linn-Mar compiled a 94-7 record and won a state title with Stokes on the club for four years. The 6-foot-3 center finished her career with eye-popping numbers that included school records for points (1,704), rebounds (1,239) and blocked shots (515), and she set a state record with those 515 swats.

"Kiah was a once-in-a-lifetime player," Brandt said.

While Brandt has lost 100 pounds, Stokes has gained 10 pounds of muscle since arriving at UConn as a freshman. Now both of them have weightier issues on their mind, with Brandt trying to build a new team and Stokes trying to build a college career.

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Jenna Eells (8.2 points) and Kailee Karr (6.8 points) also graduated from last year's club, but the Lions return five girls who played important roles in a 22-3 campaign with Mykaela Brandt, Rachel Thrune, Shanice Cheatham, Courtney Major and Sara Strauel.

"That always helps, when you have experienced players coming back," Coach Brandt remarked.

Mykaela Brandt, who led the team in floor burns, will switch from off-guard to point guard, where she'll replace Karr as the primary playmaker for the Lions. Cheatham battled injuries last year but is healthy now, so that will help the club.

Coach Brandt hopes 6-foot-2 junior Alexis Libenguth will help fill some of the void left by Stokes at center, and he's also looking for junior guards Hannah Yearling and Kristen Eiles to give the team a boost.

Brandt anticipates putting another competitive team on the floor this season and said he's looking forward to the challenge of competing for high honors with a different squad.

Linn-Mar will face Benton Community in the Cedar Rapids Kennedy Jamboree on Friday, Nov. 18 and will open the regular season on Tuesday, Nov. 22 by hosting Keokuk.