

J-Hawks ready to release their mosquitoes

Written by Jim Ecker

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Stu Ordman jokingly refers to his basketball players at Cedar Rapids Jefferson as little mosquitoes.

The J-Hawks are not insulted by the nickname. In fact, the players designed a poster this year that declares "It's not how big you are, it's how big you play."

Yes, Jarrod Uthoff is gone.

Jefferson has turned the page in its basketball program from featuring a 6-foot-8 prep All-American to featuring a collection of perimeter players who range from 5-foot-9 to 6-foot-3, with a few exceptions.

"The guys are scrappy. That's good," Ordman said. "We just have to figure out post offense, post defense and rebounding."

The J-Hawks could struggle near the basket against bigger teams, but they could pose problems themselves with dangerous players like Taylor Olson, Alec Saunders, Ky Kramer, Creighton Robinson and others around the perimeter.

It will be different from last year, when Uthoff touched the ball on practically every occasion. Now the players have more freedom and permission to take the first good shot they see.

"They do," Ordman confirmed. "We're also trying to spread people out to see if we can penetrate and kick."

Uthoff led the state in scoring at 25.9 points and averaged 11 rebounds, but the J-Hawks were one-dimensional at times. The most glaring example came in a 45-39 loss to Des Moines Hoover in the first round of the Class 4A state tournament, where Uthoff was the only player to

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make a basket for an extended period of time.

Saunders, who averaged 8.9 points, has the green light this season. So does Olson, who scored 6.9 points. And so does Kramer, who contributed 5.0 markers last year when the J-Hawks finished 17-6.

"All three of those guys have worked very hard on their game and expanded what they can do," Ordman said. "They're much better than they were last year."

Creighton Robinson, who was promoted to the varsity for the playoffs last season, showed he's not afraid to shoot on a big stage when he nailed several big 3-pointers in the state tournament against Hoover during a late rally. He's only 5-foot-9, making him the smallest mosquito on the club.

Tyler Hemphill, Justin Underwood, Layne Sullivan, Austin Goodell, Taylor Mueller and Daniel Eggers also figure in the mix, although Hemphill is battling a knee problem.

Ordman had a chance to coach a special player the last few years with Uthoff, who has decided to redshirt at Wisconsin this season after being named Mr. Basketball in Iowa last year. Now Ordman is looking forward to a new challenge.

"I think as a high school coach you have to play the hand you're dealt," he said. "And I have really good guys. I think they're very unselfish and they work hard."

And those little mosquitoes might sting you.

Jefferson hosts West Branch in a Hall of Pride Scrimmage Friday night at 7:30, with proceeds being donated to a family the J-Hawks are helping in the Jefferson school district.