

2026 Fall Sports SPOTLIGHTS

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COUNTY NEWS REVIEW



BRAHAM • CAMBRIDGE CHRISTIAN • CAMBRIDGE-ISANTI

C-I football enters third season under Geisler

JOHN WAGNER

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Coach: Ben Geisler.

Last year: 4-5, 1-2 Northstar — West-Gold.

Top returnees: Seniors Peyton Coplan, RB/LB; Grant Oliver, RB/LB; Henry Pearson, OL/DL; Tayton Westphal, QB/DB. Junior Knox Andrus, WR/DB.

Outlook: Geisler hopes the struggles his team experienced two years ago will bear fruit starting this fall, as the Blue-jackets are more experienced and more physical.

“In this senior class, 11 of them started as sophomores, which is why we struggled. You can’t win with sophomores,” Geisler said. “We don’t intend on starting any sophomores this year.

“That’s where we needed to get to as a program, where our juniors and seniors are varsity kids — and sophomores take another year to physically get bigger and mature, learn systems and make mistakes they can learn from.”

Offensively the headliners have been Coplan, a two-time all-conference choice, and Andrus, who was voted all-league as a sophomore. Westphal also has started the past two seasons and was an honorable mention all-league choice last fall.

“Everyone knows about Knox and Peyton, but [senior] Simeon Porta’s probably going to be a slot receiver for us, and he’s an All-American track kid who can run,” Geisler said. “[Senior] Landon Bartelt has worked really hard, and he’s a really fast running back for us, too. ...



PHOTO BY JOHN WAGNER

The Cambridge-Isanti football team hopes the experience of players varsity for two seasons and the work done in the off season leads to continued improvement this fall.

“I think we have enough where teams can’t just stop one kid. If you want to stop that one kid, we’ll go to this other kid or that kid.”

The offensive line will be led by senior Henry Pearson and juniors Derek Ramlet and Dalton Olson, all of whom started last season.

Defensively Oliver enters his third year as a starting middle linebacker and was an honorable mention all-league choice, while Andrus — who is considered one of

the top cornerback recruits in the state — may see action at free safety.

“Since ninth grade, Knox has probably put on about 30 pounds, and nothing but muscle,” Geisler said. “And he’s growing. But it hasn’t slowed him down — he’s only gotten faster. So he’s a little less hesitant to hit now.”

Geisler said he is particularly excited about the depth growing on the defensive side.

“We’re finally deep enough that we’re

going to have a good rotation going; it’s not just our 11 starters and an occasional backup,” he said. “Defensively, we’re going to rotate a lot of bodies, because we feel like we have guys who can play. ...

“We have way more depth than we’ve had. And I have a group of kids that just think they can be good. They’ve built in the weight room, and what you do in the offseason can build a lot of confidence. We’re hoping that shows up on the field on Friday.”

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SUBMITTED PHOTO

The 2026 Cambridge-Isanti boys cross country team has more than 80 runners on the roster.

Youth movement rising for C-I boys XC

JOHN WAGNER

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Coach: Josh Lowman.

Last year: Second at Mississippi 8 Championships.

Top returnees: Senior Lucashio Larson; juniors Jeremiah Guldseth, Hudson Dombek.

Outlook: While the Bluejackets lose just two runners from last season, the losses were a state placewinner in Hunter Jacobson and another all-conference performer in Austin Burgess.

But C-I has 80 runners on the roster, including a number of younger runners who crushed the competition on the junior high level. Last year the Bluejackets won the M8 junior high league meet by taking the top four places as well as 10 of the top 19 — no other school had more than three.

“These guys cleaned up in middle school competition last year,” Lowman said. “But they had the luxury of doing that because our rosters were full. They’re ninth graders now, and also because of vacancies, they will be competing at that next level. ...

“And I think they’re ready [for the varsity]. We’ve got three of them that

have been running right with the varsity returners, and I think freshmen could make up over half the varsity lineup.”

While having 80 runners on the roster seems like a good problem, it can cause some concerns.

“It’s just hard to keep track of everyone, to be honest with you,” Lowman said. “It can be hard, when you have three coaches, to make sure that every kid gets the attention they need and deserve.”

“But we will have three full teams — varsity, JV, and then C team — for whatever meet we go to. And I think we have 21 middle schoolers, and they can run at the level that’s right for them.”

Last year’s league meet was a dog-fight in which Becker won by just nine points, while Big Lake was within five of C-I. But Becker’s top four runners were seniors, and was Big Lake’s top three. As a result, the Mississippi 8 meet will be wide-open this year.

“We’re hoping that this is the right time for us to fill in and compete for a top spot in the league, if not a championship,” Lowman said.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The Cambridge-Isanti girls cross country team looks to put together another strong effort at the Mississippi 8 Conference meet.

Bluejacket girls XC looks to rebuild

JOHN WAGNER

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Coach: Josh Lowman.

Last year: Fourth at Mississippi 8 Championships.

Top returnees: Junior Sydney Venhuizen; sophomores Ashley Husbyn, Lucia Larson.

Outlook: The Bluejacket girls lost two top runners from last season in all-league performers Makenna Sjoborg and Lydia Smisson, just as the boys’ team lost its top pair to graduation.

But the hit on the girls side was bigger, because C-I also had seniors as its fifth and sixth runners.

So the Bluejacket girls will look to rebuild. Fortunately the numbers in the program are decent, with more than 25 runners on the roster.

The top returnee is Larson, who placed 27th in last year’s meet as a freshman.

“Lucia Larson would probably be our top returner, and she is looking great,” Lowman said.

“I think she’s going to surprise some people.”

Venhuizen also returns with varsity experience, while Husbyn has some experience after a strong performance in track last spring.

“Ashley had a phenomenal year as a middle distance 400 runner,” Lowman said. “She’s a good enough athlete that she could make the varsity just because she’s a good athlete.”

But from that point, Cambridge-Isanti enters this season with questions that need to find answers.

While the roster does not have many upperclassmen, Lowman said that is not a worry.

“We lost some big leadership, but I don’t think that we will have any issues because we have some girls who are phenomenal,” he said. “They’re on autopilot;

they can run their own practice, up to a point.

“The girls need very little hand-holding to get stuff done. Girls like [junior] Julia Steman and Sydney and Lucia have been great leaders.”

Last year’s league meet was very tight behind champion Becker, with the next four teams all with 30 points of one another.

“I think the girls’ side is going to be dominated by the Becker girls,” Lowman said. “I don’t see anybody touch them — I don’t even think they’ve peaked yet. ...

“Monticello’s rebuilding that program, and Chisago Lakes continues to put together really strong teams. But I hope we’ll be competing for a top-five finish.”

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PHOTO BY JOHN WAGNER

For the second year in a row the C-I boys soccer program will be led by a large senior class.

Large senior class lifts goals of C-I boys soccer

JOHN WAGNER

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Coach: Joe Kassa.
Last year: 6-6-4 overall; 4-2-2 Mississippi 8.

Top returnees: Seniors Zach Bauer, D; Hayden Erickson, M; Jaydon Fuhol, D; Noah Ihrke, M; Nico Levitski, D; Alex Martin, M.

Outlook: The Bluejackets were hit hard by graduation, which removed seven varsity seniors from last year's squad. Fortunately, C-I has 10 seniors on this year's roster, which should help provide continuity for this year.

"Among midfielders and defenders is where a big chunk of our seniors are this year," Kassa said. "Our whole defensive line except for one is a senior, and our midfielders are all seniors."

Those two groups will be helping two young goalkeepers, junior Nathan Nestrud and sophomore Xavier

Amdahl, gain experience in an unfamiliar position.

"Xavier and Nathan are typically 'field' players, but Nathan was our backup last year," Kassa said. "They both prefer to be on the field, but we've got to put somebody in goal."

On defense, seniors Jaydon Fuhol and Nico Levitski, two honorable mention all-league choices last season, will lead the way along with senior Zach Bauer.

"They have kind of been the anchors in our defense for the last few years — they have been a core that has been there," Kassa said. "Wyatt Overman is a junior on defense. They have got some experience with each other and have some chemistry."

"They are going to be the anchors since they have the experience."

Senior Alex Martin, an All-Mississippi 8 choice last

season, will return to a center midfield position.

"He is going to be our facilitator and our distributor," Kassa said of Martin. "He can control the pace of the game and shut down whatever he needs to shut down so it doesn't get to our defense."

Seniors Noah Ihrke and Hayden Erickson will play on the wings of the midfield — "And they're going to be expected to do a lot of running," Kassa said — while juniors Damien Kassa and Greydin Kreyer also will see significant action.

Up front, Coach Kassa said his team hopes to use the speed of juniors Colton Becker and Javier Catalan to generate offense through counterattacks.

"We are trying to get them to play off the defensive line and make a run through the back line," Kassa said. "One will make a run checking to the ball. The other will make a run on the back side where the defenders aren't necessarily paying attention. We'll try to hit them on the run on a through ball."

"We want to use their speed to our advantage; we'll try to not get into a slow-paced attack in the attacking third. Our speed is our advantage, and so we need to capitalize on that."



PHOTO BY JOHN WAGNER

The 2026 Cambridge-Isanti girls soccer team, which returned nearly its entire lineup from last season, features 12 seniors on its varsity roster.

C-I girls soccer welcomes back experienced group

JOHN WAGNER

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Coach: Tyler Hayft.

Last year: 3-10-1, 1-6-1 Mississippi 8.

Top returnees: Seniors Olivia Herbert, GK; Avery Janssen, D; Avaeh Martin, D; Finley Nelson, F; Allie Nystrom, M; Jenna Thomas, D.

Outlook: The Bluejackets return nearly the entire roster from last season, which Hayft said will lead to heightened expectations for the coming year.

The excitement begins on the backline, where senior goalkeeper Olivia Herbert — who has been in goal since eighth grade — returns after earning all-conference honors last season.

"It's easy to rely on her, especially playing with her feet," Hayft said of Herbert. "It just changes the whole way we play, because having a goalie that can use her feet is just a huge relief for everybody."

"She's basically a fifth defender. Very rarely is she standing in her box; she's usually parked out at the 30-yard line as an outlet, kind of a fail safe."

The C-I defense also boasts experience thanks to the return of Janssen, Martin and Thomas, who was an honorable mention choice in the league a year ago.

"They've got this chemistry that you really can't make," Hayft said. "They have hung out since they were little, so they just trust each other so much."

Nystrom, another all-league choice

last season, returns to button up the midfield.

On offense the options feature Nelson, an All-Mississippi 8 performer, paired with fellow senior Emery Dobda, who missed last season because of an ACL injury. Freshman Averi Darling and sophomore Siena Wolcyn also will impact the team's scoring.

The expectations for the girls in the league are similar to the boys: Push for a spot in the upper half of the Mississippi 8. Hayft said the goal is a strong start; C-I opened this season with a tight 1-0 loss at Irondale before rebounding to beat Sauk Rapids-Rice two days later.

But the next step is to not repeat last year, where the team followed up a season-opening win with seven straight losses.

"I think we really struggled last year with getting out ahead of teams and staying out ahead of teams," he said. "We constantly were trying to claw back, and it's just so hard to play from behind."

"So it's really going to come down to how we come out of the gate, and I think we're better at that this season. We just have a little bit more maturity."

The boys and girls also share the same section fate: Section 7AA is one of the deepest in the state.

"From a depth standpoint, the top end has great teams like Duluth East and Blaine and Centennial," Hayft said. "If we're able to jump over Forest Lake, Coon Rapids, maybe Anoka, that's a huge achievement in and of itself."



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PHOTO BY JOJO'S PHOTO & STUDIO

The Cambridge-Isanti girls tennis team is working to claim a third straight Mississippi 8 team title.

Bluejacket girls tennis hopes to reload in '26

JOHN WAGNER

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Coach: Thea Lowman.

Last year: Mississippi 8 co-champions, Class AA state team qualifier.

Top returnees: Seniors Anya Lowman, Clarabelle Sjodin. Junior Scarlet Porta. Sophomores Addison Sullivan, Allison Troolin.

Outlook: Last year was a dream season for the Bluejackets, who won a share of the Mississippi 8 title before advancing as a team to the state tournament for the first time in program history.

"We graduated five out of 10 players in our lineup, including three out of four in our singles lineup," Thea Lowman said. "So we lost some key players, but we still have nine girls who have played at the state tournament, and that is motivating."

"A lot of our players worked hard this summer. And hearing the girls talk, the conversation was around focus, intensity, and consistency. That is cool."

While the losses were substantial, a number of key players do return. Porta was a constant at second singles last season, while Anya Lowman and Troolin were regulars in the varsity lineup; all three earned all-conference honors a year ago.

The key, according to Coach Lowman, is figuring out who will play at what position.

"We're absolutely tinkering with

the lineup," she said. "It is a puzzle, and it's something we're still trying to figure out. When you play a team, and you know where their strengths are, you're trying to find your four points. So we will move players around to try to get those four points, shift someone back over to doubles or vice versa. ...

"As the season goes along, the lineup will become a little sturdier. But we'll still be playing the game of 'Switch the Lineup' because this is how we'll get to four points."

The certainties are Porta handling first singles, and Troolin close behind at second or third singles. Anya Lowman is a valuable piece to the puzzle because of her ability to play either singles or doubles — she has been named one of the Mississippi 8's Doubles Players of the Year each of the past two seasons, despite having two different partners.

Because of the talent returning and the program's depth, which comes from having more than 40 players on the roster, Coach Lowman feels C-I has a chance to compete for another league title.

"There's going to be some tough competition in the Mississippi 8," she said. "It's there's going to be a battle for the league title for sure."

"And our section has some very good teams such as Forest Lake, Blaine, Duluth East, Centennial and some others. It's going to be a challenging season."



PHOTO BY JOHN WAGNER

The 2026 Cambridge-Isanti girls swim team has the depth and talent to replace a graduating class that included 10 swimmers a year ago.

Cambridge-Isanti girls swim team looks to continue rise

JOHN WAGNER

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Coach: Kurt Williams.

Last year: Seventh at Section 7AA meet.

Top returnees: Senior Alison Willits, back, free. Junior Anika Michaelis, diving. Freshman Carly Asmussen, fly, free. Eighth grader Raelynn Dybvig, breast, free.

Outlook: Even though the Bluejackets lost a solid senior class from a year ago, Williams feels his team will surprise people this fall.

"We're a younger team, but we have some real speed coming back," he said. "We have a lot of good talent in our younger classes this year for sure."

Among the returnees are two strong divers in Michaelis, who advanced to state a year ago, and Evellyn Schmitt, a junior who just missed advancing to state.

In the pool, one of the leaders is Willits, who earned all-conference honors last season and advanced to the podium in the section meet.

"We're trying to figure out that second event for Alison besides the backstroke this year," Williams said. "She loves the IM, but she's really great at the 200 free, too. We're just trying to see what that second event for Alison will be this year."

Among the top young swimmers for the Bluejackets are Asmussen, who put together a strong section performance in the 100-meter fly as well as the 200 free, and Dybvig was impressive as a seventh grader competing in the breaststroke.

Williams said he is proud of the steps forward the program has taken in the past few seasons.

"I think we bring a lot of talent and a lot of excitement to the pool this year," he said. "Our starting bar keeps getting higher and higher each year that we've been doing this. And seeing the depth increase year after year has been great."

"We're trying to continue to keep the growth going in our middle schools, our seventh and eighth graders. We've got a good class of seventh graders, and we have a good returning class that are eighth graders this year."

"I really love to see that year-over-year commitment."

The concern is that Cambridge-Isanti faces tough competition in its league and section. The Mississippi 8 features defending state champion Monticello, among other tough opponents, while Section 7AA includes deep programs such as Blaine, Duluth East and Centennial.

"Monticello is cream of the crop in the state, and Becker has a strong team coming back," Williams said. "Chicago and Princeton have historically been just that one tier ahead of us; that's where we would like to close that gap between us and those schools."

"In the section, we want to work to stay ahead of Coon Rapids and try to close the gap between us and Anoka and those other teams that are in that middle group."

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PHOTO BY JOHN WAGNER

The Cambridge-Isanti volleyball team features six seasons, a group led by returning All-Mississippi 8 Conference honorable mention performer Emma Bosma.

New coach, new spirit for C-I volleyball

JOHN WAGNER

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Coach: Arei Stokes.

Last year: 4-24 overall, 1-7 Mississippi 8.

Top returnees: Seniors Addie Larkin, opposite; Jade Heifort, OH/DS; Nora Gustafson, DS; Emma Bosma, setter/opposite; Emma Zehoski, DS; Nora Willmert, setter/opposite.

Outlook: During a recent scrimmage at Forest Lake, Bosma stopped the action to tie her shoelace. Suddenly, the entire Bluejacket squad started cheering until a slightly embarrassed Bosma finished, and action resumed.

That positive attitude is one of the things Stokes has learned about the team since she started working with the squad in June.

"They love volleyball," she said. "They want to be in the gym; they want to be having fun, and they will do whatever it takes to play volleyball, which is a really, really fun thing to be around."

"And they make the sport fun. You know, sometimes the sport can be extremely serious, and it's hard not to get out of that mentality. But they change the game and they smile and they have fun, which is such a fun thing to be around."

Stokes said there have been changes in the program, but the biggest changes won't happen on the court.

"I have a lot of different accountability things, and I think that was a big change for them," she said. "But for X's and O's, really, those were small. ..."

"Everything's an adjustment when you have a change. So they adjusted to me, and I had to adjust to them. So we're really working on the adaptability of a team."

Stokes joked that one of her biggest adjustments is learning all the players in the program.

"On the varsity I have two Noras and two Emmas," Stokes said with a laugh. "And then I also have an Addison and an Addie on the team."

Bosma was an honorable mention all-league player last fall, and she and Willmert will do most of the setting for the squad.

As for expectations this season, Stokes said she is not focused on wins and losses.

"I had a pair of player meetings before tryouts even began so the expectations were very clear, from varsity to freshman," she said. "We're going to be working hard. We're not going to miss practices, although we'll have illnesses and things that you can't control. ..."

"We're not just playing volleyball here; we're trying to create outstanding women for society. We want them to go out into the world and do the best that they can do. We want them to take volleyball and grow with it."



PHOTO BY JOHN WAGNER

The Braham volleyball team returns a number of key players from last season and is led by six seniors.

Braham volleyball uses HIPPO to grow

JOHN WAGNER

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Coach: Emily Giffrow.

Last year: 11-18 overall, 5-6 Great River Conference.

Top returnees: Seniors Olivia Kiesz, OH; Grace Kuhnke, DS; Lauren Leniz, setter; Morgan Rysdam, OH. Junior Bristol Lakeberg, MH; Izzy Shockman, DS.

Outlook: The Bombers lost two seniors from last year's lineup, so Giffrow said this year's squad is already settling in to roles and responsibilities.

"The level of comfortability that they have, and the chemistry that they've already started to create, especially in the summer, has been great," she said. "They have a lot of experience and connections with each other that you can't just create on a whim."

That showed up on the floor when Braham posted a strong 3-1 record in the Royalton Invitational to open the season. It also showed up in the team's acronym to guide them this season: HIPPO.

"HIPPO stands for Heart, Intention, Progression, Passion, and Outwork," Giffrow explained. "Those are the core values that they want to live out. And we really have been intentional with getting them to make

those steps practical.

"The basic expectations are that we're always on time, we're always working hard, giving our best effort."

"The team came up with HIPPO, and they make sure that we're holding all athletes to that high standard all the time. We guide them and encouraging them to think about their values and expectations, but then for them to create that was really special. I think it means more coming from them, too."

The team is led by hitters such as Rysdam and Kiesz, while Lakeberg, who missed last year because of injury, is expected to step into a role in the middle. Leniz will run the offense from her setter position, while Kuhnke and Shockman will play key roles on defense.

In the league, Giffrow noted that Rush City deserves the headlines it receives, but Crosby-Ironton and Mora also present challenges.

"No matter what night of the week you're playing, we have so many good teams in our conference," she said. "A few years ago we added schools like Mora and Crosby-Ironton, and I really like that, actually. It challenges us so much to just grow and get better for post-season."

"Any time we play in our conference is always a great opportunity to compete."



Bomber football features young roster

JOHN WAGNER

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Coach: Shawn Kuhnke.

Last year: 7-3 overall, 5-2 Northeast — Silver.

Top returnees: Seniors David Longgren, RB/LB; Dominic Nahl, OL/DL. Juniors Ryder Olson, RB/LB; Matthew Blomdahl, QB/DB. Sophomore Eli Benzen, WR/LB.

Outlook: Last year the Bombers were led by a deep and talented senior class, so one of the first steps this year's team needs to take is determining who will step up to replace those graduates.

"That's going to be our biggest challenge for this fall: replacing a lot of experience on the varsity field," Kuhnke said. "We are inexperienced, there's no doubt about it. We're young, but we're better today than we were day one of camp."

"We've got kids that are working very hard, getting better every day, and that's



PHOTO BY JOHN WAGNER

The Braham football team is a young squad that features just five seniors.

all you can ask of them."

The challenge grows because the football roster this fall includes just five seniors.

"It's a double-edged sword because we

lose a lot of experience and we're not very old," Kuhnke said. "So we're going to be playing a lot of underclassmen, which serves well for the future, hopefully."

Among the expected leaders is

Longgren, who has bounced back from injury, and Nahl, who will be a line anchor on both sides of the ball.

Despite the inexperienced roster, Kuhnke said the goals for this season haven't changed from past years.

"It doesn't matter how many seniors we have on the field, and it doesn't matter how many ninth graders we have on the field, our goals will remain the same: every time we take the field on a Friday night, we still want to come off and walk off that field with a W," he said. "Now, whether we accomplish those goals or not, that will be determined by how much work we put into it between now and then and how much better we get. ..."

"As coaches always say, all you can control is what you can control. We're going to coach our kids hard when they're on the field with us, and the chips will fall where they may."

Bomber XC continues progress

JOHN WAGNER

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Coach: Ray Abraham.

Last year: Boys were fourth in Great River Conference; girls were third in GRC.

Top returnees: Boys—Juniors Dexter Floding, Aiden Ward, Tycen Woods. Girls—Junior Piper Anderson; sophomore Sayler Swanson; freshman Audi Shockman.

Outlook: On the boys side, the Bombers roster continues to grow, which Abraham said is leading to greater competition on the roster.

"I think that's what they need to find: how to compete, not only against competition, but against each other to push each other forward," he said. "Good team competition is what usually drives a lot of good cross-country teams — that friendly, competitive nature between everyone."

Abraham said the boys in the program have goals for this season as well as for the future.

"They want to do their best ever, and some of them want to train for 10Ks and half marathons in the future," he said. "That's awesome to hear, because we've never really had people before that have



PHOTO BY JOHN WAGNER

Last year the Braham girls cross country team placed third at the Great River Conference meet, while the Bomber boys took fourth.

been interested in running outside of cross-country."

In last year's league meet, Ward finished 19th overall while Floding and Woods finished 34th and 35th, respectively.

This year's influx of younger runners gives Raymond 10 runners on the boys' roster, nearly all of whom have learned of the coach's expectations for the program.

"I think it's making the program a lot

better, just having people that have been in the program for longer, because then they kind of know what's expected, especially for workouts," he said. "They can bring in the new people and let them know what's going on."

"I'm really hoping that they can take that leadership to the next level, embracing that leadership role versus just running. We have Adam Fix, who is a great

leader on our team because, even though he's not always the fastest kid, he's doing all the extra stuff.

"We also have some interesting freshmen. We just need more people like Adam to kind of keep pushing those boys forward."

On the girls side, Eklund returns after an ACL injury cost her all of last season, and she adds to a group of 10 runners who will help give Abraham choices in filling out a roster.

"Sayler Swanson and Piper Anderson are a good place to start, and I think Maddie Eklund could have a good year. Audi Shockman and Makenna Heath are ninth grader who I think could have some good times, too."

Shockman placed 10th at the league meet, while Anderson was 16th and Swanson placed 22nd.

Part of the reason for excitement entering this season is the work the girls did in the summer, but another is their willingness to challenge one another — and others.

"Our girls are really, really competitive," Abraham said. "They like to beat anyone next to them, which is great. I love it. You cannot coach that, and you can't teach it. You either do it or you don't."

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CCS boys soccer looks to push for MCAC's Tier 1

JOHN WAGNER

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Coach: John Newton.

Last year: 10-9-2 overall, 9-8-2 Minnesota Christian Athletic Conference.

Top returnees: Seniors Malcolm Blake, Gavin Estenson, Landon Pepper. Juniors Eli Harper, Raef Larson, Micah Ward. Sophomore Miles Sundberg.

Outlook: The success the Warriors have experienced on the pitch in recent years has helped elevate the expectations for this season.

"This group has a really good mix of appreciating what it took to be successful, and the desire to continue to improve and be better — while also having the talent that can back that up," Newton said. "This group works hard and enjoys working as a team."

Last season CCS won the MCAC Tier 2 title, and this year the team wants to step up into Tier 1.

"Tier 1 has more of the higher-level teams, and I think we'll be very close to that," Newton said. "I think the



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Cambridge Christian returns all but two starters from last season's team, which won the MCAC Tier 2 tournament title.

expectations would be that we are competing for that upper tier, with maybe an outside chance to be somewhere in that championship range or at least close to it."

While the Warriors lost only two regulars from last season, those losses were

the team's starting goalkeeper and center defender.

"We're very physical, and we have very good athletes on defense and in our new goal position," Newton said. "We just lack some experience. I think that could be

our Achilles heel; there will be games this year where we will have to chalk it up to gaining experience, and learning something that will make us better."

Among the team's top players are Estenson — "Gavin should be right up there with the best players in the league," Newton said — and other scoring threats such as Harper and Sundberg.

Pepper will play a key role in the team's center defense as will Larson, while Blake and Ward will handle the midfield.

"I think the exciting part with this season is there's not one player where I say, boy, that kid is head and shoulders above everybody else," Newton said. "There's a really good core of five, six, seven players that are all talented and work well as the team. ..."

"It makes us hard to game plan against. And I think teams are better than individuals over the long run. Obviously every coach wants the most talented player, but sometimes the team that comes together and works the best is actually the better thing to have in the long run."

Warrior volleyball looks to take step forward

JOHN WAGNER

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Coach: Madi Domino.

Last year: 7-15 overall; 7-15 Minnesota Christian Athletic Conference.

Top returnees: Seniors Grace Conniff, Elli Mitchell, Avery VanAnda. Junior Eliza Gustafson. Sophomore Faith Conniff.

Outlook: There is real excitement surrounding the Warriors, who return all of their starters from last season.

"It's been an exciting start because we have a big group, and we have four seniors this year," Domino said. "I felt like last year was our building year, knowing that everyone was returning."

Grace Conniff and Mitchell serve as the team's middles and have dominated at the net in early matches; in the team's first two games each has collected 10 blocks, more than any other player in the league.

Faith Conniff has handled the setting chores this season while VanAnda plays with a brace to help her deal with a torn



PHOTO BY JOHN WAGNER

The Cambridge Christian volleyball team is pushing to earn a berth in the MCAC's Tier 1 tournament this fall.

ACL.

"Mostly we're running with Faith as our setter while Avery is just playing back row for us," Domino said. "Faith has a crazy

good connection with Grace — they do really well together.

"Faith may be the best all-around player on the team: she can hit, she can block,

and she can pass well. She's just an all-around great player. And she and her sister just know what each other's going to do on the court, which is really helpful."

Because of the experience gained last season, Domino feels this team has a chance to do big things.

"This is the year to see what everyone can do and give it their all," she said. "I feel they really built up their mental strength this year; they're a lot more emotionally mature, where they can kind of handle the pressure and just keep going. ..."

"I felt that at the start of the season, we were a month ahead of where I usually feel we're at, which was a good feeling to have."

Domino feels that earning a berth in the MCAC's Tier 1 tournament is a realistic goal.

"We're usually playing to get into Tier 1 and just miss it," she said. "So, the team's goal is to be in tier one at the end of the year."