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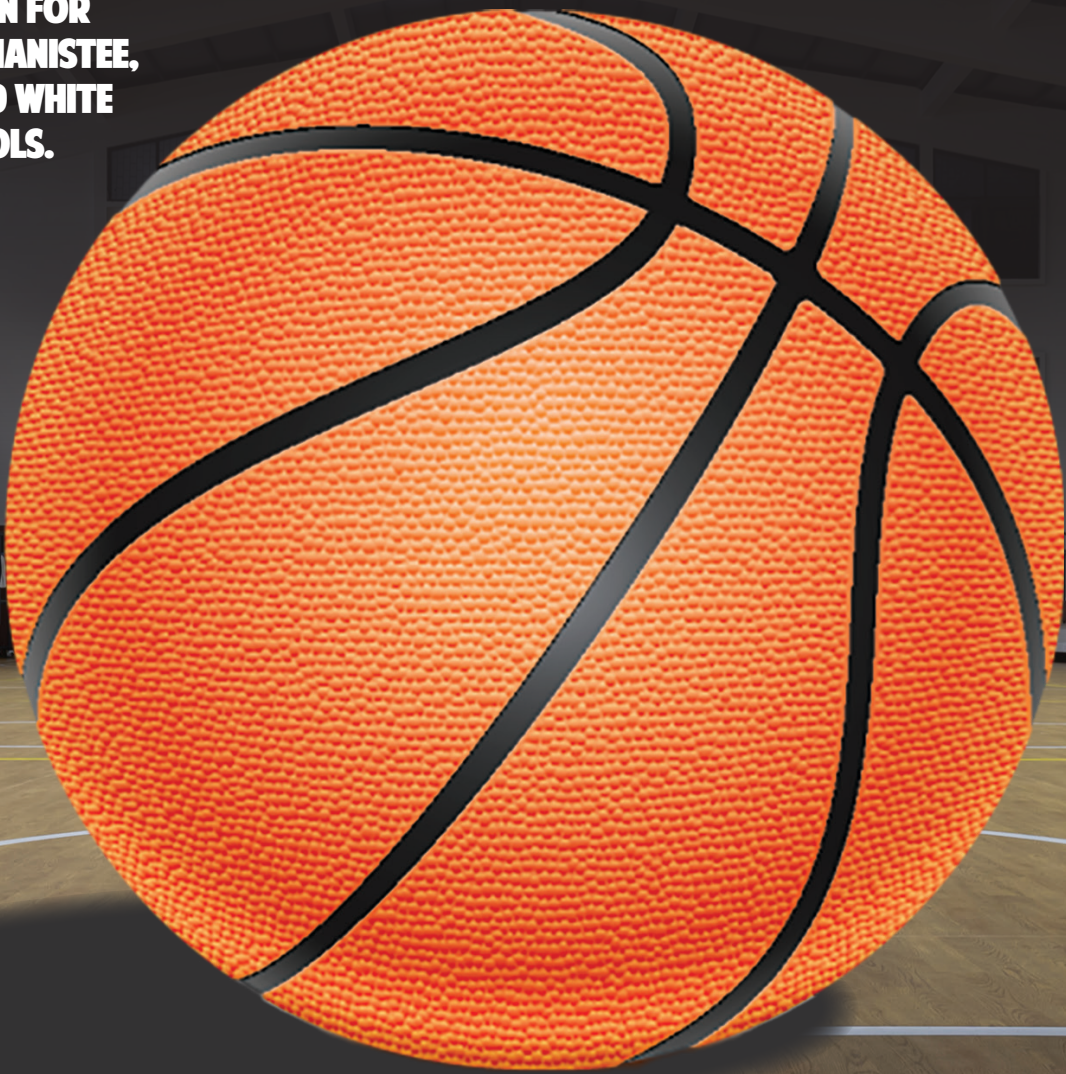


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Hart boys basketball leaning on comradery in 2025-26 season

BY SEAN CHASE
SHORELINE MEDIA SPORTS EDITOR

LUDINGTON — Last season, the Hart boys varsity basketball team was on the rise.

The Pirates look to continue that success in 2025-26 under third-year head coach Nick Bronsema.

Bronsema, 52-21 in three years at the helm, knows his team isn't where he wants them to be when the postseason rolls around. However, his team is full of kids willing to push past their comfort zone.

"We notice that our guys are unafraid to be coached," coach Bronsema said. "And at the same time we know we aren't near the finished product. We seek discomfort in practice so that we can operate comfortably on game night."

Hart returns four starters from last season, when it went 16-8 - 6-foot-5 senior guard Caleb Ackley, 5-foot-11 senior guard Jagger Lennon, 5-foot-11 senior guard Miguel Escamilla and 6-foot-3 senior guard Kolton Rockwell.



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR. | HERALD-JOURNAL

Hart's Caleb Ackley drives on the basket as Montague's Jack Degan defends. Hart won the game in Hart Nov. 26, 2024 by the score of 59-29.

During the 2024-25 season, the Pirates picked up a 56-55 win over Big Rapids in the Michigan High School Athletic Association Division 2 District 35 semifinals. However, their season ended in the district finals against Ludington, 64-49.

With the majority of his starting lineup back in the Red and White, coach Bronsema has pushed his players to focus on improving.

"We have been working on getting just a little better each day ever since we came up short in our district final game," coach Bronsema said. "Our guys have made a pact to give their best effort while displaying an unbreakable spirit in order to get better as a team every day. In

order to get to our best, we know every moment matters.

"We are here right now!" The Pirates finished second in the West Michigan Conference-Rivers Division race with a 9-3 conference record. They were second behind North Muskegon, who posted a 12-0 conference record.

While Hart brings a level of confidence to the court with four returning starters, coach Bronsema is excited to see how his class of newcomers impact the season.

The Pirates will have seven new players on the roster entering 2025-26 - senior guard Bryce Vanderkodde, junior 6-foot-6 guard Luke Vanderwil, sophomore guard Grant Ackley,

sophomore guard Trevor Vanderkodde, sophomore guard Lorenzo Furlan, junior guard Allen Alcala and junior guard Mason Guikema.

Although Hart is looking at running smaller lineups, it is leaning on the relationships between its players to help propel the Pirates past last season's success.

"This group of guys really love to be around each other," coach Bronsema said. "They are cohesive and are willing to play their role to the best of their abilities. Everybody is willing to play for the person next to them. Every player has value, and they feel valued by their coaches, teammates, and community."

The Pirates open their season with a road game against Montague on Dec. 2. They have 11 total road games in 2025-26, including three consecutive road games to end the season. From Feb. 13 to Feb. 19, they head to North Muskegon, Oakridge and Mason County Central.

Hart opens its home slate on Dec. 4 against Oakridge. From Dec. 15 to Jan. 8, 2026, it has three consecutive home games.

The Pirates have one more three-game homestand, starting on Jan. 16 against North Muskegon. They open WMC-Rivers action on Dec. 5 on the road against Hesperia.

Hart last won the WMC-Rivers Division during the 2022-23 season. It posted a 23-1 overall record while going 12-0 in WMC action.

The Pirates last district title came during the 2018-19 season, in a 60-31 win over Hesperia.



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR. | OCEANA'S HERALD-JOURNAL

Hart's Miguel Escamilla takes a shot during their 66-29 victory over Shelby Dec. 3 in Shelby.

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Hart girls basketball looks to continue success under new head coach

BY SEAN CHASE

SHORELINE MEDIA SPORTS EDITOR

HART — Last season was one to remember for the Hart girls varsity basketball team.

The Pirates rattled off 20-consecutive wins, secured a West Michigan Conference-Rivers Division crown with a perfect 12-0 record and locked up a Michigan High School Athletic Association Division 3 District 72 title.

However, things can change in a year.

Entering the 2025-26 season, Hart has a new head coach at the helm — Ron Williamson. However, he's very familiar with the talent he has inherited having been around the program for over a decade.

"We're going to play hard," coach Williamson said. "We're playing a tough non-conference schedule this year... We will be a competitive team."

Hart has a stout non-conference slate ahead of them as they face off with Nawaygo and Evart in January.

It also squares off with Kent City, Coopersville and Lowell in out of conference contests.

Coming off a 23-2 record last season, the stakes are high for the Pirates.

However, coach Williamson has talent across the board including multiple players from last year's WMC-Rivers title team.

"All together, there will be six returning players," coach Williamson said.

Two of those returners will be key for the Pirates as the season unfolds — juniors Rilynn Porter and Reese Smith. Both Smith



MATTHEW SCHEIDEL | HERALD-JOURNAL

Members of the Hart girls basketball team celebrate with the Hart student section after winning the Division 3, District 72 championship Friday night in Scottville.

and Porter were West Michigan Conference-Rivers first team All-Conference selections as sophomores.

"They're both two-year starters, coming back as juniors," coach Williamson said.

Porter, Hart's all-time assist leader, averaged over 10 points and four assists last season.

Outside of that, the Pirates only have two seniors on their roster.

"We're a young team," coach Williamson said.

Hart's roster will also feature Ava Johnson, Addison Schiller, Zoily Sarabia, Aurora Virtanen, Leah Walker, Caydence Bateson, Natalie Rosema, Joselyn Flores and Macy Riley.

Flores is on varsity as a sophomore and coach Williamson believes her quickness will allow her

to contribute during the season. That will come in handy as the conference race tightens up.

After winning the 2024-25 WMC-Rivers title, the Pirates are looking to repeat this season. However, coach Williamson is aware that Shelby will be aiming to unseat them. It went 10-2 in WMC-Rivers action in 2024-25.

"I think Shelby, on paper, might be favored," coach Williamson said. "With everything they have coming back, they're a young team. They're hungry."

Last season, Hart went 3-0 over the Tigers — including a 41-27 win in the MHSAA D3 District 72 championship game.

Last season Ravenna (3rd; 7-5), Mason County Central (4th; 6-6), Holton (5th; 4-8), North Muskegon (6th; 3-9) and Hes-

peria (7th; 0-12) rounded out the WMC-Rivers race. Entering 2025-26, they will all look to challenge the Pirates dominance as well.

Hart opens on the road against Shelby on Dec. 11 at 7 p.m.

The Pirates continue their conference slate with a home clash with Holton (Dec. 16) and a road trip to Hesperia (Jan. 6, 2026).

They will play a total of six conference home games with the final one coming on Feb. 20, 2026 as the Pirates welcome Mason County Central to town at 7 p.m.

Hart has five WMC road games this season, the final of which is on Feb. 24, 2026 in Holton.

The Pirates close their regular season slate with three consecutive road games.



MATTHEW SCHEIDEL | HERALD-JOURNAL

Hart's Rilynn Porter goes for a layup during the MHSAA Division 3, District 72 final against Shelby Friday night in Scottville.

Hesperia boys will have a young team in 2025

BY LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR.
SHORELINE MEDIA

HESPERIA — The Panthers boys basketball squad will feature a lot of young players, essentially putting a new team on the court for 2025.

Key returnees are Malakai Sellers and Nate Ruhstorfer.

And Panthers Head Coach Scott Warsaw said that jobs on his team are open.

Competing for positions on Warsaw's team include Weston Hasted, Marshall Morris, Dominic Rivera, Keegan Roberson, Ruhstorfer, Tyler Ramsey, Sellers, and Nate Sherburn.

"I believe they have a desire to win and a work ethic that matches," War-

saw said. "They will come at you the moment they step off the bus."

And Warsaw said that he expects that the Panthers work hard, be role models in the community and represent the community.

The Panthers lost a lot of players to graduation, particularly Ethan O'Neil, Andrew Sherburn and Vicente Cruz.

"We will be extremely young," Warsaw said. "Hopefully from last year's team, they will have learned the value of hard work."

Warsaw said his team will emphasize basketball fundamentals such as court spacing, weak side help, boxing out, communicating, shooting and dribbling.

Warsaw also said that he doesn't like to make predictions about how his team will fare in terms of wins and losses.

However, he said, "I know expectations are low, but mine are not."

"North Muskegon usually wins the league," Warsaw said.

"They are talented and well coached."

"Hart has a core of good young players."

With a new team, Warsaw said there are no career milestones coming to the Panthers this season.

But Warsaw is ecstatic about one of his players, Ruhstorfer.

"He's a straight-A student, participates in band, track and basketball, a true role model, speaks Portuguese and



SUPPLIED PHOTO./BROOKE HREN

The 2025-26 Hesperia boys basketball squad consists of: Back row L-R, Malakai Sellers, Keegan Roberson, Coach Scott Warsaw, Nathan Ruhstorfer, Tyler Rumsey. Front row L-R, Weston Hasted, Dominic Rivera, Nathan Sherburn, Marshall Morris

English and has traveled to several interesting places," Warsaw said. "He was born in Dakar, Senegal, and wants to become a minister."

Ruhstorfer combines hoops with character

BY LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR.
OCEANA'S HERAD-JOURNAL SPORTS WRITER

HESPERIA — Nate Ruhstorfer, a member of the 2025-26 varsity Panthers boys team, has been a traveler of sorts since his birth in Dakar, Senegal.

He has also been to Brazil before coming to Hesperia, where he also runs cross country and track.

Senegal is in West Africa along the Atlantic coast and Dakar is the nation's capital city.

Ruhstorfer was born in August, 2007 to missionaries David and Leonice Ruhstorfer, who were involved with the Malinke tribe

According to Ruhstorfer, he and his parents

traveled a lot, but he said that they lived in Senegal for about six years.

"I was born in Senegal and then, when I was born, and shortly after my mom became pregnant with my sister."

Ruhstorfer then said, "And then we went to Brazil, where she was born — my mom is Brazilian, and then we came to the United States and then we moved back to Senegal and we stayed there for about four years."

"And then we traveled back to Brazil and the U.S. for vacation," Ruhstorfer said.

"We stayed about two years in Brazil when my sister was born and then three years before we came to the U.S.," Ruhstor-

fer said.

His sister is Rokhaya Ruhstorfer, who participates in cross country, wrestling this year and track for the Panthers.

She has also participated in quiz bowl.

About how he likes having her sister in school with him, Ruhstorfer says that she's a good sister.

On November 18, Ruhstorfer won an advanced placement class award, scoring five out of five in the AP seminar.

It is an AP in English.

Also during his time at Hesperia, he has won a few student of the month awards.

"I've got one for academic excellence, I think

SEE RUHSTORFER FEATURE, A5

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Hesperia girls basketball looks to move up in WMC standings in 2025

BY LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR.
SHORELINE MEDIA

HESPERIA — With a girls basketball squad combining youth, experience, and desire, Hesperia's head coach said he expects to compete at a high level, grow during the season and make a jump up in the 2025 West Michigan Conference race.

According to Panthers Girls Head Coach Ty Elenbaas, the experience will come from key players Sarissa Conkle and Olivia Gerard.

"This will be their third year in the varsity program for both of them, which means they've seen just about everything they're going to see at this level," Elenbaas said.

And Elenbaas also said, "They've had opportunities to learn in a lot of different ways, and this is the year where we really expect all those reps and all that experience to pay off."

Youth will be served, Elenbaas said, by several



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The 2025-26 Hesperia girls varsity basketball team.

newcomers who he said could make an immediate impact.

Elenbaas talked about three of those newcomers.

"Emily McCallum and Chloe Rickard both played fifth-quarter varsity minutes and have

consistently come into the gym to put in time preparing for this season," Elenbaas said.

Additionally, Elenbaas said, "Their extra work and dedication are going to show up on the court in a big way."

Another newcomer,

Elenbaas said, is Maddie Bolles, an incoming freshman, who he said already is a high-level competitor.

"She has a lot of poise for a freshman, a diverse skill set, and real strength," Elenbaas said. "She's going to bring a dynamic to the floor that we

haven't had here for in a while."

Elenbaas said goodbye to Yasmine Luevano and Kaley Cousineau, who graduated following last season.

"Yasmine brought great character and leadership; she was a loved presence in our locker room and set the tone for how to be a great teammate," Elenbaas said.

"Kaley was our point guard and a strong ball handler who provided steadiness on the floor," Elenbaas said. "We'll miss them, but their graduation also opens doors for new players to step up and grow."

In order to be more successful this season, Elenbaas said he'll be emphasizing defense, to take pride in this team's ability to match up with teams, forcing those teams into taking the kind of shot they want to give up instead of the ones the other team wants.

"Offensively, we're going to be intentional about hunting opportuni-

ties for our best playmakers to make plays, both for themselves and their teammates," Elenbaas said.

Elenbaas also said, "These areas will help us take significant steps forward."

About this season's conference race, Elenbaas said that his team is no longer there to participate, but to make their mark.

"With the combination of experienced returners and talented newcomers, we believe we can take a significant jump in the league standings," Elenbaas said. "Our defense, work ethic and commitment to growth will help us compete every night."

"Shelby and Hart are still the teams to beat," Elenbaas said.

"Shelby has a strong young core that continues to improve and Hart is consistently tough and well-prepared."

Elenbaas also said that Hart and Shelby set a high standard for intensity and execution.

RUHSTORFER FEATURE: Hesperia's Ruhstorfer combines basketball with character

FROM PAGE A4

it was all A's, and a few leadership ones from band," Ruhstorfer said.

These awards are given out by the school.

Ruhstorfer also said that things are good in his classes this year so far.

"AP biology and math are the two harder ones for me," Ruhstorfer said.

About being a role model, Ruhstorfer said, "I think it's just a responsibility that

most people should have, which is doing the right thing."

"God gives us judgement on what we should do and what we shouldn't, so I try to do the right thing, obey coach."

Panthers Head Boys Basketball coach Scott Warsaw said, "Honestly, when I grow up, I want to be like him!"

"He's a straight-A student involved with his church and God, a very religious man, polite man, treats everyone with respect," War-

saw said.

Warsaw also said, "He volunteers to help those with physical and mental disabilities ... he's a regular member of the church; he's the first one at practice and the last to leave."

"He works hard, and he conducts himself properly."

"He's actually what we all should be," Warsaw said. "Everything he does, he sets a standard of excellence."

Ruhstorfer is a member of the Aetna Calvary Church in White Cloud,

Michigan.

During the summer, Ruhstorfer said he's involved with the Vacation Bible School.

Even though Ruhstorfer grew up with parents who were missionaries, he doesn't wish to be one.

I wasn't thinking about being a missionary," Ruhstorfer said. "I was thinking about being a pastor, a youth pastor, maybe being a teacher, a coach, I don't know."

"I was planning on going somewhere else, like, I

don't know, wherever God leads me, but maybe I'll come back," Ruhstorfer said.

Ruhstorfer said he hasn't been back to Senegal in around eight years.

Warsaw had another story about Nate.

Warsaw said, "He had an outing for band in Chicago so he missed practice, an excuse, right?"

"And so I'm opening the gym at 6:30 in the morning and there's Nate, running sprints to make up for the time he missed," Warsaw

said.

Warsaw also said, "I never have to worry about him, if he does the right thing, I know he's going to do the right thing."

"And everyone notices how hard he works," Warsaw said. "I'm talking about from the moment I saw him, the improvements he made in basketball is tremendous, but basketball is just a part of life, right?"

Warsaw concluded by saying, "It's just the person he is what we should all want to be."

Orioles looking to build on recent success in 25-26

BY SEAN CHASE

SHORELINE MEDIA SPORTS EDITOR

LUDINGTON — The Ludington boys varsity basketball team has become accustomed to success, reaching the Michigan High School Athletic Association Division 2 regional finals each of the past two seasons.

While that seems like a high bar to reach, the 2025-26 version of the Orioles may be the team to surpass their predecessors.

Entering the season, Ludington returns all five of its starters from last season – junior point guard Taj Williams, senior forward Cam Gunsell, junior shooting guard Messiah Himes, junior forward Steele Stowe



SEAN CHASE/DAILY NEWS

Ludington junior Taj Williams fires up shots at practice. Williams led the Orioles in scoring last season.

and senior small forward Micah Spunar.

"We're returning all five

starters from last year," Orioles' 23-year head coach Thad Shank said. "We were a super young basketball team last year. We were excited about the success we had with such a young team. Hopefully, we can take another step in the right direction this year. I thought at the end of the year, we kind of turned things around. We played pretty darn good basketball down the stretch.

"We return a couple kids that played meaningful minutes off the bench and we had a solid JV squad that we're bringing a couple of kids from, so we're in good shape."

Gunsell and Williams were D2 honorable mention All-State BCAM selections last season. Both

were also selected to the WMC-Lakes All-Conference first team.

The Orioles also have an infusion of youth headed their way as coach Shank has moved sophomore Kyle Himes Jr. and freshman Mikey Himes onto the varsity squad full time. Kyle Himes Jr. played meaningful minutes for the varsity team last season as a freshman. Both were large contributors to the Oriole's undefeated regular season in football.

Ludington's roster also features senior Zac Graham, junior Landon Ruboyianes, junior Jonathan Keith, junior Ethan Sweet, junior Keldan Moser and senior Xaine Smith.

Although the Orioles

are a younger team, it has the ability to overwhelm opponents with speed.

"We basically play with five guards every night," coach Shank said. "We don't have a lot of size."

However, with all the talent in the world, there is only one basketball player and coach Shank knows they'll have to be unselfish to succeed this season.

"We have a lot of talented perimeter players," coach Shank said. "That's a positive. But there's only one ball for five players. We have to be able to trust each other. We have to be able to make the extra pass. Basketball is a game where when you get good shots, you have a chance to be successful.

"It allows you to set

your defense and we have to be a team that's very unselfish and shares the basketball. If we do, we have enough weapons that we can be really hard to guard."

Coach Shank attributes the continued success of the Orioles basketball program to the groundwork of their youth program.

"It all starts with your feeder program," coach Shank said. "We've made a big emphasis in Ludington, since we're not in the big city, that we try to provide programs that get kids playing at an early age. The other thing about it is, Ludington takes a lot of pride in

SEE LUDINGTON BOYS BASKETBALL, A7

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Ludington girls basketball looking to continue success on the hardwood

BY SEAN CHASE

SHORELINE MEDIA SPORTS EDITOR

LUDINGTON — The Orioles have been a force to be reckoned with in terms of women's basketball recently, racking up a Michigan High School Athletic Association Division 2 state semifinals appearance and two regional titles since 2020.

In the 2025-26 season, the Ludington girls varsity basketball team is looking to make sure that run of success continues.

"We've had some good success," Orioles sixth-year head coach Warren Stowe said. "We've been lucky to have some good players."

Ludington's last regional crown was during the 2023-24 season. Last season, it reached the district semifinals but lost to Big Rapids, 38-46, in overtime. The Orioles posted a 17-6 overall record and were 10-2 in West Michigan Conference-Lakes action.

"The girls talked about (expectations) the other day," coach Stowe said. "They've got quite a big list, which is

good. But at a program like Ludington, these girls have worked really hard in the summer, in the offseason on their game. They want to compete for conference titles and district titles."

The biggest challenge Ludington faces in WMC-Lakes play is Fremont, who hasn't lost a conference game in two seasons. The Packers are 24-0 in conference play during that span.

"You just have to prepare and try to play your best game," coach Stowe said. "Fremont is very, very talented, but I don't think they're an unbeatable team. If you aren't playing your best game, they're fast paced, they trap a lot. They're very similar to us in that way. And if you don't take care of the ball, bad things are going to happen."

In terms of the league race, coach Stowe knows the competition will be stiff.

"I think the league as a collective whole is getting better," coach Stowe said. "Whitehall, Manistee and Montague are all continually getting better. Montague graduated a huge se-



DAILY NEWS FILE PHOTO

Ludington's Madelyn Kenyon drives inside during a game against Montague last season at Hawley Gym.

nior class, so they may be down a bit. ... Collectively, the league from top-to-bottom is better and I'd like to think we're in the top half of that. Obviously, you have to go play the games. The girls are preparing this season to try and win a league championship."

In the past four games against the Packers, that's been the issue that has plagued the Orioles.

Ludington features three returning seniors - Madelyn Kenyon, Jaelyn Laird and Ja-

cee Cole - that coach Stowe is leaning on to lead this otherwise young team. All three players have played significant minutes for the Orioles.

The roster also features junior Dalayna Slater, sophomore Leeahna Veeneman, senior Camille Brahm, sophomore Eloise Kwietniewski, sophomore Claire Keith, sophomore Grace Forfinski and sophomore Hestyn Stowe.

That will help after losing multiple key pieces to graduation.

"We lost a group that had been on varsity since they were sophomores," coach Stowe said. "We lost a lot of girls that had spent a lot of time in the program. You're not going to replace them, but trying to fill in those gaps is part of it. But, we've got girls that are up to the task."

On top of the senior leadership, coach Stowe is expecting big things out of junior Raevyn Thomas, who played varsity all last season.

While coach Stowe is looking to his upperclassmen for leadership, he's excited to see how the group of sophomores develops at the varsity level.

"We've got five sophomores up on varsity," coach Stowe said. "Eloise Kwietniewski and Grace Forfinski both came up as freshmen halfway through the season last year. They have some limited minutes on varsity and I expect them to build on what they did last year."

"This year it's full-go with those two."

With some many underclassmen on the roster,

coach Stowe has had to focus on getting them up to speed. But, he believes they're up for the task.

"That whole sophomore group, I think they're hungry and eager to have success," coach Stowe said. "They're very willing to learn. They're hard workers, just like the rest of the group is. ... It's been fun to have all that youth in there and really get to teach. It's been fun as a coach."

Although coaching will help bridge the gap between JV and varsity play, coach Stowe has been thankful for his upperclassmen.

"It's a rite of passage, as girls come up in the program, in the best possible way, they kind of get their butts kicked by the upperclassmen," coach Stowe said. "Madelyn Kenyon, Ja-see Cole and Jaelyn Laird, they're competing against those young girls just like they competed against Hailey Stowe and Abi Bandstra and those that came before them."

"I think that helps, we really do try to get after it in practice and compete."

LUDINGTON BOYS BASKETBALL: Ludington looks to improve defense, continue success

FROM PAGE A6

their basketball. So you have a lot of parents that make that extra effort to get their kids opportunities."

That focus on building a youth program has paid off, as the Orioles looked poised to dominate the conference race.

Whitehall has reigned supreme in the West Michigan Conference-Lakes Division in re-

cent history. It finished 11-1 in the conference last season while going 17-6 on the whole. The Orioles were second at 9-3 in WMC-Lakes action with a 16-9 overall record.

While the Vikings are expected to take a step back, coach Shank knows the competition for the conference title will be stiff again this season.

"Whitehall has had a couple of very good years and they've won the last two conference titles," coach Shank said. "The

conference championship goes through them. They're rebuilding a little bit this year after losing their all-state kid, Camden Thompson. Whitehall will definitely be a team to think about. Manistee is a much improved team over the past couple of years. I think they'll be very solid within the conference this year."

"It was a fairly young conference last year, other than Whitehall and Oakridge. I think it will be a very competitive con-

ference. But, we feel, if we play our best basketball, it's a conference that we can win."

Oakridge finished the WMC-Lakes race in third with a record of 8-4. It was 17-8 overall.

After reaching the Michigan High School Athletic Association Division 2 Regional 9 finale against Kingsford last season, coach Shank has made an effort to improve his team's defense.

"We've put a lot of focus on building a defensive

mentality," coach Shank said. "I think when we got the regional final against Kingsford last year, we weren't on a high enough level defensively to get the stops we needed. And that's not unusual for a group that was as young as we were."

"We're really focused on having a great half-court defense and being able to mix things up with a little bit of trapping to keep people off balance."

The Orioles open their season with a road trip to

Reed City on Dec. 2. They open their home slate on Dec. 4 against Spring Lake in Hawley Gymnasium.

Ludington plays four-consecutive road games after facing the Lakers. It's the longest road trip in its 2025-26 schedule.

On Feb. 19, the Orioles close the regular season at home against one of their rivals - Mason County Central.

They only have nine home games on their schedule.

Mariners boys basketball loaded with experience in Lakes swan song

BY GREG GIELCZYK

DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

MANISTEE – Let's address the 800-pound gorilla in the room before we proceed to analyze the Manistee Mariners boys basketball prospects for this season.

Point guard Kaden Kott has graduated, leaving behind a shining legacy and creating a vacancy everyone is aware exists.

Now that we have that out of the way, we can focus on this year's current crop of Mariners, and what might lie in store for them this season.

Exactly half of the 12 players on the varsity roster this season are returning from last year's team that recovered from a 1-6 start to reach the district championship game and finished 14-11 overall, 7-5 in the West Michigan Conference Lakes Division.

Bialik had just a seven-man rotation last year, and four of the guys he has back played in almost every game a year ago, giving the Mariners a ton of experience going into this season.

Three seniors who played valuable minutes last year were Landin Sowa, Braylen Zimmerman and Max Scharp.

Dayvion Neal-Berry, Chaos Davis and Ean Guenthardt are three juniors who also played a lot last season as sophomores.

Sowa, Zimmerman, Scharp and Neal-Berry started almost every game last year, and will be leaned on heavily this season because of that experience.

Zimmerman, a true



The 2025-26 Manistee boys basketball team. Front row left, Finnegan Nicholson, Aiden Luomala, Braylen Zimmerman, Wyatt Protasiewicz, Max Scharp, Brendan Bajtko and Chaos Davis. Back row left, Ean Guenthardt, Landin Sowa, Adam Olson, Ayden Miller, Dayvion Neal-Berry and Keegan Shannon.

GREG GIELCZYK/DAILY NEWS

point guard, has served the Mariners in that capacity through the summer and in pre-season scrimmages now that Kott has departed.

"I think this summer really helped, getting in the gym and having the group together without Kaden for the first time," Bialik said. "Kaden dominated the ball from a ball-handling standpoint, getting it across and setting up our offense for us."

"Braylen's been the point guard for this group, and is going to be a little more comfortable going back to his normal position."

"Really, nobody outside of Landin last year, had played with Kaden. Kaden had broke his arm early in the summer last year,

and didn't get to play in any of the summer stuff with us."

This group has grown accustomed to seeing Zimmerman out in front with the ball in his hands.

Bialik feels that from that perspective it makes Zimmerman's teammates also more comfortable having him direct the offense.

Sowa was on the varsity as a sophomore, and had an immediate impact, earning All-Conference Honorable Mention, and was named to the First Team All-Conference last year.

"I think Landin is one of the top five players in the conference, and everybody's going to key on Landin, and try to keep the ball out of Landin's

hands," Bialik said. "But, there's a lot of other people who can take some attention away from him."

"That's what I love about the summer, because you kind of get to learn what you're missing ... and you can talk until you're blue in the face about what we're going to miss about Kaden, because there were so many good things that he did on the basketball floor for us."

"But, Braylen is very similar to Kaden. They're both quick, they both handle the ball very well. We only turned the ball over 10 times a game last year, and in high school basketball that's not very many."

Many teams refrained from pressing the Mar-

iners last year because of how much speed they have with Neal-Berry, Zimmerman, Scharp, Davis, et al.

Filling out the roster are seniors Keegan Shannon, who sat out last year, and Ayden Miller, who hasn't played since his freshman year as well as juniors Adam Olson, Wyatt Protasiewicz, Aiden Luomala and Brennan Bajtko.

With more experience to open the season, the Mariners are hoping to get off to a much better start.

Last year, the Mariners were more of a slow it down and it kind of grind it out in a lot of close games.

Bialik says this could be different

"I think we'll have more variety in scorers each game," the coach said. "I think you'll see different leading scorers every night."

"Obviously, Landin is always going to be up there near the top. But, I think that second third (or) fourth guy could change every night."

"From that perspective, it makes us a tough team to play against because outside of Landin, there are a lot of guys that can beat you."

Bialik added that the Mariners are going to try to pick up the pace a little bit.

However, they also know their limitations.

"I think more of what I'm looking for is the different things we can do on defense this year," Bialik said. "I think being a little bit deeper, really does make a difference."

"But, I think defensively we have a little more flexibility, which will lead us into our offense, and maybe get some easy baskets that way."

This is Manistee's last year in the Lakes Division before joining the Rivers Division next season, and the Mariners would understandably like to win the title.

"My first two years (as Mariners coach) I think we were tied for last. We were fourth place last year. Those are stepping stones," Bialik said.

"You can't go from the bottom to the top overnight usually. Hopefully, we are making the right footprint. I hope we are able to push those top teams and at least be in the conversation coming down the stretch."

Mariners girls look to have better success with six seniors returning

BY GREG GIELCZYK

DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

MANISTEE - With a nearly full complement returning, the Manistee girls basketball team should be improved.

How much remains to be seen once the real games begin.

The Mariners lost only two seniors to graduation, and are bringing back six seniors who played major roles on last year's squad as juniors.

"I'm hoping that experience will be one of our strengths this year," Mariners long-time head coach Kenn Kott said. "These six girls that are seniors, they've been playing varsity basketball for a couple years now, and so we're hoping it all comes together this season."

"This is kind of a silly answer, but I look for all of them (to make an impact). I don't want to have to count on one person, I don't want to have to count on two people."

"We want to be a balanced team as much as possible. Sure, we're going to have leaders. Sure, we're going to have people that score a lot of points on certain nights."

"But, if anybody does have an off night, there is somebody that is going to step up and do the job."

Manistee struggled through a roller coaster season after reeling off a three-game winning streak in a 4-1 start, and finished 8-13.

The Mariners did reach the district finals, where they were defeated by Hart, 66-42.

Looking at his roster this year, Kott has every reason to be optimistic



MATTHEW SCHEIDEL | DAILY NEWS

Manistee's Avamae Fett drives inside during an MHSAA Division 3 district first round game against White Cloud in Scottville.

about their chances of improving on last year's win total with six seniors on the nine-player varsity roster.

Senior leadership is certainly one of the boxes Kott can check point guard and All-Conference point guard Alayna Edmondson leading the way as the recognized floor general who triggers the offense.

Edmondson possesses impressive quickness, and can turn on a dime, driving to the basket if she doesn't dish the rock to a teammate as a do-it-all playmaker.

She's joined in the starting lineup by senior wing Lindsey Gardner, a tough, physical player who has a nice shooting touch and

is an aggressive defender.

Rebounding strength is expected to come from fellow senior Avamae Fett, a power forward, who missed part of last season with an injury but gives the Mariners an interior presence.

"Alayna is just a bundle of energy, she's everywhere all the time," Kott says. "Lindsey Gardner is going to hopefully come into her own this year on the basketball floor."

"She's a lot stronger this year than she's ever been, and we're looking for her to play a major role."

"Avamae was hurt for a couple games last year when she was having a really good season and it kind of set her back a lit-



MATTHEW SCHEIDEL | DAILY NEWS

Manistee's Alayna Edmondson looks to shoot underneath the basket during an MHSAA Division 3, District 72 semifinal game against Hart in Scottville.

tle bit.

"We want to keep her healthy this season, and she can put on some big games for us."

Rounding out the senior class are guard/wing Gabby Senters who might just surprise some people, forward Maddy Wayward who is a pure shooter and post player Shalyn Harmon.

"Shalyn has come such a long ways in two years, it's utterly amazing," Kott said. "I keep telling her that just the confidence is what she needs to be a better player."

"But, she has really worked hard in the off-season to hopefully become an impact player for us."

Manistee has depth as well, with front court

players Maya Goodspeed, a sophomore forward who contributed some big minutes as a freshman, junior Annabelle Kieszkowski who played on the junior varsity last year and junior Emma Munro, another JV promotee.

"We're hoping that (Kieszkowski and Monroes) come around for us this year and not only play a good supporting role when they get in there, but they're going to have to learn because we lose six seniors," Kott said.

"I keep telling Maya that the sky is the limit for her, because she's an athlete. You're going to see her do some things on the basketball floor that many can do. We hope she does

a lot of that this year."

Although they have a lot of experience coming back, the Mariners also have enough new player to make the summer months key to having everyone familiar playing together.

Winning a bunch of games wasn't a priority. Just having the new players hopefully learning from the older girls.

Harmon, Fett and Goodspeed are all capable of playing in the post area, or slide over to power forward.

"We always like to run, we like to push the ball up the floor," Kott said. "But, we've been looking at things, and wondering sometimes if that is the right way, because we did have a lot of turnovers the last couple of years."

"And when you push the ball, you're going to have a lot of turnovers. Maybe we had too many because we were trying to push the ball too much."

"So, we'll see as the season goes on. You've got to be in shape to push the ball up the floor as well. We're working on that."

Especially with only nine players.

The Mariners like to press on defense, and have experienced the last couple years with man-to-man and different presses.

In the last year of competing in the Lakes Division of the West Michigan Conference, the Mariners are looking to be competitive against the top tier of Fremont and Ludington.

After hanging around .500 the last couple of years, the Mariners would like to take that next step and have a winning season.

Mason County Central boys' basketball team led by five seniors with experience

BY CHRISTY CHRISTMAS, SPORTS WRITER

SCOTTVILLE—The Spartan boys varsity basketball team has nine players; five are seniors who will lead the team with experience and a competitive spirit.

"My senior class are a lot of my travel ball (kids)," Chris VanderHaag, Mason County Central coach said. "I've had them for a lot of years ...the grass roots efforts of travel ball are beginning to pay off."

VanderHaag said the team has a lot of experience and they know the game, most of that experience coming in the years of travel ball and the efforts put forth outside of the traditional high school season.

"I'm really excited," VanderHaag indicated. "I've got a squad-these guys are going to just get better and better."

Senior Cole Vander-

Haag and junior Trent Hawke are expected to lead Central this season. VanderHaag was an all-state honorable mention a year ago and has been West Michigan all-conference twice. "I expect a really good year out of Cole this year," coach VanderHaag said.

"He's had a lot of gym and agility work." Hawke is a returning starter and has worked hard in the off-season, according to his coach.

Senior Kyle Peters, according to his coach, is a "smart basketball player, a workhorse. He's tough!" VanderHaag anticipates this season to be a breakout year for Caleb Bennetts, another senior. "(Caleb) is one of the best finishers. His confidence has caught up and he knows he can score," Vanderhaag commented.

Added to the mix this year is Michael Chye, a sophomore. "Chye played

junior varsity last year and was a leader there," VanderHaag noted. "Michael is a true point guard. He is super scrappy kid. He is an all-out effort guy."

Additionally, freshman Gannon Hansen will be on the varsity. "Gannon is a highly-skilled, well-balanced, high IQ player," VanderHaag said. "He shoots well and will be a guard/small forward."

A three-year varsity player, Tyler Norton is expected to have a really strong season. "There is a spark in Tyler," VanderHaag said. "He can run the floor. He is a brute and muscles and is wanting to win this year."

VanderHaag believes North Muskegon and Hart will be the teams to beat in the West Michigan Conference and believes MCC will be competitive with every team in the conference. Central will host the district tournament.



PHOTO COURTESY OF VINCE ROCKWELL PHOTOGRAPHY.

The 2025-26 Mason County Central boys varsity basketball team.

"This is a really fun group," said VanderHaag. "They are competitors. This group is even competitive in practices."

VanderHaag will be assisted by Pat Chye and

Trenton Strejcek. Coaching at the junior varsity level will be Jeff Carrier.

Central's Roster

Seniors: Kyle Peters, Cole VanderHaag, Grayden Etchison, Tyler

Norton, Caleb Bennetts
Juniors: Pierce Bladzick, Trent Hawke

Sophomore: Michael Chye

Freshman: Gannon Hansen

Lyon takes over at the helm for MCC girls

BY CHRISTY CHRISTMAS, DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

SCOTTVILLE — After 10 years as the junior varsity coach, Brent Lyon moves up to coach the varsity girls basketball team at Mason County Central this winter.

Lyon said, "I coached all the girls throughout the years." Lyon has coached travel ball as well and therefore has a familiarity with the girls on the team, making the transition very smooth.

The team is made up of 10 girls, three are underclassmen. "All fit in really well and we will grow to-

gether for the next few years," Lyon noted.

Led by seniors Jaycee Myer and Jessica Peterson, the Spartans have experience.

Myer is planning to play basketball at the college level and Peterson is a four-year varsity player. Both have been given the green light to shoot.

Another senior, Aubrey Chye, has seen a lot of varsity time on the floor and Lyon is expecting Chye to step up as a senior. "I'm looking forward to bringing out the talent in her," Lyon said.

Lyon indicated sophomores Jordan Aultman and Sophia Quick, as well as freshman Sage Griswold, will play a big role in the team this year. "Griswold is the smallest kid we have but she is a bulldog," Lyon noted.

Lyon sees depth as a strength for the Spartans. He believes he has a number of girls who can and will contribute. Although a bit height-challenged, Central will rely on really good defense and on shooting well.

Shelby and Hart are expected to be the conference

contenders, according to Lyon. Central will need to compete with these two experienced teams to have a shot at being in the upper level of the conference.

In the post season, MCC is assigned to go north to Maple City Glen Lake. They will compete with teams like Manistee, Benzie, Kingsley and Traverse City St. Francis.

Assisting Lyon this year will be Travis Aultman. The junior varsity coach is Kara Bishop, assisted by Rachel Miller.

Lyon is passionate about coaching, is excited about

building a new program that is his and watching the girls grow their talent. He also is hopeful the community will come out and support high school basketball, not just at MCC, but throughout the county.

His message to the community? Come back out and support high school sports. It's important! "The (athletes) have earned that by practicing so hard and by trying to be a part of the community," Lyon commented. "It would be awesome!"

"We want to win more games and have a lot more

fun," Lyon mentioned. The goal for the team is "make history!"

Playing basketball should be fun and if Lyon's team can accomplish that goal it is likely they will have more fun and make history along the way.

Central's Roster
Seniors: Ellen Norman, Jasmine Cooper, Jaycee Myer, Jessica Peterson, Aubrey Chye

Juniors: Aarilyn O'Brien, Keeley O'Hara
Sophomores: Jordan Aultman, Sophia Quick

Freshman: Sage Griswold

Experience, improved shooting give MCE boys basketball confidence

BY GREG GIELCZYK

DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

CUSTER - Although it presents a challenge scrimmaging 5-on-5 during practices, the Mason County Eastern boys basketball team will ride with nine players on the varsity roster this season.

In some ways, it's almost beneficial since the varsity coach will use a junior varsity player or two, and they can learn a lot going against the older guys.

The Cardinals graduated four players off last year's team that finished 5-18 and endured a couple long losing streaks.

Eastern was 5-9 in the West Michigan D League, and tied Mesick for fifth place.

One positive for the Cardinals is that they have a good number of juniors who played up on varsity as sophomores, giving them experience as well as two more years if they stick with the program.

Danny Bothwell and Aaron Drake are the only seniors on the team, with Afton Shoup, Milo Shoup, Keith Craig and Josh Rogers all coming back from last year.

Kaiden Lague, Arik Verschueren and Trevor Steffes all played on the junior varsity last year and will be vying for playing time.

Milo Shoup and Rogers both earned All-Conference Honorable Mention last year, and coach Boundy is hoping to see them make First Team this year.

Drake is the Cardinals big man, and gives them an interior presence



GREG GIELCZYK/DAILY NEWS

Mason County Eastern's boys basketball team is pictured. Front row left to right are Trevor Steffes, Kaiden Lague, team manager Ryan Tyndall, Arik Verschueren and Josh Rogers. Back row standing left to right are Afton Shoup, Aaron Drake, Milo Shoup, Danny Bothwell and head coach Austin Boundy.

along with scoring punch on second chance shots.

He's also a good defender, using his size and strength to keep the opponents out of the paint.

"From what I've seen, he's gotten stronger, and he's jumping higher, so I expect him to get a lot more rebounds," coach Boundy said. "He led our team in rebounds last year, but I think he'll get quite a few more."

"That will help our team get offensive rebounds, and get under the rim and score. Those are our three scorers right now."

"The conversations we (with Drake) had this

summer were trying to get him to not be so passive.

"Get down into the post, call for the ball, and when he gets it, go up with it. Sometimes last year he wouldn't want to score."

Drake is 6-foot-4 and 200 pounds, and can score on anybody.

Coach Boundy just wants him to get more aggressive.

Turnovers were a major problem for the Cardinals last year, and coach Boundy has emphasized the need to cut them down considerably if they want to be more successful.

Coach Boundy did see improvement in that area over the summer, especially with guards Milo Shoup and Rogers, along with better team chemistry.

"I think the shooting is getting a little bit better," coach Boundy added. "We didn't shoot very well last year."

"They play year round, they've been shooting a lot and look like better shooters right now. So, that's promising."

"Offensively, I'd like to see us get to the rim more. We tried to take more perimeter shots last year, and it didn't go well."

"Milo and Afton can shoot the ball pretty well. We don't have a ton of size, but they can still finish around the rim pretty well, even against bigger defenders."

Against most teams, the Cardinals will most likely slow it down and set their offense up since they only have nine guys.

Pushing the pace, and running, can tire a team out if it doesn't have the bench to keep sending in fresh troops.

"There's going to be games where I think we can kind of push the tempo, because we'll be faster than certain teams," coach Boundy

said. "If we can get down the court and score before they can get there, that would be ideal."

"It's going to depend on the matchups. I thought our defense looked a lot better this summer than it did during the regular season last year."

"Our emphasis was stopping guys from getting to the paint. They did really well with it."

Coach Boundy says Baldwin and Bear Lake will be teams to beat in the conference, and thinks the Cardinals can realistically finish in the top four.

If they can take care of the ball better.

Four starters return for Mason County Eastern girls, who were 12-8 last year

BY GREG GIELCZYK

DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

CUSTER - Following a season-opening win over Cadillac Heritage Christian, the Mason County Eastern girls basketball team slid into a three-game losing streak and had its fans wondering where things would go from there for the Cardinals.

The Cardinals responded from that 1-3 start with a six-game winning streak, improving to 7-3 on the season and went on to post a 12-8 record and reach the district finals, before season their season come to a close with a loss to Onekama.

Only one starter, Lucy Shoup, graduated off that team last year after averaging double figures in scoring and rebounding in the West Michigan D League as the Cardinals finished 8-5 for third place.

"Big shoes to fill, of course," Cardinals head coach Jacob Smith said. "And a lot of leadership there, because she played four years for me.

"But, some of these girls now this will be their third year. So, I expect the same dedication out of them as I have in the past.

"I don't see any weak spots, other than being a Division 4 school there's always a few weak spots."

The Cardinals welcome back four returning starters in juniors Annabelle Zwagerman Brailyn Johnson and Bryanna Hasenbank, and sophomore Aubrey Myers.

Coach Smith is looking for Annabelle Zwagerman to pick up some of the slack rebounding



GREG GIELCZYK/DAILY NEWS

Mason County Eastern girls basketball team is pictured. Front row kneeling left to right are Haley Bacon, Bryanna Hasenbank, Bridget Whitaker and Emma Whitaker. Back row left to right are Alice Shoup, Brailyn Johnson, Aubrey Myers, Elena Hopkins and Annabelle Zwagerman.

with Shoup's departure, and he's confident she can step her game up a bit inside.

Johnson takes Shoup's spot up top as the Cardinals' point guard, but she'll also move over to the two guard, and possibly even slide over to a wing, joining Hasenbank on the flanks.

Myers has been tabbed to fill the two guard spot, and showed a lot of promise with her shooting last year.

Eastern also has eighth grader Emma Whitaker on the varsity, where she'll be groomed to take over the point guard position in the future.

"Looking to get a little more scoring out of Brailyn. She led our team in scoring last year, but trying to do that from a point guard position is a little more difficult," coach Smith said. "But we're trying to get the ball distributed to her a little more often.

"We should get good rebounding out of Hasenbank and Zwagerman, and Myers is a good two guard for me. She ran some point for me last year, too.

"Fully expect them to compete hard. I think we should have a fairly quick team this year. Not that we've been slow in the

past."

Elena Hopkins, entering her fourth year on the varsity, is the team's lone senior and is a fine outside shooter according to coach Smith.

Rounding out the team are sophomore Bridget Whitaker and eighth grader Alice Shoup.

"It starts with getting the ball up and down the court, we'll see how Emma Whitaker can run point," coach Smith says. "She's a good outside shot herself.

"Even if she struggles at point and I have to bring in one of my two other girls to help her out, she'll get slotted into the two or

three guard.

"She's quick, good instincts. I expect to get some good rebounds out of Alice Shoup. She's the second tallest kid on the team, and the second highest vertical behind one of my juniors, and knows the game of basketball."

What are his goals for the team this season?

"Obviously, we'd like to compete for the league title," coach Smith said. "We had some close losses last year.

"This team is totally capable of winning the league. I don't know what Grand Traverse (Academy, new to the league)

has.

"Bear Lake is going to compete. They have a very good coach up there (former Manistee Catholic Central coach Todd Erickson).

"It just about the girls going out there and playing."

Eastern hosts the district tournament this year, and coach Smith says the Cardinals have a good chance of winning it.

The Cardinals have not won a district title in about seven years.

He added that they haven't been conference champions in about two decades.

2025 Montague boys basketball hope off season workouts become wins

BY LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR.
SHORELINE MEDIA

MONTAGUE — The 2025 Wildcats boys basketball program is seeking to translate this year's off-season player development efforts into a more competitive team this season.

And according to Wildcats Head Coach Nick Thaler, there will be opportunities for new players to make it to the varsity lineup this season.

Returning to the team this season, according to Thaler, include senior guards Noah Raeth, Kyle Earnest, and forwards Cole Herremans, Logan Hansen and Elijah Ellers.

They will be joined by junior guard Karter Johnson.

Thaler said that he expects them to compete daily and make the team better each day.

"We have a lot of guys who have the opportunity to crack the lineup and help us," Thaler said.

Expected to round out



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR. | BEACON

Montague's Cooper Bradley blocks the shot by Kolton Rockwell Nov. 26, 2024. The Pirates defeated the Wildcats, 59-29, in Hart.

the team, Thaler said, is a collective group of junior varsity players who will join the team following an off-season where these players hit the weight room and played summer basketball to

adjust to the game.

"We feel we have a great group of players that will compete and work hard to reach our goals," Thaler said.

"Our summer was competitive working with So-

phia Wiard and Harrison Sorrelle," Thaler said. "They helped elevate us as a group and we will play the guys who give us the best chance to be successful."

Wiard was an outstand-

ing player at Oakridge High School, where she was able to earn a full-ride scholarship to Toledo to play Division 1 basketball.

Following a successful, well-decorated career there, she went on to play professional basketball overseas.

"She is currently one of the best skill development trainers in West Michigan," Thaler said.

Sorrelle, Thaler said, was a four-year varsity player he coached at Grand Haven.

Scoring over 1,000 points, Sorrelle became one of the most successful players in the Grand Haven program's history.

Thaler said that Sorrelle was able to get a scholarship to play D-1 basketball at Air Force, but entered the transfer portal last year and currently plays for Division 2 nationally-ranked Lake Superior State.

Thaler said, "They

came in and provided additional skill development for our players and also provided them with direct knowledge from past experiences that can help them grow as athletes mentally."

"We needed to become more competitive and skilled across the board," Thaler said.

Additionally, Thaler said, "That is why we invested so much into our off-season in player development and giving them opportunities to play against high-level competition."

Thaler said that his team should be in the mix for the West Michigan Conference's Lakes Division title.

However, he also said, "Ludington is the best team in the conference."

"They return much of their team from last year," Thaler said.

"In the summer, they were competitive with a very good Muskegon program."

Montague girls basketball rebuilding in 2025 after graduation losses

BY LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR.
SHORELINE MEDIA

MONTAGUE — After several seniors graduated from the Wildcats girls basketball program at the end of last season, they are starting this one in a rebuilding phase.

But Wildcats Head Coach Jess DeBruin said that she expects her team to compete and finish in the top 3-4 in the West

Michigan Conference Lakes Division race.

Returning to the team this season is Gentry Knop, a senior point guard.

"Gentry will be a strong leader who was able to gain experience and contribute at the varsity level under a very strong, senior-led team last season," DeBruin said.

DeBruin also said, "She is knowledgeable of

the game and will bring both her leadership and knowledge to the team, on and off the court."

Talking about her expectations for her team this season, DeBruin said, "We're a young team, but I expect us to use our speed and style to compete and finish in the top 3-4 in the conference."

DeBruin is also looking to see what impact

her incoming players can make this season.

They are junior guard Gabby Dietz and Addi Smith, and junior forwards Molly Mulder and Annelise Schneider.

"This is a solid group of juniors that will bring speed, strength and ability to go to the basket to this year's team," DeBruin said. "They have played together since middle school and are

coming off a successful season at the junior varsity level."

Graduating from last season's team were Braylyn Bultema, Amanda Cederquist, Maize Collins, Addie Peterson, Addison Pranger, Jocelyn Rodriguez-Perez and Avah Vandermeulen.

"We graduated a talented senior class and will be in the rebuilding process, but this group

coming up will bring different roles and opportunities to the table that will make them competitive," DeBruin said.

"We have a young varsity team, but we bring a different style of play from last season that will allow us to be competitive," DeBruin also said.

She said that Fremont and Ludington will be the teams to beat this season.

Pentwater boys face big challenge with new team starting the season

BY GREG GIELCZYK
DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

PENTWATER – Trey Johnson's buzzer-beating 3-pointer to take down Baldwin, 55-52 and secure the Pentwater boys basketball team's Division 4 district championship at Mason County Eastern last year.

Finishing 21-3, the Falcons also won the West Michigan D League title. They had not won either since the 2019-20 season, when they tied for the league.

Considering the Falcons graduated Johnson and four other seniors — Kaleb Brown, Mikey Carlson, Nathan Macher and Johnny Arnouts who all were major contributors – it would not be surprising if their competitors might wonder if they might suffer a bit of a letdown this season.

Whether they'll win as many games, and repeat the conference and district titles, would be difficult under any circumstances.

Still, there is talent returning in seniors Abram Kieda, Brody Austin and Wyatt Roberts.

It was Austin's unfaltering in bounds pass to Johnson that set up the final second heroics last year.

Long-time Falcons head coach Ashley Lubera is counting on the contributions of the sophomore class of Kyle Oomen, Ben Roberson, Edgar Vazquez and Gavin Macher to help the Falcons get back to the regionals.

"Having a new group of athletes (with exchange student (Jacobo Martin Fernandez de Mora), provides an unlimited



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The 2025-26 Pentwater boys varsity basketball team. Back from left, Gavin Macher, Abram Kieda, Brody Austin and Kyle Oomen. Front from left, Wyatt Roberts, Ben Roberson and Jacobo Martin.

amount of growth and positive motivation to start a new chapter from last year's success," Lubera said.

"I know Brody Austin will continue to help lead this team with his strong work ethic, shooting ability and floor presence.

"Jacobo will make a great statistical leader. Wyatt Roberts is back as a playmaker. The man in the middle, Abram Kieda, has improved immensely, and will continue to contribute statistically down low and outside."

Kieda is very flexible playing inside the paint, and also has a good move

to step out for big shots.

Coach Lubera, who is entering her 18th consecutive year coaching the Falcon boys team with a 198-174 career record, feels all three seniors have strong skills and will contribute from all parts of the floor.

She sees the sophomore class as bringing lot of excitement, and will be valuable additions to the rotation, as well as the team's dynamic.

While there might be the one or two players who can light up the scoreboard, the Falcons expect more balance.

On any given night, any-

one from the group of four or five athletes could fill up the stat sheet and contribute to big wins.

"I have a solid group of seniors and sophomores this season," Lubera said. "We are versatile, and proud of our speed and court IQ.

"We will improve, and hopefully peak in the post-season as chemistry and court experience improve."

Obviously, the Falcons would like to win the league again, but they realize the road to the title will be challenging.

Everyone will be looking to knock off the Fal-

cons, especially since with a new team they could be vulnerable.

"We are accomplishing large goal setting in practice everyday, and each night we step on the floor will provide a test to our perseverance and skills," Lubera said.

"Our goal as a program is to tackle each and every day, moment by moment. We are prepared for any changes.

"The teams that pose the largest challenge in the league for us this season are Baldwin, Mesick, Bear Lake and Marion.

"We are looking forward to the aggressive style

of play, and the tough schedule. The non-conference schedule (Shelby, White Cloud, Muskegon Catholic Central, Western Michigan Christian, Muskegon Oakridge and Hesperia) of larger class schools should help challenge and prepare us for the post-season.

"Overall, with our experience (or lack of it) we need to stay focused on all of our strengths, and we could present ourselves as the team to beat in our conference."

It's guaranteed all the other conference teams will have the Falcons circled on their schedules.

Falcons girls adjusting to new coach, new system with three veterans back

BY GREG GIELCZYK

DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

PENTWATER – He had taken the first couple of steps, coaching middle school girls basketball for two years at Mason County Central and then spent two years running the JV program at Hart.

But, he knew that he wanted to eventually be given the opportunity to be the head guy at the varsity level.

That time is now for Brandon Knoll, who takes over the varsity girls program at Pentwater this season, replacing former coach Jeff Knapp, who spent only one season with the Falcons after took over from Joe Gorton.

Despite all of the upheaval, the Falcons still managed to post a 12-8 record last year, including an 8-5 mark in the West Michigan D League.

Pentwater closed out the regular season with five straight wins, including a win over Baldwin in the district opener, before losing to Manistee Catholic Central in the finals.

Manistee Catholic has since closed, and been replaced by Grand Traverse Academy, a team no one in the league is that familiar with.

"I'm like super excited. I think the team looks pretty good right now, and it's just fine-tuning little stuff right now," coach Knoll said. "Obviously, I'm the new guy, so it's a lot of new plays, new system ... stuff like that."

"The girls are buying in pretty well, and I think we're going to be pretty competitive. We only lost one (player) last year, that



Aubrie Adams (5) with the ball.

I know of."

But finding someone who'll step up and fill the vacancy created with the departure of Mandi Sayles won't be easy.

Sayles could be counted on to give the Falcons an average of six points per game.

More importantly, Sayles consistently had at least 10 rebounds and that part of her game will be missed the most.

"I watched a lot of their games last year, and I watched a lot of film from last year," Knoll said. "She was good in the paint, and a good rebounder."

"Filling her spot is going to be the major challenge this year. But, everyone else is coming back."

One of the key veterans is starter Aubrie Adams,

whose name frequently appeared at the top of the scoring list for the Falcons.

Lauren Davis is another returning starter, providing the Falcons with rebounding strength and an defensive presence down low.

Karina Olivarez brings starting experience to the front court as a returning guard, and is projected to be the Falcons' point guard.

The fourth spot was filled by Charlie Swanger, but she decided not to come out for the team this year.

So, coach Knoll has two open starting spots to fill.

"Aubrie will probably be our off guard, but should play some point guard as well," added

coach Knoll. "Lauren is going to be our forward."

"For lack of a better term, those are our big three. Karina and Aubrie play totally different styles."

"Karina is constantly on the go, 100 percent, and she's very good at setting up her teammates."

While she's not quite there yet offensively, but coach Knoll said Olivarez is good at pushing the pace.

Adams is probably the Falcons' best offensive player in terms of shooting the ball, especially from the perimeter and beyond the three-point arc.

"Lauren, I think, is going to be an absolute monster in the paint," coach Knoll said. "They

didn't really lean on her much for offense, which kind of surprised me. She put a lot of time in the summer, and got a lot of work in the paint."

"She's come a long way. She's very good at her layup, she has a good floater. And she's even stepping outside and hitting some 3-pointers now."

Coach Knoll opined that Davis is turning a knock down shooter and expects her to have a pretty big season.

The Falcons have three girls who can forward, and all are strong rebounders, which bodes well for the transition game.

Emma Workman-Grondsma returns for her sophomore season, after coming close to breaking the freshman single game rebounding mark last year.

Emelie Barter might be only a sophomore, but she's already proven to be a force inside with her rebounding and scoring.

"We practice rebounding every day, and that's with our guards, too," coach Knoll said. "So, I'm really hoping we're going to be a good rebounding team."

"That's the goal at least."

Riley Swanger is an eighth grader who coach Knoll feels has a lot of promise, and could be the Falcons' fourth guard.

Pentwater has another eighth grader who's been practicing with the varsity, but coach Knoll believes she isn't there yet.

"Just from what I saw on film, there's a ton of room for growth," coach Knoll said.

"It seemed like they

played pretty well together as a team last year."

"They kind of hurt themselves with turnovers and fouls. If we can tone that back, we can be a really good team."

"I love pressing. Our team is going to press a lot. With our team working on that, it's going to put us in high stress situations in practice."

"We're working on down shifting to get into our offense."

Other than pressing on defense, coach Knoll wants the Falcons to focus on closing out on shooters, hands up and communication then finishing it by rebounding the ball.

The Falcons are going to push a lot of pick and roll on offense.

"I really want our bigs onto the blocks, because I think they have a lot of talent," coach Knoll said. "So, in a perfect world, our three bigs can score some points on the blocks, and open it up for us to get some 3's."

"So, I kind of like to go inside, and then to kick it out."

Bear Lake and Big Rapids Crossroads Academy shared the West Michigan D League title last year with matching 13-1 conference records, and Pentwater was third at 9-5.

Coach Knoll expects the Lakers to be solid again returning several players, including key starters.

MCE is always a handful, and after suffering several close losses will be looking to make up the ground after several close losses last year.

The Falcons certainly believe they can push to finish in the top three, if not finish at the top.

GREG GIELCZYK | HERALD-JOURNAL

Reeths-Puffer boys basketball look to finish in top half of OK Green Conference

BY LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR.
SHORELINE MEDIA

MUSKEGON TWP. — The Reeths-Puffer head boys basketball coach, J.R. Wallace has set a goal for his boys basketball team to double their win total from last year and finish in the top half of the OK Green Conference standings for the 2025-26 season.

To help Wallace accomplish the goal he set for him, one of his key returners is Marvin Moore, who averaged 19 points, four rebounds and 3.5 assists last season.

Wallace also said that Moore should be a candidate for Player of the Year in the conference.

"He provides a level of stability for us with his quickness, ability to get to the basket and his improved shooting," Wallace said.

"Another returner that played some games for us last season is Hank Mitchellson, an utility player that can play in a bunch of spots; his brain and shooting ability are this sophomore's greatest assets," Wallace said.

"New additions for us are Justin Chan, a senior shooting guard that comes to us from Godwin Heights," Wallace said. "His shooting and overall hustle will help us."

"Another addition is Anthony Nueman," Wallace said. "He is a junior that is a rebounding machine that brings great energy, effort and focus when he's on the floor."

Wallace has to accomplish their goals this season without Brayden Mitchellson, who graduated.

According to Wallace,



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR. | BEACON

A Rockets players puts up a tough layup over his teammate.



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR. | BEACON

A Reeths-Puffer player attacks the rim during practice.

Brayden led the Rockets in scoring with 20-points- a-game and was the



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR. | BEACON

A Reeths-Puffer varsity basketball player attempts a layup during practice.

team's overall leader.

About his team, Wallace said, "Overall team chemistry is good; the sky's the limit for this group if everyone embraces their roles."

"We will be a scrappy group that plays team basketball that will be fun to watch," Wallace said.

"I believe we will surprise a bunch of teams and should finish in the top half of our conference," Wallace said. "Muskegon will be the fa-

vorites because of their overall team experience."

Wallace said that the Rockets will face some big games, one of them being Grand Haven on December 12, and two against Mona Shores on January 20 and February 10.

"The games against Mona have the added energy of being coached by my former college roommate-teammate TJ Meerman, so they will be heated battles," Wallace said.

Reeths-Puffer girls basketball optimistic about 2025 season

BY LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR.
SHORELINE MEDIA

MUSKEGON TWP. — The 2025 Reeths-Puffer girls basketball program is excited about their upcoming season, and the enthusiasm is starting with the head coach and being passed on to his players.

Rockets Head Coach Rodney Walker said, "Our team is bursting with energy, enthusiasm, and a shared belief in teamwork, hustle and relentless growth."

"Each workout, drill and game is fueled by a genuine love for the game and a commitment to supporting one another on and off the court," Walker said. "We're ready to embrace every challenge, celebrate every improvement, and create memories that will last a lifetime."

Walker said that this season will be all about fun, focus and continuous development.

"We're dedicated to building a cohesive unit where every player contributes, learns and leads with character," Walker said.

And Walker also said, "Expect fast-paced, high-intensity play, smarter decision making, and a culture of perseverance and positive energy."

"We can't wait to see the team's hard work translate into exciting games, lasting friendships and a delightful, growth driven season," Walker said.

Returning players who will help Walker maintain his team's goals for this season are Ashlyn David, Raquel Walker, Abrianna Do, Grace Tindall, Jaslynn



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR./BEACON

A Rockets guard looks for an open teammate to pass the ball to during a drill in practice.



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR./BEACON

A Reeths-Puffer girls varsity basketball player attempts a floater during practice ahead of Thanksgiving.

she will be one of our best on-ball defenders," Walker said. "She has a natural ability to lead through her actions on the court."

"Their contributions should help our rotation and tempo," Walker said.

The players who graduated, Mya Swain, Jenna Terpstra, Savannah Lockwood, Makaia Riley-McGuffey and Chloe Brainard could, according to Walker, create a situation where the players will have to step up quickly.

"We'll need patience as they grow, and we'll support them as they develop into reliable contributors who will help carry the team forward," Walker said.

Walker also said, "We aim to be a tougher, more disruptive defensive unit that creates opportunities off turnovers."

"Our defense should be the catalyst for offense, allowing us to push the pace and capitalize on transition opportunities," Walker said.

"We expect to be highly competitive with opportunities to win many games this season," Walker said. "Summer workouts and competitive play have prepared us to compete at a high level across the league."

The teams to beat in the conference race, according to Walker, are Muskegon, Mona Shores and Caledonia.

"They have strong chemistry and high-caliber players, making them all really tough opponents," Walker said. "Our focus remains on executing our game plan and maintaining our standards."

Kops and Trinity Moore.

According to Walker, these players are being counted on for leadership, chemistry and a solid foundation for the upcoming season.

"I expect these returning players to anchor our lineup with improved chemistry and leadership," Walker said.

"The work ethic they demonstrated this summer should translate into collective strengths that elevate the entire group and make this a very delightful season to watch as we execute together," Walker also said.

In addition, Walker said, "Our goal is to play as one-intentional, connected and unselfish."

"We will celebrate each other's gifts and talents, using them to strengthen

the team as a whole and achieve our shared objectives," Walker said.

And Walker will have a group of newcomers that he believes will make an impact during the upcoming season.

These players include Mariyana Spears, Addison Mitchelson and Olivia Ambler.

About Spears, Walker said, "Mariyana provides inside presence on both ends."

"She is a terrific rebounder and finishes very well around the basket," Walker said.

About Mitchelson, Walker said that she will add perimeter scoring and a strong defensive intensity.

"Olivia is a point guard who will help with being a coach on the floor and

Shelby boys hoops counting on solid core of returning seniors

BY GREG GIELCZYK

DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

SHELBY - With the football team enjoying one of its most successful seasons in many years, and making a run to the regional championship game, several Shelby boys basketball players have been unavailable for pre-season practice.

Not that Shelby Tigers long-time head coach Rick Zoulek, a member of the Michigan High School Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame, is complaining.

He's naturally hoping that some of the Tigers production on the gridiron rubs off once the round ball season starts.

Zoulek can boast a solid group of returning players with the experience and skill he hopes leads to them bouncing back from last season's 3-20 finish.

"We really expect to compete in every game this year," coach Zoulek said.

"We have several returning players, and expect our newcomers to contribute in a positive way.

"Our increased confidence on offense, and our intensity will be counted on as well.

"Defensive effort and overall team speed will contribute to our success. Our team chemistry will determine our success, win or lose, this season."

But locking up a better record in the end will be a difficult challenge, with most teams in the West Michigan Conference Rivers Division return their top players.

North Muskegon, Hart,



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR./OCEANA'S HERALD-JOURNAL

Shelby's Evan Waller drives to the basket as Hesperia's Ethan O'Neil defends. Shelby won the game over Hesperia 61-38 Dec. 20 at Shelby.

Ravenna and Mason County Central each welcome back an All-Conference performer.

Hesperia and Holton should show marked improvement with another year's experience, so the Tigers can't afford any letdowns.

With the majority of Shelby's core of senior leaders have just started to practice, putting the Tigers a bit behind in preparing for the basketball season.

In fact, the Tigers only had four players at their

first practice, who must now permit the gridders to get up to speed.

As seniors, though, that isn't expected to take long, especially with their experience.

That senior group includes Eli Kelley, Evan Waller, Trevor Weiss and Dayday Garcia are just beginning to switch gears from football.

Kelley is one of the Tigers' starting guards, along with sophomore Leighton Belasco.

"We really expect our starting guards to lead



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR./OCEANA'S HERALD-JOURNAL

Shelby's Eli Kelley moves the ball up the court as Hart's Brendan Hiddema defends. Hart defeated Shelby 66-29 on Dec. 3 at Shelby.

us in the right direction this year," added coach Zoulek.

"The inside guys (Waller and Weiss) will be more forceful on both ends of the floor."

Isaac Garcia, the football team's senior quarterback, has taken the year off from wrestling to play basketball and coach Zoulek is high on his potential to make a big contribution.

The Tigers also welcome first-year varsity players Chase Oakes, Andrew Arquette, Tristan Johnson and Kamari Richmond.

Richmond is new to the school this year, but like the others should see significant game time.

"We got a little late start this year because of the football team's success, but that was awesome, and will help drive this team to strive to be our best by February," said coach Zoulek.

"We're banking on our defense and rebounding to really improve this year.

"I'm sure the confidence and intensity will be better because of the football team's playoff run."

The early schedule finds the Tigers at home for the first six games, with the usual contingent of non-conference games against area teams.

Coach Zoulek is hoping that lengthy home stand at the start allows the Tigers to gain confidence for the road ahead.

Despite their season record last year, the Tigers gave White Cloud a battle in the district tournament opener before falling by a 53-43 score.

Shelby hopes to be peaking at tournament time again this year.

Everyone is back for Shelby girls who finished last year 19-5

BY GREG GIELCZYK

DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

SHELBY - Few coaches can count on returning everyone from a hugely successful season.

But that's just what Shelby girls basketball coach Sarah Wolting can say as she prepares the Tigers for the 2025-26 campaign.

The Tigers were 19-5 last season, and clicked off a couple of extended winning streaks, including 11 straight from Dec. 13 to Jan. 31 which gave them a 12-1 record.

Shelby then won four in a row to end the regular season, and tacked on another in the district tournament before closing the season out with a loss in the district finals.

Four players saw extensive minutes, and

made big contributions for the Tigers last season when they finished second in the West Michigan Conference Rivers Division to conference champion Hart.

Hart completed the conference schedule undefeated at 12-0, while the Tigers finished with a 10-2 record.

Jayna Burmeister was the Tigers' leading scorer last year as a sophomore and has put in a lot of extra work in the off-season.

Another sophomore, Michelle Peterson, was the Tigers' point guard despite being just a freshman, and was their second leading scorer.

Kylie Brown, a senior, will lead the Tigers defensively.

Jordan Wolting, Ava Lamberg and Annabelle Stark are all soph-

omores who have dedicated themselves to being major contributors this year.

Junior Lydia Soelberg was the Tigers starting point guard until tearing her ACL early in the season last year.

She's hoping to join the team after Christmas, and gives the Tigers different looks at scoring and is a great defender.

"Our experience, since I didn't lose any players to graduation, will be a strength,"

coach Wolting said. "We were able to jump right into practice and learn new things, since they all know the basics of our offense and defense.

"We are super athletic, and our defense will bother a lot of teams. We aren't overly big, but the girls I do have ... Brown, Stark and Burmeister (who is about 5-foot-8) move well to the ball, and jump well, so we rebound well.

"Even our guards

crash the boards well."

Coach Wolting sees the Tigers getting most of their points inside, but thinks their outside game is going to be more consistent with all of the off-season shooting the girls have been doing.

Shelby's defensive strategy will largely depend on the nightly matchups. In the past, the Tigers have been best at pushing the tempo, and coach Wolting wants to continue to be good at it.

"But, one of my goals is to make us better in the half-court, and the ability to be patient and run our offense," she added.

"Peterson handles the ball and runs our offense, scoring well off the dribble. Soelberg also handles the ball well.

"We struggled to score outside last year, but there have been a few girls really working hard to be better shooters ... so, we'll see."



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR./OCEANA'S HERALD-JOURNAL

Shelby's Jayna Burmeister shoots over the Muskegon Catholic Central defenders during the Tigers victory, 49-23 Jan. 16. Helping defend for MCC is Abbi Cook and Aaliyah Winston.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The 2025-26 Shelby girls varsity basketball team. Back from left, sophomore Jayna Burmeister, senior Kylie Brown, sophomore Annabelle Stark, junior Jasmine Ruiz and sophomore Jordan Wolting. Front from left, junior Lydia Soelberg, sophomore Michelle Peterson, sophomore Ava Lamberg, sophomore Peyton Rapes and junior Emma Stoval.

New head coach has Walkerville boys start from scratch this season

BY LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR.
SHORELINE MEDIA

WALKERVILLE — The 2025 Wildcats boys basketball team is starting a new era and is looking to start their program over from scratch.

And new Wildcats Head Coach Jeremy

Dixon said he's looking ahead to this season and will not look back at the past.

Dixon said, "Expectations are simple-strive to get better each and every day."

"I'm not looking at the other teams," Dixon said. "I'm looking for

daily improvement with our team."

Dixon also said he's looking for three of his upperclassmen to take on leadership roles this season.

They are Collin Man- nor, Dillan Peets and Zander Bajtka.

Other players return-

ing include Logan Hill, Dom Nehm and Hugh Tanner.

And some of the new players include Hunter Nielsen, James Steffes, Skylar Bajtka, Ethan Demogola, Corbin Hill and Phoenix Fulford.

But Dixon said, "Im- pact will be earned, not

predicted ... Whoever competes the hardest will play."

"I'm focused on the players who are currently here," Dixon said.

"We're not evaluating this group based on last year," Dixon said. "This team is earning every- thing from scratch."

Talking about the West Michigan D League conference race, Dixon said that all the other teams will be the ones they'll have to beat this season.

"We're young and learning; every game is going to be a test for us," Dixon said.

Walkerville's Achterhof has high expectations for Wildcats girls for 2025

BY LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR.
SHORELINE MEDIA

WALKERVILLE — Combining a group of experienced players with some new ones, Walkerville has high expectations for the 2025 girls basketball season.

Said Wildcats Head Coach Mandy Achterhof, "We have a good group of girls returning this year for the varsity squad."

"Returning this season are Paige Sadenwater-Riggs, Isabel Babbitt, Macy Oomen, Marrison

Simpson, Grace Riggs, Ayla White and Kelly Masta," Achterhof said. "These girls will be leading the team."

Achterhof said, "These girls all have one year or more of experience playing varsity and the great thing is that all of them will be returners for next year as well."

"These girls learned a lot as a team last year and they know what to expect; we are still a young team," Achterhof said.

"These girls learned a lot as a team last year

and they know what to expect," Achterhof said. "We are still a young team, with the majority 9th and 10th graders, but they are excited and ready to play this year," Achterhof said.

"I have high expectations for the team," Achterhof said. "They have put in work during the off season and are pumped up and excited for this season."

"I know what these girls are capable of and they will continue to put in the work in for what they



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR./OCEANA'S HERALD-JOURNAL

Walkerville's Isabel Babbitt shoots over the Pentwater defense in their girls basketball game Jan. 30 in Pentwater. Walkerville lost, 54-21, but showed some signs of improvement in the second half.

want to achieve," Achterhof said.

And Achterhof will be getting help from some newcomers.

"We have a new senior joining the team this year, Jazz Rogers," Achterhof said. "She is new to our school as of last year and new to the team this year."

"I think she will make a positive impact on the offensive end," Achterhof said.

Another newcomer to

the Wildcats is Kelsey Garrett, a junior.

"She will help our inside play on offense and defense," Achterhof said.

There are also some new freshmen and eighth-graders joining the team as well.

They are Alyssa Shafer, Harley Masterman, Onyx Thommen and Jamari Carter.

"We have enough numbers to have a junior varsity, so those girls will be utilizing the fifth-quarter

rule for JV on nights that we can," Achterhof said.

Achterhof had two seniors graduate from last year's team, Azaliah MacDonald and Jaymes Conklin.

"Azaliah was a brand new player as a senior last year and suffered with illness and injury all season," Achterhof said.

"Jaymes also struggled through illness last season, but was a veteran player for us," Achterhof said. "She was a leader for the team and one of our point guards."

"I'm looking towards a couple of girls to step up in that position this year."

Achterhof also said, "We are making adjustments on the offensive end and are working on being stronger and more dynamic on the defensive end."

About the West Michigan D League's conference race, Achterhoff said, "I see us finishing towards the top half of our conference."

"These girls have been working really hard and are more determined than ever to succeed."

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Expectations very high for 2025 Whitehall boys basketball

BY LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR.
SHORELINE MEDIA

WHITEHALL — According to their head coach, the expectation for the Vikings boys basketball squad is to always win the West Michigan Conference Lakes Division, and the 2025-26 season is no different.

The Vikings Head Coach, Christian Subdon, said, “The work we put in every day in practice and in the off-season will determine if those expectations become reality.”

“We want to continue to let other schools know that this is a program that’s built to last,” Subdon said.

To help Subdon accomplish this task, he has three seniors returning this season.

Subdon said about Corde Anderson, “He started many games for us last season and has really developed into a leader and a tough basketball player.”

Another is Hunter Osborne, about who Subdon said, “He started most of the games last season and was a Honorable Mention Player in the West Michigan Conference.”

“He has developed into a fantastic leader and is poised for a great season,” Subdon said.

About Evan Thomas, Subdon said, “He didn’t get as many minutes as others last season, but has put in a lot of work and developed into a key player for us and someone that can make an impact as a senior.”

And Subdon welcomes several new players into



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR./BEACON

Whitehall’s boys varsity head coach Christian Subdon goes over things during practice.

the fold that he believes can make an immediate impact on the team’s play this season.

One of them is junior Pierce Westerlund.

Subdon said about him, “Great shooter and one of the hardest working players on the team.”

“Has put in a lot of off season work to make him into a great player,” Subdon said.

Another junior Subdon said he’s high on is Elijah Smith.

“Big guard with elite

athleticism.” Subdon said.

“Underrated shooter and has knack for getting tips will make him someone that will be a great defender for the Vikings.”

In addition, Subdon said of another junior, Alex Winczewski, “Phenomenal scorer and a tough defender.”

“Going to immediately make an impact with his shooting,” Subdon said.

And Subdon had this to say about yet another junior, Isaiah Lewis.

“Playmaker and an elite transition player,” Subdon said.

And a sophomore who Subdon said could be a three-year starter for the Vikings is Rex Pumford, who has a chance to join Luke Schumm, Red Watson and Kyle Stratton as the other three-year starters.

About Pumford, Subdon said, “Worked incredibly hard this off season to put himself in position to be a starter at the point guard position.”



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR./BEACON

A Vikings player attacks the rim during practice.

Subdon also said, “This team has the potential to be a dangerous team come tournament time and someone that can win the conference.” “They love being around one another and continue to get closer every day,” Subdon said.

Subdon concluded by

saying that Ludington is always a tough game and will continue to be again this season.

He also said their upcoming games against Spring Lake and their arch-rivals Montague are also ones his team will be keeping an eye on this season.

2025 Whitehall girls could face unknowns despite five returnees

BY LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR.
SHORELINE MEDIA

WHITEHALL — Despite returning five players in 2025 from last season's basketball squad, the Vikings could have several unknowns to start the season.

Vikings Girls Head Coach Brian Milliron said that seniors Janie Fagan, Emma Decker and Kate Beda, along with junior Claire Westerlund and sophomore Peyton Schultz, will be counted on to be leaders this season.

Milliron said, "This core group of five girls will be leaned on heavily for both on the court performance and keeping our team moving forward through their leadership."

And Westerlund, according to Milliron, will pass the 500 point-500 rebound mark this season.

But, Milliron also said, "With the return of five girls, there are a lot of unknowns heading into the season, making our expectations very cloudy."

"Senior Kayden Johnson and juniors Ellie Conklin and Reese Hesse will be three players that will be



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR./WHITE LAKE BEACON

Whitehall's Claire Westerlund shoots over Montague's Addison Pranger during their opening round MHSAA district tournament. Whitehall lost to Montague, 51-23, at Montague March 5.



LARRY LAUNSTEIN JR./WHITE LAKE BEACON

Whitehall's Drew Buckner passes the ball to a teammate as Montague's Gentry6 Knop defends. Montague won this 2025 MHSAA girls basketball district opener Feb. 5 over Whitehall, 51-22, on the Wildcats home court.

joining the varsity group that will see meaningful minutes," Milliron said.

Milliron also said, "Ellie and Reese have worked a lot in the off season to become better athletes, and Kayden has been a regular at open gyms since enrolling at WHS."

"These three players, along with the core of five returning players, will make a solid group that should be able to compete nightly in the WMC," Milliron said.

But following the end of last season, Milliron saw four players graduate who had an impact on their team's fortunes.

Point guard Lianne Fa-

gan, forward Sidney Shepherd and guards Grace McDowell and Megan LeTrea, Milliron said, provided fantastic senior leadership and will be missed.

"Losing four impactful seniors will most be felt in the leadership capacity," Milliron said.

And Milliron said, "We are lucky to have three seniors on the team that have been in the program for awhile in Janie, Emma, and Kate and with the addition of Kayden, we look forward to having another great senior group who will help us become a more competitive team."

"Coach Emily MacAr-

thur and I have been very fortunate to have great groups of seniors in our years coaching at WHS and we expect that to continue this year," Milliron said.

"Nearly every team in the WMC will be better this year on paper," Milliron said. "We hope to be able to compete in the WMC Lakes on a nightly basis and know if we don't show up ready to play, every team in the conference could beat us."

"I believe that Fremont will be the team that is expected to be at the top of the conference again due to their depth and quality of play," Milliron said.

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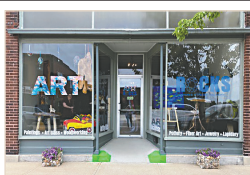
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Sowa ready to take on a bigger role with Mariners boys basketball team

Offense will
run through
the senior
power
forward

BY GREG GIELCZYK
DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

MANISTEE – It's no secret that returning senior power forward Landin Sowa will draw a lot of attention from the opponents this season, after landing a spot on the West Michigan Conference First Team and leading the Manistee boys basketball team in scoring.

Sowa came up to the varsity as a sophomore, and had an immediate impact, earning Wests Michigan Conference Lakes Division Honorable Mention.

He really came into his own last year, leading the Mariners in scoring and rebounding, and was rewarded by being selected to the First Team All-Conference.

"I really think Landin is one of the top five players in the conference," Mariners head coach Zach Bilalik said. "Everybody is going to key on Landin, and try to keep the ball out of his hands."

"But, there's lot of other people who can take some attention off of him, too. It's bound to leave somebody open."

Still, there's no denying the Mariners offense



Landin Sowa was First Team All-Conference last year, and became more of a scorer last year.

will run through Sowa ... which was the same thing on the football field this year.

Kott was the school's all-time leading scorers, supplanting the late Donald "Doc" Cederholm, who set the record back in 1960, by finishing his career with 48 touchdowns.

This year, Sowa became the focal point of the Mariners offense and while he led the team in rushing, Manistee won only two games.

Now, he's being counted on to take on an even big-

ger role on the basketball team.

"Football is a running sport ... you're constantly running, constantly moving, blocking other guys, hitting other guys with pads on," Sowa said. "That keeps your cardiovascular up for the other sports you play."

"I would say my main strength in basketball is my shooting. I try to shoot a lot, that's my favorite thing to work on."

Although he's not the tallest player on the Mariners ... who are vertically

challenged as a whole ... Sowa has always shown an aggressive nature getting inside the paint.

Even against taller opponents, Sowa is not shy about banging against those bigger bodies and crash the boards with abandon.

"It's also fun to get inside," agreed Sowa. "Basketball, although it doesn't seem like it, is a very physical sport."

"That's one of the best parts about it, it's physicality. Going down there and bumping with the big

guys is always fun."

How does he manage to overcome his lack of height to get position on the taller players, and succeed in snaring those rebounds?

Especially on the offensive glass, and get those second chance baskets?

"Like you say, I'm not that tall, and we have guys on our team that are short, but they have all the heart," Sowa said.

"So, size doesn't matter when it comes to sports, in my opinion. Going against taller teams all the time, considering we're so undersized, you get used to it after a while."

"You figure out ways to get around (the taller players), and find ways to position yourself to score."

A strong interior defensive presence, Sowa says the biggest asset is intensity.

"If you're into the game, and you're constantly talking and communicating with your teammates, it makes defense that much easier," Sowa said.

One of the top moments of Sowa's career to this point was knocking off eventual conference champion Whitehall on the Vikings home court last year.

"You beat a great basketball team, great basketball program at their court when they hadn't lost a conference game ... it was a great feeling," Sowa said.

"I mean, we worked for it, and it showed in the game. You play those teams throughout the year, and they're all great teams, and you use those games (to get better)."

Manistee started the season 1-7 last year, but

everything finally clicked and the Mariners made it to the district final and ended up 14-11.

Sowa admits the poor start was frustrating, but the team never doubted itself.

"We knew that wasn't us," Sowa said. "We put in the work every day in practice, and then everything started to fall (into place)."

"Everything started meshing together, and we started playing like a team, and ended up with a winning record."

With more experience to start the season, Sowa is confident the Mariners can have an even more successful season this year.

He likes the talent of some of the newcomers as well.

"They're great workers, hard workers," Sowa added. "I feel that we'll play with a lot of chemistry this year."

"You kind of work with them. As a leader, a veteran, they kind of look at you and are inspired by the work you do."

"If you work hard, they'll work hard. They all have great mindsets as it is, they'll work to get to where they need to be."

Sowa says it's important for everyone to play as friends, more so than as teammates.

"I feel I just need to do my role," Sowa said. "On defense, play my position well, guard my guy well."

"Offense, when it's my turn to score, score. If I have to pass, pass. Whatever I have to do. Hopefully, that results in some wins."

It's clear that Sowa is, first and foremost, a team player.



Game On!

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