

Decker likes what he sees at Washington

Written by Jim Ecker

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Justin Decker saw hundreds of high school basketball games during his nine years as an assistant coach at Cornell and Coe when he was scouting players and knows talent when he sees it.

That's one of the reasons he's so excited about being the new boys basketball coach at Cedar Rapids Washington.

"We're about as athletic as you're going to see a high school team be in the state of Iowa," Decker said this week. "We're definitely going to try and use that to our advantage."

Decker played four years of college basketball at Cornell and served as team captain his senior year. He spent one year as the head coach at Riceville High School, then returned to Cornell as an assistant coach for four years before spending the last five seasons as an assistant coach at Coe.

He was not searching for a high school job, but the right opportunity came along.

"I had my chances to take some college jobs that I'd say were high-risk type jobs and not the perfect situation," Decker remarked. "My wife and I love the area here in Cedar Rapids. We have kids who go to school. It just made sense.

"These type jobs like Washington in one of the best conferences in the state, those jobs don't come about too often. It was a really good fit for me at the time."

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Decker thinks Washington's top candidate for the job withdrew and he was able to enter the picture at a fairly late juncture. "I applied at the right time and interviewed and must have done something right," he said with a touch of self-deprecation.

Washington finished with a 13-10 record last season after several years of sub-.500 records. Adam Sanchez left after the season and is now the head coach at Williamsburg, putting Decker in charge of a program that could be on the rise.

Jared Printy, last year's leading scorer at 12.2 points, transferred to Linn-Mar High School and the next three leading scorers all graduated with Maurice Arrington, Keegan Moore and Steven Kramer moving on.

"Outside looking in, it looks like we really lost a lot, which we did," Decker said. "I know how good some of those seniors were, and obviously Jared went over to Linn-Mar. But we have some pretty good pieces, to be honest."

Decker has been impressed with Hunter Strait, Keion Wills and Laveechie Williams in the short time he's known them. Strait averaged 4.3 points and 2.8 assists as a freshman point guard in the Mississippi Valley Conference last season and has attracted the coach's attention.

"A true leader for sure," Decker remarked.

Wills and Williams are seniors this season.

"Keion Wills is one of the more athletic guards that I've ever coached," he said. "And Laveechie Williams, he's got a motor like none other for an undersized '4' man."

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Williams recently had surgery for a broken nose and will miss the first few weeks of the campaign.

Decker said there are a lot of talented young players in the program who have paid their dues on the freshman and sophomore teams at Washington in recent years.

"They had a lot of success," he said. "They kind of waited their turn. There's a lot of guys, I think, that are anxious to get out there and prove themselves."

Dallas Hobbs, a 6-foot-6 senior, missed all of last season with a knee injury, but he enjoyed a good year with the Washington football team this fall and is ready to play basketball again.

Decker said the Warriors have some "capable pieces" that might surprise a few folks this season. He thinks he has good depth on the club with at least 10 players ready to perform.

Decker said he could have a starting lineup with two good guards and three front-line players who measure 6-5, 6-6 and 6-6, with other big kids coming off the bench.

"I'm kind of counting us as a wild card," he remarked. "People don't really expect much. I have high expectations and so do they."

"We're going to be a work in progress throughout the season, but I think I've got guys who have bought in and I think we're just excited to get the year started."

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Washington opens the season Tuesday against New Hampton.

"By far our biggest strength is going to be our transition game, getting out and running, using our athleticism," he said. "I think we can really get after teams.