

Kennedy girls could have strong team

Written by Jim Ecker

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Watch out for Kennedy.

When you talk to girls basketball coaches in the Metro area, you hear that refrain more and more as the new season approaches.

Watch out for the Cougars.

Kennedy Coach Tony Vis does not disagree, but he's not without his own concerns and not without praise for other clubs.

"We have a lot of pieces to work with," he acknowledged Wednesday after practice. "I'm excited to see what the puzzle ends up looking like."

Paige Hendrickson, Stephanie Botkin, Madi Meier and Jordan Holmes return after averaging 42.5 points per game on a 15-8 squad last season. Hendrickson averaged 11.4 points, Botkin 11.3, Meier 10.3 and Holmes 9.5, so there's plenty of firepower.

Morgan Martin, a premier 6-foot-1 post player, has rejoined the mix after missing nearly the entire 2012-13 campaign with a knee injury. That gives Kennedy five players who can average in double figures.

Vis has talked to the Cougars about that, praising them but also warning them.

"We feel like the five of you can score 20 points, but at the same time we'll never have a night when all five score 20 and we put up 100," he's told them. "We have to make sure we're

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playing for the team and not out there chasing after individual things."

Lots of people can score, but Vis is looking for players who can make an extra pass or set a screen for somebody else. He likes what he's seen in practice this week, but it's a long season.

"When things get tough, will we be able to stick together?," he wondered. "That's a question we ask every year, and that's a question I'll be interested to see answered by this group. Will we stick together, or will we get into the blame game where we point fingers at each other? Hopefully that doesn't happen."

Kennedy has good size with Martin (6-foot-1), Botkin (6-foot), Brinley Milbrath (6-foot-1) and a half-dozen players in the 5-foot-7 to 5-foot-9 category, but he's not sure if they'll hit the backboards with abandon. "I just don't know if we're a dominant rebounding team yet," he said.

Vis thinks the Cougars have the potential for a deep bench, but it remains to be seen. "Those are probably the two biggest keys that concern me right now," he said.

Martin, an all-state player in Quincy, Ill., before moving to Kennedy last year, was running free and easy in practice Wednesday. She had a small pad on her surgically repaired knee, but looked good and ready for action.

"I would say she's in the 90 to 95 percent range as far as being back," Vis remarked.

Holmes, a 5-foot-5 senior, is the point guard and catalyst. She's flanked by Hendrickson and Meier on the wings, with Botkin and Martin up front.

Sophomores Sydney Hayden and Carly Langhurst are battling for the backup spot behind Holmes at point guard. Langhurst, Abby Hellweg and Mariah Vis are competing for spots on the wings, while Madi DeLong and Milbrath are vying for the third post position.

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Vis mentioned Iowa City High, Waterloo West, Prairie, Hempstead and Washington as some of the strongest teams in the Mississippi Valley Conference ... along with Kennedy.

"I'd like to think at the end of the season, we'll be standing right there with some of the other good teams," he said.