

Ollinger stands above the crowd

Written by Jim Ecker
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Amanda Ollinger has received all the accolades she needs for the time being. And heaven knows she's hosted enough college basketball coaches in her home, where her mother was happy to cook for them on their long trips to Cedar Rapids.

All Ollinger wants now is one thing. She'd fervently like to play for a winning team at Cedar Rapids Jefferson and help the J-Hawks succeed at a high level. It hasn't happened yet, although it could this winter.

"Yeah, that bugs me a lot," she said Tuesday after basketball practice.

Ollinger has played three years of varsity volleyball and has been named first team all-state in Class 5A, but Jefferson has finished with losing records all three years. She's played two years of varsity basketball and has been named second team all-state in Class 5A, but the J-Hawks finished with sub-.500 marks both times.

That's five seasons and five losing records. Now the 6-foot-3 junior wants to get Jefferson pointed in the right direction.

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Ollinger has accepted a scholarship to play basketball at the University of Iowa, beginning with the 2016-17 campaign, so her days of being constantly barraged by college coaches has ended. She won't be playing club volleyball this winter, so now she's free to focus entirely on turning the J-Hawks into winners.

It could happen this year.

"I'm a really competitive person, so this year I'm going to do whatever it takes, leave nothing on the floor," she said. "Not that I didn't in previous years, but there is a difference between being an upperclassman and a lower-classman, and I feel like I need to step into that leadership role."

Jefferson finished with a 9-13 record last season with a young basketball team. Ollinger averaged 18.6 points and 7.4 rebounds as a sophomore, while Kennedy Dighton (12.0 points) and point guard Avery Guy (61 assists) made important contributions as freshmen. Erin Kuba, Sam Kitterman and Autume Starks are back as well, giving the J-Hawks cause for optimism.

"I think we've got the ingredients and the pieces in place. That's our goal," said Jefferson Coach Jason Edwards, eyeing a winning season. "We tell them all the time, we want to win our next game, we want to win a conference championship.

"If we can do that, we're going to be competitive in the state. We're definitely going for it."

Edwards said Ollinger has improved as a player and especially as a leader.

"I've been very pleased with how vocal as a leader she's becoming," he said. "The first couple

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of years she was kind of quiet, but I think she understands that a lot is going to fall on her shoulders. And she's kind of setting the tone for everyone else."

Jefferson will host a Jamboree Friday night with six of the eight Metro teams on display in 16-minute contests. The regular season begins Tuesday, with all the Metro teams except Washington in action.

Ollinger feels like a great weight has been lifted off her shoulders now that she's committed to Coach Lisa Bluder and the Hawkeyes. The recruiting process got a little crazy, especially beginning Sept. 1 when colleges were allowed to legally contact high school juniors on the phone.

"My first call was at 12:01 at midnight," she said. "It was (like that) from there all the way until I committed which was October 1st. Some days I'd get 20 calls in a night."

That first call at 12:01 on Sept. 1 was actually a text message from Central Florida.

"I was up, but I didn't answer," said Ollinger. "I thought, 'This is crazy.' It was really, really intense."

College coaches were allowed to visit juniors in their homes from Sept. 9 through Sept. 27. Ollinger figures she had 10 or 12 of those, including a visit from Stanford Coach Tara VanDerveer, who runs one of the top programs in the country.

"That was really nice to meet her," said Ollinger. "It was a really good experience. I learned a lot from it."

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Some of the basketball coaches would come to Jefferson's volleyball practices to watch Ollinger, who was the top kill-shot artist in Class 5A this season. Then the coaches would follow Ollinger to her house to meet the family and stay for a meal.

"My mom, she just loves to cook," said Ollinger. "She cooked all the coaches our favorites, so they could experience our culture a little bit. It was really fun."

Stanford, Louisville, Michigan, Iowa, Iowa State, Florida, Northwestern, Wisconsin and other coaches found their way to Cedar Rapids. Ollinger narrowed it down to Iowa, Stanford, Florida, Michigan and Iowa State before picking the Hawkeyes.

"It's all about finding where you feel comfortable and where you feel you're going to excel the most, where it kind of feels like home," said Ollinger. "And that's what Iowa felt like."

"Iowa was in my top-three all the way, but I don't know if they were my No. 1 until the very end," she said. "There are just a lot of amazing schools."

It's hard to know who will have the best girls basketball team in the Metro area this year. Kennedy has been ranked No. 8 in Class 5A in the IGHSAU preseason poll and Xavier is No. 14 in Class 4A. No other Metro clubs made the poll.

Kennedy graduated Morgan Martin (11.5 ppg) and Paige Hendrickson (11.4), but the Cougars return Stephanie Botkin (10.6) and have been bolstered by Lela Sanders, a promising transfer from Minnesota who is being recruited by Division I schools as a junior.

Xavier lost an all-state player in Hayley Deutmeyer (13.4) but returns Lizzy Bailey (7.4) and

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Morgan Breitbach (7.2).

The Washington Warriors graduated a pair of all-state players in Dani Franklin (22.3) and Aleena Hobbs (16.4). Kandis O'Donnell leads the returning players (6.3).

Linn-Mar lost all-state guard Katie Sommer (15.1) and her twin sister, Kristie (14.4). New head coach Jaime Printy has Olivia Montague (6.6) back on board.

Prairie graduated Cyerra Hutchins (12.8) and Madison Dellamuth (9.6). New head coach Josh Bentley can build with Olivia Usher (7.6) and Emilie Rotter (5.8).

The Marion Indians finished 6-16 last season, but stalwarts Amanda Sahm (13.3) and all-stater Michalyn Mohr (12.8) are back and have been joined by a promising freshman class. Coach Corby Laube and the Indians could be moving up this year.

One of the top stories this season could take place at Cedar Valley Christian, where Shelby Hembera is back for her final season after leading the state in scoring (33.2 points) and rebounding (16.4) as a one-girl show. The Huskies have 11 players on the roster this season and a promising freshman class, so Hembera's numbers could go down while the victory total goes up.