

J-Hawks looking to bounce back

Written by Jim Ecker

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Jason Edwards never saw it coming last season.

The Jefferson girls basketball team had gotten off to a nice start with a 5-3 record, but Amanda Ollinger left the club in mid-December and began playing for Linn-Mar a few weeks after that.

The J-Hawks, staggered by the blow, won only three more games the rest of the season, although Edwards thought his players handled the adversity the best they could.

"I think the kids did a nice job of circling the wagons and sticking together," he said Thursday. "We all wish Amanda well. She's a good player, obviously. They did what they needed to do for their family.

"Obviously in the middle of the season it takes awhile to find your identity without a very important piece, but I thought the girls did a really nice job of that. I've been very pleased."

Ollinger averaged 17.8 points and 11.8 rebounds during the first eight games of the 2014-15 campaign at Jefferson before the family left and moved into the Linn-Mar district. Ollinger is a senior at Linn-Mar now and the J-Hawks have turned the page.

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Kennedy Dighton, Avery Guy, Kylie Wise, Sam Kitterman, Sparkle Melton and others had to play bigger roles after Ollinger left the club and are back this year as juniors and seniors, wiser and more experienced. Freshmen Lindsey Culver, Kaylee Donner and Maddy Baxter have joined the varsity this year, giving the J-Hawks more depth. And this time the J-Hawks have gained new players with the Oler sisters -- Emily and Erica -- moving into the Jefferson district from Washington.

Emily Oler is 6-foot-1 and Erica Oler is 6 feet tall.

"They've been a good addition in the gym," Edwards said. "It was definitely a surprise."

Edwards said there are 21 freshmen in the program, including Culver, Donner and Baxter on the varsity.

"I think they're hard workers," he said. "They listen, they hustle the floor. I think those three in particular are pretty heady. They've played for awhile, they have a pretty good knowledge of the game and are giving good effort."

Edwards said the returning players have gotten stronger since last season and have become good leaders. Dighton, a 6-foot-1 center, averaged 11.2 points and six rebounds last season as a sophomore and appears poised for a bigger contribution this year.

"I think so," Edwards said. "She's had a good off-season. I know she played quite a bit on the AAU circuit over the summer. She's gotten stronger."

Dighton made the all-tournament team at the Class 5A state softball tournament last summer,

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something that could propel her to even greater heights on the basketball floor.

"When you have success in one area, that breeds confidence in other areas," he said. "I think that's really given her a lot of confidence.

She's looked really good. I'm looking forward to seeing what the year brings for her."

Guy, the shortstop on the Jefferson softball team, is the point guard for the basketball club.

"She's stronger," Edwards said. "She's really bought into the weightlifting program. She moves well. She's always had good court vision and a high basketball IQ, in terms of knowing where people are supposed to be."

Wise averaged 8.4 points last year with 37 3-pointers, nearly two per game. Edwards said she's worked hard on her shooting and on her ability to drive to the basket.

Edwards called Kitterman a "tenacious" defender who has steadily improved. "I think she's really poised to show people how well-rounded she is," he remarked.

Jefferson begins the season Nov. 28 against Bettendorf.