

## Bulldogs defense sharp from tip in win vs St. James

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

The Mexico boys looked good early to start the season.

The Bulldogs won 74-48 on Saturday morning against St. James (0-1) in the Vienna Shootout, maintaining control throughout thanks to scoring 34 points off 47 turnovers.

Head coach Darren Pappas said the defense was great early in Mexico's opening game, coming away with 16 steals and helping the Bulldogs (1-0) take a 19-11 lead after

the first quarter and 41-22 at halftime. He said they will have to be better rebounding in its next game against Wellsville-Middle-town at 6 p.m. Tuesday to start the Montgomery County Invitational Tournament.

"I thought we did a good job of forcing some turnovers and then being able to capitalize off those turnovers," Pappas said. "The one area we could improve on is rebounding because we got beat on the offensive glass and the defensive glass and 32-24 overall."

See **BULLDOGS** on page B2

## Mexico girls lose 42-35 after Owensville comeback

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

The Mexico girls held Owensville back most of their opening game Saturday but couldn't hold the deluge of 3-pointers.

The Lady Bulldogs led 21-15 at halftime in the Bluefish Shootout in Rolla before Owensville tied the game at 27 going into the fourth quarter and then won the fourth quarter 15-8 for Mexico to lose 42-35.

First-year head coach Makenzie Mudd said Mexico (0-1) did great holding the strong shooting

Owensville (1-0) down through most of the game but allowed some 3-pointers late to fall short.

"They are a strong shooting team and we were active and aggressive, preventing them from being comfortable at the 3-point line," Mudd said. "We went back and forth throughout the game, but in the second half, they found some opportunities to score and hit some big 3-pointers to push them ahead of us."

Claire Hudson led Mexico with nine points and six rebounds, and Jo Thurman

See **LADY BULLDOGS** on page B2

Read season previews for the Bulldogs and Lady Bulldogs on page B2 and previews for other teams throughout the section

## Community R-6 girls defeat Christian Fellowship 59-46 in inaugural meeting

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

The Community R-6 girls conquered the unknown on Friday night.

It wasn't unknown just because it was a new season and new roster for the Lady Trojans, but they won their season opener at home 59-46 against Christian Fellowship, a religious private school that they've never played before. Aaliyah Welch made herself known to the Lady Knights by leading the floor with career-highs of 19 points and 13 rebounds.

Head coach Bob Curtis said Community was in an interesting position from the opening tipoff this year. Chamois, who played the boys later in the evening, didn't have enough for a girls team so the Lady Trojans needed another opponent. It turns out Christian Fellowship — who plays schools in MSHSAA and the Missouri Christian Schools Athletics Association — needed another opponent after it had to drop a game against Chamois, setting up a scouting challenge for Community.

"The first half was extremely difficult," head coach Bob Curtis said. "(Brooke Grathwohl) and (Kylie Babich) are their best players. It took us about 15 minutes to figure out (Grathwohl) and (Babich) are who we need to put our best defenders on. Until halftime, we were still learning about Christian Fellowship."

Grathwohl finished with 18 points to lead the Lady Knights while Kylie



Community R-6 junior Aaliyah Welch prepares to go to the rim against Christian Fellowship on Friday at Community R-6 High School in Laddonia. Welch had career-highs in points and rebounds in the victory.

[Jeremy Jacob]

Babich had eight points. In the second half, Grathwohl scored seven points in the fourth quarter after being shut out in the third, and Babich had only one 3-pointer in the second half.

After holding on to a 32-27 lead at halftime, Community outscored Christian Fellowship 14-4 in the third quarter and took its first double-digit lead at 40-29 with about three minutes left in the third quarter. That bucket was an offensive putback by Welch, who seemed to grow stronger as the game progressed.

Welch went into halftime with

six points but then showed her strength inside with six points in the third quarter and then seven in the fourth quarter. She was one of several reliable players the Lady Trojans had inside as Kylie Brooks also finished with a double-double of 11 points and 11 rebounds, Brooklynn Glasgow had 11 points and seven rebounds, Alyssa Beamer added eight points and Jocelyn Curtis had six rebounds and three blocks off the bench.

"We're going to have outrebound teams, and I think we have the size

See **LADY TROJANS** on page B2

## Community R-6 boys lose 64-29 to Chamois in slow start

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

The Community R-6 boys wanted a better start on Friday night.

The Trojans hope to have a better effort in their next games after losing 64-29 at home to Chamois, a team they defeated 54-31 a year ago. Community couldn't get going as it trailed the Pirates 14-4 after the first quarter and then 33-1 at halftime and 46-20 after the third quarter.

Head coach Kody Asquith said it was a down night all around as the offense struggled to produce points because of so many turnovers and the defense faltered when guarding Chamois players like Jaxon Wuelling and Dawson Brandt, who finished with 21 and 18 points, respectively. Asquith, who was promoted this season from his assistant position, is confident the Trojans are a much better team than that and will need early adjustments.

"We need to go back to the fundamentals on defense and start from there to build up," Asquith said. "It's the same thing on offense — start with the small things and add in more complex things as we get going."

Asquith said Chamois had "lockdown" defense all night to make this Pirates team more competitive than they were a year ago against the Trojans. Even though he said Community was prepared, he said his kids still made some mistakes on offense that can't continue.

On several possessions, the Trojans weren't able to attempt a shot because they tried to set up a scoring opportunity, only for a pass to be thrown off-target out of bounds or into a Chamois player's hands.

"Somehow, that got in our head tonight," Asquith said. "The turnovers killed us all night. We missed passes, we misread passes and we misread where we're supposed to go on offense."

Mason Carroll led the Trojans with 10 points, five rebounds, two blocks and two steals; Aaron Carter followed with five points and three rebounds; Clayton Eikel had five points; and

See **TROJANS** on page B2

## Mexico girls open season with medals

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

Mexico girls wrestling opened the season with some hardware on Saturday.

The Lady Bulldogs had two girls medal at the Wright City Girls Tournament, including Alexis Johns winning first at 235 pounds and Alizabeth Welch being second in the 105 weight class.

Johns defeated Wright City's Ella Greenwell twice by pinfall after defeating her in the district tournament last season. Welch won by pinfall three times — the longest taking a minute — before being pinned by reigning state qualifier Candace Calvert, of Hallsville.

"The returning girls all looked good to go," head coach Tony Senior said. "Alexis beat Wright City, who we wrestled in the semifinals at districts last season. Alizabeth Welch

had a fiery tournament by knocking girls out early with some big-time wins."

Senior said there were other girls that wrestled well like Abby Bowen falling just short of third place at 135 after winning twice by fall, being victorious by a 7-0 decision and losing once via pinfall. In the final moments for third place, Bowen lost a 9-7 decision to Palmyra's Janie Triplett.

Karisa Hayden finished 2-3 at 170, scoring a 12-6 decision over Sullivan's Chloe Carson and a pinfall over teammate Abby Seibert. Among Hayden's losses was a pinfall loss to an undefeated state champion last season in Moberly's Breanne Gibbs.

Senior said Seibert, Lilly Debo, Jashayla Johnson and Alyssa Knight all learned a lot in their first tournament, with Seibert earning her first career win against Pacific's Sofia Krehmeyer via pinfall.

Mexico has the Thanksgiving break before wrestling Monday in the Hallsville Girls Invitational.



Mexico sophomore Alexis Johns and junior Alizabeth Welch won medals in their respective weight classes on Saturday in the Wright City Girls Tournament.

[Submitted]

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# Mexico boys want team effort in accomplishing goals

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

Mexico boys basketball has had a lot of players in its gym during preseason practice.

The Bulldogs hope to rely on depth this season to continue its annual goal of having about four to five players scoring in double figures a night.

Mexico is coming off a four-year run of winning seasons, including two that were north of 20 victories and last season that ended at 18-10. Last year, the Bulldogs had many players come off the bench and will need more of that this season from a roster that includes a double-digit of freshmen to go with all the returning players.

"We have a talented bench," head coach Darren Pappas said. "We have depth and guys that can score on any given night. Hopefully, they can't key on one or two guys but key in on the whole roster."

The team has several players who played significant minutes a year ago that opponents might be focused on initially, Pappas said, but hopes the rest



Mexico senior DJ Long slides through the air for a layup during a preseason jamboree this year. Long and the Bulldogs open this season with high expectations and have already won a game.

[Jeremy Jacob]

of the roster can contribute to take some attention off them. DJ Long is one of four seniors and Mexico's returning point guard that earned several post-

season awards a year ago, junior Jaydon Eldridge was one of the Bulldogs' best weapon from the perimeter and seniors Donye Nunnally and Grant

Broeker are Mexico's primary post options along with junior Holden Aulbur.

Long was Mexico's leading scorer and passer with averages of 18.1 points and 4.5 assists, but junior PJ Perkins is a returning player that led with 5.9 rebounds per game. Pappas said these two bring athleticism that has been integral to the Bulldogs over the last few years.

"Hopefully, DJ can bring his leadership and court vision and get other guys involved every single night," Pappas said. "If we can move the basketball and find the open man to knock down perimeter shots, I like our chances a lot. We'll try to use our athletes that can get downhill like DJ and PJ and try to help make the defense collapse."

With there being so many guards on the roster this year such as senior Aidan Knipfel, juniors Sam Ryan and Austin Maxwell, and sophomores Kaden Benne and Charlie Fisher, Pappas believes the perimeter scoring can be better. Mexico nailed 152 shots from 3-point territory a year ago but wants to make even more.

Another area Pappas said must be better is free-throw shooting as that was the main reason Mexico lost 66-62 to Kirksville in districts last season – shooting 11-for-32 in the loss. The Bulldogs were 53 percent from the line and could attempt even more with the new free throw laws including five team fouls in each quarter and two shots being awarded instead of one-on-one situations.

"It's kind of been an Achilles heel, and hopefully it's not this year," Pappas said. "We've got to go the line more frequently and often and knock down free throws. They're there and they're free and you've got to make both of them."

Pappas said goals start with improving on the 18 wins and second-place North Central Missouri Conference finish from a year ago to making a run in districts, as is the case every year.

"It's going to take a lot of hard work and a lot of guys buying in defensively," Pappas said. "That's another goal is we want to try to hold teams to 50 and under in each contest."

# Mexico girls basketball to use quickness this season

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

Mexico girls basketball hopes to be quick and stingy this season.

The Lady Bulldogs will be lacking the post presence they've had in recent years so they want to make use of the players they have this season under first-year head coach, who is an alum and assistant coach for several years Makenzie Mudd.

"Post is where we are lacking this season," Mudd said. "Our three big post players from last season are all not present right there so we're trying to fill those roles with some younger players. Overall, we're pretty young with our experience level of varsity this year."

Senior Capri'Ona Foun-

tain and Messiah Simpson graduated and junior McKenzie Taylor had ankle surgery and might or might not return in January. Mudd said sophomores Landri Teel and Hannah Loyd are post players who have looked good in practice and will be expected to shoulder more minutes this year.

Mexico does have some speed to make up for the lack of size like with returning leading scorer and junior Claire Hudson, returning starter and senior Jo Thurman, senior Karlee Sefrit, junior Kenley Jones, and freshman Grace Hudson. Seniors Kylie Burnett and Addison Heim also played quite a bit of minutes a year ago and will be expected to lead the team this year.

"We're playing around

with some different offensive strategies to take advantage of our heavier guard set and try to work around the fact we're not going to be as big as some of the other teams we're playing," Mudd said. "We're going to try to get some more movement on the offensive side to find some easier shot opportunities without those post players."

The additional speed for Mexico this year hopes to make up for the lack of varsity experience, Mudd said, as the junior varsity game isn't as fast as varsity. Mudd is also a person who has already talked about the importance of defense and believes Mexico can be a good defensive team.

"Looking at the points we were able to score last season and the points that

we gave up, we were not a very high-scoring team as a whole last year," Mudd said. "My hope is, if we can spend some more time slowing down the other teams, maybe that will make up for that differential of us not being able to put as many points on the board."

The Lady Bulldogs were 9-18 a season ago with a 5-4 North Central Missouri Conference record in their first losing season in six years. Mudd looks at Mexico's potential this year as being better than that and able to defeat opponents from a season ago that also lost key players.

"My hope is to get a few more conference wins than last year," Mudd said. "We may have some struggles, but I think other teams will too."



Mexico junior Claire Hudson passes from the floor on Saturday against Owensville in the Bluefish Shootout in Rolla.

[Courtesy of Will Johnson/Gasconade County Republican]

## Bulldogs from page B1

PJ Perkins led in scoring with 24 points on 11-of-13 shooting along with four rebounds; DJ Long had 14 points, 11 assists and four steals; Jaydon Eldridge finished with 11 points, four steals and two blocks; and Charlie Fisher had nine points.

Pappas said the Bulldogs did well against the zone defense by St. James as he remembers two possessions where they passed the ball five to six times without dribbling before finding an open cut to the basket.

## Lady Bulldogs from page B1

followed with eight points and five assists.

"I am so proud of this team and how well they worked together and used what the defense gave them to find great scoring opportunities," Mudd said. "If we can keep playing this way, it will be such a fun season."

Mexico hosted Silex on Tuesday before opening the Montgomery County Invitational Tournament at 6 p.m. Monday against Hermann.

## Lady Trojans from page B1

to do that," Curtis said. "They were quicker to the ball for a little while. When we quit taking perimeter shots in the third quarter and got stuff at the rim is when we got the lead up to 15."

The junior Welch is entering her first season as a regular starter after having some earlier in her career. Curtis liked Welch's positioning all night when she went for rebounds.

Welch said she didn't know how many points or rebounds she had during or after the game and was all smiles when she learned she had set new career-highs. She said she was motivated to play well for her teammates even with the nerves that come with a first game against an unknown opponent.

"It was different because we usually scout teams," Welch said. "Coming into this game, we didn't know what to expect, but we just came out and played our best."

"She got a little tired and actually wasn't so wound up," Curtis said. "The first game, a lot of times, everybody's so excited to play. She calmed down as she got worn down a little bit and used her body well. There were several shots then went up, she boxed out, got a board and got a stick back. That's what she

did extremely well in the second half."

Curtis said Community will be more knowledgeable about the rest of the opponents on its schedule and has to keep something in mind to have another good season.

"We didn't know who their best kids were, but if we do know, we don't want their best kids to combine for 26," Curtis said. "We're going to have to guard people because we're not going to score 59 every night."

## Trojans from page B1

Brant Cope finished with four points and six rebounds.

The Trojans couldn't collect many rebounds when Chamois was flying around on the offensive and defensive glass. Asquith said those areas and playing better fundamental defense need attention as Friday night could be bogged down by negatives or it could be turned into positive results the rest of the season.

"On a positive note, it was a good eye-opener of what I have to do in creating a practice plan (for our next game)," Asquith said. "We all have those nights, but it just so happened to be our first night of the year, which is unfortunate. We could only go up from here."

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# Community R-6 girls showcase size this season

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

The Community R-6 girls think their balance will keep them in many games this season.

The Lady Trojans, who are coming off their eighth district championship season in 10 years, have guards on the perimeter that will shoulder more minutes but also some girls who can shoulder through opponents with some physicality.

Sophomore Peyton Beamer will be handling the ball a lot more after the graduation of point guard Sarah Angel and others like Adriana Woodson and seniors Alyssa Beamer and Brooklynn Glasgow will help. Head coach Bob Curtis said he hopes post players like senior Kylie Brooks, junior Aaliyah Welch and sophomore Jocelyn Curtis give Community the edge on the glass.

"We have a fairly balanced attack," Curtis said. "Around the rim, we have kids that can really be physical and go get it and get us extra, high-percentage shots around the rim. This team has some size. We've been a little smaller and a little quicker, but this is definitely a physical and strong group."

Brooks displayed double-double potential last season and was one of four to be an all-conference player along with graduates Angel, Olivia Kuda and Kayla Jett. Curtis said Brooks averaged around seven rebounds per game and expects at least that and a nice scoring season from her.

"Kylie Brooks is going to have a big year offensively," Curtis said. "She jumps really well. She really gets off the floor and gets us extra shots."

Curtis said opponents will have more than a handful of girls to worry about as most of the 13 girls on Community's roster are expected to play. He said each Lady Trojan has prior basketball experience and is capable of contributing.

Eight are underclassmen so Curtis said some "growing pains" will emerge, but that also brings much potential. The rota-

tion will be in the 8-10 range instead of the 6-7 from a year ago since Community had a senior group that led the team to a 22-6 record, or the Lady Trojans' sixth straight 20-win season.

"Over the next three years, if (Peyton Beamer) stays healthy, she'll play a lot of minutes, she'll handle the ball a lot and be asked to play a big role scoring the ball," Curtis said. "Adriana Woodson will help bring the ball up, but Peyton Beamer will be our starting point guard. Chloe Johnson looked really good this summer guarding people. Kat Meyer's going to shoot it really well off the bench."

This year's crop of seniors has provided much leadership already to the team's younger roster, Curtis said, and bring much more than that. Along with the aforementioned Brooks, Glasgow and Alyssa Beamer are valuable perimeter pieces.

"Brooklyn Glasgow is a great free-throw shooter – not a kid you want to put on the line – and a great defender," Curtis said. "Alyssa Beamer had a big district championship (against Wellsville-Middletown). In the third quarter, when we pulled away from them, she had 10 points in that quarter and two 3s in that quarter so she can explode."

Community came up short for the Central Activities Conference title a season ago and missed out on a share of it after a tight 52-47 loss to champion Cairo. Curtis wants to be in the conversation for conference and district, pushing its opponents after a summer the Lady Trojans finished 18-7. The team's performance in close games will make a difference and made a difference last year with the Lady Trojans' eight wins by a margin of eight points or less.

"We want to be consistent," Curtis said. "Once we get a couple quality wins, we want to be consistent every night and give ourselves a chance to win. We've got to make better decisions in the last four minutes. Close games are won in the last four minutes so we got to get better at that."



**Community R-6 senior Kylie Brooks shoots a ball at the rim on Friday against Christian Fellowship at Community R-6 High School in Laddonia. The Lady Trojans won their opening game and will rely on their post players to provide them presence inside this season.**

[Jeremy Jacob]



**Community R-6 freshman Caden Thomas rebounds a ball on Friday against Chamois at Community R-6 High School in Laddonia. The Trojans opened the season with a loss as they adjust to a new lineup this season.**

[Jeremy Jacob]

# Community R-6 boys breaking in new rotation

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

The Community R-6 boys will need to play smaller to shoot for bigger goals.

The Trojans are coming off a 14-14 season for their most victories in eight years but will have plenty of faces taking on more responsibility. That starts at the top with Kody Asquith, who becomes the head coach after spending two years as the varsity assistant coach and also has been the junior high head coach at Community and a junior high coach at Mark Twain.

Asquith said the Trojans will rely on players who didn't receive as much varsity minutes a season ago because of the roles of Gavin Allen, Tucker Robnett and Eli Johnson. Johnson is still in school but will be out this season because of knee problems, but that opens up a spot and a team identity for the Trojans.

"We're going to be a little smaller and not have the size of last year," Asquith said. "We're going to have to move the ball up and down the floor a little more fluidly. We can't have Gavin setting up underneath the basket like we had last year."

Returning all-conference player Mason Carroll and Brant Cope are seniors that were in the rotation a year ago and will be relied on more this season, Asquith said, as will other seniors Aaron Carter and Mason Rohan. Rohan came off the bench last year so he has some experience, but it will have been a while for Carter because he didn't play his sophomore and junior years.

"Brant (Cope) and Mason (Carroll) are going to have to step up, and I think they're going to do a fine job of stepping up and filling the shoes of Gavin," Asquith said. "Mason Carroll is strong with the ball, he can go to the basket, he's pretty consistent

outside the perimeter and can knock down shots pretty well. Brant Cope, if we feed him the ball, he can go to work underneath the basket."

"Aaron Carter is quick on the floor," Asquith said. "He's got that mindset of, 'What do I need to do to get my job done?'"

Asquith said he is unsure of the amount of minutes his younger players will play but said they are in the running for playing time. He can speak firsthand on their potential as he led the junior high Trojans to double-digit victories last season. Caden Thomas and Clayton Eikel are names from that group that jump out to Asquith since Thomas brings good ball handling skills and Eikel is strong under the rim.

"That freshmen group, they're played ball together their whole lives," Asquith said. "They know each other and know how each other plays."

Other than the freshmen, Asquith said sophomores Lane Carter and Cooper Rohan are underclassmen that are expected to fill good roles with the varsity team this season. Carter and Carroll are players Asquith is looking at to primarily handle the ball due to the Johnson injury.

"It's really killing him not to play," Asquith said. "I'm still inviting him to the team to be part of it. I think he's going to be a good person on the bench to help keep the boys' tempo up."

Asquith said the goal for this year is simply to be better than last year so that means more wins. In their conference, the Trojans will have to overcome Cairo and New Franklin, but Asquith would like to see them emerge out of districts.

"We have the potential to make some noise this year," Asquith said. "I feel like I've got a great group of boys who are willing to do that and want to do that."

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# Van-Far boys to condition for deeper run

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

After going further in football this year, Van-Far would like to do the same in basketball.

The Indians' football season came to an end in the district semifinals, which gave boys basketball head coach Pat Connaway his full roster about a week before the start of the season. On the court, Van-Far is coming off a better year with a 17-11 record, but the season ended in the district semifinals.

Connaway said Van-Far hopes to be playing for a district title this year and perhaps beyond since most of last year's roster is back. The Indians graduated senior all-Eastern Missouri Conference player Cody Smith but will still have their other all-conference player and all-district player of the year Nikos Connaway. Junior Carson Huff joins the team after transferring from Wellsville-Middletown, and while he won't have the ball in his hands as much, Pat Connaway said Van-Far will put him in good positions to score.

"Carson has significant varsity experience already, but he just has to get our system down," Connaway said. "My senior group – like Gage (Gibson) and Nikos – have started since their freshman year, (junior) Carter (Jennings) has started since he was a sophomore and (senior) Brayden Lay has started off and on so these kids have a ton of experience. Chemistry and things like that, we should have a lot of hiccups once we knock the rust off."

The rust exists every year as kids progressively play into game shape and become accustomed to playing together again, Connaway said, but Van-Far might have more challenges beginning this season pertaining to conditioning. During football season, the Indians stayed active and will need to adjust to a different game.

"The average play in football lasts four to five seconds, and of course, basketball, you can go two minutes at a time without the whistle blowing," Connaway said. "It's a different kind of conditioning. We'll get there, but it will just take a little while."

Connaway said every team wants to be playing its best basketball in February and believes the Indians could start clicking after Christmas. He said Kasen Christian was one injury that carried over from football that should be back around that time, Huff should be better adjusted to the system and



Van-Far senior Nikos Connaway goes for a layup during a shootout this summer. Connaway expects to be the primary player for the Indians yet again after several award-worthy seasons.

[Jeremy Jacob]

the whole Van-Far roster should be starting to figure things out then.

Whenever Van-Far starts playing to its potential, Connaway said he has a team with a ton of energy that runs up and down the floor and plays suffocating defense. He said championships are won with great defense – allowing an opposing average under 50 points – and that is what Van-Far did last year at 48.6 points per game and during its 2018 state championship year at 49.4 points per game.

"We should be pretty solid," Connaway said. "We've been harping on that with some of these kids for four years. You're going to have off-nights shooting. You can't have an off-night shooting, give 65 points and expect to win."

The Indians averaged 8.5 steals per game and had 12 games with double-digit steals. Nikos Connaway led the way with 3.2 steals per game and also led the way with 19.5 points, 8.9 rebounds and 3.9 assists.

"It all starts with Nikos," Connaway said. "He's had three outstanding years and continues to get better. We're asking him for even more – be more of that well-rounded player and more of that leader to make everyone else better."

Connaway has plenty of help starting with his best friend Gage Gibson, who led Van-Far with 41 made 3-pointers last season. Gibson is one of four returning Indians to average at least six points a game with the others

being Connaway, Jennings and sophomore Pacey Reading and "gets better every year from kindergarten on" with added skills of shooting off the dribble and driving to the rim.

Jennings is a 6-foot-4 post player that can knock down perimeter shots, having 12 made 3-pointers last year, and finished with 5.6 rebounds per game. Reading was one shy of Gibson's 3-pointer total, can help "stretch the defense" and is noticeably stronger because of football. Sophomore Evan Utterback is a post player Van-Far can bring off the bench and also brings much strength from the football field, sophomore Gaven Gaston is a big guard that impressed Pat Connaway during the jamboree last week, and Lay has athleticism off the bench and is back off knee surgery.

Connaway really likes his group this season and believes they can have bigger accomplishments. During the regular season, he would like to see the Indians win more in tournaments, including the Centralia Tournament after competing in previous years but going 0-4. More importantly, the Indians believe they should improve the 6-4 conference record from a year ago and could since they lost three of those games by one or two possessions.

"We want to be able to compete with the Montgomery's in our conference and be one of the top schools in our conference," Connaway said. "A district title is something we want to capture."

# MMA basketball crafting culture for more wins

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

Missouri Military Academy's goals for the season should be easy to remember.

The Colonels have their three season goals displayed on the wall in their gym so they can have a good follow-up to last year's 10-15 team, which was the program's first double-digit-win season in three years.

Head coach Roger Siwak is back after beginning his coaching tenure with MMA started last season. He said he believes the key to an improved Colonels team this year is emphasizing the intangibles, which are shown on a poster on the gym wall.

"The first few days of practice, we hit the intangibles hard," Siwak said. "Our intangibles are we want to be the hardest workers, the most disciplined and the most coachable. We want to get our culture right. Last year, we could've won maybe a few more games if our culture was right."

Siwak said that ideal culture includes consistently working harder at practice and being closer as teammates. Everything has been viewed as whether it's a "culture fit," like if a player is sprinting up and down the floor, and the tangibles, or results on the court, should emerge from there.

The effort up and down the floor is particularly important, Siwak said, as he wants MMA to be good in transition, close out on rebounds and limit turnovers. Accomplishing all this will give the Colonels more chances near the rim that they will hopefully make.

"We call that a red zone (near the basket)," Siwak said. "We want to get to the red zone on offense. We want to be a transition team that does fundamentally well on defensive rebounds."

Siwak said getting to know teammates on the court takes time as it is not the same thing as if the same cadets know each other from the barracks or the classroom. There will be plenty of Colonels on the team this year with little varsity experience so they will need time to gel.

Senior Nathan Dempsey is one returner for MMA that has played varsity basketball multiple years and averaged about 11 points in the starting lineup last season. Siwak said he expects to start about three players who were in the program a year ago such as juniors Batbileg Bataa and Kymani Erskine. Senior Bradley Thumbi is a newcomer that Siwak said still brings good leadership.

With this group, Siwak doesn't know how many wins will be in the Colonels' record this season but hopes they are at their best

late in the season. "Our goal is to play our best basketball in February," Siwak said. "I feel like

our practices have been better and our intensity's been better so I feel like our trajectory's better."

# Van-Far girls look for progress through season

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

The Van-Far girls will be looking to be better as the season progresses.

The Lady Indians are taking it game by game with their roster of eight girls – three seniors and five freshmen – this year. They won't have everybody available right away, though, as they are waiting on senior McKenna Engh-Hoffman and freshman Khloe Wallace to return from injury.

Head coach Heather Minter said she believes there are games this season Van-Far can win to follow its 6-20 campaign a year ago. Most of the freshmen had a chance to play even more than the usual 5-6 player rotation Minter features during last week's jamboree in Mexico as the Lady Indians were also without senior point guard Carmen Wilburn because of a FFA prior commitment.

"We need to talk more and look up more, but I feel like the kids competed and played hard with just five kids," Minter said. "We know what we'll need to work on, but we'll get there."

The roster when at full strength brings a good amount of leadership, Minter said, as Wilburn has been with her for years. Engh-Hoffman was a good secondary post option last season along with the graduated Mara Jensen, who was voted as a unanimous all-Eastern Missouri Conference player. Katelyn Sutton added some shooting last year.

"Carmen has started for me all four years so I'm looking for good things from her," Minter said. "Sutton played quite a bit last year and started some. She struggled some, but I feel like she's starting to get a little bit more confidence. McKenna is that post player we miss, and hopefully we get her back as quickly as we can."

Minter said Engh-Hoffman is anticipated to be back from an ACL injury in January, and Wallace should be back but has to be cleared for a nerve issue. Having those two return should help the defense and provide more leadership to the freshmen group.

The freshmen will start unfamiliar to the varsity game but aren't unfamiliar to each other, Minter said. Along with Wallace, Van-Far is adding Elliott Utterback, Mylee Keller, Kenya Jones and Chloe Zumwalt.

"Those kids have been playing together since they were in the first grade," Minter said. "We're going to take some lumps with them because they are playing against older kids, but they're going to be a fun group to coach and watch them grow."

Minter is aware there will be teams that are better than the Lady Indians so she asks that her group competes as hard as possible as they hopefully improve before the end of the season.

"We're just going day by day and game by game," Minter said. "We're so young and then we've got the three upperclassmen. We want to send them out on a good note."

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North Callaway senior Sam Pezold goes to the basket for a layup during practice this season. Pezold is one of two returning varsity starters for North Callaway. (Jeremy Jacob)

## North Callaway boys focused on this season's success

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

North Callaway boys focused on having success this season

The North Callaway boys are reloading this season after a successful season.

Following the program's first district title since 1999, the Thunderbirds will feature a roster without the seven seniors from a year ago. Still, they hope to break in this roster on the way to at least another winning season as they've done in six of the previous seven years.

Head coach Matt Miller said the varsity roster of about 10 kids will have seven playing their first "meaningful varsity minutes" right when they step on the court in the first half. North Callaway has three seniors returning from last year, including second- and third-leading scorers and reigning all-conference players Sam Pezold and Isiah Craighead.

"We've needed all the practice time we could get, but they've been very coachable and have absorbed everything thrown at them," Miller said.

Paul Russell is the other returning varsity senior that doesn't have as many minutes as Pezold and Craighead but will definitely spend more time on the floor this year. Miller said Russell brings a nice shot from the perimeter as probably "the best spot-up shooter in the gym" and "one of the highest basketball IQs."

Miller said he'll be counting on the three seniors, especially Pezold and Craighead, to lead the Thunderbirds this season. Pezold has been starting since freshman year, and Craighead has played varsity basketball since sophomore year.

"They're versatile, Miller said. "Isiah can guard all five spots on the floor, and Sam can guard multiple positions on the floor. Offensively, those two will bring the ball up for us some. They're not true point guards but will be doing a lot of ball handling. They're great passers, and they're great scorers — they can score inside and outside."

Because of them, Miller said the team chemistry has been good so far. Admittedly, he said North Callaway lost some size from previous years as the program's junior varsity team is taller, but that means the Thunderbirds will be quicker.

"We've got a lot of team speed at all five spots, a lot of athleticism and we should be versatile on the offensive end," Miller said. "We're trying get up and down a little bit and move the ball, and our ball movement has been awesome."

Miller said a starting five will be tough to figure out as the Thunder-

## North Callaway girls want to be deep

BY JEREMY JACOB  
Sports Editor

The North Callaway girls hope to be 10-12 strong this season.

The Ladybirds had their strongest showing in six years — finishing with a winning 15-12 record — and want everybody involved in the follow-up campaign this year.

Andrew Klein, who steps in as the girls basketball head coach this year after spending three years as the volleyball head coach and assistant boys basketball coach, has liked the confidence shown by the girls and instilled by his assistants Logan Blevins and Mariah Peace. He said he expects a strong effort in every minute the Ladybirds are on the floor.

"If you're on the floor, you're playing as hard as possible," Klein said. "I've almost told them, 'It would be a problem if you didn't need a sub.' I want girls that play their tails off for three to four minutes at a time, and if they need a minute break, I've got girls to go to on the bench that are going to play their tails off for a minute or two."

Klein said the concern with these expectations is "coasting," or saving energy for the fourth quarter, so North Callaway has been working on conditioning. The fact that the Ladybirds are "guard-heavy" and fit a style of running up and down the floor also is why conditioning will be important.

A big advantage of North Callaway this season is the amount of girls returning from a season ago and also the quality of the experienced players returning. At the forefront are senior captains Riley Blevins and Abrielle Burgher, who were the second- and third-leading scorers and ranked first and second in assists per game from a season ago. Blevins was also an all-conference player last year along with junior Natalie Shryock,



North Callaway junior Natalie Shryock shoots during practice this season. Shryock returns as the Ladybirds' leading scorer and 3-point shooter from a season ago. (Jeremy Jacob)

who is the returning leading scorer and best shooter for the Ladybirds as evidenced by her 71 shots made from 3-point territory.

Shryock and Blevins are familiar to Klein from volleyball and expects them to touch the ball most frequently to benefit the offense, which has improved the last three seasons culminating in a 46.5 scoring average a year ago. Klein said the returning starter Burgher is someone who can make the offense go with her ball handling and also brings tough defense to the floor.

"(Shryock and Blevins) are going to be our go-to players for sure and going to be a problem for a lot of schools to have to guard," Klein said. "I'm still confident in some returners besides them, finding ways to get the open on offense and get them the shots they need. Abrielle Burgher is one of them. She's phenomenal as she plays both ways and plays hard."

Klein has one more volleyball player that has accumulated a ton of basketball experience that could have a big emergence this season. Junior Lakyn Hartley was one of North Callaway's most effective weapons off the bench a year ago, finishing fourth on the team in scoring but leading the team in rebounds at 4.4 per game.

"It's going to be really hard

but will be undersized this time around.

"We definitely need to play bigger than what we are," Klein said. "It really comes down to toughness. I'd imagine there's going to be a couple games this year where we're outmatched vertically. Finding ways to exploit that and cover up our lack of size is definitely something I have to keep an eye on."

Klein said he hopes North Callaway can further improve on last year's record and hence make a run at the Eastern Missouri Conference title and a district title. The Ladybirds will have tough conference competition as always from Montgomery County and Elsberry, but Klein said aiming high should help North Callaway through the season.

"Peaking at the right time is definitely a goal of ours and making a run at districts," Klein said. "Last year, I was lucky enough and blessed enough to be part of the boys team that won districts. I think that's an expectation for the girls as they want an opportunity to play for a district title too."

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