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TOP STORY

SPARTANS BOYS BASKETBALL

Spartans basketball looks to make playoff push this winter

NATHAN ECKER Special to the Daily Sun
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Northland Prep's Henry Troutman (2) passes during a game against Madison Highland in January.

Jake Bacon, Arizona Daily Sun

Numerous banners fill the rafters and line the walls of the gymnasium at Northland Prep Academy. Cross country and soccer have their names printed everywhere, with multiple section and state tournament awards to boast. Though one sport that is noticeably absent is basketball.

In the school's 28-year history, not much of the Spartans' success has come from the boys hoops team. The best year in school history came in the 2012-13 season, which the team finished on a 20-9 overall record.

The Spartans finished sixth in their section that season, warranting a trip as the No. 22 seed in the Division IV state tournament and a first-round exit.

Outside of that year, sustained winning has been difficult to come by. The program's past five seasons have seen several winning records, but a state tournament berth has eluded the Spartans.

Now, the objective of the team is to reach the playoffs.

Coach Brett Hanson's solution to the program's drought begins with a focus on unity and awareness.

In previous years the approach featured a play-oriented mindset. Quickly moving the ball in transition, scoring and winning games were the main concerns.

Though those attributes are important to the growth of players in the program, it took away from ideals that Hanson believes will correspond with success in the coming season.

"I told the guys early on that if you're a starter one game, you may not be a starter the next," Hanson said. "This season we're looking to let go of personal egos, we're looking for more of a team focus, team coherence, not individual accolades so much. If those accolades come during the season, then we'll let that be, that's a good thing, but that's not the focus. Winning is not the focus. The goal is to build a solid team and out of that we're going to get wins, we're going to have success."

The reason for a change in mindset was inspired by the players. Six seniors are included on the roster, with several talented players. The combination of mature leadership and skill gives Hanson reason to believe that his team will achieve the goals it sets.

Preparation that began in June also gives Hanson optimism for the season.

The team participated in over 30 games during the summer and was dedicated to becoming better and closer as a group. Hanson left the summer impressed with his team's ability to work together.

"The team coherence, the team unity, the respect they have and the love they have for one another has been out of this world," he said while proudly watching his team continue to put up shots after a late-night practice.

The seniors themselves understand that lofty expectations are not the norm for their small school. It's not championship or bust, but they have a chance to stun some of the better 2A Conference teams.

Training Spartans

Discipline, speed and athleticism are traits that seniors Sawyer Gordan, Dylan Mortenson and Henry Troutman believe will make the difference toward the team's success. No specific expectations mean the squad can focus on playing its own style of basketball — one that centers heavily on the team's ability to communicate, find open lanes and pressure opposing offenses.

"We're definitely a smaller team compared to the other teams we face, so if we can keep pressure and keep pushing our offense we'll definitely have an advantage," Troutman said.

"It's definitely our defense that will help us win all of our games," Mortenson added. "We're not the biggest, we're not the strongest, but we're one of the smartest teams out there, and we're the most committed on defense and most hard-working, that's for sure."

Ironically enough, it is the senior center, Mortenson, that Hanson believes will make one of the largest impacts.

Mortenson's knowledge of the game is extensive and he makes sacrifices on the floor for the benefit of his teammates.

"He's a really smooth player, he's so sacrificial," Hanson said. "You may not see him on the stat board a whole lot, but he's going to be the guy that wins us games."

Junior guard Jaden Joiner is another figure Hanson expects to move the needle for the Spartans. Hanson calls Joiner a "shooting threat." His ability to consistently make shots from the corners makes him a key piece of the offense, as ball movement and zone defenses are likely to create many open opportunities for the shooter.

The staff around Northland Prep basketball is determined to reach two goals: a team goal of securing a tournament berth, and a larger objective to propel its athletes into the next stage of life and to build a program where success is expected every season.

That process appears to be expedited thanks to a mature team that is hungry for postseason basketball.

The seniors are aware of the role they play but do not falter at the idea of creating the building blocks for the future success of their school.

"I want to prove that NPA can do some damage in our bracket," Gordan said.

He added: "All those shots I put up, they got to mean something, right?"

Gordan believes his team is experienced compared to past rosters. The current group of varsity players have done a lot of work over the years to reach a point at which they can showcase the Spartans' potential.

Now, with only months left until the six seniors graduate, there is excitement about their final opportunity to embrace the team and provide an example for future generations of Spartan athletes.

“The biggest goal for me is just to be satisfied about my last season being captain,” Mortenson said. “Being a senior, it’s the home stretch, you can definitely see the end in sight and it’s real now.”

“Every minute here counts when it’s your last year,” Troutman added. “It comes quick. I’m excited to help the younger kids grow, especially the new sophomores moving up and then some of the JV kids, too.”

Regardless of success, the development of young athletes into better people is the main focus of the school’s basketball program. Winning would be nice too, though.

“We’re a 2A school, we understand winning is not always the goal, that’s not the point,” Hanson said. “Working hard is the goal, never giving up is the goal. We have bigger goals than just winning basketball games and I genuinely love our athletes.”

The Spartans will visit the 3A Page Sand Devils Thursday to open the regular season.

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