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OTHS girls prep for hoop wars

By Steve Oliver - Progress Sports Writer

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Aiming to improve on last season's 15-15 record, the O'Fallon High girls' basketball squad is fine tuning their court skills in preparation for their season-opening appearance against the Hillsboro Hiltoppers in first round action of the Taylorville Round Robin tournament. Head coach Ryan Massey, who begins his fifth year as O'Fallon's court mentor, welcomed an eager and enthusiastic crew of hoop hopefuls to preseason practices the first of November and hopes that his charges will have the right stuff to make the 2010-11 campaign a successful one.

Some questions will have to be answered in O'Fallon's initial few weeks as the local girls' team will have a decidedly different look with the graduation of several squad members from last year. Most notably, the inside-outside tandem of Stephanie Copelin and Ally Fore, both multiple year starters for OTHS, have been lost — two big spots to fill.

Their departure along with five other players has created a void in the O'Fallon roster — one that Massey will fill with a combination of new varsity talent.



Panther Katie Roustio shoots over teammate Kendall Butler during practice on Tuesday. - PROGRESS/Roger Popwell

The Panther cage cupboard is not bare, however. The two key returnees, although still underclassmen, have already proven their court savvy and skill.

Post player Katie Roustio, who logged impressive minutes last winter as a freshman, and perimeter shooter Taylor Klingelhoefler, now a junior, will form the nucleus of what Massey anticipates being a very competitive team.

Klingelhoefler was O'Fallon's leading scorer last year, and Roustio returns as the Panthers' top rebounder in 2009-10. The duo gives O'Fallon an inside-outside threat with a proven track record. Although Roustio spent most of her offseason concentrating on volleyball, Massey is confident that the sophomore standout will be ready when the ball is tossed up for the first time.

"Both Katie and Taylor have demonstrated what they are capable of doing on the court," Massey said. "They both have outstanding attitudes to go with considerable physical skills. Taylor is a tremendous worker and has great

basketball instincts, and Katie is one of a very small group of female athletes in our conference who is blessed with superior athletic skills that allow her to be successful in any sport she chooses to play. With that combination in our lineup, we will be able to compete against anyone that we might face. They match up well with every team on our schedule."

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In order for the Panther girls to compete in the rugged Southwestern Conference, they will need more than just a two-pronged attack, and Massey is confident that he has the personnel to be able to succeed.

Six foot tall junior Victoria Ham showed great improvement during the offseason and, in the absence of Roustio in summer league games and tournaments, was able to log valuable court time against a varsity competition. This additional work will allow Ham to fill the post spot and move the versatile Roustio to the four position along the baseline, doubling O'Fallon's inside scoring potential.

Point guard Sabre Flager returns after seeing varsity action last winter. Junior Kaitlin Kendall and sophomore Camille Ulery will also see action as returnees who have contributed at the varsity level previously.

Added to the mix will be a group of talented underclassmen including four freshmen players for which Massesy has high expectations. The quartet includes Blair Butler, who Massey characterizes as a "true point guard", 5'7" slasher Clara Jones, 5'11" post player Cloe Luster and 5'9" inside player Taylor Underwood.

"This is the first time in my five years as head coach that the varsity/jv squads are not cut and dried," Massey said. "We still have positions open on the varsity team, and every day there is an opportunity for someone to step up in practice and secure a position. I am still not sure yet whether we will take 12 girls to Taylorville or 13, 14 or 15. It's still up in the air.

"Initially, we won't have a lot of depth as far as experienced players, but we do have potential to make things very interesting no matter who are opponent might be."

Those opponents, especially in Southwestern Conference play, will be formidable. Edwardsvill appears the team to beat with Belleville West and Belleville East not far off the pace. East St. Louis has a loaded roster of excellent athletes, and Granite City will field a team that has been together at the varsity level for the last three years.

"Nothing every comes easily in the Southwestern Conference," Massey said. "We know that several teams will have an advantage on us as far as experience and team depth is concerned. Our approach will be to improve on a game to game basis as our younger players acclimate themselves to the level of intensity and execution that is demanded in the SWC.

"If we learn are lessons quickly and keep a positive attitude, our girls will have a good year. Having two veteran players of the caliber of Klingelhoefler and Roustio will give us a solid base on which to build on exciting and productive season."

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