

Panther girls primed for hoop heroics

By Steve Oliver - Progress Sports Writer

Armed with a full arsenal of veteran cagers, OTHS coach Ryan Massey is expecting good things from his 2009-10 girls' basketball squad.

At the top of the roster are three returning starters and five seasoned veterans who will carry the bulk of the offensive load for O'Fallon. However, Massey is just as positive about an influx of new talent that he feels will complement his veteran cast with the result, hopefully, translating into victories.

Now in his fourth season as head coach, Massey has had to endure some long nights on the bench over the previous three years, but the O'Fallon girls' program has shown steady improvement, particularly last year when the OTHS girls pulled several upsets to finish close the .500 mark. Massey wants more this time around.

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"We need to make a statement and push ourselves over the hump," Massey said. "We have the experience, shooting and team depth to make that move. It's simply a matter of executing and improving our team effort game by game. We are a better conditioned team this year without a doubt.

"Last year we came close to pulling off some major upsets that would have completely turned our season around. We would be even or ahead going into halftime but then lose momentum and the lead in the final minutes. That won't happen this year. I'm confident that our girls are hungry for a real

good year. That approach, better conditioning and the experience factor have us pretty excited as to what we may be able to accomplish."

Cause for optimism begins with a trio of seasoned players: guard Alley Fore, center Stephanie Copeland and forward JaMaia Nixon. The talented trio enter their third full year of varsity competition.

Collectively, they give O'Fallon a balanced scoring punch with Fore proficient from the perimeter and at the charity stripe from her guard position, Copelin a valuable inside presence and Nixon with the ability to score from outside as well as in traffic.

"Stephanie (Copelin) and Jamaia (Nixon) give us some added scoring potential because they both can go out on the perimeter and score effectively as well as giving us points in the paint," Massey said. "Ally (Fore) was our best free throw shooter last year and can drive as well as spot up for jumpers outside the arc."

The offensive potential does not end with O'Fallon's three most experienced players. The Panthers should benefit from the return of Camiyha Tally, who was a leading rebounder and scorer inside last year before an injury sidelined her for most of the second half of the season. Michelle Lay and Julia Garrison round out a group of seven seniors on the 13 person varsity roster.

Juniors who will work into the mix include Sabre Flager, who saw considerable varsity action

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last year and will flank Fore at the guard spot and transfer Kelsy Bash, who joins the O'Fallon squad from Bellevue East High School in Nebraska. Bellevue East garnered the state championship in their classification last year, and Bash was a contributing member on the squad. Her basketball background and athleticism will make her a definite contender for varsity minutes as the season progresses.

Underclassmen will also play a pivotal role in just how successful the Panther girls will be in 2009-10. Returning as another veteran starter will be sophomore Taylor Klingelhoerfer. Inserted into the lineup at about Christmas time last year, Klingelhoerfer became one of the Panthers most consistent offensive and defensive players. Massey expects the same kind of season from his sophomore standout this year.

"Klingelhoerfer really helped solidify our team last year," Massey said. "She has great basketball instincts and is a very hard worker. She took some pressure off our guards and also helped tremendously on the boards when we lost Tally. With almost a full varsity season of experience, we expect great things from her this year. She is capable of doing so many things well that her presence on the floor makes everyone around her better."

Other sophomore hoopsters who have been impressive in preseason practices and may add more depth to the Panther attack include Kendall Butler and Kaitlin Kendall.

The last piece of the puzzle may be supplied by freshman Katie Roustio. After bursting onto the prep volleyball scene this fall, Roustio has the athleticism and size to give O'Fallon an additional weapon — on both ends of the floor. Her development as a varsity player may dictate just how powerful the Panthers could become.

"Right now with the physical tools she possesses she may be the best defender we can put on the floor," Massey said. "How well she adjusts to playing against varsity competition will determine just what kind of impact she has for us. If she is able to perform close to the level that she did in volleyball, we can't help but benefit."

The OTHS girls will get an immediate indication as to just how successful they can be during the 2009-10 campaign this weekend when they begin play in the Taylorville tournament. After their season opener Thursday at Mascoutah, the Panthers will play Hillsboro on Friday and a double-header against Rock Island and Springfield Lutheran on Saturday in Taylorville.

O'Fallon will complete the tournament the following weekend with games against Lincoln and Taylorville on Nov. 27 and 28. Their first home game will be Thursday, December 3 against Granite City.

Before finally playing in the friendlier confines of the Panther Dome, Massey and his charges should learn a few things about themselves — lessons that Massey hopes will send them on their way to a banner season.

"Realistically, I think that a 20 win season is in reach," Massey said. "With the combination of experience, shooting and depth that we have, anything short of that would be disappointing, and no one would be more disappointed than me. The girls that are now seniors were my first group when I took over the job at O'Fallon. We've learned some things over the years, and our girls are ready to put those lessons into practice with some good basketball."

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