Women's basketball: Blue Devils young but experienced

By Jason Cox
Leader-Telegram staff

The UW-Stout women's basketball team took its lumps a year ago. Playing with no seniors, just two juniors and 12 freshmen on their roster, the young Blue Devils went 7-18 and 3-13 in the WIAC.

As a result, this season's version features plenty of players with court experience. Six of the top eight scorers from last season's squad are back. But with just four upperclassmen on this year's team, the Blue Devils are still young.

"All the freshmen that played are a year older, but they're still just sophomores," said Mark Thomas, who is entering his 26th season as the Blue Devils coach. "I'm cautiously optimistic. They've made a lot of improvements, but we haven't reached the potential I hope we can get to."

Senior Whitney Rawdon, an Eau Claire North graduate who averaged 9.4 points per game a year ago, is a player Thomas hopes can carry a lot of the load this season. The 5-foot-11 forward led the team with 5.8 rebounds per game last season and was an honorable mention All-WIAC selection.

Also returning to the floor is Durand native Sami Schoeder. The junior guard led the Blue Devils with 9.8 points per game last season before her season came to an end after just 13 games when she tore her ACL. Schoeder was an All-WIAC selection as a freshman, but she's just seven months removed from surgery and likely won't be as effective as she's been in the past.

"She's probably at about 80 percent," Thomas said. "It's something she'll have to fight through for the rest of the year, but she'll be able to help our team. Even right now when she's not up to speed, she just does some things that are better than other kids."

Senior guard Kayla Windt, who has started since a freshman, will also play a key role for the Blue Devils. She had a team-high 43 assists last season and added 37 steals.

"She's a real athletic, hard-nosed, quick kid," Thomas said. "We need her to have a really good year for us. She's kind of our defensive stopper."
Junior guard Rachel Hanley will play a similar role as Windt. Sophomores Katelynn Follokers and Brea Boomer, who averaged 5.9 and 5.2 points per game respectively last season, figure to be key contributors again this season.

Thomas plans to mix in a full-court press on occasion this season in hopes of capitalizing on a strength of last season's team, which forced 11.56 turnovers per game.

"We're going to try to get up and down," Thomas said. "We're not going to be able to sit in the half court and pound with people game after game. We don't have enough size or experience to do that right now."

The Blue Devils finished eighth out of nine teams in the conference last year, and despite their returning experience, they were picked to finish in the same position in the WIAC preseason poll.

"We played better at the end of the year last year, so hopefully we're far more competitive this year," Thomas said.