Men's basketball: Blue Devils have strength in numbers

By Joe Ziemer
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There are certain problems coaches don't mind having. Finding enough minutes to go around is one of them.

That's what UW-Stout coach Eddie Andrist faces this season. And he thinks his problem can cause further problems for the rest of the WIAC.

The Blue Devils bring back 11 players from last year's team, which closed the season strong. Ten of those players have starting experience. It's going to be hard for UW-Stout to find enough minutes for its veterans, never mind a crop of newcomers it's also high on.

"We're going to have a minutes problem," Andrist said. "That's a good problem to have."

Deeper and bigger than a year ago, the Blue Devils hope to build off their late-season success. They won their final three games, beating UW-Eau Claire at home, winning at UW-Stevens Point and knocking off UW-Oshkosh on the road.

That, combined with a successful summer exhibition series against Canadian teams, has been a good confidence-booster for the Blue Devils, picked to finish seventh in the WIAC.

"Our kids know they're good enough to compete," Andrist said. "They just have to be able to put it all together."

Leading the charge is senior point guard Erik Olson, who has been a bit snake-bitten on the injury front but is vital to the success of the Blue Devils offense.

The 5-foot-10 Olson averaged 5.4 assists per game last season and will be the trigger man again this year.

"He's a lot of firepower," Andrist said. "He's a tough nut to crack. He's really aggressive. He'll be one of the better point guards in the league."
Along with Olson, the Blue Devils, 9-16 a year ago, return their top two scorers in 6-foot-4 junior forwards Alex Oman (18.4 points per game) and Jarvis Ragland (11.5).

Chris Hortman, a 6-foot-3 senior guard, provides another perimeter option. That, despite an added offseason emphasis on height, remains the strength of UW-Stout.

"We're really loaded at the 1, 2 and 3," Andrist said. "We can do a lot of different combinations and put a lot of people on the floor."

Andrist supplemented those perimeter players by bringing in a tall recruiting class. That bolsters a frontcourt that includes 6-foot-5 junior Tim Butina (5.1 points per game, 4.8 rebounds per game), 6-foot-3 senior Thomas Scholle-Malone (2.8 points, 2.9 rebounds) and 6-foot-8 junior Josh Kosloske (4.8 points, 4.8 rebounds).

"I think, like all coaches, we need to get bigger," Andrist said. "Not necessarily be bigger in terms of 7-footers but get forwards that are 6-6 or 6-7 or an off-guard that's 6-5 or 6-6. There's no substitution for height."