

October 8, 2008

IOWA BASKETBALL



An interview with:

COACH LISA BLUDER

THE MODERATOR: Coach, the stage is yours.

COACH BLUDER: Thank you for coming out today. Excited about another year beginning. Can't believe it's already here. But last year I think was really proof to this team that great things can be accomplished when everybody's working on the same page, when you're working hard, you're working confidently. I know this year's team is equally excited about having another remarkable season.

There's plenty of reasons to be optimistic about the year this year. We return three key players from last year. Kristi Smith, who I think is the best point guard in the Big Ten conference. Wendy Ausdemore, who is ranked as the best three-point shoot neither Big Ten conference. Megan Skouby, who has had the most experience of any center in the Big Ten conference. Those are three very key positions. We return exceptional people at all those positions.

We also have the addition of Kachine Alexander back to our team. I don't think I get a lot of arguments that people would think she was probably one of our best defensive players on our team last year. She was really coming into her own when obviously she had to leave our team because of academic reasons. But she's had a great spring and a wonderful summer academically. She's doing well. She's excited about being back on the floor, being able to contribute on the floor.

We have JoAnn Hamlin back. JoAnn Hamlin I think is ready to be a factor this season, after sitting out, after her transfer, and playing behind Krista VandeVenter last year. I think this is

her time to be a big factor in our basketball program as well.

We have four freshmen that I feel will contribute almost immediately for our basketball team. Kamille Wahlin, very excited about her potential as our future leader on this basketball team, as our future point guard. She reminds me a little bit more size than Kristi Smith. So I think that's a good thing for her. She will be a great player. This is going to be a wonderful year for her to learn from Kristi and play behind Kristi but get valuable minutes in preparation for her leading our team in the future.

We also have Hannah Draxten as a freshman. Hannah is a great shooter, scoring over 2,000 points in her high school career. Could play the two or the three for us. Again, another good defensive player, but a really nice offensive scorer for us.

Kelly Krei, our local recruit, what a great athlete. Kelly could play in so many different positions on the floor. I think that makes it fun to coach her because she can do so many things that you just by looking at her don't think she can do. She is going to be a factor for us, a tremendous defensive player, very coachable, works extremely hard. I think Kelly is going to be an exciting player for everybody in this community to watch after her successful career at City High.

Then Shante Jones. Shante could play a two or a three for us. She's from Dayton, Ohio. Again, a really nice scorer for us. But is going to have to play catch-up a little bit because she wasn't here this summer. That will put her behind just a little bit.

But just like last year, I don't think teams do remarkable things without special seniors, and we have five special seniors again this year, just like we did last year. In fact, I think we kind of have this unique combination right now of successful experience and youthful enthusiasm. If we can get those two things to blend together, I

think we've got a really, really good product on our hands.

Another tough and challenging schedule. In fact, 20 of our 29 games are against teams that were in post-season play last year. We have a lot of highlights, including hosting Iowa State, hosting the University of Northern Iowa. Again, our Hawkeye Challenge, we're having Boston University, Providence and Portland in that tournament. We are going on the road to play at Kansas, at Duke, who is ranked No. 5 in the country right now, and at Drake University. Then at our neutral site in The Virgin Islands over Thanksgiving, we'll be playing Texas Tech from the Big 12, South Florida from the Big East, and California, a team that's currently ranked No. 2 in some polls. So we're going to have a great challenge there in The Virgin Islands, a great schedule that will prepare us for the Big Ten season.

Then, of course, at the end of the year playing host to the NCAA tournament is something we have not done in 10 years here at the University of Iowa. Our players are very excited about the opportunity to host the tournament. What that means is if we are selected, and I'm not going to say if, when we are selected, we will be playing at home in the first two rounds of the NCAA tournament.

Q. This senior class, four years ago when you brought these five girls in, I remember you saying, Wait to see what these girls can do. Is this what you had in mind?

COACH BLUDER: You're right, this was a special class. I was thinking about that as we prepared for this. One thing, I can't believe they're seniors already. It's gone incredibly fast. It's also kind of sad, too. It's my last opportunity to coach them.

But that's what brings special things out of kids. I think we saw that last year with our seniors the remarkable things they did in their senior year. When you're a senior, you have a different way of approaching things. I think that these guys have had marvelous careers so far, but they're really ready to put a stamp on it this year.

Q. There was one game, their freshmen year, all five of them together on the floor at the same time. Is that going to happen again this year?

COACH BLUDER: It could. Not able to look into the crystal ball. It may. They're obviously

five very talented individuals. It would be fun to have that happen.

Q. Lindsey and Nicole have been nicked up their whole careers. Are you hoping to get them healthy the whole time?

COACH BLUDER: Yeah, you know, Lindsey and Nicole have had obviously some injury problems coming in here. Right now Lindsey's having a little bit of foot pain again. We just hope to get her pain free so that she can, you know, be able to really show everybody what she can do in her senior year.

Q. Kelly Krei, thought maybe she would be a wing coming into college. Are you going to need her more as a four?

COACH BLUDER: You know, we could use her as four, definitely. I think she's so versatile, she could play in a number of different positions for us. You know, Kelly is really a kid that's capable of playing the two, three or four. But we'll probably need her more at the four position. We have a little bit more depth at the two and the three position.

Q. It seems like the graduation from last year, the area maybe you're going to be hardest hit at is rebounding.

COACH BLUDER: I agree with you.

Q. Who is going to pick up the slack there?

COACH BLUDER: That's the challenge we've been giving them during individual workouts this year. We've been trying to point out to them that we did lose a lot of great rebounders from last year. When you think of Jenee Graham and Johanna Solverson, Krista VandeVenter, or Stacy, what they did for us in the rebounding part of it, we have to have some other people assume new roles in rebounding.

Also on the defensive end, too. Those were some of our best defensive players. We've really been challenging them in individual workouts that that's an area we need to work on because we were very good in those two areas last year and we need to continue if we want to have a successful program to do that.

You're exactly right, other people are going to have to step up and assume those responsibilities. I think we have people that can do

that. When you look at JoAnn Hamlin, she's a natural rebounder. Kachine, 10 rebounds at Minnesota, she's a tremendous rebounder. Wendy can be a great rebounder. Megan. We have people that can assume that responsibility, but now they're going to have to instead of talking about it.

Q. Last year Iowa made 197 three-pointers, which was 40 more than the previous season. You were ranked first in the Big Ten in three-point shooting. Talk about the three-pointer and will it again play an important part in your offense this season?

COACH BLUDER: It will. As long as we've got great three-point shooters, we're going to work around it. That doesn't mean that's what we're going to solely rely on. I believe you have to have a good inside attack to make your outside shots more available.

I think that's why we were successful at it last year. That's not what we only did. But definitely when you've got Wendy Ausdemore, Kristi Smith, you've got to be putting up a lot of three-point shots. And we will continue to do that.

Q. How is it different coming into a season as the defending Big Ten regular-season champion?

COACH BLUDER: You know, the only difference is it gives the kids confidence. It gives them proof that what we did last year works, so let's continue doing those same things.

But truly, that's over, and now besides the confidence it brings you and the lessons, it's over, and now it's ready to start again. I think these guys are ready. They want their own legacy here. These five seniors, especially.

Q. Defensively last year the team made huge strides. You were second in the Big Ten in defending field goal shooting, first in defending the three, held teams to 60 points a game. Talk about the defense this year and the role it has to play.

COACH BLUDER: Again, that's something we really challenged our team with. Again, last year was such proof that we have to have those two elements, rebounding and defense, for a team to be a championship team, for a team to be successful. So we've got great lessons to draw upon. We just have to keep reminding them of that and their commitment to doing a good job in those two areas.

We haven't made a lot of changes in our defense from last year. A couple minor things. But we haven't made a lot of adjustments. We think what we did last year worked really well. We just need to continue to bring that intensity that we established on defense last year.

Q. Johanna Solverson, she was probably the most aggressive player as far as creating her shot. Do you need somebody like Johanna to become the person that will take the initiative or do some creating?

COACH BLUDER: Right. I'm smiling because I think she was the most aggressive in everything. You know, first in line for the water cooler. Now she's over in Greece playing, enjoying a professional career now. Very happy for her.

But you're right, Johanna was an aggressive player, but not just offensively really, I mean, defensively, rebounding, get out of my way. We do have to have that type of personality. I think that type of personality on your team raises everybody else's intensity. I think we have people that are capable of being that aggressive, assertive type of person. I think Kachine Alexander is very much like that. I think JoAnn Hamlin is very much that personality.

Now, as far as creating offense, I don't know if we've got a replica of her, just to be able to put out there. But I think Kachine Alexander really worked on her offense over the summer. I think we're going to see improvements in her offense there. And, again, I think with Wendy and Kristi, we've got some really good guns in there offensively.

Q. Last season the team seemed fueled by maybe it was the disappointment of the previous year. How are they handling the success of last year?

COACH BLUDER: Yeah, you know, that's always a fine line because you want to enjoy last year's success, but you also at the same time don't want to rest on your laurels either. I believe that they have enjoyed last year's success, and you have to have success. If you don't have any success ever, you start to lose motivation, you start to lose the belief. So I think those things have really intensified from last year.

But at the same time I think as coaches we have to keep them hungry. We've got to keep

reminding them of what it takes to be successful.

I think the team is pretty smart, though. They realize we did lose some pretty important elements of last year's team. And I think that alone has kept this team hungry. I think if everybody would be returning, it would have been a little bit harder. But I think with the loss of some pretty important seniors, it almost makes this team realize, yeah, we do have to keep working hard because we've lost some really good players from last year.

So I think that's almost made them a little bit more hungrier because of that.

Q. Do you think they have the swagger of a Big Ten champion returning or still that chip on their shoulder?

COACH BLUDER: I hope that they have more of the swagger versus the chip on the shoulder. But I don't know that I've been around them enough in practice situations yet to really give you a complete answer on that. But I hope that they have the swagger. I think you have to have the confidence and you have to have the belief going to play on the road in the Big Ten, going to play at Kansas, at Duke, playing against the competition we're going to play. You better believe in yourself or it's going to be over quickly.

Q. When you look at the schedule, you can't help but zero in starting late November, eight days when you are going to face Cal, Duke, come home to host Iowa State. Looks like a pretty critical and challenging part of the schedule for you. Your thoughts on that section?

COACH BLUDER: It's going to be extremely difficult, as we know. We're playing on the road, on a neutral site, obviously getting to host Iowa State, who is going to have an excellent basketball team. That's a tough segment.

But, you know, you can't look at it as a segment. We've got to look at it as one game at a time. If we start looking at the overall picture, I think it gets overwhelming. Just focus on one game at a time and that's how we'll keep our team focused.

Q. Was this schedule designed to be that tough early, knowing the girls you had coming back, wanting to challenge them right away?

COACH BLUDER: Some of it is definitely by design, knowing we had a pretty good team

coming back this year. That's why we started the Kansas series. We will be hosting them here next year with that series. We think that's a great series to add.

To play at The Virgin Islands, that is one of the premiere women's basketball tournaments in the country. Great competition, three games in three days. That's very difficult to do. You're playing in The Virgin Islands, which is really nice. So it's a great tournament. It's a premiere tournament, like I said.

But, you know, the Duke game, we had no control over that. We don't know who they're going to give to you. You have no idea who they're going to match you up with in the Big Ten/ACC series. That's the only one we really don't know what's going to happen until after the season.

Q. You talk about Kristi, Wendy and Megan. Have they changed much since they got here? What were they like as freshmen versus now?

COACH BLUDER: Oh, my. You know, I think they've all changed. But Kristi has really changed because she's had to become more of a leader. Kristi was always a leader by example. She always worked hard and did what you asked of her. But she's had to become more of a vocal leader. And that's really not something she's comfortable with. And even now she's still not. Even though she's so much better than when she came as a freshman, she is so much better in understanding that.

Wendy, same thing. Wendy is the type of person that would really cheer people on, but holding other people accountable wasn't really something that she was comfortable with. And she's had to learn to as a senior and as a captain on our basketball team, they've had to learn those roles.

But I think both of them, all of them, their game has changed tremendously from when they came here as a freshman. But I think more than anything, it's their leadership that has really developed, and what really shines.

And then one thing that's been a constant is the type of people they are. I mean, they are wonderful human beings. They're incredible role models. They excel in the classroom. And that's one thing that's been a constant throughout their career that I'm extremely proud of them for doing.

Q. Megan, seemed like when she came in, she had all the natural talent. Seems like she's had kind of adjusted to the years to add the grit to her talent.

COACH BLUDER: Yeah, Megan has probably had to make the most adjustments to anybody, from being a starter to being a non-starter, from being a person being the leading scorer on our team to somebody who wasn't.

I have a lot of confidence in Megan this year. I think she can have a tremendous year. Has she made the big huge strides that maybe Kristi and Wendy, that we saw with them? You know, probably not. But at the same time she came in at a pretty good level. I mean, she came in as a great, great basketball player. We just want her to leave that way as well.

Q. Only two Big Ten teams, Ohio State and Michigan State, have gotten any mention in the top 25 pre-season rankings. Is the Big Ten being overlooked or taken for granted?

COACH BLUDER: I think those two teams deserve to have that type of attention. I think Purdue also deserves to have some of those type of notoriety. I think people look at us and see that we were hit by graduation. So that's going to give you nothing in the early season as far as attention. And that's fine with me. I've never really been a big believer in that you have to have those early season rankings. I'd rather have them at the end of the year, like any coach would.

As far as the Big Ten, we didn't do extremely well in post-season play last year. So it's probably where we should be. We need to go out and earn it this year, earn that respect nationally.

Q. With Megan, has anybody had a career path quite like hers? It seems unusual.

COACH BLUDER: I'm not sure if any athlete ever -- if two athletes ever have the same career path. They're all so individual. They're all unique and different in how they respond to coaching, how they develop.

I just think we saw Megan develop very early. Was almost a surprise on the scene her freshman year at how much she contributed right away. How much bigger jumps can kids make? I mean, that's pretty tough when you come in, maybe on a scale of 1 to 10, a 9 on your scale of your development. You don't have as big a jump to make as a kid that comes in that hasn't been developed as much.

So I don't know if I've had another player that's had her same career path, but I'm not sure that I've had a Wendy or a Kristi either.

Q. Is she still going to be coming off the bench this year? Do you know that yet?

COACH BLUDER: I don't know that yet. That's the kind of carrot I like to keep out there until the week before the game as far as keep the kids guessing as to who's going to be a starter and who's not going to be a starter. I'm sure they can kind of look around the room and figure it out for themselves. So can you guys.

But, you know, is there surprises? There always is. And I certainly am not going to say who is going to be a starter right now because that would take a lot of the competition out of the first month of practice for us.

Q. Looking at the Big Ten schedule, you play Ohio State only once. We play Michigan State once in East Lansing. The first five games in the Big Ten, three are on the road. What are your thoughts about the Big Ten schedule for Iowa this year?

COACH BLUDER: You have it analyzed much more than I do, to be quite honest (laughter).

I did realize that we had Ohio State and Michigan State only once, which from a perspective right now, that would be really good for post-season and for rankings in the conferences. They're the two highest-ranked teams in our conference. At the same time that can hurt your RPI because you're not playing the top teams twice.

Obviously we love to have the opportunity to have Michigan State on our home floor. We've fared very well against Michigan State on our home floor in the past. The three road games to begin the season, I really hadn't even realized that. I know we have one against Wisconsin before the Christmas break on the road. I didn't realize we had two right away to begin the Big Ten, which almost surprises me, because that's one of the things they try to avoid, having so many road games in a row. So I'm surprised, quite honestly, that you bring that up, that is true.

But, you know, on the other hand that means we're going to have a lot of home games late and it means we're going to have a lot of home games in a row. That can be a real positive. If you can get some of those road games early, boy, it

makes the latter part of your schedule really attractive.

Q. Of the seniors, Nicole maybe got lost in the shuffle last year. Does she have the most to prove this pre-season to get back in the rotation a little bit?

COACH BLUDER: I'm not sure if she's got the most to prove of anybody. I don't know if Nicole has to prove anything to anybody on our team because we all admire so much what Nicole brings to this basketball team, what Nicole has done with having diabetes and being able to perform at this level. To perform at this level alone is challenging. To add that type of health issue to it is amazing what she accomplishes.

So I don't think Nicole has to prove anything to anybody because we all recognize when she comes in the game, the spirit she brings, the enthusiasm she brings, and what a competitor she is every single day in practice.

So I know that Nicole, because she's a competitor, wants to be out on the floor more. She'll have that chance just like everybody else will.

Q. Do you think at the end of the year Hannah will have probably the most minutes of all the freshmen?

COACH BLUDER: I think Hannah will log a lot of minutes. But I think Kelly, Kamille as well. Those three probably the most of our freshmen. But I wouldn't want to single out one of them because I'm not sure right now. I mean, Kamille will be backing up Kristi. Again, we need to give her valuable minutes. We need to make sure Kamille gets those minutes for our future program.

Q. Play her at the one or two?

COACH BLUDER: We're going to have her stick to the one. We don't feel like right now we need the depth at the two for one thing. As a freshman, I would rather they concentrate at one position, especially when you're talking about a point guard, because it's such a demanding position. Not only are you a freshman adjusting to just being a Division I basketball player, but now you're expected to lead the team, call the offenses and defenses. That alone, I think for her just to concentrate on being the backup point guard, is probably enough to ask of her as a freshman.

Thank you. Appreciate everybody coming out.