

Winter(sports)is(are)coming

by Blake Thomason

During the winter, the Clackamas Cougars men's and women's basketball and wrestling get underway. The women's basketball opens this season on a streak of success: 13 straight seasons making the NWAC Championship Tournament, as well as seven Southern Region championships in those years.

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL:

"I expect us to be very competitive once again," co-head coach Kayla Steen said. "We don't have a win/loss goal but the expectation every year is to compete for the Southern Region championship and position ourselves to have a chance to make a deep run in the [NWAC] Championship Tournament."

The team returns five players and welcomes seven newcomers.

"The group is a good mixture of returning players and new freshman," Steen said. "They are a hardworking, athletic group. If we can figure out how to play together and learn how hard we have to play to compete at this level, we have a chance to be pretty good."

Head coaches Steen and Jim Martineau expect sophomore Cassidy Edwards – who started every game last year – to be a team leader, as well as incoming freshman Toria Bradford, who was the starting point guard on Oregon City High School's state championship team.

MEN'S BASKETBALL:

The women's basketball team isn't the only hoops team with high hopes. The men's team, led by head coach Cliff Wegner, has enjoyed similar success, qualifying for every NWAC Tournament since 2001.

"We feel good going into this season," Wegner said. "We have six returning sophomores who have all played in the program and are all good players, so that's a nice nucleus to start with."

The men's team has worked hard in the offseason, hoping to rebound from last year's 16-13 season that ended with

consecutive losses in the NWAC Tournament. This year's focus is primarily on defense.

"We expect to see them play hard every night," Wegner said. "Bring that effort, be consistent on defense, be consistent rebounding and get better and better throughout the season with the offense. Defense needs to be a constant all season long from the get-go, from day one. That's what we're really focusing on, developing a team mentality, a team personality. Every time we play we're going to play defense this way, we're going to play this hard."

"I challenge our guys to redefine what greatness is to them."

Last season, the team won a share of the Southern Region crown and hopes to do so again.

"Our goal is to always play for a postseason spot, the best spot we can get," Wegner said. "To do that, you have to win the league, so our goal is to try to win the Southern Region. We've got the people back to potentially win the region again."

Wegner expects a trio of experienced stars to lead the team this year.

"Michone Hopkins is returning," Wegner said. "He played two years ago and he was one of the best guards in the

NWAC, and then he had knee surgery last year and missed last season. Brandon Halter was our leading scorer and rebounder off last year's team. Ezekiel Martin started last year. He's a great defender, all around basketball player."

WRESTLING:

Aside from hoops teams, Clackamas boasts a dominant wrestling program. In eight seasons under coach Josh Rhoden, the Cougars have placed in the top five at the NJCAA Wrestling Championships six times. This year the team expects similar success.

"We've got a pretty good group," Rhoden said. "We returned seven All-Americans from last year's team. Currently we're ranked no. 2 in the preseason polls in the country, which is great but we still got a ways to go. The main thing for us is just being able to continue to be learners, stay focused, take care of our class work, and being healthy."

Dominant teams often have trouble with complacency. Rhoden combats it with new challenges for his wrestlers.

"I challenge our guys to redefine what greatness is for them. In the classroom, off campus, with wrestling, all the aspects kids have to come to junior college for. Going forward it's not just about competition, but what can we do in the classroom and outside the classroom to impact ourselves as best we can for the future."

Of course, the team still has high expectations for winning.

"We're going to have an awesome season; we have a really fun group, a wonderful group of young men. Our team captains this year will be Lawrence Otero, Dylan Reel and Kyle Bateman. All three of those guys we expect good things from. It could be super special, maybe a record-setting year, but a lot of things have to happen between now and then."

For a program that has accomplished so much, what is there left to do?

"I think for us, our goal to redefine greatness, we'll try to get 10 All-Americans because nobody has ever done that before. Can you get to 10? That would take an entire group of guys doing something pretty cool."

Registration for winter term starts this week!

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