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Summertime is crunch time

Girls hope hard work in the offseason will pay off in high school games and beyond

BY DOUG RITCHAY • OF THE NORTHWESTERN • JULY 20, 2008

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Megan Wenig's goal is to play college basketball, and she hopes a scholarship goes along with it.

ADVERTISEMENT She's willing to do almost anything to give herself the best shot of playing past high school.

Truth be told, Wenig could play now at the Division III level, but she has bigger dreams. She wants to play on as big a stage as possible, which is why the senior-to-be at Oshkosh West is spending more time on the hard court this summer than on the beach.

She has dreams.

Wenig's like countless high school girls basketball players, who use the summer to improve their game. This summer, Wenig has been playing for the Fox Valley Hustle, her own high school team, has been coaching camps and even has tried a speed training camp.

She'll go to no end to make herself the best player possible.

Wenig, like Hustle teammates Katie Luethe (West), Morgan Werch (Ripon) and Calla Schnell-Harrison (Ripon) are dribbling towards a dream, they hope.

"Stay in shape and improve on every thing you can," said Wenig, when asked what she's working on this summer. "Everyone else who wants to be at that level is doing it, so you better be doing the same, if not more."

Wenig, who was key in leading West to a runner-up finish at the WIAA Division 1 state tournament last season, isn't just playing basketball this season. When available, the Fox Valley Association first-team selection is playing club softball, where she was a second-team pick.

Sometimes the basketball and softball schedules conflict, so the point guard/shortstop plays basketball. She doesn't seem worn down by all the activity.

"I look forward to basketball practice," Wenig said.

But she conceded by adding, "It's nice to have a long nap once in a while."

Wenig said she has received a lot of letters from colleges, but has no timetable for a decision on her choice of what school she will attend.

Not too worried now about it, Wenig is working hard on everything, but admits one area is getting a lot of attention.

"Definitely my body," Wenig said. "I want to get stronger."

While Wenig is one year away from college, Luethe is two. The junior-to-be played a support role last season for West, but displayed a good touch from the outside.

The left-hander will need to take on a bigger role this coming season, but Wenig isn't worried.

"She gets a ton of rebounds," Wenig said. "I think she has a lot more confidence after last season."

Luethe is in her first season playing with the Hustle and didn't have to think twice about accepting a chance



Shu-Ling Zhou/of The Northwestern

Megan Wenig of Oshkosh West, right, Morgan Werch of Ripon, Katie Luethe of Oshkosh West and other Fox Valley Hustle players listen to their coach at halftime during a tournament at Ripon College last month. Calla Schnell-Harrison of Ripon also plays for the Hustle.

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to play.

"I was asked by the team and thought it would be great exposure, and to get more experience," Luethe said.

While Wenig has been named to the Fox Valley Association's all-conference teams the last two seasons, Luethe is scratching the surface of her talent. Because she was a role player last season, Luethe wasn't on the court for significant time.

She's offsetting that by playing a lot this summer. She says some of the tournaments she's played in for the Hustle have given court time for seven games. It's a lot of basketball, but Luethe enjoys it.

"I've been getting a lot of playing time," Luethe said. "It puts you in more pressure situations. It's all voluntary, so I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't enjoy it."

There is a price, however.

"You definitely feel beat up the morning after a tournament," Luethe said. "You wake up and are sore, but you just work out the next day."

Luethe said the level of competition the Hustle plays is better than high school. As she said, "All the teams have good players."

Because of that, she has no choice but to improve or ride the bench.

"The refs let more things go," Luethe said. "The girls are bigger and better. It's more competitive."

One of the perks of playing together is Wenig and Luethe get a chance to develop chemistry on the court. West lost three starters from last year's team, meaning Luethe will be asked to contribute more.

"It really helps to play outside high school with her," Luethe said. "Hopefully that carries throughout the season."

Added West coach Niki Sutter: "It's a great opportunity for the girls to play together, especially after losing five seniors.

"I think it's important for them to play with a team — AAU or with the high school team."

While Luethe has two seasons left at West, she admits playing AAU this summer is something she needed to do to reach her goal of playing college basketball.

"That's definitely a thought," Luethe said. "A lot of these AAU tournaments, there's a lot of scouts."

Apparently, Luethe is making strides.

"She has impressed me so much," Sutter said. "AAU has helped her a lot."

While Luethe can't have direct contact with colleges, seniors-to-be can, meaning Werch and Harrison, like Wenig, are putting their best foot forward now.

They return to a team that was 22-1 last season, losing in a sectional semifinal, and boasts one of the best players in the state in Taylor Wurtz, another senior, who's also playing AAU this summer, but at a national level.

Last season, Werch and Harrison complimented Wurtz and Erin Lind, who graduated and will play at Ripon College.

Both Werch and Harrison know they need to do more. This is why they are each going to great lengths to improve their game this offseason.

"That's what I've been working for," Harrison said. "I've been working for myself to get better and for the team. I'm not ready to give up basketball."

Harrison plays in two leagues, in addition to playing for the Hustle. Like her teammates, she enjoys the constant competition.

Unlike Luethe, though, Harrison played a lot last season. But when a team has the likes of Wurtz and Lind, there weren't a ton of chances to make impacts.

She knows that changes this season, so she's readying herself for what she hopes is a brilliant senior season.

"Being a senior, I know I have to be a leader on the team," Harrison said. "We have to pick it up a lot. I have to step up big time."

Like her Hustle teammates, Harrison doesn't just leave her work to games. She puts in extra time.

"I've worked on my shot a lot, taking it to the hole," Harrison said.

Although Harrison didn't have a standout junior season by statistics, she's hoping that changes this coming season. She wants to play college basketball and said this summer's work will go a long way in her reaching her goal.

"All I know is I want to stay in the state," Harrison said. "I want to stay close to family; probably a Division III school."

Harrison, like Wenig and Lueth, is getting extra court time with Werch. Both started last season and will be asked to do more this year. Playing the level of competition they are with the Hustle will only advance their chemistry.

"Morgan and I have done it all together," Harrison said of playing basketball. "It's like we can read each other. We know what the other's going to do."

Harrison also said one other thing is pushing her this summer. Ripon lost shockingly to Fox Valley Lutheran in a sectional semifinal, handing Ripon its only loss of the season.

Don't think she and her teammates have forgotten. That likely is fueling every Ripon player's fire this summer.

"It does," Harrison said. "That was a lesson. It gives me more motivation, more determination to play as hard as I can."

One of the obvious concerns of playing so much basketball like this foursome does over the summer is if the players are asking too much of their bodies. Of course, the players say no, but...

"That's why I put it in the kids' hands," Sutter said. "The kids put time in and want to be successful. You don't want them getting burned out."

"They have so much going on in their lives. As long as they do something."

Ripon coach Bill Peters said this is the way it works nowadays.

"If you want to excel in high school, you have to play all year round," he said. "I have girls who play basketball and volleyball, but they pick one (to excel in)."

"We play in two leagues and we have an open gym. You can play five to seven nights. Does it lead to burnout or overload? I don't worry about it because everyone is doing it."

Wenig, Lueth, Harrison and Werch haven't shied away from the court this summer. For the three seniors-to-be, this is their showcase summer. Although they have their senior seasons ahead of them, the preparation has started.

"Everyone says the summer going into your senior season is the most important," Wenig said. "This is your last shot to get noticed."

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