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By Dennis Garcia
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ASHEBORO - Austin Davis admitted he knew very little about the Uwharrie Charter Academy girls varsity basketball program when he took over two short years ago. He said by looking at the team's records over the past four seasons, they must have struggled as the Eagles recorded just 10 wins in those four campaigns.

"With the returning players, there just wasn't a whole lot of excitement or hope when it came to basketball," Davis said.

My how things have changed in just two years.

After taking over for the 2018-19 season, Davis saw a big jump as the Eagles won eight times, including four Yadkin Valley Conference wins after capturing a total of just one league game the previous three years.

This year, the jump has been even greater as the Eagles finished 11-5 in league play, finishing fourth in the YVC. UCA is 16-8 overall and Monday's 46-34 win over North Stanly in the opening round of the conference tournament represented the very first postseason win of any kind by the girls basketball program.



Head coach Austin Davis.

UCA will look for a big upset tonight when the Eagles meet top-seeded and YVC champion Grey Stone Day in the conference tournament semifinals. That game is set for 7 p.m. at South Davidson High School.

Win, lose or draw, the Eagles will taste state playoff action after the conference tournament is completed.

Quite a leap in the two years under Davis.

"The first thing was to build relationships," said Davis, who spent four years prior coaching the girls basketball team at Archdale-Trinity Middle School before a one-year stint as the assistant boys coach at Providence Grove High School. "I set out from the start to get to know these girls and to find out what we needed to do to get these players invested in the program as a whole.

My understanding was there wasn't a lot of off-season things going on. We were going to have off-season workouts and play summer basketball and build relationships. It was important that they knew they had the opportunity to get better, get better in the weight room and get better on the court. They had the opportunity to improve themselves."

The Eagles took advantage.

"We took a big step last year when we went 8-17 overall, but the biggest thing that has helped us get over the hump was that we had an entire off-season together," Davis said. "After last season, we went right into spring workouts, summer camps and summer league games and then fall workouts. Everyone put in the time and the effort to work hard from the very end of last season."

That effort is quite evident on the floor. The Eagles won their first four games, saw their record at 9-6 before winning six of their next seven games. That streak included a 56-50 win over North Rowan a game after falling to Albemarle.

"It was after a game we shouldn't have lost and we were able to come back and beat a very good North Rowan team, that was a signature win for us," Davis said.



Junior Natalie Beeson leads the Eagles in scoring.

The Eagles have received plenty of contributions from plenty of players. Junior Natalie Beeson is averaging 14 points per game and Gabi Greene is averaging nearly eight points and five rebounds per contest. Sophomore Kristen Jensen is averaging nearly eight points and six rebounds a game.

"Those three have been our big statistical players, but we have so much balance," Davis said. "Our rotation goes nine deep and that allows the people to play the role they do best. We have several kids who don't score a lot, but they can play defense so we'll put them on the top scorers for the other team."

Ashara Spruill, Lauren Gordon, Mia Leonard, Bre Brooks, Paige Ingram and Madi Duvall have all played important roles as have others.

"We're still a young team," Davis said of his roster, which includes just one senior, one junior, six sophomores and four freshmen. "Our kids have really worked hard to be put in the position to have success.

They have completely bought into what we are doing. There has been a change of mindset. The girls know the expectations. They know these are the times that the gym is open and the weight room is open.

"Another big part of our success is we have a lot of volleyball players and that team had a fantastic season, getting to the third round, so they know what has to be done and the work involved," Davis continued. "They have worked their tails off and the mindset has shifted from just going out there and playing basketball thinking they are not very good but it's OK, to we are some pretty good athletes and if we work hard we can be successful."

The Eagles have already met a preseason goal, but they aren't going to stop there.

"Going into the season, we set a goal of 15 wins and here we are sitting at 16," Davis said. "So from that perspective, we're slightly ahead of schedule from where I anticipated we would be two years ago. Again, they have worked very hard. I have seen them grow not only from a physical standpoint but from a basketball IQ standpoint."

That is quite evident every time they take the floor.

