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ASHEBORO - Heading into a new league could cause a bit of trepidation, especially when you're a 1-A school in a new split conference loaded with established 2-A talent.

But when Uwharrie Charter Academy joined six other Randolph County teams to form the new split Piedmont Athletic Conference this past realignment, there wasn't any trepidation from girls varsity basketball coach Austin Davis, who only saw a great opportunity to see his program improve.

"Our kids, for a long time now, have looked forward to the opportunity to play other county teams," said Davis, who is in his fourth year of leading the Eagles. "I don't think we necessarily look at the size of the school we are playing, but our emphasis is to play up to our standard. It doesn't matter if we're playing a winless team or the top team in the state. We definitely look at this as an opportunity."

The Eagles have had very few chances to play teams in Randolph County, but that will change this season. And the Eagles couldn't have picked a better year to switch to a mostly 2-A conference as UCA, which is still playing as a 1-A team, has plenty of returning talent.

"We had pretty high expectations walking into the year," Davis said. "We had four seniors and two of them have been with me for four years and two for three years and we had four juniors with three years experience. There was a lot of experience so we had high expectations."

So far, the players haven't disappointed. Uwharrie Charter opened the season with wins over Clover Garden School of Burlington (68-39), Bethany (57-8), Chatham Charter (56-42) and North Stanly (34-32) before dropping its only game so far, a 45-24 decision to Richmond. Wins over Chatham Central (47-35), Chatham Charter (47-37) and Clover Garden (49-44 in 2 OTs) sent the Eagles into their very first PAC contest last week against Providence Grove, which was a perfect 6-0 entering the game. The Eagles' PAC debut was a success as they earned a 47-27 win over the Patriots.



Head Coach Austin Davis. Photo by PJ Ward-Brown Photography.

"I think it solidified for everyone that we are a pretty solid team," Davis said of the conference-opening win. "We had good non-conference results. We never felt any extra pressure. Getting a win in that manner against a county school and a conference opponent shows we are a team that can compete."

Competing is certainly something the Eagles have done in recent years. Prior to Davis taking over the program, the Eagles were struggling. UCA recorded just 10 total wins in the previous four seasons combined before Davis led a resurgence that saw the team win eight times in the 2018-19 season, finish 18-10 overall and 11-5 in Yadkin Valley Conference action in the 2019-20 season and 7-3 overall and 6-1 in the YVC during the abbreviated 2020-21 season.



Gabi Greene (#20). Photo by Johanna Holland Painter.



Kristen Jensen (#21). Photo by PJ Ward-Brown Photography.

Among the leaders for the Eagles this season are senior Gabi Greene (13.3 points per game and 7.7 rebounds), senior Kristen Jensen (9.9 and 6.0), junior Ashara Spruill (7.1 and 7.8), sophomore Mackenzie King (5.5 and 2.5), sophomore Lily Charlesworth (4.4 and 3.4) and sophomore Chloe Painter (4.4 and 2.0). Others have contributed greatly to the early success.

"The biggest change we had this year was that Natalie Beeson, who had been our leader, graduated and losing that big of an impact would change everyone's roles," Davis said. "We had experience and had been playing together, but they had to adjust to new roles."

Davis also gives a great deal of credit to

the Eagles' success to assistant coach Terry Allmon, a veteran girls basketball coach who won a state championship with East Davidson.

"I value his opinion more every year," Davis said of Allmon, who is in his third year at UCA. "He has been a huge blessing for me personally. He has been an asset to our program with his wisdom, knowledge and demeanor. Every year I have leaned on him more and more."



Ashara Spruill. Photo by Johanna Holland Painter.

The Eagles have two non-league games this week as they will travel to Forsyth Country Day Tuesday, play at Chatham Central Wednesday and return to PAC action Friday at Trinity.

After the Christmas break, the Eagles should be even stronger as Savannah Surratt will return from an injury that has kept her out all season.

"I think our non-conference schedule has gotten us ready," Davis said. "We've played in just about every kind of game and scenario imaginable. We're looking forward to it."