

By EARL WATT

- Daily Leader State recognition is starting to come to the Liberal Redskin basketball programs.

The investment has taken quite some time.

Both the boys and girls teams have seen an emphasis placed on summer basketball since the current senior class has been 8 years old.

The result was seen three years ago when players like Hannah Rotolo, MaKayla McPhail and Alex Gilmore were participating in varsity games as freshmen.

As the younger classes continued to focus on the game in the off- season, more experience made its way onto the Redskin and Lady Redskin rosters.

And the wins started to come.

Not only are the varsity squads off to a perfect 5-0 start, but the junior varsity teams also finished the first semester at 3-0, making Liberal's four top basketball teams a combined 16-0.

Last season also had high expectations for both teams, but the boys lost the season opener at Woodward, Okla., and the girls lost the second game of the year to Guymon, Okla.

This season, those games weren't close.

The two toughest challenges of the season so far came from Caprock, Texas for the girls and Muskogee, OKla., for the boys. Both had to overcome second-half deficits to get wins.

If anything can be said about the 5-0 start is that it might be the easiest portion of the schedule. Four of the five were played at the Big House, and other than Muskogee, all were played against smaller schools.

Up next will be the Western Athletic Conference, which will offer a more extensive challenge than the first five games according to Hannah Rotolo.

We're going to practice and get ready for WAC.

"Hays is 5-1, so they have won as many as we have," she said.

"It's going to be a whole different ball game," McPhail said. "WAC schools are used to us playing faster. We're going to have to work on our half-court offense."

That was the same sentiment from Lady Redskin coach Shane Stout.

"WAC schools aren't going to let us build 20-point leads at half," he said. "That's just not going to happen. We will have to be a better half-court team."

If games get into a fast pace, the Redskins will feel right at home.

The Lady Redskin defense has led a transition game as good as any in Class 5A.

The Redskins earned their first WAC title last year in more than 15 years.

The team went on to win Sub-State and qualify for the state tournament. A tough loss in double overtime to Bishop Carroll ended Liberal's season.

The 5-0 start is just the beginning for what they have established as goals for this year.

Eight of the remaining 15 games on the schedule will be against Hays, Great Bend, Garden City and Dodge City — otherwise known as the WAC.

"The WAC is tough, no matter what," Liberal coach Drew Gruver said.

"We have to get back after Christmas and do what we do. It's a long season."

The first five games were played in 10 days. The next 15 will be spread over three months.

Liberal was tested against Muskogee after jumping out to a big lead early and having to rally from a fourth-quarter deficit with clutch free throws down the stretch to preserve the win.

Muskogee is one of the better teams in Oklahoma, however, and it was a measuring stick game for the Redskins early in the season.

But it's the wins that hang banners that matter to this group.

"We are off to a good start, but there are bigger and better things down the road," Gruver said. "We haven't done too much yet."

Liberal basketball teams off to a perfect 16-0

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