

Embracing the challenge

New-look Marlins take aim at similar success in 2014-15 winter

BY MIKE MOORE

mmoore@candgnews.com

Like two prizefighters waiting for the other to weaken or the bell to finally ring, Mercy and Marian dug in for a classic Class A basketball state semifinal last year.

In the end, the Marlins came up a few points short on the scoreboard, and two wins shy of the ultimate goal.

Fast forward to now, and Gary Morris has a totally different group, thanks to graduation and some untimely misfortune.

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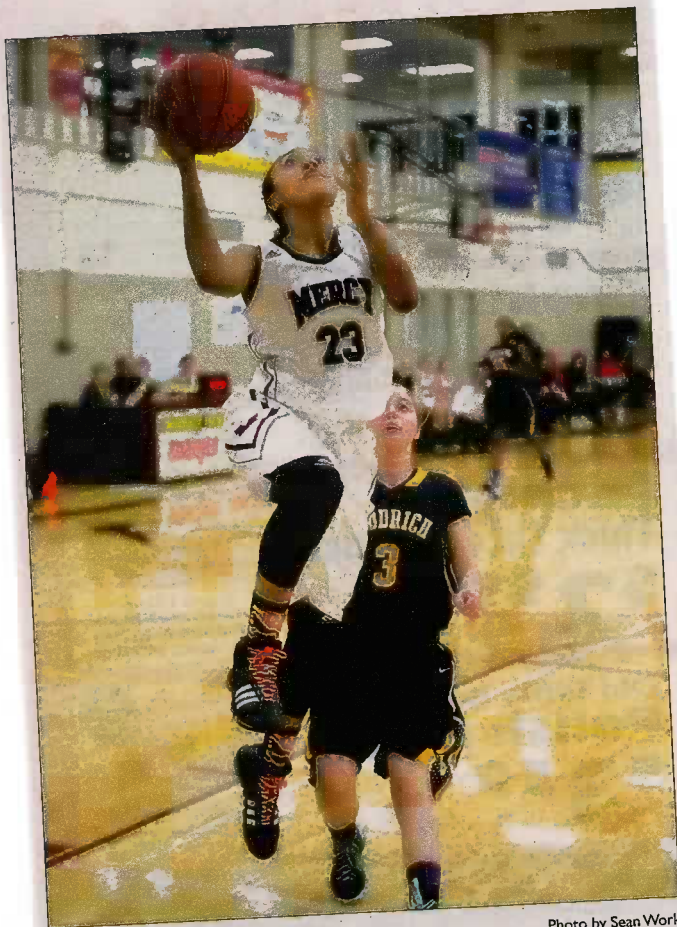


Photo by Sean Work

Mercy's Taylor Jones goes up for a shot during a 50-44 victory against Goodrich last week. Jones scored 33 points while helping the Marlins to a 4-0 start.

Hoops

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"We've had some things to overcome," the Marlins' coach said.

Mercy returned just four players from last year's 25-2 squad.

Taylor Jones is the lone, full-time starter back in the mix, though Sierra Wangler saw starts here and there a year ago and played significant minutes.

Still, some of the key components to the run to the Breslin Center moved on, and others, expected to play a bigger role this winter, went down.

Bridget Lyons, a player expected to contribute immensely, tore her ACL shortly before tryouts while training on her own.

Freshman Jenna Schluter, who was slated to be the team's starting point guard, tore her ACL at the end of the soccer season.

Both are gone for the season.

Yet Morris has a team off to a 4-0 start.

This group, though a bit inexperienced, knows how to win.

"This group of younger girls we have went 37-1 the past couple years on JV, so they know what winning is," Morris said.

"I think those experiences will get us through some big moments."

It's been close calls so far, but all the right ones.

Mercy started the season with a 55-52 victory against Waterford Mott, beat Plymouth Salem 49-46, topped Flint Powers Catholic 58-44 and in its most recent win Dec. 12, topped Goodrich 50-44.

"Real pleased so far," Morris said. "We've taken on some solid competition and played well."

The inexperience factor was hardly one that caught Morris by surprise.

He said the team worked a ton this offseason and played in plenty of games in an attempt to find some chemistry.

"They started working in March," he said. "When we opened camp in the fall, you could see how much they improved."

Jones, who scored 33 points against Goodrich, and Wangler have served as the team leaders, as

they will all season.

"Captains that have done a great job," Morris said.

In the Mott and Salem games, Mercy trailed late before finding a way to win.

"I think the success these girls have had, at both levels, is going to help us," Morris added.

But for now, it's the one-day-at-a-time approach that the Marlins will stick with.

Getting back to the Breslin Center or winning 20-plus games are fine goals, though not talked about just yet.

"Our thinking is all about getting better every practice and every game," Morris said. "We're going to play a tough schedule, some great challenges, but these girls are working hard and are very coachable. We have a lot to overcome — the injuries, the minutes and points we lost (by graduation) — but I really like this group. They fight for every situation we're in."

Call Sports Writer Mike Moore at (586) 498-1038. Follow him on Twitter @CandGMike.