



**By Russ Pankonin**  
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For the first time in several years, Coach Carl Zuege sees a new demeanor in his boys' basketball team.

He's seeing a new brand of enthusiasm, intensity and pace that he feels will lead to a successful season.

He returns just two starters from last year's team that finished 5-15.

This means his team will still be fairly young and inexperienced at the varsity level.

Only juniors Alex Strand and Tanner Stromberger saw a significant amount of varsity action. They will be joined by seniors Alec Spady and Jeff Banks, along with juniors Kyle Bottom, Jakob Burke, Charlie Haarberg, and Daniel Regier.

These players will represent the core of the varsity squad as the season opens.

"I'm really optimistic about the improvement these guys are going to make," Zuege said.

While the team's tallest player is only 6-3, Zuege said his squad makes up for that by being really athletic.

Plus, he's seeing strong chemistry amongst his players. "This group has played a lot of minutes together over time," he added.

Zuege's looking for additional support as the season progresses from juniors Shane German and Grant Lenners and sophomores Adam Moline, Adam Dickey and Steven Fish.

Compared to last season, Zuege said the team's ball handling has improved. Most of those duties fell on Strand last year but Zuege noted Bottom worked hard on those skills since last year.



**Need to be aggressive**

Looking back on last year's 5-15 record, Zuege said his team lacked aggressiveness. That's one thing he's demanding his players to change this year.

Twelve games into last season, Zuege said the Longhorns had shot 100 less free throws than their opponents.

In order for that to change this season, Zuege said his team will have to attack the basket and

get in position to draw fouls.

This year's squad will also have to learn how to close. In seven of the team's 15 losses last year, the Longhorns held a lead or were tied with their opponents in the fourth quarter.

That means playing smarter and harder down the stretch, maximizing opportunities when they come, Zuege said.

### **Early season tough**

The Longhorns will get a trial by fire as the season opens here with McCook tonight (Thursday) and at Goodland, Kan. Friday.

Before the Christmas break, the Longhorns will face Sidney, Ogallala and Garden County.

Across the SPVA conference, it's one of those years, Zuege said, when every team's beatable and every team can beat you.

He expects St. Pat's to be one of the top teams to beat in the conference this year, in large part because of their outside shooting abilities.

This week, Zuege feels his team will match up well with McCook. The biggest chore will be trying to shut down shooter Connor Larson.

Goodland fielded a solid jayvee team last season and Zuege expects a competitive game from them as well.

### **Different format this week**

This week's game follow a slightly different schedule than normal.

Today, the girls varsity will begin play at 5 p.m. in the Longhorn gym while the boys' jayvees play in the Shorthorn gym.

The boys' varsity will follow the girls' varsity in the Longhorn gym with girls' jayvee game being played at the same time in the Shorthorn gym.

The same schedule will be followed at Goodland Friday night.