By Russ Pankonin
The Imperial Republican

Boys' basketball coach Carl Zuege gets to enjoy something this year his team didn't have last year—depth.

That makes Zuege quite excited about the prospects for this year's season which kicks off today (Thursday), followed by another game Friday.

"We're nine to 10 deep this year and that's going to be a real plus," he noted.

Plus, he brings back two of his big men—6-9 senior Josh Schuman and 6-4 senior Colin Larson, who both gained lots of experience last year.

The other seniors joining the pair include Matt Hayes, Casey Francis, Daniel Morales and Alex Sharp.

Sharp saw some playing time last year and all three of the other seniors will see plenty of action this season.

One disappointment for the team comes with the loss of senior Schyler Heathers.

Heathers will miss the entire season after suffering an ACL tear in the final regular season football game.

He had surgery this week and will target his recovery so that he can return for the track season.

Good solid core

Zuege said he has a solid core of 14-15 upper classmen who are all competitive. That makes for great practices with good match-ups, which helps the development of everyone, he added.

In addition to the seniors, there are three juniors, nine sophomores and six freshman out this season.

Zuege said the juniors and sophomores will be able to contribute to the team throughout the season.

Probable starters going into the season opener tonight at McCook include Schuman, Larson, Hayes, Francis and sophomore Alex Strand. Sharp and sophomore Kyle Bottom will also see action.

Zuege said 6-4 Strand has made great strides since last year, enough so that he's won a starting role.

With the depth and athletic squad, Zuege wants to run more man defense and match-up zone, as well as pressuring the ball. "We've got a great mix of kids to do that," he said.

Conference outlook

Zuege said the competition in the SPVA conference this year will be keen as usual.

He sees Sutherland and North Platte St. Pat's as the teams to beat in the SPVA.

Sutherland brings back plenty of experienced players from last year.

While St. Pat's was young last year, another year of maturity will make a big difference.

There will be a new member in the conference this year. Maxwell joined the SPVA after Garden County dropped out at the end of last year.

Zuege said Maxwell has some good athletes, evidenced by their strong run in the eight-man 1 playoffs.

New coaches will lead Perkins County, Sutherland, and Hershey.

McCook and Goodland this week

The season kicks off at McCook tonight. Zuege said the Longhorns will have their hands full with the Bison.

Typically, McCook only gets four to five practices before this game because of state football

finals.

But since they lost in the semis, Zuege said they'll come in with an extra week of practice.

That won't hurt a team that qualified for the Class B state tournament last year and returns some very good players from last year's lineup.

On Friday, the Longhorns will play host to the Goodland Cowboys.

Zuege said they're not as deep as last year but have a shooter or two who can catch fire outside the three-point arc.

Zuege expects both games to be great contests.

The format for the two games is somewhat different than the rest for the schedule.

The schedule calls for the girls' varsity to start play in the main gym while the boys' jayvees play at the same time in the second gym.

The boys' varsity game will follow the girls' varsity game and the girls' jayvee game will be played at the same time as the boys' varsity game.

Tip-off tonight at McCook is set for 5 p.m. MT. Tip-off in the home opener here Friday is set for 5:30 p.m. MT.

The 24 players out for this year's basketball season include:

Seniors: Josh Schuman, Matt Hayes, Casey Francis, Colin Larson, Daniel Morales and Alex Sharp.

Juniors: Alec Spady, Jeff Banks and Steven Way.

Sophomores: Kyle Bottom, Misael Garcia, Shane German, Alex Strand, Jakob Burke. Charlie Haarberg, Daniel Regier, Tanner Stromberger and Grant Lenners.

Freshmen: Travis Wheeler, Taylor Gellerman, Steven Fish. Adam Moline, Trevor Oxford and Adam Dickey.