

“It’s time to take the next step.”

Michael Huffman doesn’t mince words when he talks about his expectations for the West Lowndes High School boys basketball team in 2023-24.

Huffman has been around Class 1A basketball in the state of Mississippi long enough to know it is common for schools like West Lowndes are still playing football early in November. That’s why it doesn’t faze him that he entered his final week of preparation before his team’s season opener against Aberdeen on Tuesday night without 10 players on the football team.

On paper, though, Huffman has had plenty of time to envision what he will have once everyone returns and the football players get their basketball legs.

“Last year was all about believing,” Huffman said. “I had a couple of boys last year who were getting into the program and they started believing in themselves, which spurred our big run. I was happy with that team because the players were able to see we can be successful.

“West Lowndes has always, always had a rich tradition in winning basketball, and those kids from sophomores to juniors to seniors when I took over, they realize it.”

West Lowndes went 17-13 last season and lost to Houlka in a double-overtime heartbreaker in the district tournament championship game. It then defeated Tremont in the first round of the Class 1A tournament before falling to Biggersville in the second round.

This season, Huffman anticipates having more size once he has his full team. He also feels the Panthers will have a stronger sense of belief based on the fact many players have been in his system for several years.

“The last three years, we have had a great junior high program and a great junior varsity program. Those kids are getting into the high school program, so we will have a lot of kids who know the system and have been successful,” Huffman said. “That is a good thing. Even though our kids play football and basketball, we take pride in the fact that we play ball in the summer and they have stayed in contact. That helps us in the transition.”

Huffman said a district that includes Houlka, Okolona, Smithville, Vardaman and West Union will present challenges. But after being on the home and visitor’s sideline as a coach, Huffman knows the power of West Lowndes’ home-court advantage. That’s why he is stressing the importance of winning the Class 1A, Region 4 tournament (at West Union) to his players.

“If we can win the district tournament, we can get two home playoff games,” Huffman said. “This home gym presents such a great atmosphere. I don’t think anybody in 1A can beat us at home. If we can win our district, that’s the key, we’re going to be tough to beat in 1A.”

Senior guard Cameron Smith hopes the chemistry on this year’s team will be stronger and that everyone will be able to make good decisions when they’re in “crunch” time. If the Panthers can do that, he feels there is enough talent and experience to help fuel a deep run into the playoffs.

Smith hopes he can grow as a scorer and as a facilitator to help the team realize that goal. Senior guard Taylan Brown wants to be the “spark plug” who fires the team up when it needs a lift.

Senior guard Jayden Spencer, who missed last season with an injury, plans to add more hustle and leadership to the mix. He said he and his teammates have been talking about what the Panthers will be able to

do once everyone returns and everyone has high expectations, just like Huffman.

“I expect everyone to come together, hustle on defense and hustle in practice and in the games and to communicate,” Spencer said.

Said Brown, “The boys who are playing football are very talented. I expect them to come back and catch on fast and be dedicated and help us win.”