

Brooks DeBartolo's motto: 'If you can't play defense, then you can't play'

By Scott Purks

4-5 minutes

TAMPA — Talk to the girls on the Brooks DeBartolo basketball team and the conversation will quickly, inevitably, involve defense.

Help each other out. Do your job. Never let up.

It's a way of life for these girls, three of whom have played together since elementary school — juniors Amarie Godwin, Brionna McClinton and Triniti Youngblood — and another, sophomore Jaela Davis, who joined the group in middle school.

Add them to senior Julian Trice and freshmen Maia Lewers and Aleyna Sherman and you have a relentless, cohesive defensive storm — always held accountable by the voice of fiery 26-year-old coach Ellie Wilbur.

"If you can't play defense," Wilbur tells her team, "then you can't play."

Wilbur's defensive sentiments run extra deep, all the way back to her elementary school days, a few steps from her father, James, who coached high school football and assisted with girls basketball for 40 years in New Jersey.

"Even when I was little I would tell people, 'I want to be a high school coach because my dad looks like he's always having a good time,'" said Wilbur, who won two state titles as a point guard for New Jersey's Rumson Fair Haven High School in 2008 and '09 for legendary coach George Sourlis, who has 14 state titles in his career. "Now I'm having a blast."

Wilbur said she feels extra blessed because in her first year as a head coach she not only inherited a team full of talent and athleticism, but one with a great attitude of hard work, teamwork, while having fun while you work.



First-year Brooks DeBartolo coach Ellie Wilbur couldn't have asked for a better collection of talent. [SCOTT PURKS | Special to the Times]

Favorite thing to work on?

To be honest it wasn't always defense because working on defense — particularly the advanced, physical, man-to-man style Wilbur has instilled — can be challenging, mentally and physically.

“But now I would say we like working on defense because we see how much better we are at it,” Youngblood said. “Defense is something we take great pride in. It’s defense first.”

The goal is to hold the opponent to under 40 points or, at least, get to 40 points first.

So far this season, while playing a super tough schedule, it has worked pretty well with the Phoenix entering the week with an 11-3 record, an overall state ranking of 10th and a No. 4 ranking in Class 3A by MaxPreps. In the process they have held seven opponents to 40 or fewer points.

All the above ranking information, by the way, was news to Wilbur, who said, “None of that really matters until the final game of the season. I don’t pay a lot of attention to rankings and individual stats. It’s about the team and getting better. That’s all.”

That said, Brooks DeBartolo’s unselfish-looking stat sheet shouldn’t be too much of a surprise with four players — Youngblood, McClinton, Godwin and Davis — averaging 11 or 12 points a game.

“It works out great,” Godwin said. “We get most of our points off our defense and nobody cares who scores. We’re happy when anybody scores.”

Nervous?

No way. The Phoenix has played in its share of big games, including last year’s 70-42 region final loss to Oxbridge Academy, which went on to win the state title.

“We were eager to play that game,” Godwin said. “When we play we just put on our game face and go play hard.”

This year, the ultimate goal is simple: Win a state title. The challenges for the Phoenix down the stretch, however, appear to be many, including in its own district, Class 3A, District 9, which includes a senior-laden team from Carrollwood Day School, which is 13-2 and is ranked No. 8 overall in the state and No. 3 in Class 3A.

“We know we have our work cut out for us,” Wilbur said. “But that’s good. We like challenges. It makes it more fun.”

In the meantime, Youngblood said, “We’re going to keep working on that defense. Defense wins games.”