Bulldogs should surprise opponents

Commentary

LOGAN JACKSON

Sixteen wins and 65 losses. The worst three-year stretch in the history of the men's basketball program. Three straight years of being picked to finish last or second to last in the preseason coaches-and-media polls.

After reading all of that, one might get the impression that this season is finished even before it starts. However, don't let their past fool you. This men's basketball team is better than the 16 wins it's picked up during its first three years.

Sure, 65 losses is way too many. But of those losses, 33 of them were by 10 points or fewer. Anyone who watched the 'Dogs last year saw a team that was competitive for the majority of the game. However, a short run by the other team seemed to bury Truman.

To stop those runs, the Bulldogs need to do two things: They must limit their turnovers and keep the other team off the boards.

Last year, Truman out-rebounded its opponent only 11 times. The team doesn't have to win the rebound battle to win a game, as Truman out-rebounded eight teams that beat them. It's offensive rebounds that the Bulldogs have to be wary of. Opponents scored more than 10 second-chance points against the Bulldogs 18 times last year.

"We have got to establish the aggressive mentality that we're trying to do," head coach Jack Schrader said. "That comes with crashing the boards, which I'm pleased with how we're doing. We weren't a good defensive rebounding team. If you have the mentality to get offensive rebounds, you get the mentality defensively."

Truman usually sends one or two players to the offensive glass, allowing three defenders to hang back and prevent fast breaks. However, sending more players to the offensive boards should give the Bulldogs more second-chance points. This won't hurt the defense at all, as Schrader still has the team focused on playing sound defense.

"Defensively, the mindset is aggressive, more physical play," Schrader said. "I would think after a couple disappointing years you would want to knock the crap out of somebody."

The number of turnovers also must come down if the Bulldogs want to compete. Truman opponents scored more than 15 points off turnovers 17 times last year. The Bulldogs averaged 14.5 turnovers per game while forcing their opponent into only 10 turnovers per game.

Schrader said another thing the Bulldogs will change is how they take the ball out after an opponent's basket. However, the team will still have the same mentality offensively.

"We always push it," Schrader said. "Teams can't run against us, that's why the scores are always low. Instead of having our bigs take it out, our guards will take it out. The reason is to give [senior forward Ethan] Freeman more of a break and give [junior center] Vesko [Filchev] more time to get up the floor."

So the question becomes, can this team get it done? And I think the answer to that question is "yes."

Truman has 10 returning players, including seven seniors. The Bulldogs return 97 percent of their offense from last season. They return all five starters and their two most productive bench players. In addition, they bring in six freshmen that could see some playing time.

Believe it or not, I think the Bulldogs have some pressure on them. During the 2005-06 season, Truman went 20-9 and advanced to the NCAA Tournament. That team featured five seniors and four juniors and was experienced at every position. The year before, that same team was just 8-19 overall and 4-14 in the MIAA.

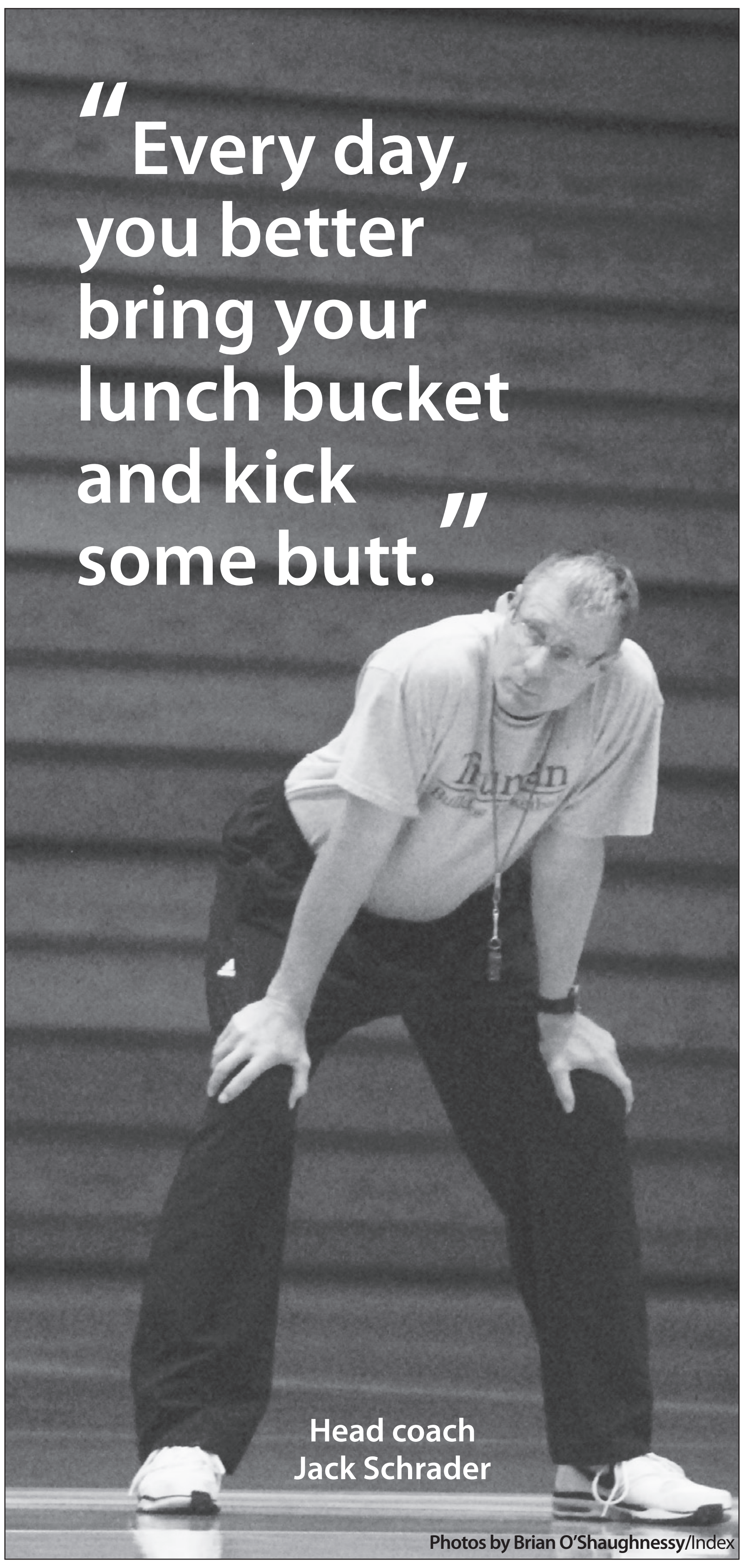
I don't know if this year's team can get to 20 wins, but I know they're going to finish better than their 11th place pick in the preseason polls. I think the team is hungry to prove everyone wrong.

"Every day, you better bring your lunch bucket and kick some butt," Schrader said. "That's what I expect. And that becomes a habit. If they're competitors, it's hard not to think about making the conference tournament or the national tournament, because we've talked about it. I think there's still some doubt, but that makes you a competitor too."

Doubt is the most important thing this team has to overcome. If the team doesn't get off to a stellar start, they can't throw in the towel. I know it sounds corny, but they have to keep their heads up.

That's why these first few games will be so important for Truman. If they can get a few early wins, that will build early confidence. Schrader said the team can't think the season is done if they don't get off to a great start.

"I would be happier than anybody if they had success early," Schrader said. "That would just prime their engines. I think they deserve it. If they



Head coach Jack Schrader

Photos by Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index

Women need to improve first half success

Commentary

JACK NICHOLL

Late Bloomers
MIAA record, last two seasons

	First 14 games	Last 6 games
2008–09	1–13	4–2
2009–10	2–12	4–2

"Every game is the most important game of the season."

It's one of those cliché sayings that coaches and athletes often use to dodge questions regarding regular season games with playoff implications. The majority of the time it is viewed as an unimportant quote and does not make its way into a story.

There are a few times, however, when the quote rings true.

Case in point: the women's basketball 2009-10 team. After losing their first conference game, the Bulldogs won their second in overtime. They then reeled off 11 loses in their next 12 conference matchups.

With the team needing a miracle to finish in the top eight of the conference to make the postseason tournament, the Bulldogs won four of their last five games. They finished two games out of a playoff spot.

Had the team won a few more early-season games, the late-season push would have put the team in the postseason.

Case in point No. 2: the women's basketball team in 2008-09. The Bulldogs won one of their first 14 conference games. Again, needing help to make the postseason, the team won four of its last six games and missed the tournament because of a tiebreaker.

Of course, the team did not try to lose at the beginning of the season and then suddenly try to win at the end. There was emphasis on winning throughout. But both seasons show that the team cannot wait that long in the season to start pushing for the playoffs.

The split success the last two seasons could have come from any number of reasons. It could have been the result of a young team, the team mentality or certain players wanting to play their own way.

Whatever the reasons, the team cannot afford the same trend this season. The women cannot wait until the end of the season to earn the majority of their conference wins.

"We've been close, but close doesn't quite cut it," head coach Michael Smith said. "And I'm tired of being close."

The good news is that this year there are multiple reasons why the team should win early and often. The team probably won't reach the upper echelon of the conference in 2010-11. But a bid to the MIAA tournament, given some early-season wins, should not come down to a tiebreaker.

It all starts with more experience. Even though the Bulldogs have only two seniors, they return three starters who were newcomers to the team last year. Senior guard Amy Galey should only improve on her assist total from last season, which was second best in the conference. Sophomores guard Becka McHenry and forward Megan Sharpe also should improve with a year of experience.

Then there is junior guard Bri Daniels, who should provide some leadership along with senior forward Malorie Kiecker. Daniels led the team in points last season and was named honorable-mention All-MIAA.

"They have no excuses now, because now they know what to expect every Wednesday and every Saturday as far as MIAA is concerned," Smith said.

The Bulldogs should have early-season success even with Sharpe still playing volleyball, although her return will give the team a boost. Sharpe started 10 games the second half of the 2009-10 season after leading the volleyball team to the playoffs.

Smith said Sharpe will vie for a starting forward spot when she returns to the team, but the power forward position also could be filled with a couple of freshmen.

"I think our 3 and 4 are probably our key positions," Smith said. "It doesn't mean that nobody is going to be important, because they're always going to be important."

The third, but arguably the most important factor, is that Smith now has had two full years to implement his style of coaching and recruit to his system.

The last couple of years there might have been some players who did not fully buy into Smith's system — but that shouldn't be the case anymore.

With the experience of the team and Smith's experience with them, the team should pick up more MIAA wins early in the season. Maybe then the Bulldogs will begin to face questions regarding actual playoff games.

WWW.TRUMANRENTALS.COM

Providing affordable student housing for more than 24 years.

Boardwalk • Waterworks • Park Place • States Avenue • St. James Place • New York Avenue

Four Horizons Realty
703 N. Marion St.
Kirksville, MO 63501
660-665-**RENT**
www.4horizonsrealty.com

wake up right. wake up right. wake up right. wake up right.

WITH THE INDEX
EVERY THURSDAY MORNING