

IMMACULATE BASKETBALL

ICHS LIONS' TOUGH OUT-OF-CONFERENCE SCHEDULE PAYING DIVISIONAL DIVIDENDS

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Each season, Immaculate Conception High School girls basketball schedules the toughest teams it can find.

The idea, according to second-year head coach James Kreie, is to strengthen his team with out-of-conference games so it can dominate in conference. "I'm not worried about the record," Kreie said during a recent practice. "I'm worried about championships."

The process usually works for ICHS, and landed it in the Essex County Tournament and NJSIAA North Jersey Non-Public B finals for the 2019-20 season.

It appears to be working this year as well. While the Lions' overall record is 2-4, their Super Essex Conference-American Division record is 2-1, and there's an argument to be made that had the Lions met University — their only SEC loss so far this season — in the last few weeks instead of in the first week of the season, that 61-58 game might have dropped ICHS's

way. "That was our first game," said senior Tahirah Kelley. "And [University] had a game before [us]. So for us to come out and for that to be our first game I just feel like we did pretty well, because if you think about it, this is



pretty much a new team."

"It's like better basketball, knowing better basketball, playing better teams," fellow senior Bukky Akinsola said. "So it was like, we know how things should be run. So, the common mistakes that we did during those games, we won't make in [conference] games that we normally play.

So, [the schedule] was just basically preparing us for better games."

The Lions had an injection of new blood to their already talented squad, with several transfers and three freshmen

who are all contributing. Former Trenton Catholic player Tiarra Bellamy, for example, has put up 21 points and 9 rebounds, while freshman Tayla Thomas leads the team in scoring with 70 points and rebounding with 38.

Thomas said she feels she has been able to find her role on the team via her strength: putting the ball in the hoop.

“Everybody on the team, they already had a bond and chemistry together,” she said of the beginning of the season. “So [I had to work at] being able to find my spot in place on this team and being able to pull down that spot as my role. And I think the easiest [way] was probably doing what I do best, being able to score.”

While the school has a hybrid learning program, most of the team’s members have chosen to remain remote. In some ways, that has made things tougher than usual to keep the team focused.



“Maybe one of these kids is in school,” Kreie said.

“Everybody else is at home, staring at a computer screen for seven hours a day. I mean, that’s hard. It’s tricky, but it’s about being able to transfer what we do in practice into the game.” The shortened season and preseason makes things more accelerated, and time is short.

“I have 50, 60 days to teach these kids adversity, and we are going through that right now,” Kreie said.

He said one thing that has worked in the Lions’ favor in counteracting that disruption is the strength of the seniors. The older kids know what is expected of them, and they do a good job making sure the newer players know it too, and meet those expectations. That’s where seniors like guards Akinsola and Kelley come in.

“We really had to work together and figure out how we play with each other because you [didn’t have time] to really play with each other to get that chemistry on the court,” Kelley said.

Kelley, Akinsola and the other seniors keep the younger players on task during practice and games, but also lead through action. Kelley is

the second-highest scorer on the team, with 50 points to go with her 20 rebounds and 12 assists, while Akinsola is right beside her with 49 points and 11 rebounds.

Senior Sydney Echevarria-Briscoe has snagged 22 rebounds, while Kyra Brant has added 25 points to the team total. Just because they are the upper class and are putting up points now doesn’t mean the seniors think they can ease up. Akinsola, for example, has worked hard to improve her game off the court as well as on it.

Ever her own toughest critic, Akinsola feels her best is yet to come this season. “I feel like I’ve been studying all fall and eventually [the numbers will] come up, but I’m not trying to stress it,” she said. “I want the game to just come to me instead of just kind of force it. When I find it, I’ll be good, so I’m not going to stress it yet.”

ICHS was on the road against Hawthorne on Wednesday, Feb 17 (results after press time), and then will face University for the second time this season on Thursday, Feb. 18. That game is at home, with tip-off at 4 p.m. Per Gov. Phil Murphy’s recent announcement, there will be a limited number of parents allowed in the building to watch.