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SPORTS

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Game Changer

Sophomore delivers in clutch moments, leads Bartlett to 29-win, title filled year

By: John Lemon



Lexie Sinclair of Bartlett is the Daily Herald Fox Valley All-Area Captain for girls basketball for 2018-19. Illustration by Patrick Kunzer | Staff Photographer

Few things make a coach happier than having a player who plays her best in the biggest games of the year.

If anything does it might be having a player who is an extension of himself on the court, a leader who can get across to her teammates what the coach wants.

That would make Bartlett coach Brad Hunt a lucky man because sophomore point guard Lexie Sinclair checks off both those boxes.

Coming into the season Hunt asked Sinclair to become more of a leader for the Hawks. She did just that for a young and talented Bartlett squad who went 29-5, won the Upstate Eight Conference championship and a regional title, then knocked out two-time defending 4A state champion Geneva in the sectional semifinals.

And about those big games?

She scored 31 points in a 64-57 win over South Elgin to wrap up the conference title. Playing Wheaton North in the regional championship, Sinclair led Bartlett with 20 points.

Sinclair saved her best for last with 26 points in a 60-52 win over Geneva at the Class 4A Batavia sectional. It wasn't her season high, but she made all the shots her team needed to win, scoring the first 6 points of the game to give the Hawks control they never relinquished.

And when Geneva surged in the second half, Sinclair came through with the big baskets to hold the Vikings off.

"Honestly sometimes I do get nervous before games but once the ball goes up all my nerves go away and I just enjoy playing in big games," Sinclair said. "With all my AAU teams I've had to play in big games before and I've been put in situations to be prepared for it."

Sinclair is the Fox Valley All-Area Captain. She had plenty of other big games throughout the year including 22 points in a win over Batavia and 21 to hand Wheaton North its first loss of the season at Christmas.

"She runs that team and plays big for them," Geneva coach Sarah Meadows said. "She is a nice player. She is young but plays like a senior."

On a team that started just one senior with three sophomores and a freshman, Hunt appreciated Sinclair's leadership as much as all those key shots.

"The biggest thing was taking control of our team," Hunt said. "We needed somebody that when things weren't going well to settle us down. She was that girl. She was that girl who got us into our sets and made sure we were doing whatever I wanted. I just really enjoyed her growth as a leader more than anything."

Sinclair relishes that role and playing with teammates like sophomore Danielle Hedeem and freshman Mackenzie Hare who also play with her in the offseason with the Truth out of West Chicago. Sinclair said the three have been playing together off and on since third grade.

"Last year at the end of season Hunt told me I had to take over the leadership role after having that year of experience," Sinclair said. "I knew I had to have a bigger part on the team this year. I think me and Kenzie did a really good job of having our moments and knowing when we had to step up for the team. I think that will really help me in the next two years too."

"On the court I have to make sure everyone is in the position and knows what we are doing. If someone makes a mistake I think I understand basketball well enough I can go and explain what they could do differently. I embrace that and use my basketball IQ for leadership."

After averaging 11.6 points, 3.2 rebounds and 2.4 assists as a freshman, Sinclair improved to 15.3 points, 4.5 rebounds and 3.0 assists this season.

Sinclair gets a lot of her points by attacking the basket. Few players can stay in front of her which leads to a lot of layups or trips to the foul line by opponents who have to foul after they've been beaten off the dribble.

Hunt said the next step for Sinclair is to become a more consistent outside shooter.

"She's really darn good at driving the basketball," Hunt said. "When she knocks down the 3-pointer a little more consistently she's just going to be lethal. She is already good, don't get me wrong, she shoots at about a 33 percent clip. If she gets that up to 37, 38, that would be lights out."

Sinclair also is a bulldog on defense averaging 2.6 steals. Her all-around play has attracted interest from mid-major Division I schools such as Colgate, Ball State, Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Wisconsin-Green Bay and Illinois State.

Sinclair said her interest in basketball began at a young age watching her older brother Brandon play. He also was one of the first to recognize her talent and encouraged his sister to find a more competitive team to play for.

Her grandfather John Strupeck is another big influence.

"He's traveled with me everywhere I've gone, out of state tournaments, if my mom (Jen) can't go, he's always there supporting me," Sinclair said. "He's been a big part of my basketball career."

Free time? Sinclair said she doesn't have much of it.

"I watch Netflix and sleep a lot. Basketball just takes up so much of my time," said Sinclair, a hoops junkie who went to a couple regional games, a sectional semifinal and a supersectional in the past two weeks on nights Bartlett didn't play.

"If I'm not playing in the game and there's a game I'm going to it. I'm always watching basketball. I grew up watching my brother play sports. It's just what I do."

Bartlett figures to be a team to watch the next two years with four starters returning. The Hawks will try to learn from their sectional championship loss to a Wheaton Warrenville South team that started five seniors. The Tigers held Bartlett scoreless in two quarters and to 22 points.

"Every loss we can learn from," Sinclair said. "There's always things we can work on. The next two seasons one thing we will remember for sure is the feeling after that game. We don't want that to happen again. I think we'll be more prepared for that situation."

"I just had a lot of fun playing with all my teammates this year. I'm going to remember this year that's for sure."

As will Hunt.

"Lexie has learned how to be a team leader for us on and off the court," Hunt said. "She just gets the game of basketball. She's been around the game for a long time. She's played a lot of basketball through AAU and us. She just understands where she needs to be and what she needs to do to be successful. And on top of that she's just really, really talented."