



BIG CYPRESS — What a difference a year makes.

There was no basketball season at the Ahfachkee School last year. The interest was there - enough kids wanted to play - but the court was silent because not enough players met the academic requirements.

This season improvements made by students in the classroom have allowed for the return of both boys and girls basketball teams on the high school level.

"We've really worked at getting grades up over the last year, which we've done," said Ahfachkee athletic director Matthew Beckham. "The kids are a little bit more in tune with their academics. It's been a success there, so we look at continuing that success and continuing to grow."

Ahfachkee's girls and boys teams made their home debut at Herman L. Osceola Gymnasium on Dec. 5 against Donahue Academy from Ave Maria.

The boys played well enough to win, but fell to Donahue 47-45 in a competitive game from start to finish, something that bodes well for the future.

"They gave a lot of effort," said boys coach Cicero Osceola. "We only had six [players] and then we were down to five, but they played good. We have a lot of young kids. It's a work in progress. They played hard."

Ahfachkee's sharp shooting was on display early. With a starting lineup of Les Gopher, Leviticus Buster, Jeremiah Pickup, Anthony Alvalos and Gordon Cypress, Ahfachkee built a 12-9 lead after one quarter behind 3-pointers from Buster and Gopher. Alvalos hit a tre early in the second quarter and Gopher dominated the final few minutes before halftime with three layups and a steal to give the hosts a 25-16 lead at the break.

Donahue, which had taller players and a deeper bench, wore down Ahfachkee in the second half. Donahue rallied to take a 35-34 lead after three quarters, but instead of faltering down the stretch, Ahfachkee showed plenty of determination. Buster hit a 3-pointer and had a layup that gave Ahfachkee a 39-37 lead, but Donahue went ahead with a few minutes left and didn't relinquish the lead.

Although Ahfachkee lacks size, it makes up for it elsewhere, such as strong ball handling and passing and quick transitions.

"We're small. We don't have big guys, so we have to run small ball," Osceola said. "Once we get more games under our belt and more practice, we'll be fine."

Similar to the boys, Ahfachkee's girls hung close with Donahue until the final minutes. The game was knotted at 24-24 before Donahue scored the game's final 11 points to emerge with a 35-24 win.

There will be plenty of learning moments this season for the Ahfachkee girls, which feature some players who have never played on a team and are new to the sport. Plus, most of the team is comprised of sophomores and seventh-and-eighth-graders. It was understandable that they were nervous on opening night against Glades Day.

"They were like a deer in headlights. They didn't know where to go," girls coach Eddie Redd said. "After the second half, they put it together and we played way better. We only had six players. I had two girls with four fouls. They made a good game out of it."

Abby Tigertail, the team's top offensive threat who can pull up and hit jump shots and drive the lane for layups, scored 20 points in the team's opening day loss to Glades Day. Aloni Gore contributed 12 points.

One challenge Redd faces is getting all eight of his players to attend practices at the same time. Practicing shorthanded makes it tough to teach the basics and run plays.

"It comes with being at practice and doing the fundamentals. The drills are going to get you where you need to be at," Redd said. "We're young. Stay at it and stay focused."

At least Ahfachkee is on the right track now that basketball has returned. Missing entire seasons, such as last year, sets back programs.

"Kids go to other schools and don't come back," AD Beckham said. "It's like starting from scratch."

But perhaps the foundation being laid this year will help solidify the basketball program in years to come.

"The future is looking bright," Beckham said.

Beckham would like to see more sports be offered at the school. He said there wasn't enough signups for softball, but interest in forming a girls flag football was strong. He also hopes to create a soccer team at some point.

"I want to open their eyes to other athletics," he said. "When you specialize in one sport it actually limits your athletic ability, so I want them to have a well-rounded athletic program that allows them to open all types of motor skill functions that can allow them to develop and increase their skills in the sports they decide they want to specialize in later."





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