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Girls Basketball

Eighth-graders making their mark in girls basketball this season

Eighth-grader Danielle Rauch will lead Bishop Ludden against top-seeded Sherburne-Earlville tonight in a Class B girls sectional quarterfinal game. (Gary Walts | gwalts@syracuse.com)

By Nolan Weidner | nweidner@syracuse.com
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In eight previous seasons, Jamesville-DeWitt girls basketball coach Rob Siechen never had an eighth-grader on his varsity teams.

Now he's got two of them - including forward **Meg Hair** who scores 10.8 points per game for the 16-2 Red Rams.

"I don't know. It's an unusual class," Siechen said recently of a group of youngsters who are making their marks on varsity teams throughout the area.

In addition to J-D's Hair, who will be on the floor tonight when the top-seeded Rams take on Fulton in a Section III Class A quarterfinal, there are several other youngsters who play key roles on their teams.

Bishop Ludden's **Danielle Rauch** (12.4 points, 3.4 steals and 3.4 rebounds per game) will run the offense when the No. 8-seeded Gaelic Knights travel to face No. 1 seed Sherburne-Earlville in a Class B quarterfinal.

Meg Hair of Jamesville-DeWitt is an eighth-grader who starts for the Red Rams, the top seeded Class A team in sectionals this season.
(Courtesy of Roger Hagan)

Amani Free doesn't start for No. 4 seed Cicero-North Syracuse, which plays at home tonight in a Class AA quarterfinal against Fayetteville-Manlius, but the

forward is the first post player off the bench for coach Eric Smith.

"I've had one before. She turned out to be OK," Smith said of former C-NS superstar Breanna Stewart, who is now one of the nation's top collegiate players as a Connecticut sophomore.

Perhaps the most productive eighth-grader this season was **Azariah Wade** at Syracuse Academy of Science. The 6-foot Wade scored just under 20 points per game and was credited with more than 20 rebounds per outing for the Atoms (10-9), who made their first appearance in the sectional playoffs.

"There is a pretty good group of eighth-graders in the area right now," Siechen said of players who have been developed in the off-season through greater involvement with AAU travel teams. "It'll be interesting to see how they develop throughout their careers."

Smith said specialization plays a role in having more youngsters with varsity-level skills.

"There is, if you look across the board, fewer girls that are playing," he said.

"Specialization, I think, is taking hold in a lot of areas. Kids want to play one sport."

The C-NS coach said AAU basketball produces girls who have sharper skills, and a better knowledge of the game, who can step onto the court - even at the big school level.

Eighth-grader Azariah Wade (13) of Syracuse Academy of Science averaged just under 20 points per game in leading the Atoms into the play offs for the first time in four years.

(Mike Greenlar | mgreenlar@syracuse.com)

"Kids, when they play AAU basketball, they can do everything," Smith said. "You can press, you can play zone, you can do everything that you do at the varsity level."

Smith said the transition is much more difficult for those who only play modified basketball for their schools, where rules limit teams from doing certain things. Still, Smith gives credit to youngsters who can adapt to the physicality of play and the length of the varsity season.

"I give credit to any eighth-grader that can play varsity and compete," he said, "especially against some of the seniors out there and especially in (Class) AA."

Siechen said it's a little bit tricky to integrate girls who are only 13 into a varsity mix with teammates who might be five years older.

First, they have to be able to play, he said, and the older players have to accept them.

"The team I have this year has welcomed them," he said of Hair, and Kasey Vaughn, who doesn't start but sees plenty of floor time.

Other youngsters who have seen time with their varsity teams this season include:

- **Sierra Neddo** of Beaver River
- **Claire Sehring** of Notre Dame
- **Taylor Williams** of Corcoran
- **McKenzie Mattison** of Hannibal
- **Samantha Doupe** and **Brianna Squier** of Phoenix
- **Paige Leonard** of Indian River
- **Anna Hoover** and **Courtney Evans** of Thousand Islands
- **Kelsey Gonseth** of Sackets Harbor
- **April Dabrowski** of Canastota

Did we miss anyone? Let us know in the comments below.

Already I've heard about several players who should be on this list.

- **Kyra Grimshaw** of Liverpool was brought up to the Warriors' varsity in mid-season and played significant minutes. She scored 10 points in Liverpool's sectional play off loss to Baldwinsville.

- **Chyna Butler** started all season at guard for Henninger.

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