

Baxter, Pioneers set for photo finish

February 9, 2017

(Butler, PA) So clustered are team portraits inside Dick Hartung's office that a wider smile on any one of its men's or women's basketball players dating to 1967 would nudge an adjacent photograph.

Julia Baxter's engaging grin may soon throw the whole collection of portraits off kilter as easily as she has opponents' game plans to try to stop her.

At 5-foot-11 the tallest member of BC3's women's basketball team, Baxter also looms largest in the program's history as its sole 1,000-point scorer. Like that luminous hardwood floor she calls her second home, the sophomore forward is polishing off a picture-perfect career never before seen at BC3.

"I've never coached a girl that good," Hartung says. "We've had some good girls. She is the best of the lot."

And getting better. Baxter has scored 30 or more points in five of her past eight games as the Pioneers position themselves for another run into the National Junior College Athletic Association playoffs.

Her 29.6 points per game since Jan. 11 – five points above her season average – have sparked the Pioneers to a 7-1 record in that span and a 14-8 overall mark.

After its final regular-season game Monday at Penn Highlands Community College in Johnstown, BC3 will enter the post-season and defend its second Western Pennsylvania Collegiate Conference crown and venture into the National Junior College Athletic Association Division III Region XX playoffs.

"She's got that extra gear"

Can't blame Hartung, coach of BC3's women's squad since 2010, for being optimistic.

"Her motor runs hot for competition," Hartung says of Baxter. "She hustles, comes to play every game. She's a worker. She's got that extra gear."



Julia Baxter, left, a sophomore forward on the Butler County Community College women's basketball team, drives toward a shot Monday, Feb. 6, 2017, during a game against Westmoreland County Community College. Defending on the play is Brooke Kalp.

One which she has found in BC3's drive toward the playoffs.

"These have actually been (conference) games, so that's what's been kind of awesome about that," she says of her recent scoring streak. "Those will count toward the WPCC (post-season seedings.) Everyone is kind of getting back into their groove of shooting like we were last year."

That's when Baxter averaged 23.2 points and 13.9 rebounds and the Pioneers finished 16-8.

This year she's averaging 24.7 points and 16.3 rebounds – ranking sixth and third, respectively, in the NJCAA's Division III – as opponents struggle to find a way to contain what Hartung calls a "blue-collar player."

Pat Lewis has seen that work ethic himself.

"She is not lagging behind," Lewis, coach of the Penn State-DuBois women's squad, says of Baxter. "And that's what makes her so valuable. If there is a rebound to be had, you can bet she is somewhere near the ball. She is one of the best players at our level. Anyone who can put up points like that obviously has some things going for her. I would love to have a player like that involved in our program.

"The first time we played them I didn't know who she was. She was a freshman coming out of Butler High School, and I had no clue who she was.

"And I learned real quick."

Baxter, who with 846 points ranks sixth all-time on the Golden Tornadoes' girls scoring list, tallied her milestone 1,000th point for BC3 on Jan. 25, with a first-half free throw. She went on to a 28-point night and BC3, to an 81-40 blowout against the Community College of Allegheny County.

"It's unbelievable to me, because I just missed out on that (achievement) in high school," Baxter says.

Her performances are equally unbelievable, according to Baxter's teammates.

"Julia just kind of owns the paint"

Melissa Verlotte, a freshman guard, says Baxter "never lets anyone push her around and she doesn't let anyone get in her head. She's there to do her job and she executes it every time."

Says sophomore guard Christina Davis: "Dominant. Julia just kind of owns the paint against every team we play."

Everything Baxter does on the court makes sophomore guard Saydie Moore shake her head.

“She is amazing, her post moves,” Moore says. “She can go running full speed and not slow down once and make a basket.

“With three people on her” – she is quick to add.

Kalynn Callihan has been a teammate of Baxter’s since seventh grade, in the Butler Area School District.

“It’s just been an honor to be able to play with her, not only in high school, but here at BC3,” Callihan says. “She just works so hard.”

Hard work remains for Baxter and her teammates.

West Georgia Technical College may stand again in the way of BC3’s path to the national tournament. West Georgia beat the Pioneers 87-55 in the NCJAA Division G playoffs en route to a final No. 4 national ranking.

“We got a chance to go to the national tournament, but we are going to have to beat a couple good teams to get there,” Hartung says. “It’s possible. We almost did it last year. We lost to that team from Georgia. And they were better than we were. And I think the national tournament goes through (West) Georgia again.”

Baxter has received a full scholarship to continue her studies and play basketball at Slippery Rock University, whose women’s squad is coached by Bobby McGraw, who played basketball for BC3 from 1990-1992.

For now, her focus is on defending that WPCC title, chasing that national tournament berth.

“The playoffs mean a lot to me,” she says. “We get another chance to go and show that we can be successful, to play harder.”

And smile wider.

“I can’t believe how everything in my life has turned out,” Baxter says, “because of BC3.”