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BASKETBALL

Buchtel, East, Ellet, Firestone welcome new basketball coaches ahead of 2022-2023 season



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Akron Public Schools will have five new high school basketball coaches for the 2022-2023 season.

Jonnica Gardner, Cari Guyton and Nick Harris have been hired to lead the girls teams at East, Buchtel and Ellet, respectively.

On the boys side, Mark Fisher is returning to coach at his alma mater, Ellet, and Brian Neugebauer is the coach at his alma mater, Firestone, after a successful run as Buchtel's girls basketball coach.

"We welcome these coaches and their new energy," APS athletic director Joe Vassalotti said. "We are excited to watch these coaches work with their players."

City Series basketball: Buchtel boys have eyes on winning a state championship; Ellet girls aim to make history with back-to-back league titles

Tina Wallace steps down at Ellet, Nick Harris gets promotion

Harris is the new lead voice for Ellet girls basketball after Tina Wallace stepped down after serving as coach for 35 seasons and recording more than 300 wins.

"We are returning a lot of players from last year and they are going to be really good and fun to watch," Wallace said. "... I have spent a lot of time with other people's kids and it is time that I focus on my family. The program is in good hands with Nick."

Harris spent last season on Ellet's coaching staff as an assistant to Wallace. Ellet split the City Series regular season title with Kenmore-Garfield and then topped K-G in the league's postseason final at Firestone.

"Tina felt like it was time and has a lot going on with her own family," Vassalotti said. "We certainly thank Tina for her years and dedication with the basketball program and the girls at Ellet."

City Series basketball: Ellet tops Kenmore-Garfield to win City Series girls basketball championship

Prior to arriving at Ellet, Harris spent seven seasons on the Buchtel girls basketball coaching staff alongside Neugebauer. Harris is also the High School Director of Ladies First Akron, an area youth travel basketball program.

"I am very excited," Harris said. "It has been a dream to run a program at the school I teach at where I can be all in throughout the day with the kids and around the kids to offer support and get them excited about the game.

"We have a lot of quality girls coming back. We won the City Series regular season and playoff titles for the first time since 1975. ... I am honored and I feel lucky to take over from a legend like Tina. I thank her, and she taught me a lot in one year. I also thank Neuge and he taught me a lot, too. They set me up for this position."

Harris graduated from Cuyahoga Valley Christian Academy in 2003. He competed on CVCA's boys golf, basketball and chess teams. He helped the chess team finish second in the state.

Harris served four years of active duty in the United States Air Force and graduated from the University of Akron in 2013. Ellet Athletic Director Missy Blondheim described Harris as a "young and energetic coach."

"We are excited with Nick," Blondheim said. "He was Tina's assistant last year and worked with her and the kids. She felt it was time to make a change and have a little more time with her family. It is going to be a nice transition. The kids are excited. He is a teacher in the building as well, which is nice."

City Series basketball: High school boys basketball / Ellet 48, Tallmadge 44: Trevin Carter leads Ellet during transition from Mark Fisher to Chad Hazard

Mark Fisher returns to Ellet

Fisher returns after stepping down as Ellet's boys basketball coach in 2019. Fisher compiled a 110-95 record in nine seasons, and led Ellet to three Division I district semifinal appearances, three City Series postseason final titles and two City Series regular season championships.

"It is good to be back," Fisher said. "I have been off for three years, and stepping back into the gym I am rejuvenated. I like it a lot and I am excited to work with some great kids. ... We are trying to get back to where we were and have some success that we had in the past."

City Series basketball: Former Ellet standout A.J. Gareri was a go-to scorer, leader for coach-uncle Mark Fisher

Fisher played football, basketball and baseball at Ellet before graduating in 1985. He then earned bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Akron, and was an assistant coach at Manchester (baseball), Firestone (basketball and football), Kenmore (football) and Ellet (basketball and baseball).

"Coach [Keith] Noftz had some other plans and has moved on, so Mark decided to come back, and we are very excited to have him back," Blondheim said. "... I think Mark will bring back a little stability."

City Series basketball: Buchtel girls basketball players party like it's 1989 with a 2019 district title under coach Brian Neugebauer

Brian Neugebauer takes over at Firestone

Neugebauer, a 1991 Firestone graduate, played basketball under former Falcons coach Harvey Sims. Neugebauer said former Firestone coach Richard Rudgers encouraged him to get into coaching as an assistant for another former Falcons coach, Tony Dickens.

Neugebauer spent 19 seasons as a boys basketball assistant coach from 1993-2013 with stints at Firestone, CVCA, Central-Hower, Kenmore, Copley and Buchtel.

Neugebauer compiled a record of 109-88 as the Buchtel girls basketball coach from the 2013-2014 season through the 2021-2022 season. He led the Griffins to a Division II district crown in 2019, five City Series regular season championships and four league postseason titles.

City Series basketball: Buchtel earns 2020 City Series girls basketball postseason title with win over Kenmore-Garfield

“I have always wanted to be a head boys basketball coach,” Neugebauer said. “I loved my time with the girls at Buchtel for nine years. We had great seasons, great relationships and great teams, but having the opportunity to get back to coaching boys as a head coach at my alma mater where I played, there is nothing really like that.

“Everyday I go for workouts and it is like going home. I think about classmates, teammates, coaches, former players and teachers everyday I walk into the school and the gym. I want to make all those people proud. There is nothing like it. It feels good. This is a very special opportunity and they don’t come around very often.”

Firestone athletic director Brian Fuller is happy to have Neugebauer, who earned bachelors and masters degrees from the University of Akron in 1996 and 2006, respectively. Neugebauer takes over the program after DeAndre Walker left to take a job in Florida.

“We are loving bringing home another alumni to take over the program and get them moving forward again,” Fuller said. “Brian is a successful and proven coach. We look for him to bring that same energy and success to Firestone.”

City Series basketball: Former Firestone High School standout Cari Guyton signs NLI with University of Akron women’s basketball team

Buchtel hires Cari Guyton

Guyton graduated from Firestone High School in 2010 and helped the Falcons win two City Series titles. She then played at Pratt Community College and the University of Akron and earned degrees from both schools in 2012 and 2014, respectively.

“I am really excited about the season,” Guyton said. “We are rebuilding, so one of my main goals for this year was to accomplish having all three levels of play, which we have obtained. We have a varsity, a junior varsity and a freshman team this year. We are still a very, very young team.

Guyton, who is 6-foot-2, played on the 2014 Zips team that won a Mid-American Conference Tournament championship and competed in the NCAA Tournament. She also played professional basketball for one season in Morocco, North Africa.

Guyton started her coaching career as an assistant in 2015-2016 at Copley and served as an assistant in 2018-2019 at St. Vincent-St. Mary when the Irish advanced to a Division II state semifinal. She also was a graduate assistant at UA for the 2019-2020 season.

“Cari’s motto is the famous quote by Muhammad Ali, ‘Impossible is nothing,’” Buchtel athletic director Bryan Williams said. “She will instill this in her players for the upcoming year, not just in basketball, but in their studies and in life.”

“Cari was a four-year starter for me, is a University of Akron graduate and an outstanding basketball player,” Firestone girls coach Audley McGill said.

City Series Basketball: Photos: Akron Public Schools City Series Basketball Media Day

Jonnica Gardner takes over at East

Gardner is a 2000 East graduate and a three-letter winner in basketball. She helped East win the City Series title during her senior year and will get the opportunity to coach her daughter, senior Janiya Goldman.

“We are working on building a program,” Gardner said. “... I am excited to be here. I can not wait for the season to begin.”

Gardner earned degrees from the University of Akron in 2006 and 2019. She has coached at Jennings Middle School and was a high school assistant coach at Kenmore and East.

“I definitely never thought I would be in this position, but I am thankful for it,” Gardner said. “I am thankful to have the opportunity to coach at my alma mater.”

East co-athletic directors Marques Hayes and Becky Duhon are pleased with the hiring of Gardner.

“When we interviewed Jonnica, she was super excited to be able to come back and coach where her daughter goes to school,” Hayes said. “She teaches at the school, so she is starting to build a great rapport with a bunch of the girls.

“... She has 17 girls to work with on the team, and she was like, ‘Yeah, we want to add some more.’ I told her, ‘You do know we only had six girls on the team the year before. We played some games with five players.’ For the short amount of time that she has been building this team, I told her, ‘You are making an impact already on the foundation because now we have a lot more young ladies coming out wanting to play.’”

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City Series basketball: Ellet freshman guard Caitlyn Holmes continues to be 'dedicated' to basketball

City Series basketball: Buchtel tops East to win City Series boys basketball postseason championship

City Series basketball: Friends Khoi Thurmon, Amire Robinson continue to develop basketball skills at Buchtel