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## Wierzba, UIS learned on the job

First-year coach, Prairie Stars got to know each other in a hurry

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Hired one month before the men's college basketball season started, University of Illinois Springfield Prairie Stars' coach Ben Wierzba hit the ground running last September.

He finally came up for air Sunday, one day after the Stars' ended the season with a 78-70 win over Lewis. Wierzba's first foray as a head coach finished with UIS compiling an 8-17 overall record and a 4-14 Great Lakes Valley Conference mark.

"I'm very appreciative of how hard these guys worked," Wierzba said. "Me coming in three weeks into school and them not knowing me, they bought in and did what we asked."

The Stars suffered through long stretches without a win, but they ended the season on an up note.

"It was a day-by-day process trying to get better each day, and these guys continued to do that," Wierzba said. "As you could see at the end of the year, we were playing probably our best basketball.

"It got to a point where it got a little bit difficult, but they came to practice every day trying to get better. It paid off the last week of the season.

"Offensively, we came around from where we had been shooting the ball earlier in the year. I told the guys I thought we could shoot the ball. We just needed to relax.

"Our defense really has to make bigger strides for next year, but I thought on Saturday it was one of our better defensive games that we played."

### Ending with a flourish

The final week of the regular season included back-to-back wins against Wisconsin-Parkside and Lewis. The Stars won two games in a row only one other time during the season and that's when they opened the season 2-0.

In the final five games, UIS was 2-3 with a pair of overtime losses.

"It's tough getting a brand-new coach and learning a brand-new system, but down the stretch toward the end of the year we really started buying in and everybody really started realizing what they can do," UIS sophomore forward Chigozie Umeadi said.

Junior forward Michael Fakuade was the Stars' leading scorer at 13 points per game. He's at the top of the GLVC rebounding list with 9.3 per game. Fakuade's 73 blocks rank him among the nation's leaders in that category and he had 12 double-doubles.

"These guys knew from Day One he can be a presence on the block," Wierzba said. "He's coming around and understanding how good he can be and dominant down there."

In addition to Fakuade, junior guards Lester Hart and Jermaine Love-Roberts averaged in double figures — Hart averaged 10.5 points and Love-Roberts averaged 10.3.

Nine different players started throughout the season for various reasons. Four of the nine were seniors, so the Stars should return lots of experience. The only player who started all 25 games was senior point guard Brandon Farmer, who averaged 9.6 points.

Injuries and illnesses were an issue for the Stars.

"Go down the line and all but two guys missed a practice," Wierzba said. "By the time, we got to the middle of November we only had a handful of practices where we had the whole team together.

"Lester gets hurt in the preseason. Fakuade gets hurt right before the exhibition starts. Ryan Thornton's season ends abruptly."

### Looking ahead

After whizzing through the last six months, things are slowing down, giving Wierzba the time to recruit and focus on all the things it takes to build a program.

“When we come back from spring break, we’ll start lifting and doing individual workouts,” he said.

“Now I’ve got an idea knowing the players a little bit better having coached them for six months. We’re coming to the time now where we get better individually and getting better individually will make us better as a whole.

“With what we’ve got coming back, we have a good nucleus, but we need a little bit of everything for next year.”

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