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UW women's basketball: Dunham changes for the better

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Mariah Dunham can feel the change from last year.

She's more confident in her game at both ends. She's more explosive driving to the basket. And most importantly, she's not as tired when the University of Wisconsin women's basketball team finishes running during practice.

Dunham, a Watertown native, made improving her conditioning a priority after playing in all 36 of the Badgers' games and starting 14 of them as a freshman last year.

And it's shown since the beginning of practice Oct. 12. Dunham has certainly caught the eye of UW coach Lisa Stone, who thinks the sophomore forward can be an All-Big Ten Conference player this season.

"That girl right there has really taken a leap of faith in terms of preparation," said Stone, whose team opens the season with a Nov. 1 exhibition game against St. Norbert at the Kohl Center.

Dunham ran with sophomore point guard Rae Lin D'Alie over the summer, and worked out under the tutelage of both D'Alie's AAU coach, M.M. Hall, and John Waring, the president of Pacesetter Basketball, an elite training program for high school and college players in Illinois and Wisconsin.

"It made a huge difference," said Dunham, who averaged 8.0 points and 5.1 rebounds per game while shooting 31.5 percent from behind the 3-point line last season.

"I can just tell, the way I attack the basket and my shooting and stuff, just staying low on my shot, just the little fundamental stuff. Last year I kind of wasn't all with it. On defense even, I feel like I'm a little bit quicker at the ball and quicker at anticipating stuff."

Waring helped Dunham improve her shot she shot just 39 percent from the field last year by speeding up her release and making sure she put more backspin and arc on the ball. But most of all, they focused on her conditioning.

"I expect her to be able to play longer stretches of time at a high level (this season)," said Waring, who also works with Badgers junior center Caitlin Gibson, freshman forward Lin Zastrow and junior guard Christine Spencer, as well as UW recruits Jamie Russell and Ashley Thomas. "Last year I don't think she was able to do that."

An improved Dunham would be of great benefit to the Badgers namely in adding a third scorer behind senior guards Jolene Anderson and Janese Banks. UW was 10-3 last year when Dunham scored in double figures, and her ability to score in both the post and from the perimeter is key in the team's swing offense. Waring thinks Dunham is underrated as a passer as well.

The 2006 Associated Press prep girls state player of the year and three time first-team, all-state selection showed glimpses of her potential as a freshman, like her career best 25-point performance against Iowa Feb. 25. But she also scored five or fewer points in 13 games.

"I just think (Dunham) has capabilities of shouldering some big responsibilities because Jo and Janese are going to get a lot of attention," Stone said. "And Mariah, she can step right into a spotlight that she deserves, because she's worked hard at it."

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