

As she enters the 2004-05 season, Washington State Head Coach Sherri Murrell has a number in mind to gauge the success of her team.

And it is for a category not found on a stat sheet.

"Our goal this year is to have one heartbeat," said Murrell, who is entering her third year at the helm of the program. "I want everybody to be on one page with one common goal and really come together; leadership-wise, ability-wise and passion. Everybody has to have the same passion to turn things around. If this happens, the wins and successes will fall into place."

Murrell and the Cougars are coming off a 2003-04 season that saw significant development from Murrell's inaugural year.

In Murrell's first year (2001-02), the Cougars were in seven games decided by 10 pts or fewer, winning one. The following year, the number increased to 12, with the Cougars prevailing in five games.

Murrell sees that improvement as just an initial step in the program's progression.

"We have to make bigger strides in the Pac-10," the Redmond, Ore. native said. "We had a lot of close games last year and we have to finish those games. We have to turn them into close wins, not close losses.

"When you turn that corner, when you're able to finish and win those close ones, that's a decisive point for a program," Murrell added.

The team enters 2004-05 with the momentum of last year's positive ending to the regular season. The Cougars had a close loss to Pac-10 co-champions Arizona but rebounded to end the regular season with a win over Arizona State. In addition, the team received a jump start into 2004-05 with a four-game tour of Italy in May.

"Our 5-point loss to Arizona and win over Arizona State showed our improvement," Murrell said. "When we beat Arizona State, we had four freshmen out on the floor and one senior. That just shows you right there how our youth improved across the season.

"When Italy is factored in, that trip will make our team better with the extra playing time it gave us outside of our normal season," Murrell added.

Unlike last season, when Murrell had seven returning

upperclassmen, including four seniors, to draw from the third-year coach has three returning upperclassmen back in the fold for 2004-05.

What the Cougars may lack in experience quantified in years does not translate to game experience, however.

"We are very young," Murrell said. "I do consider us a very young and inexperienced team although the freshmen we had last year gained a lot of experience. Even though they are young in years they are experienced with playing time."

The freshmen class that Murrell refers to is now the sophomore quartet of forward Kate Benz and guards Adriane Ferguson, Stephanie Singer and Nikki Stratton.

The group saw ample time last year. Combined, they played in 105 games, including 62 starts, as freshmen. Collectively, the foursome tallied 24 double-digit scoring games.

"They showed their strengths and abilities and how that can be utilized for our team," Murrell said of the quartet.

"Looking back at some of our success last year, each one of them was a part of it. They are a big nucleus of what our building of the program is about."

Benz recorded three double-doubles in points and rebounds to lead the team. She led the Cougars in rebounds (6.7/game) and was second in points (8.8/game). Her numbers helped earn the Portland, Ore., native a conference all-freshman team honorable mention selection.

The trio of Ferguson, Singer and Stratton all finished the season strongly. In the final three games Singer averaged 10.6 points a game while Ferguson (10.0 ppg) and Stratton (9.3 ppg) were not far behind. The trio combined to score 41 of the team's season-high 75 points in the regular season finale triumph over Arizona State.

In addition, Singer ended the season with three consecutive double-digit scoring games capped by a team-high 11 points against Oregon State in the Pac-10 Tournament.

Murrell's returning contingent is completed with seniors Jessica Perry and Emma Joneby and junior Charmaine Jones.

Perry, a 5-foot-6 point guard from Phoenix, Ariz., and Joneby a 6-foot-2 forward from Vasteras, Sweden, bring a combined game experience of 162 games including 81 career starts. Perry enters her senior year 10th on the



Jessica Perry

school's all-time list with 243 career assists.

Jones, a 5-foot-6 guard from Los Angeles, Calif., played in every game last year and was third on the team with a 6.5 points a game average. She led the team from the charity stripe shooting 71-of-91 (.780), which was tied for eighth in the Pac-10.

Murrell sees the returning veteran trio as an important component of the team this year.

"I think the Italy trip was really good for Emma and Jessica," Murrell said. "They really stepped up in leadership on that trip.

"I think our offense really caters to Jessica and Charmaine," Murrell added. "They are going to see significant minutes. The more that Emma gains confidence out on the floor the more she will do better at her position."

The newcomer class includes three junior transfers – Keisha Moore, Ariana Scales and Crystal Blue – and two freshmen: Jordan McCormick and Dani Montgomery.

Moore, a 6-foot-2 center, transferred to WSU from Idaho in December 2003. Because of NCAA Division I transfer rules, Moore is not eligible to play for the Cougars until the day after the conclusion of the 2004 fall semester, which is Saturday, Dec. 18. She is able to practice with the team, however.

In her two years at Idaho, Moore played in every game, averaging 12.4 points and 7.4 rebounds a contest. She earned an All-Big West Conference Honorable Mention selection as a sophomore, which followed a conference all-freshman team nod.

"Keisha is definitely a pure post player for us," Murrell said. "She can run the floor and is a good scorer from the low block as well as the high post area. I will look to her to contribute a lot for us this year."

Scales, a 5-foot-8 guard, comes to the Palouse from Cowley County Community College in Arkansas City, Kan. She averaged 20.5 points, 3.1 rebounds and 2.7 assists a game for a team that went 23-9 last year. Those numbers earned her a second team All-Region VI selection and an All-Jayhawk Conference First Team accolade.

Scales set school records for points in a game (42), field goals made in a game (17), field goals made in a season (255), three-point baskets made in a season (75), and points in a season (654).

"Ariana is a very explosive scorer," Murrell said. "She is

someone who can create her shots. She knows how to score."

Blue, a 5-foot-10 guard, enrolled at WSU in spring 2004 and sat out last season because of NCAA transfer rules.

Blue, who hails from Seattle, played her junior college ball at Odessa College in Odessa, Texas. During her sophomore season at Odessa, Blue averaged 13.4 points, 5.4 rebounds and 2.0 assists. She shot 45 percent from the field including 37 percent from 3-point territory. Blue's play earned her a first team All-Western Junior Athletic Conference selection, which followed up her honorable mention honor after her freshman campaign.

"I look to Crystal as a defensive stopper," Murrell said. "She is one of our best defenders and will defiantly play against our opponent's toughest offensive threat."

The newcomer class is rounded out by the freshmen duo of McCormick and Montgomery.

McCormick, a 5-foot-10 guard from El Cerrito High School in El Cerrito, Calif., averaged 12.1 points and 5.2 rebounds a game for a team that went 22-9 in her senior season. She was the second leading scorer in the Alameda/Contra Costa Athletic League last season and a two-time all-league first team selection.

"Jordan is going to be a good force for us as she matures with the game," Murrell said. "I think she is going to help us along the way."

Montgomery, a 5-foot-11 guard from Crater High School in Medford, Ore., was named second team All-State, in leading her team to the Southern Oregon Conference championship.

Montgomery was named the league's player of the year in her senior season. She averaged 14.3 points, 10.3 rebounds, 3.2 assists and 2.1 steals for the Comets, who won the SOC with a 13-1 record and a 19-7 overall mark.

"Dani is a fierce rebounder who is probably one of our most intense competitors," Murrell said. "She is a hard-nosed player that is going to get the job done."

The Cougars' schedule features possibly as many as 10 teams that reached postseason play in 2003-04. Six -- Valparaiso, Northwestern State, Tennessee- Chattanooga, Stanford, Arizona, UCLA -- advanced to the NCAA Tournament. The postseason group is rounded out by Nebraska, Arizona State, Oregon State and Washington, who all earned a spot in the WNIT.



Adriane Ferguson