CRYSTAL FALLS—Ready or not, here comes the new Forest Park girls basketball season.

Just two weeks after most of the girls finished their volleyball season at the Class D state quarterfinals, the Lady Trojans take the floor Tuesday, Nov. 27, at home against North Central, which will be Parents Night. __PUBLIC__

On Nov. 30, a special presentation will be held for Lexi Gussert, who scored her 1,000th point during the playoffs last March.

That was during the Lady Trojans' magical ride through the playoffs, when they won district and regional titles, won the quarterfinal game on a last-second shot and got all the way to the semifinal game in East Lansing. They finished 15-5 in the regular season, (21-6 including playoffs) and were 10-2 in the Skyline Conference.

A for attitude: That team was led by four seniors. All their experience is gone now, and only one starting job—Gussert, of course—is set. Most of the other girls are new to varsity play, so there's plenty of work to do.

But the Lady Trojans have a solid work ethic. After the volleyball team lost on a Tuesday night, Syrjanen said they could have two days off before starting practice on Friday.

"They all showed up Wednesday at practice," he added. "The whole team was there. They didn't want to miss." That, he added, shows the team's attitude. "Everybody's really hungry, and I'm sure it helps that we made it to Lansing last year."

The younger girls only came along as JV players, but they experienced the excitement first-hand, and that memory remains vivid. "They got a taste of it," said their coach, "and I know, every one of them, their dream is to get it back."

The team's goal this year: another long playoff run.

In the middle: Did we mention Lexi Gussert? The junior center already earned her 1,000th varsity point by the end of her sophomore year. A two-time Skyline MVP, she is also a two-time selection to the all-U.P. and all-state teams. She averaged 22.4 points and 9.3 rebounds last year. Any team with her at center is going to be very strong.

But the team's destiny hinges on how quickly the other girls learn their roles and become a cohesive unit. Besides Gussert, the only girls with serious varsity experience are sophomore Adel Isaacson and junior Kendra Campbell (who injured an ankle last week).

Syrjanen: "Not a lot of coaches out there feel real sorry for me when I have one starter coming back, and it's Lexi Gussert."

The roster: Still, it's going to be young team. The team has two seniors (Gina Graff and Ronnie Jaeger), six juniors (Gussert, Campbell, Mary Grandahl, Samantha Nylund, Kaitlyn Bradley and Jessica Bawyn), three sophomores (Isaacson, Kelsi Hendrickson and Sierra Robarge) and a freshman (Maria Stankewicz).

The team also has a German exchange student, Melina Doering. "She's a fairly decent ballplayer," said her coach. "She may be able to help us."

Play catch-up: Due to their very late start, Syrjanen arranged two scrimmages over Thanksgiving weekend—Norway and Negaunee. That should help him select starters for the North Central game.

With smaller guards than before, Syrjanen is switching to a quicker pace. "We want to be a faster, up-tempo team. To compete, we have to get up and down and the floor and not get into a lot of half-court sets with big teams.

Hang in there: "We want to play a little scrappier, challenging defenses and press the ball a

little harder this year, because of our quickness—and see where it takes us."

Like last year, it's going to be a work in progress at first, and a slow start is possible. "But we really believe that by the end of the year, we're going to be right of the mix of things—in the conference as well as the U.P. and in the tournaments.

"If people are patient with us, they're going to see a pretty good product by the time we're done this year."

Coming up: The season opener is Nov. 27 at home against North Central. On Nov. 30, Bark River-Harris visits.

The Jets and Broncos are two of the top teams in the Skyline Conference. "And we face them both in the first week, right out of the chute."