

Multifaceted Mertz helps Sleepy Eye start season 9-0

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SLEEPY EYE - Whatever her role may be, Sleepy Eye Indians senior forward Brea Mertz is happy to contribute any way she can on one of this year's top Class A girls basketball teams in Minnesota.

Mertz is currently enjoying her Christmas break, with her team sitting pretty at 9-0 on the season.

After the Indians opened the season two years ago with a 9-0 win streak, they weren't able to duplicate that success last season as they started off with a win over Cleveland before being beaten by BOLD.

The Indians were then defeated by Buffalo Lake-Hector-Stewart to start the 2022-23 season 1-2.

This season, the Indians have already defeated both BOLD and BLHS during their 9-0 start. There are a lot of games yet to be played, but the Indians are out to show early on that they're the team to beat in Section 2A.

They're also currently ranked No. 4 in the state in Class A.

While fellow senior and teammate Kadence Hesse draws many headlines and has Player of the Year awards to her name, Mertz has also been key in the team's success over the past several years.

Dating back to her early years on the Sleepy Eye girls basketball varsity team, Mertz has frequently taken over games, especially when teams dare to key in on Hesse alone. Whether Hesse draws a double team or not, however, Mertz still often ends up upsetting opponents and finding herself at the top of the stat sheet.

"I never try to compare myself to her because we have our own games," Mertz said of Hesse. "But we still play together, play like a team, we are a team. ... We're a dynamic duo."

Mertz has been happy to play alongside Hesse for years, with the two playing basketball together since fifth grade. Both players began their varsity basketball careers together during their seventh-grade seasons and started as eighth-graders.

"She's my best friend," Mertz said of Hesse. "We have our friendship on the court and off the court. We have a good bond."

Hesse may lead the Indians in most statistical areas, but Mertz is right there with her as the two compliment each other's games well. Mertz is averaging 18.7 points per game this season behind Hesse's 23 ppg.

As for Mertz's role, some nights she may be looked at to lead the team in scoring. Some nights she may be paving the road to victory with her defense and rebounding. And there have been several nights where's she done all of the above.

But more than anything, Mertz wants to be a reliable teammate.

"They can come and ask me questions and I'll answer them if I know them," Mertz said. "I just try to be a leader on and off the floor at all times."

Mertz said the part of her game she's most comfortable with is her rebounding, and it certainly shows as she's leading the team on the glass this season with 10 rebounds per game.

She's also averaging 4.2 steals and 2.8 assists per game and has taken steps to improve her offense from last year, especially from the 3-point line.

"My outside shooting - I've definitely worked on a lot this summer, that's where I tried to focus," Mertz said. "And then I really try to just finish around the rim when I can."

The work Mertz has put in from beyond the arc has led to her leading the team in 3-point percentage at 38.7%.

After graduation, Mertz will continue to playing basketball at the collegiate level after committing to play with the Briar Cliff University Chargers women's basketball team in Sioux City, Iowa.

"I wasn't completely sure if I was going to play in college," Mertz said. "I wasn't sure if I was going to go to a two-year, like a community college, but then I was like, 'You know what? I'm going to go play,' because that's what I wanted to do."

Mertz said she initially wasn't sure about making the decision to attend college in Sioux City due to the distance, but after seeing the campus and being welcomed by the coaching staff, she decided to take the leap.

Mertz visited the school twice this year, once in January and once in June, before deciding to commit.

Mertz's senior year at Sleepy Eye is far from over, however, and she has more goals in mind as the Indians look to make a push to the state tournament for the first time since 2018.

In order to do that, Mertz said the team will have to focus on a few key goals the rest of the way.

"Just stay together as a team," Mertz said. "Staying positive and keeping everybody's heads up, and staying healthy."

And in order to push their win streak to 10, the Indians will have to travel to Marshall and beat a familiar foe in Minneota at Southwest Minnesota State University on Thursday. While the Vikings eked by Sleepy Eye in 2021, the Indians defeated Minneota last year at SMSU 48-38.