

Yes, I know the risks of handing out semester grades. Students don't like them, and there is always the question of subjectivity. So before I grade the Liberal Redskins and Lady Redskins on their first semester basketball games, let me qualify the criteria: winning and losing is critical, but so is the manner in which the games are won or lost. Margin of victory, quality of opponent, all of these things weigh in the final grade, which is really not an outcome of how the teams will play the rest of the season. It is really more like a pre-test since the majority of the season will be played in 2010.

So what have we learned in the first four games of the season about the Liberal Redskins and Lady Redskins? Let's take a look:

#### Lady Redskins

Coming in to the season, Liberal coach Shane Stout was not just beginning a rebuilding year, he was starting an entire new project altogether.

His starting squad from a year ago had graduated along with some contributors from the bench, and he had to put together a competitive varsity team with a group of players that had seen little time on the main gym floor. Other than Kayla Payton, the Lady Redskins were starting over at the varsity level.

And, there was no height on the team.

With an inexperienced team and no height, the Lady Redskins were going to have to find other ways to win against more experienced teams.

They have won three out of four by using their quickness and athleticism to their advantage. Even in their lone loss to a much taller Sunrise team, they kept the game respectable.

There are several factors that have led to the early success for the Lady Redskins.

The first of which is the emergence of sophomore Justice Norah. She is averaging more than 20 points per game and will be a force in the second semester for Western Athletic Conference teams.

Kirsten Ross has also proven to be a handful for defenses on fast-breaks, and she has been able to handle the ball against pesky guards looking for easy back-court turnovers.

Payton continues to contribute from long range, something she brought to last year's state tournament squad.

Kayla Varnes has become a utility player, being able to shoot from mid-range and apply defense.

There's Megan Campbell and Sharika Sanchez who also contribute.

While Liberal's schedule has not been, the strongest, Liberal has had to overcome some daunting challenges.

For years the Lady Redskins have struggled at Guymon. It seems the Lady Tigers get up for the Liberal game. This year was no different.

But the Lady Redskins were able to score an overtime win, 53-51.

The first four games have shown us that Stout has created another competitive Lady Redskin

team that will have to find other ways to compensate for their lack of height.

First semester grade: A-

Redskins

Qualifying for the state tournament a year ago with a talented group of seniors and underclassmen left high expectations for the Redskins this season.

Liberal had returners Jade Cathey, Tyson Deaton and Kowan Russell, and they were joined by the talents of Kedrick Eyle, Bryce Johnson and Justin Andrade along with a supporting cast of Slader McVey, Blake Willimon and Bryan Morris to create a deep team that was balanced with size and speed.

One of the question marks for the Redskins was would Andrade be able to replace Alex Gilmore who ran the point for Liberal for four years.

So far, that answer has been yes. Liberal has had little trouble moving the ball to the front court and setting up the offense.

That makes Cathey's size more of an advantage along with Russell and Deaton.

In the past two games, Deaton has scored double digits, which will put pressure on WAC opponents in the second half. Do they try to shut down Cathey or Deaton? And if they pack it inside, will Andrade hit the three?

There is no doubt the talent and the weapons are in place.

But, in Liberal's biggest challenge in the first semester, the Redskin fell to Sunrise 33-27.

Defensively, only giving up 33 points to a team with three Div. I commitments is a great showing. But only scoring 27 indicated that a tall, talented opponent could slow down the high-octane Redskin offense. It is highly unlikely Liberal will face another team with the height and talent that Sunrise had.

Liberal made easy work of Guymon and Perryton, and each game the Redskins have gained the needed experience and confidence to compete in the WAC.

First semester grade: A-