Jackson Center made it all the way to the Division IV State finals last season before falling in the championship game to Berlin Hiland.

Despite having a number of those players back, St. John's (19-5) hopes to keep a repeat from happening as the Blue Jays take on the Tigers 5:30 p.m. today in the opening game of the Kettering Fairmont Regional.

"They have a lot of the same players back, so they are experienced. They are very skilled, well-coached and very physical, especially defensively," St. John's coach Aaron Elwer said. "They are well-schooled defensively, with good positioning, understanding and a solid team concept. They understand what they are trying to do and they make it very difficult for you. With what we have seen in scouting and films, they are basically half-court man-to-man, with not a lot of extending it; at this stage of the year, I don't expect them to change what's got them there.

"They are perimeter-oriented, much like we are. They have two guys that go around 6-4, 6-5, so it's a good size matchup; they ask their bigs to defend and rebound."

The Jays trot out a starting five of seniors Curtis Geise, Ryan Buescher and Seth Bockey and juniors Eric Clark and Ryan Koester.

Off the bench are senior Cole Fischbach and sophomores Andy Grothouse, Evan Hays and Tyler Conley.

"We have a couple of keys but they have been keys for us all year. One, we have to execute offensively; we have a game plan and need to attack them with confidence, especially since they are so solid defensively," Elwer continued. "We need to execute our defensive game plan as well, especially with a concerted team effort because they are so skilled. The third part is rebounding; we need to hit the boards on both sides to limit them to one shot and maybe get extra shots for ourselves."

Elwer has seen this edition of Blue Jays meet his expectations.

“Every year, it’s a coaching cliche to see your team get better from day one but that has happened for us this year. As a group, we have gotten better on offense, defense and rebounding; we have gotten more confident and comfortable in what we are doing and it shows,” Elwer added. “What I like best about this team is its chemistry; they aren’t worried about the credit. Whether it’s guarding an opponent’s best player, rebounding, distributing the ball or whatever, these guys aren’t afraid to do it. It’s been more and more of a collective team effort in whatever we’re doing as we’ve gone along.”

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