The hardest part in any rugby team's schedule is the offseason. That's where good teams can get complacent and a team that got trounced in the fall can come back and shock their competition after putting in the work during the down time. This is true at any level of the sport, and for the high school squads in Ohio that reigned supreme last year, they are looking to make the most of the wintry months in an effort to secure the spots at the top.

One of the hardest things to do after a hot season is to repeat that level of success - it's even harder to improve. Hennie Pieters, head coach of the Indian Springs Jets in Cincinnati, intends for his team to do just that. After a strong 2012 season, Pieters and his players face a hard road back to prominence, this time in a higher division.

"Generally, we had a good season," Pieters said. "In the league we went unbeaten. The only game we lost was the game that we played against the team from Canada at Classics, and that team eventually played against Pickerington for the final and Pickerington beat them."

Pieters and his team took down tough local squads like Saint Xavier and Tri-Villages to capture the Division II State Championship.

"The final that we played against them we beat them by 14 - I think - to nothing, but it was a tough, tough match," Pieters said. "At the state semifinals we played against Avon, but we beat them pretty convincingly, even though they had quite a lot of big guys. The final, that was our closest game of the year. That was against Tri-Villages and I think the score at the end was five to three."

Now, Pieters and the Jets are faced with a new challenge: being competitive in a higher division with an almost brand new side. Pieters believes what set them apart last year will continue to do so against their new competition and lead them to another strong showing.

One thing that put the Jets above and beyond their competition was their stock of strong, experienced and team-oriented athletes in the lineup.

“We didn’t have any kids who were Prima Donnas who upset the team dynamics,” he said. “They were all very committed to the team and the success of the team.”

With nearly all of the starting XV from the State Final game gone due to graduation, getting more players and getting his current players more experience will be the primary goals in preparing for the coming season.

“We will have less experienced players this year,” Pieters said. The majority of the players taking the field will have at most two seasons of rugby under their belts.

The plan to overcome this: keep the coaching structures from last season and recruit heavily.

“The one thing we put in place last year that we didn’t have prior years was and increased coaching staff,” Pieters, who has been with the team six years, said. These additional coaches consisted of homegrown talent who started playing rugby in high school and could explain the finer points of the game differently than Pieters. “I think we’ve got a very good coaching staff.”

Pieters and his coaching staff helped the Jets overcome tough area teams like West Side and Saint Xavier, who they played and beat in pre-season, league and postseason competition.

“If we can coach the structures and repeat the ways in which we do our backline moves, I think we can be competitive again this year,” Pieters said. “The teams that are around here play a lot in their forwards, with their pick-and-gos and those types of things. They don’t really spread the ball as often. I think we try to play a 15-man game.”

Recruiting is going to be an important pursuit for Pieters and the Jets this year to make up for the large graduating class from last year while accounting for injuries that can occur throughout

the season. Fortunately, the Jets pull from a number of schools in their area, including Mason, Lakota East and West, Cincinnati Christian, Princeton and Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy. Getting interested players from these schools should help fill the Jets' depleted ranks.

Jaime Cleary, head coach of the Saint Joseph Academy Jaguars in Cleveland also had a good season last year, leading her girls to a nearly unblemished record, a second place finish at the State level and third place honors at Midwest. Their only loss came at the hands of Lakewood High School for the State Championship.

The Jaguars' impressive results are a result of the preparation during the off season, which doesn't consist of just wind sprints and weights.

"Our trainings are mostly conditioning inside," Cleary said. These trainings range from running stairs, lifting weights and even looking at dietary habits. "We have a nutritionist that comes in and talks to the girls. Being a high school girls' team, that's something we definitely need to focus on."

Like Pieters, Cleary doesn't operate with a skeleton crew at her disposal. Her efforts are supplemented by two assistant coaches – Sara Leary and Sara Koprek – who have over 20 years of experience between them. This experience along with Cleary's, which dates back to 1996, allows the Jaguars' coaching staff to train their players at a level that allows them to rise above the bulk of their competition.

"Any kind of hesitation or doubt can rake away from their momentum and so we want to make sure they know as much as possible when they walk on that field," Cleary said.

This focus on preparation and training does more than get the girls in shape. It also creates bonds and chemistry needed to have a successful team.

"We get along well, the girls get along well and I think that really sets a great base as to how well we're going to do," Cleary said. "We're very tight-knit."

What's even more important to the Jaguars' success is the help they receive from off the pitch.

"We do have that strong base, that support," Cleary said. "The parents are amazing. They do so much for us. Our school does recognize us as a sport and the girls can letter at Saint Joseph Academy. I think the support that we get from the school, the parents, the community and the players themselves really is the good base we work from."

The backing from the school might be the Jaguars' most important off-field tool for each season's preparation and success. This status in the school is yet another thing that sets them apart from a bulk of their competition.

"We worked hard for this status," Cleary said. "The first few years we were only a club and now being varsity and recognized by the school is very nice. We are a little different than any other team in the area because we have that."

The recognition and prestige the Jaguars have received from the school certainly help their off season recruiting. They get so many girls eager to join the squad that there's a cutting process. This continual interest level ensures that the ladies of SJA won't have to worry about numbers in the off season. Even after the cutting process, the team takes close to 50 girls into each season.

Despite all the support that Cleary and her team get from outside sources, the Jaguars still face opposition off the field.

"Sometimes it's hard to get a field," she said. There had been times Cleary has had her team bumped for various reasons and had to reroute almost 50 girls to a new location on very short notice. "If we had more resources for fields I think it would be better."

The Jets and Jaguars, like other high school teams in the state, are gunning for strong seasons in 2013. Whether they have focused on strategizing, recruiting or conditioning in the off season,

teams will see how their preparation has paid off when the season starts in early March.