

After a postseason lost...

THEY'RE BACK

BACK TO WORK: BRADLEY WOMEN'S BASKETBALL EXCITED FOR SEASON AHEAD

BY JOEY WRIGHT
Assistant Sports Editor

For Bradley women's basketball, there are a wealth of reasons to believe that the best stretch in program history will continue this season.

On the heels of a 2019-2020 campaign that saw the Braves finish 22-7 and 13-5 in the Missouri Valley Conference, the Braves enter the upcoming season with higher expectations than ever before. Bradley was chosen to finish second in the conference behind Missouri State in the preseason poll that was released on Oct. 13.

But why all the hype for these Braves, who are slated to begin MVC play on Dec. 31 versus Drake?

For starters, Bradley returns four mainstays from last season's starting lineup, including preseason Missouri Valley Conference player of the year Lasha Petree and fellow first-team honoree Gabi Haack.

Petree and Haack are staying focused on the end goal despite the accolades.

"Those are just preseason awards," Petree said. "It's a great honor to be recognized in that way. But personally, it doesn't change how we look at the season and how we're going to go about things."

Though attention is rightfully directed toward Petree and Haack, Bradley boasts a deep team that will require a careful look at the entire roster.

"Yes, everyone's gonna be focused on them," head coach Andrea Gorski said. "And they're gonna be probably one and two on the scouting report. But you can't really spend all your time focusing on those two, because there's a lot of weapons ready to go on our team."

Petree and Haack are complimented nicely by the return of fellow starters Nyjah White and Tatum Koenig. White provides a balanced attack that features scoring and rebounding, while Koenig is a floor general that gives the Braves a strong presence at the point.

"I mean, it's hard not to have your top defender not guarding Nyjah," Gorski said. "And like I said, Tatum's come along so well."

Mahri Petree is also expected to have a big sophomore season. Last season, Petree was a member of the MVC's all-freshman team and emerged as a regular threat from behind the arc in 29 appearances off the bench.

"She's so versatile," Gorski said. "This year, it's gonna be hard not to have her on the floor. She's just improved in so many areas defensively, especially. She's always one of our best rebounders ... I have seen a lot of progress with her."

Though four of Bradley's five starters will return and continue playing at a high level, there is one major area that Bradley will have to address: the loss of Chelsea Brackmann due to graduation.

Brackmann departed as Bradley's all-time leading rebounder and averaged 9.5 points per game in her 117 career games.

Options exist for filling the role vacated by Brackmann. Returning senior forward Emily Marsh headlines the cast of post players available at Andrea Gorski's disposal, and could play a big role in the conference portion of the season after recovering from hip surgery. Six-foot-2-inch forward Veronika Roberts should also be in store for a

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THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME FOR BRADLEY MEN'S BASKETBALL

BY LARRY LARSON
Sport Editor

On Jan. 25, Bradley men's basketball had just seven players available for its road game against Indiana State. With just six scholarship players in the rotation, the Braves fell by eight points.

Head coach Brian Wardle doesn't anticipate running into that situation again this season. As Bradley begins its quest for its third straight Missouri Valley Conference tournament title and first regular season championship since 1996, depth may be the team's biggest strength.

"Anybody can start, any given night," senior forward Elijah Childs said. "We could have guys that can play multiple positions. We have guys coming off the bench that can start, play multiple positions and finish games for us."

While the Braves return two starters, including Childs and fellow senior Danya Kingsby, much of the squad's depth will come from a sizable class of newcomers – three transfers and five freshmen.

Those three transfers – junior guards Terry Nolan and Kevin McAdoo and sophomore guard Sean East II – all enter with previous Division-I experience and figure to make an immediate impact in the backcourt following the graduation of Darrell Brown and Nate Kennell.

"With Nate and DB, we lost scoring," Nolan, who redshirted last season in Peoria, said. "I kind of got to pick up that role a little bit with the scoring aspect, leading, 3-point shooting and definitely defense also."

Nolan has shown off his scoring and passing ability before in two seasons at George Washington, averaging 9.8 points and two assists per game. McAdoo has also scored at a similar rate, averaging 8.6 points per game in two seasons at Eastern Michigan before his transfer redshirt

season.

East, who received a waiver for immediate eligibility, is a candidate to replace Brown as point guard. As a freshman, the 6-foot-3-inch East led Massachusetts with 4.9 assists per game to go along with 9.3 points. In comparison, Brown averaged 4.7 assists per contest last season.

Sophomore guards Ville Tahvanainen and Antonio Thomas could also receive big minutes after playing roles off the bench last year. Tahvanainen was second to Kennell in 3-point percentage and averaged over six points per game. Thomas started seven games and stepped up during Brown's midseason injury.

Add in Kingsby, who averaged nearly eight points per game last season, and Wardle has no shortage of options at the one and two guard positions.

"[McAdoo and Nolan] have a great feel for our system, our culture," Wardle said. "Very talented; quick, fast, they can playmake, they can guard ... I like our guard play, it's very deep."

Much of the team's newfound depth is in the frontcourt, a spot where Bradley was particularly thin last season. All five of the team's freshmen can play forward, after only featuring five total forwards last season.

Of those five freshmen, Rienk Mast is the most experienced, having played for Donar of the Dutch Basketball League. After tearing his ACL during the summer of 2019 playing in the Netherlands, Mast spent his first season with the team rehabbing. The 6 foot-9 inch, 240-pound Dutchman has impressed those inside the program with his versatility.

In addition to Childs – the team's leading returning scorer and lone All-Conference preseason first-team selection – junior forward Ja'Shon Henry and junior center Ari Boya,

return from back-to-back title squads.

Despite the graduation of starting center Koch Bar, the confidence is high among the group.

"I don't think we're going to struggle rebounding," Childs, last season's leading rebounder, said. "Reink Mast can space the floor. All we need Ari to do is catch, turn and dunk, rebound, block shots ... I think this frontcourt is probably going to be the best frontcourt in the MVC."

With innumerable talent amongst the group, team cohesiveness remains paramount, especially in 2020, which saw limited summer practices and off-court bonding experiences.

"Chemistry is gonna be big," Wardle said. "Our basketball IQ, how smart this team is in picking up the offense and the schemes, is going to be very important. Just getting the newcomers to understand what we stand for in our program. That's the unselfish play, we protect each other and we play for each other ... so far, it's been really good. All our transfers and newcomers have really bought in to the system and to the culture of the program."

That culture, established by now-tried-and-true mantras such as "be a star in your role" and "compete, defend, rebound," is what Childs and others point to as a difference-maker across the last two seasons.

This season, that culture has taken another step forward according to those in the locker room.

"We have a very vocally led team this year, it seems like, more than the past years that I've been here," Henry said. "A player-led team is what the coaches always kind of preach and

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ONE-ON-ONE

Who has the best uniforms in the MVC?

Indiana State vs. Valparaiso

It's not the blue that Larry Bird wore, but it's better.

Indiana State has always raised the jersey game in the Missouri Valley Conference, and these royal blue jerseys with white and black accents bring a lot to the table.

The jersey uses the classic Indiana State lettering, with the first "I" being the state outline. The letters are white with a black outline, and in between the two words is the players' number in black, outlined in white.

On each side of the jersey is a solid white stripe that slowly breaks up and eventually turns to black as it progresses down the side. The rest of the jersey is a solid royal blue that sharpens the white and black accents.

The shorts are also primarily royal blue with a solid black stripe on the side that slowly breaks up and transitions to a solid white stripe at the bottom. On the lower left side of the shorts, a patch of the Sycamores' logo finishes it off.

Now, with respect to the Crusaders, yellow and brown is not a good pairing, so these all yellow jerseys are hard to gaze upon.

The shortened 'VALPO' on the chest in white is nice, and the shield on the side of the shorts is a good touch, but it takes a lot to make all yellow look good, and in this case, this jersey leaves much to be desired.

You could make an argument that there are better jerseys in this conference than the Sycamores road blue, but the Valparaiso all-yellow option is not one of those arguments.

Out of all the threads worn by the Missouri Valley Conference basketball squads, Valparaiso's dark yellow road uniforms should be considered the best.

Being a traditionally bright color, it's well-known that yellow is difficult to deal with when considering the visual appeal of a sports uniform. You could go with the University of Oregon approach, where your eyes may hurt while looking at a brightly-colored jersey for 40 minutes.

On the other hand, you could try the Jacksonville Jaguars color rush uniform and its horrendous attempt at a dark yellow design. But the balance found by Valparaiso to incorporate the exact shade of yellow in their uniforms makes it one of the most appealing basketball uniforms in the MVC.

And, of course, Valparaiso's jersey is one that stands out from the rest. They are the only team in the MVC to frequently don a uniform with yellow as the main color.

However, the primary jersey color is not the be-all and end-all of the aesthetic. The white letters spelling 'VALPO' outlined by a thin and dark brown border are a nice touch to the front of the uniform. The players' names and numbers are listed on the back of the jersey in similar fashion, and the uniform's shorts feature the dark yellow with a Valparaiso logo stitched on one of the sides.

Indiana State's solid blue uniforms with white lettering are a very close second to Valparaiso's road uniforms. However, the vibrant and unique color scheme of the former puts it at the number one spot in the MVC.



- MATT LUCAS



- NICK ZOLL



TRENDING UPWARD:
HIGH EXPECTATIONS NOTHING NEW FOR GABI HAACK

BY JOEY WRIGHT
Assistant Sports Editor

Bradley senior Gabi Haack has good reason to believe that her senior campaign will be her best one yet.

She enters the 2020-21 season as a member of the preseason all-Missouri Valley Conference and will play a key role on a Bradley team that has more expectations than ever before.

But it wasn't all that long ago that Haack was a preps standout in Elk River, Minnesota. Oddly enough, the successes that Haack has enjoyed at both levels mirror each other closely.

"I started playing basketball in kindergarten. Absolutely loved it," Haack recalled. "My dad was my coach. And he ended up coaching me all the way up until my eighth grade year. And I played other sports, volleyball, softball, but it wasn't the same as basketball."

Haack, who had a small basketball court in her backyard – a lane, as she recalls – simply was not invested in those other sports to the extent that she was in basketball.

"Basketball was always my first love," Haack said. And I always love going to basketball practice ... the other practices, I just did not want to go to them. But I loved every second of basketball."

Every summer, Haack competed in a shooting and dribbling competition in her hometown. Her rebounder was her father, Dan, who Haack credits as her biggest supporter in basketball.

"He taught me so many skills that I couldn't have learned like any other way," Haack said. "He taught me how to be a hard worker, how to set goals and just everything like that."

At Elk River High School, Haack's teams started off slow. A four-year varsity starter, she recalled that the Elks only won about half of their games during her freshman campaign. However, the Elks mounted a run to the sectional final before falling to St. Michael-Albertville in the sectional championship game.

The team continued to improve, winning the conference championship in Haack's

sophomore and junior seasons. But again, St. Michael-Albertville was there to deny Elk River a chance at the state playoffs in the sectional title game. But it was during Haack's final season as an Elk that the tide finally turned.

The Elks again won the conference and, after a 32-0 season, reigned as Minnesota AAAA state champions. For her contributions to the run, Haack was named Minnesota's Gatorade Player of the Year.

"So my career is kind of similar to my high school career is kind of similar to college," Haack said. "Starting [with a .500 winning percentage], and then we just kind of slowly get better."

Before Haack could contribute toward Bradley's improving culture, she had to make the decision to attend the school. It was assistant coach Paul Fessler who had a conversation with Haack's high school head coach, which eventually led to in-person scouting at an AAU game and Haack's first visit to the Hilltop with her parents.

"When I got here, got to meet all the coaches, got a tour of the campus, got to meet the team," Haack said. "And I just loved everything about it. The facilities were amazing. The coaches were very nice and personable ... Driving home after the visit, I was just talking with my parents and I just like it just kind of feels like a no brainer to go there."

Haack's freshman year at Bradley was rather quiet. Haack had a nice campaign, starting 21 of 31 games and averaging 10.4 points per game and a tick under six rebounds. The season resulted in a spot on the MVC all-freshman team. All parties involved will point to the team's record first, though, and the 13-18 mark that the Braves posted was soon to improve.

Haack's sophomore season ended with a loss to Illinois State in the MVC tournament – a frustrating loss, said Haack, to a team that Bradley had downed twice in the regular season. But the Braves were proving they were ready to compete with a 20-win season.

"My junior year, I was like, okay, this is like our year to actually do something in the Valley," Haack said. "And we actually got the win record for the school. And then we were projected, we got that third ranking, which we've never gotten ranked

that high going into a conference tournament. So last year, going to the tournament I was really pumped."

Of course, the ongoing pandemic thwarted the Braves' chance at making a run in the postseason after a 22-7 regular season. But the bitter taste of last season will not serve to stop the Braves from fighting back this year. Bradley returns a solid core and figures to be in the conversation for a conference title yet again.

It's not just a conversation, either. It is a pursuit that the entire team is focused on.

"I think their perspective is single-focused," head coach Andrea Gorski said. "It's win a Missouri Valley championship and that's what their goal is individually and they're not going to be happy unless we do that."

Haack enters her senior season as a member of the MVC's all-conference preseason team. It's the first time she's been tabbed for the preseason honor, but far from the first time she's been recognized among the conference's best. Twice an all-MVC first-teamer, she was thrice a Valley player of the week award winner last season.

"It's deserved," Gorski said of Haack and fellow honoree Lasha Petree. "I mean, they work extremely hard. They are always in the gym. They love the game, they want to win. They've taken a lot of pride in moving this program forward."

The accolades and expectations only add to a list of memories that have piled up over Haack's four years on the Hilltop. Haack said beating Drake last season was a particularly fond memory, but not necessarily the best one from her time at Bradley thus far.

"As far as memories, I guess most of my memories are just the time I get to spend with my team," Haack said. "I've been close with all my teammates on all the teams I've been on. So all those memories and the friendships I've developed is one of the biggest things that stands out to me."

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that’s what I’ve noticed.”

Having earned an NCAA Tournament bid each of the last two seasons, the Braves are hungry for that same taste of success. However, revenge is a dish best served cold and the team knows that come conference play, they’ll be circled on opponents’ calendars.

“We have to act like we haven’t won anything; I think that’s the biggest thing,” Childs said. “If you get too comfortable, you can get passed by. We just stay hungry and be ready to work every day we step on that floor.”

NO SHORTAGE OF MOTIVATION FOR CHILDS
ENTERING SENIOR SEASON

BY LARRY LARSON
Sports Editor

When senior forward Elijah Childs was a freshman, then-senior star and starting forward Donte Thomas kept his words of wisdom simple to the up-and-comer.

“Just hard work, stay in the gym,” Childs said of Thomas’ advice. “He just told me just to play my game and let the game come to me.”

Three years later, Childs’ game has led him to a laundry list of accolades entering his senior season; 2019 Missouri Valley Conference tournament most outstanding player, 2019-20 All-Conference second team, 2020 MVC All-Tournament team and 2020 Preseason All-Conference first team, to name a few.

As Bradley’s top returning scorer entering the 2020-21 campaign, the 6-foot-8-inch star is far from a well-kept secret. His paint presence and left-hand hook have been known by opponents in and out of the Valley.

Following the graduation of leading scorer and volume shooter Darrell Brown and paint defender Koch Bar, Childs’ role as a scorer and defensive juggernaut will become even more prevalent.

Despite the seniority, Childs’ mindset remains the same as in previous years.

“I feel like the team does look to me to get us going, if we are struggling, to go get a bucket and rally everybody,” Childs said. “But my mindset doesn’t change. I want to win. I like to win, even if I’m not scoring, I can do other things. Rebound, block shots, bring guys along, pick guys up.”

According to Bradley head coach Brian Wardle, the senior’s off-court contributions have been innumerable as he’s picked up a leadership role, much like Thomas led him.

“It’s kind of how our program has grown,” Wardle said. “You want your juniors and seniors to guide and help the freshmen and sophomores along, and Elijah is a perfect example of that ... He’s a vocal and by example leader, and you love having leaders that can do both.”

However, it’s tough to find a game where Childs fails to contribute in a big way in the scoring department. Throughout the 2019-20 season, he averaged 14.8 points per game, along with 8.7 rebounds and 1.3 blocks.



As the old adage goes, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

So, despite the new-look roster and changes brought about by COVID-19, the goals and the mantras preached in the Braves’ locker room remain.

“We get after it, we still do our regular stuff ... As far as the season, I really don’t think a lot of things are changed,” Childs said. “My expectations for this year are to just be in the same spot that we were last year... I want to be at the top of the league. I feel like this team can be at the top of the league.”

It seems as if Childs shines the brightest in the spotlight. In the final game of his sophomore season, he led the Braves with 19 points in their narrow first-round loss to Michigan State in the NCAA Tournament. Last season, in a road loss against nationally ranked Memphis, Childs picked up the Braves when Brown struggled, scoring 21 points against soon-to-be NBA draft pick, Precious Achiuwa.

“I think it just says I live for those big games,” Childs said. “If I feel like we’re underappreciated or somebody’s talking about another team more than they’re talking about us, don’t give us respect, I take that to heart and I go out and play.”

In this season’s non-conference slate, the Braves’ Dec. 22 date with Mizzou is already circled on the calendar for Childs. During the Kansas City native’s senior year at Lee’s Summit West High School, Childs’ Titans lost the state championship basketball game in blowout fashion at Mizzou Arena.

“I’m definitely looking forward to the game,” Childs said. “I got a little revenge coming for Mizzou ... It just means a lot for my family, they can come to the game and it’s close to home and I just want to put on a good performance for them and get a win.”

That chip-on-the-shoulder mentality has done the Braves well the past two seasons on their way to back-to-back MVC Tournament Championships and based on Childs’ demeanor, that won’t be changing.

Even as the awards, honors and championships have accumulated for Bradley’s lone senior in the frontcourt, if you ask him, there’s still plenty to accomplish.

“I’ve put the work in, I’ve waited my time and I definitely feel like this is the year that we get that number one spot and I get the player of the year,” Childs said.

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big sophomore campaign.

From there, the Braves boast a strong cast of newcomers, including 6-foot-4-inch center Uche Ufochukwu, who will play out her senior season on the Hilltop after spending the previous four seasons at Winthrop. Although her tenure with the Eagles was affected by injuries, she should make an immediate impact in Peori as the tallest player on the Braves’ roster.

Freshmen Tete Danso, Sami Martin and Isis Fitch round out a deep frontcourt for Bradley that should have little problem defending the basket. It’s no surprise that four of Bradley’s five newcomers have the opportunity to make contributions early on.

“Our five newcomers fit in perfectly with our team,” Gorski said. “They just blend in really well. They’re quick learners, they’re very competitive as well. And they all bring something different.”

Bradley’s other newcomer, junior Chloe Rice, offers the Braves an added backcourt depth. Rice played regularly in a depth role at St. Louis and joins Annah Interrante and Violetta

BY JONATHAN MICHEL
Contributor

The Bradley women’s basketball team bestowed the nickname “The General” on point guard Tatum Koenig. It only seems fitting, since the junior’s biggest goal is to lead the Braves on a conquest of the Missouri Valley Conference title.

Koenig’s leadership role is showcased on the court, but also extends to the huddle, the locker room and off the court. A point guard is to a basketball team what a quarterback is to a football team.

After leading the team in assists in 2019-20, Koenig pairs up again with Lasha Petree, Gabi Haack and Nyjah White, all holdovers from last year’s starting lineup.

“The experience we’ve gotten the last three, four years is what’s put us at the top,” Koenig said. “It’s going to be amazing what we’re going to be able to do.”

Coach Andrea Gorski’s team is seeking redemption after finishing third in the conference before their season was cut short by the pandemic. This year, Koenig believes that this Braves team can dethrone nationally ranked Missouri State on top of the Valley.

“I think we have more threats,” Koenig said. “We’re just going to amp up what we did last year. We’re going to be better in transition, better defenders and get more steals.”

She said a big focus of the team’s preseason practices is being more active on defense and scoring more points per game. Bradley ranked eighth out of the 10 teams in the Missouri Valley in steals with 6.6. Their scoring offense ranked third at 70.5 points per game, but the Braves are now without the services of forward Chelsea Brackmann.

Koenig is adamant that Braves fans will see her and her teammates engage in more aggressive gameplay this season. However, the Iowa native is mild-mannered off the court, enjoying reading, hiking and biking in her free time.

She also happens to co-own a tarantula with her mom, a science teacher. Her dad was a football

Verano in the ability to play quality minutes at any point in the game.

Expect Bradley to use all of the assets at its disposal as the season moves along.

“I think last year, we played seven, eight continuously decent minutes,” Gorski said. “I think this year, you’re going to see us in 10 or 11. So, very deep team, we’re two or three deep at every position. And that’s the first time that’s been the case since I’ve been here.”

To focus too intently on last season is a grave mistake. This year’s Bradley squad – and every Division-I team, for that matter – is a new one with a fresh start. But what was left unfinished last season was the story of arguably the best season in Bradley’s history, with the ongoing pandemic forcing the cancellation of postseason play.

How does that change the way Bradley’s key players are focusing on the upcoming season?

“The main goal of your season is to get to that tournament, and then win that tournament,” Haack said. “So just not having that just kind of felt like our season was unfinished, like, we have something [still left] to do. So I’m definitely extra hungry.”

Petree agrees, and added that the team won’t approach this season any

KOENIG EMBRACES ROLE OF ‘THE GENERAL’

coach at West Branch High School and encouraged his daughter to play football starting in fourth grade. Koenig’s football career culminated in earning defensive MVP honors in her one season of playing in high school.

Cross country, track and softball also appear on Koenig’s athletic resume. She mentions that her teammates have always played a big role in enjoying whatever sport she’s played. This year, Koenig looks to



Photo by Kayla Johnson

inspire and energize her fellow Braves in a season of uncertainty.

“Bradley fans can expect me to keep the team engaged this year because we don’t know if we’re going to have fans at our games,” Koenig said. “We don’t even know if we’re going to have all our games this season.”

A good leader ensures that their teammates are also receiving encouragement. Koenig certainly checks that box, singing high praise for a number of teammates, notably Haack and White.

The Bradley women welcome five newcomers this year, one of them being fellow Iowan Chloe Rice, a transfer from St. Louis. Koenig noted that adding freshmen such as Tete Danso and Sami Martin in the paint diversifies the array of weapons the Braves have at their disposal.

“We’ve just been learning what our strengths and weaknesses are over the past month and a lot of the freshmen brought in different strengths,” Koenig said.

Bradley’s point guard is no different, addressing the stronger and weaker parts of her game over

different than previous years.

“But I definitely think we have more motivation this year to go get a championship because we did get cut and that kind of hurt ... to not even get to play for the chance of the championship,” Petree said.

COVID-19 also had an impact on the offseason, as Bradley and other teams were forced to design summers around largely individual workouts. But that hasn’t been a huge detriment to the Braves, who continue to gel as a unit.

“We did a lot of individual workouts and everything,” Haack said. “But recently, [in] the last month, we’ve been able to play together. And we’re learning how to play together with the newcomers. And it’s been really fun, like we’ve been working really hard, really competitive.”

With a new season on the horizon, the Braves are ready to get back to work.

“We’ve got a lot of soul on this team,” Petree said. “I think this team is hungry. It’s the team where every single person on the team wants a ring. Everyone wants the championship, everyone’s on the same page, and everyone’s looking to get everyone else better too, not just themselves. So I think that we’re gonna be really good with that.”

the offseason. She’s a strong passer, pacing the Braves with 108 assists in 2019, but that’s not enough to satisfy her. Having better vision and executing more skilled passes are two focal points for Koenig this upcoming season.

Koenig chose Kyrie Irving as an NBA player she’d like to emulate on the court, citing his passing and ball-handling as something she’s always wanted to emulate. Irving’s ability to finish at the rim is a feature that the 5-foot-7-inch Koenig plans to add to her arsenal, but scoring is not a particular issue for her. Koenig averaged 7.6 points per contest in her sophomore year while her field goal percentage astoundingly stood near 50 percent, compared to 40 percent in her freshman season.

Koenig can be a true force for Bradley in the 2020-21 season, but she spoke little of how her play would benefit herself. Instead, she repeatedly emphasized how her play would help others.

“I want to be more known as a passer just because we have so many offensive threats on our team like Lasha, Gabi and Nyjah, so I know my role is more to find them and get them open,” Koenig said.

The Braves have stars on their roster this year, namely the preseason Player of the Year in Petree and another first team all-conference member in Haack. However, it is safe to say that one of the biggest cornerstones of Bradley’s success is Koenig.

With her at the controls, the Braves seem poised to have their best season in recent memory, provided they play their full slate of games. Uncertainties about the season aside, Koenig has her sights set on only one thing: “An MVC title.”



THEN & NOW:

GORSKI'S BU PLAYING CAREER SHAPES COACHING EXPERIENCE



Andrea Gorski drives past a defender in a 1991 game against Indiana State. Photo via Scout Archives.



Bradley head coach Andrea Gorski draws a play during a timeout in a game against Southern Illinois in February 2020. Photo by Kayla Johnson.

BY JACOB STEINBERG
Contributor

An alma mater is a source of pride for many college graduates, and Bradley Women's Basketball head coach Andrea Gorski is no exception.

The Dearborn, Michigan native was a point guard for the Braves during her college career and was responsible for running the offense on the court. She chose to come to the Hilltop because of a feeling of community amongst peers.

"It was a perfect size where I felt like I could get to know enough people and professors and be able to leave my mark," Gorski said.

Gorski left that mark on the all-time women's basketball leaderboard at Bradley, as she finished her career with 980 career points, which is 21st on the all-time scoring list, fourth in career assists, seventh in three-point field goals and eighth in minutes

played. In 1996, she was inducted into the Bradley Athletics Hall of Fame.

Since Gorski last took the court, the women's basketball landscape has changed dramatically. Recruiting, for example, used to be done by going to basketball camps and tips on players from certain high schools.

"That's how Bradley found me: at an all-star camp in Indiana," Gorski said. "Recruiting is probably more efficient now than it used to be."

That's because the sport is now based on exposure, mostly through the AAU travel circuit.

"Now ... you find [players] at a tournament that has 50 games going on in the same facility and then you'll follow up and go to their high school game a few months later," Gorski said.

From a player's standpoint, the players Gorski now coaches have an entirely different college life than

she did. Players are now limited to 20 hours of team activity per week, which wasn't a rule during her playing days.

"If our coach wanted to have us practice and watch film and do all that for 30 hours a week, they could have," Gorski said. "If we had a bad game and we wanted to get off the bus and practice at midnight, we could have."

Since those rules have been in place, players have been able to shape their own college life.

"[Players] definitely have more say in what their experience looks like," Gorski said. "The players really have probably more time now in terms of away from basketball than we did."

Since Gorski graduated from the Hilltop in 1992, the women's basketball program at Bradley has seen ups and downs. A 21-win season in 2009 was the high point of

a program that rarely finished more than a few games over .500 while she was away. When she came back to her alma mater in 2016, the team had gone through four straight losing seasons and three straight seasons with single-digit win totals.

However, the turnaround under Gorski gained the program more positive exposure through the media. Because of the MVC's rights deal with ESPN, every game is now televised through ESPN+ or ESPN3. Women's basketball was rarely televised during Gorski's playing career.

"I think there's more attention to women's basketball now ... the caliber of players we have now coming into Division I basketball programs, it's higher," Gorski said. "I think people, probably the casual fan, appreciate the women's game more now than they used to."

All told, Gorski has used the

changing landscape of the sport to help build a winning culture at her alma mater. Now in her fifth season of coaching the Braves, the team is going for a third-straight 20-win season, which would be a first in program history.

As a graduate of the program that she is now in charge of, Gorski's experience at Bradley is a primary motivator for her coaching style.

"I came as an 18-year-old to Bradley ... not as confident as I should have been and it's transformed me and I felt after my time at Bradley, I just really, truly felt like I could do anything," Gorski said. "That's really what drives me now as a coach, is I want our young women to feel that, you know, gain that confidence freshman year through their senior year."

Dutch Dynamite: After redshirt season, Mast looks to continue BU's international movement

BY HERNAN GUTIERREZ
Sports Reporter

In recent years, the Bradley basketball program has established a legacy of recruiting European stars. Now, after a season on the sidelines due to injury, redshirt freshman Rienk Mast hopes to continue that tradition.

Growing up in the Netherlands, basketball wasn't a family tradition for Mast. Instead, he and his family played korfbal, a game that shares similarities with both basketball and netball. However, he knew from a young age that basketball was his true calling.

"Since I was seven, I always said I wanted to play basketball," Mast said. "You couldn't get on a team [until] you were eight ... Right on my eighth birthday, the next day I was at my first basketball practice."

Making the transition from korfbal to another ball and net sport was easy for Mast at a young age. While picking basketball was a no-brainer for him, it left some of his family members confused.

"[Why I moved on to basketball] is still a question my dad always asks me," Mast said. "Nobody else played it, so how did I end up wanting to play it?"

Basketball started to become a serious part of Mast's life when he entered high school. While academics and athletics tend to be separate for most European student-athletes, Mast attended TopSport TalentSchool in his hometown of Groningen. There, his class schedule worked around his club's practices.

Mast started to make a name for himself and was soon called on to try out for the youth national team and made the cut. At the U16 level, his team took the silver medal in the 2017 International Basketball Federation European Division B championships. A year later, he captained his team to a gold medal at the U18 level.

Coming to the United States to play basketball was always in Mast's plan. Thanks to his success in Europe, Mast was recruited by many different colleges. While athletics have always been his main focus,

he believed Bradley offered him the academic challenges to succeed in his physics major.

"Next to basketball, I like to also be challenged in education," Mast said. "I wanted to [go to] a university that had a good education in my major."

The 19-year-old already has a list of impressive accolades on the court. Mast was named the Dutch Basketball League's Youth Player of the Year and Most Improved Player of the Year playing for his hometown club Donar in 2019.

It was with Donar that Mast ran into injury problems, tearing his ACL early in 2019. His subsequent surgery and rehab benched him for the Braves' repeat tournament title season last year. Despite being on the team for its championship run, Mast felt disconnected from the process.

"It's extremely tough not being able to do anything," Mast said. "You can still do a lot of things — of course in a limited role — but you can't really show what you mean. You're a part of the team, but you don't really

feel a part of the team ... I don't like winning without doing anything."

Mast was cleared for competition back in June, but he also recognizes that there is still room for him to improve and recover.

"Ever since [June], I've been trying to get back into my original shape," Mast said. "After a whole year of sitting out with this kind of injury, it's not going to be the same right away."

The 6-foot-9-inch, 240-pound star is clearly a force to be reckoned with, and head coach Brian Wardle is excited to finally get to use Mast to

round out his lineup.

"He's a unique ... skilled big that you just don't see many of," Wardle said. "He's a really good passer. I think with his basketball IQ ... and feel, he gives us another weapon."

Looking ahead to the upcoming season, while there is still work to be done, the goal is clear for Mast and the rest of the Braves.

"We still [have] a lot of work to do," Mast said. "I think we got all the pieces we need to be really, really good ... The goal is first and foremost [to] win a third championship."



Rienk Mast pumps his fist in celebration during the 2020 MVC Championship game on March 8, 2020. Photo by Anthony Landahl.