



WOMEN'S BASKETBALL PREVIEW:

Braves reload, not rebuild, on quest for repeat MVC titles

BY JONATHAN MICHEL
Sports Co-Editor

On Nov. 9, an unprecedented event will take place in Renaissance Coliseum as the Bradley Braves women's basketball team will raise its MVC Championship banner into immortality in the rafters before their season opener.

The Braves are in the midst of their best run in program history; their 72 wins in the last four seasons have tied the most wins ever for the Braves in a four-year stretch.

And the best part?

One of the best players in Braves history, Gabi Haack, is returning to Peoria for one last dance.

Bradley's first conference title punched the Braves' inaugural ticket to the NCAA Tournament, where they ran into a buzzsaw, namely the sixth-seeded Texas Longhorns and top WNBA draft pick Charli Collier. Despite the 81-62 defeat that ended their season and significant losses in the transfer portal, head coach Andrea Gorski, the first team all-MVC selection Haack and seasoned veteran Tatum Koenig have aspirations to repeat their historic season.

"I'm looking to accomplish another MVC championship," Koenig said. "That's always a personal and team goal for us."

Surprises were aplenty in the Braves' offseason, first in mid-April

when Haack (16.5 PPG, 6.8 RPG in 2020-21) announced that she would exercise her option to play a fifth year in the red and white.

Just a week later, two of Bradley's most versatile players in two-time MVC First Team selection Lasha Petree (18.0 PPG, 3.8 RPG) and Nyjah White (9.9 PPG, 5.1 RPG) transferred to Rutgers and Kansas City, respectively. Petree's younger sister, Mahri, (7.2 PPG, 3.7 RPG) dashed for UTEP shortly after.

The Braves didn't miss a beat with roster construction though, as three transfers and five freshmen have been added to the mix. Even with losing the three transfers and Emily Marsh, the latter due to graduation, Gorski said that Bradley's roster is even more loaded this year.

"This will be the deepest team we have had at Bradley since I have been here since we can easily play up to 11 players in any given game," Gorski said. "They are a no-nonsense group who are very coachable and understand the expectations we have for our program."

Leading the group will be Haack and Koenig, who both have at least three years of starting experience. Haack, one of the most decorated athletes in Bradley history, scored at least 10 points in all but four games last year and is poised to make an even bigger impact this season.

"I envision Gabi as having another

all-conference type year for us," Gorski said. "Potential player of the year, if we finish in the top three in MVC."

New Braves bigs

The Braves' backcourt looks to be their strong suit, at least experience-wise, as each senior on the team is listed as a guard. Heading the group of traditional fourth-year seniors are Koenig (7.5 PPG, 3.1 RPG, 3.0 APG) and Chloe Rice (1.7 PPG, 0.8 RPG). While Koenig will maintain her role as the floor general, she is ready to assume a more scoring-centric role, should the Braves need her to.

"There may be games where I am the main scorer, but we have a couple returners and several newcomers who will step up into that role," Koenig said. "I would like to remain a main distributor because that's my identity, but we have a lot of people who can score on any given night."

On paper, the Braves are thin in terms of frontcourt members from last year's MVC championship team, but Gorski has liked what she's seen from her group of bigs.

Junior transfer guard Sierra Morrow has impressed after receiving NJCAA Honorable Mention honors at Seward CC in Kansas. Morrow impressed in the Braves' Red/White scrimmage, with 11 points in the

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MEN'S BASKETBALL PREVIEW:

Open book: Veteran core leads cast of newcomers in fresh page

BY LARRY LARSON
Managing Editor

The last time Bradley men's basketball took the floor in front of a home crowd at Carver Arena in downtown Peoria was Feb. 29, 2020. Nate Kennell lobbed an inbound pass to Elijah Childs, whose tip-in shot at the final buzzer rimmed in and out as Darrell Brown — and 8,000 plus in the stands — jumped up and subsequently exclaimed their disappointment.

That 67-66 loss to Loyola would be the Braves' last of the season, as Bradley rattled off three straight wins the following weekend at Arch Madness to win back-to-back Missouri Valley Conference titles.

All five starters (Brown, Childs, Kennell, Danya Kingsby and Koch Bar) from those four memorable games are no longer on the roster. Seven of the nine players who helped Bradley defeat Valparaiso in the 2020 Valley title game have since moved on.

In case last year's roller coaster, COVID-19 complicated season — which culminated in an 8th place finish and a Thursday exit at Arch Madness — didn't convey it, when the team takes the court at Carver this year, we will have turned to a new page of Bradley basketball.

"Last year wasn't the year that we wanted at all, but now that's in the

past," senior forward Ja'Shon Henry, who is the only remaining player to register minutes in both the Braves title-clinching wins, said. "I think we took all the right steps in the offseason and all the right steps in the preseason."

"There was a long list of things out of our control that happened to our team," seventh-year head coach Brian Wardle said. "We just [have] to control what we can control though. I think you learn your lessons in that area, but the things out of our control last year ... I just kind of put an asterisk by that, because there were so many things that were not normal last year."

While this season's team includes an influx of six new scholarship athletes, the protagonists of the story are familiar.

As one of two seniors, the three-year stalwart Henry has been designated as the leader of the group, while junior guard Ville Tahvanainen and redshirt sophomore Rienk Mast will be integral parts on and off the floor.

"Every year, veterans are important [for] their experience, their wisdom," Wardle said. "They understand the program, the culture, how we do things, how we work."

7-foot-1-inch center Ari Boya is see **MEN'S PREVIEW**
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also back for the Braves to start at the five spot after missing all of conference play last season with a foot injury. Wardle and the coaching staff plan to be cautious with the big man, but when healthy, Boya has shown he can leave an impact on both ends of the floor.

The departure of Childs and his 14.2 PPG leaves a hole in the frontcourt that needs to be filled by Boya, Mast, Henry and reigning NJCAA DI player of the year, junior forward Malevy Leons.

The 6-foot-9-inch Dutchman could prove to be a scoring option from the jump after he filled the bucket at a clip of over 18 PPG in his final season at Mineral Area College.

However, Mast could be the scorer Bradley relies on the most in the post after a strong finish last season, in which he stepped up in place of several absent teammates to average 13.3 points and 6.9 rebounds per game in the final 11 games.

"You get the same Rienk every day; he works his tail off," Wardle said. "He executes, he's a very smart player and we're going to need him to stay aggressive for 40 minutes [a game] and really kind of take charge and know that how you finish those last 10 games, you can do for a full season."

The conference took notice of Mast's strong finish — which was capped off with a 24-point, 10-rebound double-double at Arch Madness — as he was named to the preseason all-conference third team alongside Henry.

"That just proves that that last little stretch last year really showed people what I can really do," Mast said of the honor. "I was happy about the last couple games of last season, but

I've just got to come out and continue what I was doing; [you] can't live in the past."

Henry, the team's leading returning scorer at 10.9 PPG, spent the offseason developing his guard skills and will likely slide into the small forward spot for the Braves as a true swingman.

The rest of the frontcourt will be filled out by sophomores Darius Hannah and Jayson Kent, who Wardle notes have improved over the offseason after both made key contributions down the stretch last season.

"If we can stay healthy, I love our depth," Wardle said of the front court. "But, [we've] still got to get better. One thing you learn after you play somebody is there's so much more room for improvement. Backcourt and frontcourt, we've got to continue to gel."

The gelling might take a bit longer in the backcourt, as five newcomers join Tahvanainen, who averaged 8.6 PPG last season.

Grad transfer Mikey Howell, junior transfer Terry Roberts and freshman Connor Hickman are slated to be key cogs, replacing last year's leading passer Sean East II (3.6 APG) and backcourt scorer Terry Nolan Jr. (11.2 PPG), who transferred.

With Tahvanainen out for at least the first game or two of non-conference play with an ankle injury, the trio has an early opportunity to be the go-to-guys.

"It's what you do every day that will get you on the court in this program, and those guys have been really consistent," Wardle said. "I'm kind of excited to see what Terry, Connor and Mikey — with Ville out — how those three can play together, because they've been good in practice together."

After becoming the all-time assists leader at UC San Diego, Howell's

experience and pass-first mentality will be utilized heavily as a leader at the one spot.

"I want to come into this year just being a leader [and being] vocal out there," Howell said. "Coach really emphasized during timeouts, during huddles, just be vocal and really just call out the shots."

As the only team in the conference to not return at least three starters from 2020-21 (per the MVC's count), Bradley was selected sixth in the preseason poll.

However, at least for now, the group's goals for the season aren't focused on wins, losses or even necessarily quantifiable benchmarks.

"We have private goals, team goals," Wardle said. "I do know this: it's all process goals, not results. It's not 'win this many [games] or get this many stats,' it's all about the process and doing the little things every day... Usually the results work out for themselves."

After last year's equivalent of a fever dream of a season with an empty Carver Arena, eroded roster and inconsistent results, Bradley is ready for the next page of the history book to write itself.

Last season's page was an unsettling reminder of the tumultuous nature of college sports — main characters come and go and heroes become outcasts with a turn of a page. After two pages of fairy tales, last year resembled a sci-fi horror.

This year's entry provides an opportunity for the supporting cast to become the center of the story, and for newcomers to become folk heroes. While the next page is completely blank, the book of Bradley history tells us that Brian Wardle's chapter has been a page-turner.

Time to get back to reading.

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abbreviated intrasquad contest. The newcomer also proved she can light up the scoreboard in a jiffy, tallying 41 points against Cloud County last season.

Also looking to contribute and earn significant minutes are a trio of sophomore forwards. Forward Tete Danso, who tied for fifth on the team with 3.1 rebounds per game despite averaging only nine minutes, is another face who Gorski said will contend for a starting spot. Texas Tech transfer Daija Powell and returnee Isis Fitch round out a deep group.

"We have several student-athletes that we feel can contribute in a big way right away," Gorski said. "From the post position, Sierra Morrow will be a big factor in our success. Isis Fitch has worked tirelessly to improve her offensive game and will have a bigger role this year. We will have 4-5 posts contributing in the rotation from game to game."

Freshmen won't wait to make an impact

Even though the Braves have not started their regular season yet, Gorski and company feel like they hit a home run on the recruiting trail, picking up two talented Iowan guards in Caroline Waite and Koenig's younger sister, Sasha.

"It's always been our dream to play college ball together, so this has already been an amazing experience,"

Tatum said. "We mesh really well on the court, and off the court, we are best friends. I'm thankful to have such a great relationship with my sister."

Waite, the all-time leading scorer at Ames High School, packs a punch in her 5-foot-4 inch frame, displaying a poised transition game and sweet shooting stroke in the Red/White scrimmage. The younger Koenig led the Red team's scoring with eight, so it's safe to say that Gorski will give the duo playing time right away.

The road to repeating

The Braves' biggest key this year to repeat as conference champs will be locking opponents down on defense, as the Braves deal without the services of Marsh and Lasha Petree in the post. Bradley outperformed its opponents in nearly all defensive categories last season, but as the team takes time to perfect its offensive chemistry, it may have to learn how to win a defensive dogfight.

"Defensively, we need to stay in the top three in the MVC in [defensive field goal percentage]," Gorski said. "[We need to be] able to stop a hot guard and play physical defense from the guard position."

The MVC will bring a worthy challenge as fellow conference powers Missouri State, Drake and Illinois State all return a majority of their best players. Despite the Braves being projected to finish fourth in the MVC, Gorski is confident that her team will compete for the conference crown, thanks to a hearty non-conference

schedule featuring four teams in last year's top-100 NET rankings.

"The MVC will be the strongest it has ever been this season, and that is saying a lot since we had five postseason teams last season," Gorski said. "Our goal is to always get a postseason bid, so in order to do so, we need to play a non-conference schedule that will put us in position for an at-large bid."

The biggest factor working in the Braves' favor is the versatility of their athletes. Just as Lasha Petree and White were positionless players last year, the line between Bradley's guards and forwards will be very thin. Haack, Morrow and freshman Abbie Draper are three of the many Braves that will likely play multiple positions on both sides of the ball.

"This year's team has depth," Koenig said. "Our identity will be our versatility. We have several weapons on this team. . . and will be able to throw different things at our opponents."

The 2021-22 campaign is full of tests of the Braves' depth, grit, size and experience, but the Braves shouldn't be written off from contending with MVC heavyweights. While Bradley's NCAA Tournament berth came as a surprise to some, the Braves' confidence to repeat the same result is undisputed.

The Braves appear to be here to stay and will put that to test in their season opener against Wright State on Tuesday.



The Dunking Dutchman:

Leons ready to make his presence felt

BY MASON KLEMM
Contributor

There's something about Bradley men's basketball and recruiting international players.

Making up almost 40% of the 2021-22 season's roster, these athletes are anticipated to be a key part of this Braves team, with three of them (Ville Tahvanainen, Rienk Mast and Ja'Shon Henry) averaging in the top six in minutes last year. Mast, a sophomore forward hailing from the Netherlands, was even named to the MVC All-Freshman team last year.

Now, there's a new Dutchman in town, and his name is Malevy Leons.

Leons, a junior college transfer from Mineral Area College, averaged 18.7 points per game and 9.5 rebounds while shooting 56.4% from the field last year to lead his team to a perfect 20-0 regular season and claim the Region and District Championships. Mineral Area also won their first ever NJCAA tournament game and Leons was named to the All-Tournament Team after their Elite Eight run.

Leons' stellar season at Mineral Area earned him the NABC Two-Year College Player of the Year, the highest honor one can achieve from junior college. He also nabbed first team All-American honors and the NJCAA Division I Men's Basketball Player of the Year. Through two years, he led the Cardinals to a 54-3 record, their most wins in any two-year span in program history.

Hailing from IJmuiden, Netherlands, a small port city in North Holland, Leons learned basketball from his mother Monique, who used to play as well. She would take Leons to practices once he was old enough and the rest was history.

"I tried a lot of different sports,

but basketball was the one I fell in love with," Leons said.

Now, he comes to Bradley fresh off the best season of his career. Despite offers from Missouri, Marquette and Wichita State, among others, he landed on the quaint university in Peoria.

"I just had the best feeling with [Bradley]," Leons said. "It felt like a family over here and a place where I would really grow."

Mast also played a factor in Leons' choice. Even though their hometowns are over two hours away, the two competed against each other in the Dutch Basketball League. According to Leons, seeing a familiar face has made the transition to the U.S. a lot easier.

"It's always easier to talk to someone who knows where you came from and has the same perspective as you," Leons said.

Sporting a wingspan of nearly 7 feet, Leons gives lots of versatility for head coach Brian Wardle on both sides of the ball, which was evident when he snatched three steals in the Red-White Scrimmage on Oct. 13.

"He's a great teammate and he's learning the defensive system," Wardle said. "He can guard multiple positions, [and] he can do a lot offensively for us, so I'm excited to see how he fills in with all these guys on game nights."

Despite all his success, Leons admits he has a lot to work on before fully transitioning into D-I play.

"[I've] got some improvements to make to be ready to play at this level," Leons said. "But that makes it interesting and I wanna play against the best."

Leons and the rest of the men's basketball team will kick off regular season action on Nov. 9 against South Dakota State.



HENRY STEPS INTO SENIOR SPOTLIGHT

BY JONATHAN MICHEL
Sports Co-Editor

The last three years have been a roller coaster for Bradley's men's basketball team. After starting conference play 0-5 in the 2018-19 season, the Braves turned their campaign around with a magical month of March and an NCAA Tournament berth.

Bradley maintained its momentum with another MVC championship in 2019-20 before COVID-19 derailed the Big Dance — and Bradley's guaranteed berth in it — altogether. To follow up, the hoopsters of the Hilltop teetered on the edge of toppling notable foes such as Missouri early last season, but the Braves stumbled to a 12-16 finish.

Many other college basketball players in the country would find it hard to remain steady if they were a senior on the Braves throughout that given period.

But not Ja'Shon Henry.

"He's consistent every day," head coach Brian Wardle said. "Ja'Shon Henry is Ja'Shon Henry every day ... He doesn't try to be anything he's not and I think that's a great strength and that breeds consistency."

Henry has provided a steady presence on Bradley's roster throughout his college career. The senior forward puts his hallmark on mistake-free basketball, averaging nearly 20 minutes per game, shooting no less than 51% from the field and rarely committing turnovers over three seasons. Anyone who has watched Bradley basketball knows that the Braves are a different team when Henry is on the floor.

"He works extremely hard, he has a great attitude, he's a good teammate and he comes in and he's just him," Wardle said.

While the native of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan led by example last year as the Braves featured a new-look group, Henry will face a new challenge this year. Over the offseason, Henry was tasked with leading more with his voice for a team with eight newcomers. The forward is one of only two holdovers — fellow senior big man Ari Boya being the other — that has experienced both of Bradley's recent conference titles.

Henry took his coach's challenge in stride and has thrived in his new position.

"Me and [Wardle] just had a conversation about it," Henry said. "We talked about [how] now that I'm older, I need to be more of a vocal leader, rather than leading by example, so I kind of took that on as a challenge and kind of applied it throughout the summer. Now in the fall, I feel like I've done a pretty good job."

"That's critical as we have a lot of newcomers," Wardle added. "We have a blend of older and younger in the classes and we need that communication and we need that leadership."

More than just a morale-booster

Henry's mentorship and intangibles are invaluable, but the senior is looking toward a starring role for the coming season. The forward earned MVC All-Bench team honors after being primarily the sixth man for the Braves in the 2020-21 season. Despite starting only four games, Henry's 10.9 points per game was the most by any

player in the conference with less than five starts in 19 years.

It's no secret that Henry takes his offseason work seriously; he took home more hardware as the MVC's Most Improved Player after his sophomore campaign. The 6-foot-6-inch forward improved on his defensive versatility before last season, repeatedly shutting down forwards taller and heavier than him.

The Braves are deep at forward with Boya, Rienk Mast, Darius Hannah and transfer Malevy Leons all expected to earn minutes. As a result, Henry diversified his game even further this offseason and now gives the Braves the option to put him at small forward.

"A big focus in my offseason was just becoming more of a guard and getting more perimeter skills," Henry said. "I'm learning coming off the ball screen, learning to make certain reads and things like that."

Wardle sang Henry's praises as well, emphasizing that the veteran added more playmaking and passing skills to go with more conditioning; a necessary asset to play on the perimeter.

"He's done that adjustment well and I think he's thrived in it this fall," Wardle said. "He's really looking forward to it and I'm excited because it keeps us long and big and athletic at a lot of positions and I think that can help us."

Coming full circle

As Bradley marches into the new season with half the team consisting of new faces, it becomes all the more important for Henry to produce. After the Braves struggled to put the pieces together last year following a roster overhaul, Henry feels that he can help ensure that the team will be more cohesive now.

"The biggest thing is staying together," Henry said. "I think if our team stays together, which I don't think we're going to have a problem doing, then I think we're going to be just fine. Having trust on and off the court is huge, which we were able to develop over the summer."

Henry developed a rapport with the Braves' fresh faces over the summer, saying that he helped calm their nerves on the court and even assisted them in finding their way to classes. Henry credits the 2018-19 senior class from when he was a freshman with giving him an example, which he now leads by.

"[The seniors] really took me under their wing and showed me the ropes on how we do things here," Henry said. "Now that I'm the older guy, I'm able to do the same thing with the younger guys, so it's kind of a cool cycle."

Henry will no longer be in the shadows as Elijah Childs and four other key pieces from the Braves last year have departed. Whether or not Henry will start most games remains to be seen, but what is guaranteed is that he will not be taken lightly, no matter his role.

However, as has been the case for Henry during his Bradley tenure, the more things change, the more things stay the same.

"I think my approach is going to be the same," Henry said. "I think the only thing I changed is my leadership now that I'm an older guy. My approach to the game is still going to be the same; I'm still going to be the same player."



HAACK SEARCHES FOR RECORDS AND A REPEAT IN SUPER-SENIOR YEAR

BY JOEY WRIGHT
Sports Co-Editor

After electing to return to Bradley for a fifth year due to the NCAA granting a blanket year of eligibility following the COVID-19 pandemic, Bradley guard Gabi Haack has one objective in mind.

"My expectations for this upcoming season are very high," Haack said. "My goal is to bring home a second [Missouri Valley Conference] championship."

Haack was a big part of a Bradley team that won its first-ever conference title last season as part of a 17-12 campaign that ended with a loss to Texas in the opening round of the NCAA Tournament.

The Elk River, Minnesota native was named to the MVC First Team for her efforts, averaging 16.5 points and 6.8 rebounds in 28 games. It was an unorthodox journey to the top of the conference for the Braves, who navigated constant uncertainty en route to the conference championship.

"Last year was especially tough due to all of the regulations and uncertainty," Haack said. "In the end, all of our hard work paid off. The returners

know what it takes to get there and have had a taste of what the NCAA Tournament is like."

It will be a tall task for the Braves to return to the top of the mountain in a difficult MVC landscape, with Missouri State, Northern Iowa and 2021 title game foe Drake all boasting deep and able rosters.

While Haack wasn't in Peoria to take part in the Braves' usual offseason routine, the alternative kept her in shape for the coming campaign. She interned with the University of Florida's football strength and conditioning program in Gainesville, Florida, lifting and training with her fellow interns and participating in strength-based workouts.

"I made sure to get shots up on my own," Haack said. "I also gained experience coaching and working on my leadership skills. This offseason has prepared me mentally and physically for this upcoming year. I feel like I am in the best shape of my life and am so thankful to be able to wear a Bradley jersey for my final collegiate basketball season."

An imposing figure in the paint or beyond the arc — where she shot 39% last season — Haack can impact the floor in a myriad of ways. Her fifth

year on the Hilltop will see her join forces with five freshmen and three transfers, a group that she's already started to make an impact on.

"Watching her day in and day out prepare like a professional with how she goes about getting ready for practice or a weight workout ... she is always going to bring her best," Bradley head coach Andrea Gorski said. "The newcomers could not have a better role model."

Of the three seniors from last season's team, only Haack is returning to suit up in red and white for a fifth season. Emily Marsh elected not to continue playing basketball and graduated in May, while Nyjah White will play as a graduate transfer at Kansas City.

The success of last season alone wasn't all that went into Haack's decision to return. To pass on the chance to play another season of basketball would have been almost impossible, she said.

"[With] school, I still had an extra semester to complete at the end of last school year," Haack said. "If I was going to be here for school, I knew I wanted to also be playing basketball. The second factor was the relationships I've built with my coaches, teammates, professors and other staff.

There are many people at Bradley who have my best interest at heart and will help me be successful with my life after basketball."

Haack enters the season needing just two free throws to surpass Raisa Taylor's school-record free-throw mark of 348, and 29 points to break Karen Anderson's school-record scoring mark of 1,679 career points. Additionally, she's within 237 rebounds of Chelsea Brackmann's record of 953.

Outside of the record books, Haack is looking to build on a Bradley career that has been fulfilling at every step of the way. Beating Drake in 2020 and later winning the conference title stands out to Haack, just as the latter does to Gorski.

"Gabi is more of a quiet player on the floor and doesn't often show her emotions," Gorski said. "During our championship run, she was one of our most vocal leaders, and watching her fist pump after scoring an 'and one' versus UNI gave me chills. She brought her emotions to a different level and there was no way she was going to let her team leave without a championship."



ONE *on* ONE

Who had the best offseason in the transfer portal?

BRADLEY BRAVES

BY COLTEN KAHLER
Contributor

The Bradley Braves were active this offseason in the transfer portal, adding three players who should all make an immediate impact.

The Braves lost junior guard Terry Nolan, who averaged 11.2 points last season, as well as Sean East II and Kevin McAdoo. What the Braves lost, though, they replenished.

Headlining the Braves' transfers is JUCO Player of the Year Malevy Leons, who comes in from Mineral Area College. Last season, Leons averaged 18.7 points and 9.5 rebounds. Look for him to make an immediate impact on this team.

The Braves also added junior college standout Terry Roberts, a very athletic and an elite defender from Florida Southwestern State. Last year, Roberts set a program record for the most steals in a career.

Lastly, the Braves added Mikey Howell from UC-San Diego. The senior guard is an all-around player who averaged 6.9 points per game and 6 assists per game. Head coach Brian Wardle said that Howell is a traditional "pass-first point guard."

Looking at Missouri State, they did not lose as many players as Bradley. The Braves added a lot of depth to their guard room, which could give them the edge over the Bears. Missouri State did have an interesting addition in Donovan Clay from Valparaiso. However, with the additions that Bradley made, they had a better offseason in the transfer portal.

MISSOURI STATE BEARS

BY NICK ZOLL
Contributor

With the offseason behind us, I believe that Missouri State improved the most via the transfer portal for the upcoming 2021-22 season.

Two players transferred to the program and these newcomers can help this Bears team contend right away, especially with all five starters returning from last year's third-place finish in the MVC.

First, the Bears welcomed Donovan Clay, a former Valparaiso star who was named to the MVC's All-Freshman team in 2019-20. This past season, Clay averaged 10.1 points and 5.1 rebounds per game. Listed as a guard/forward, the 6-foot-8-inch, 223-pound junior provides versatility for Missouri State this upcoming season.

Missouri State's other transfer, Jaylen Minnett, played four years at IUPUI, where he averaged 16.4 points per game in 2020-21.

The Bears lost forward Jared Ridder to the transfer portal, after he averaged 7.4 points per game in the 2020-21 season. Perhaps more importantly, he logged 25.3 minutes per game in a sixth-man role. Missouri State will have some bench minutes to fill, but its two incoming transfers will likely help fill the void without a problem.

Bradley's key additions of Malevy Leons, Terry Roberts and Mikey Howell stand to make a massive impact in a potential bounceback year for the program. However, the Braves also lost three players to the transfer portal (Terry Nolan Jr., Sean East and Kevin McAdoo), leaving them less fortunate than Missouri State, who only lost one bench player.

MISSOURI STATE LEADS WOMEN'S MVC

BY JOEY WRIGHT | Sports Co-Editor

1. MISSOURI STATE



Missouri State and a roster stacked with upperclassmen stands firmly atop the conference. Seven seniors, most notably Brice Calip and Jasmine Franklin, will suit up for the Bears when their season begins at Little Rock on Nov. 9.

Calip earned MVC Player of the Year honors last season, averaging 13.9 points, 4.9 rebounds and 4.4 assists in 26 games. Franklin earned MVC Defensive Player of the Year honors after recording 2.2 steals per game and 24 blocks. Senior Abby Hipp also returns after averaging 9.2 points in 23 starts. The only key losses for the Bears come from the departures of Elle Ruffridge, who averaged 9.8 points while starting in 15 of her 26 appearances, and depth player Emily Gartner.

3. ILLINOIS STATE



Illinois State is experiencing a program renaissance under fifth-year head coach Kristen Gillespie, who has led the Redbirds to three consecutive winning seasons after the program had gone since 2012-13 without one. Expectations have followed the program too, with the Redbirds earning a fourth-place nod in the preseason poll. Returning MVC first-teamer Juliann Redmond will be a large piece of the puzzle after leading the team in points (13.9), rebounding (6.1) and assists (2.8) last year.

Big contributions are also expected from junior Mary Crompton, who earned all-MVC honorable mention and most improved player honors last season after converting on 46% of her three-point attempts. Senior Lexy Koudelka is also expected to take a step forward after averaging 4.3 points in 24 games.

5. NORTHERN IOWA



Seniors Bre Gunnels, Nicole Kroeger and Karli Rucker headline a Northern Iowa roster that was chosen to finish third in the conference in the preseason media poll. Rucker earned a spot on the MVC First Team for the third consecutive time last season after averaging a team-high 13.3 points per game on 40-percent shooting from the field.

The departure of starting center Megan Maahs will impact the Panthers, but they should be able to overcome it with the help of junior Cynthia Wolf, who played in all 30 games last season and tallied 25 blocked shots.

7. LOYOLA-CHICAGO



First-team selection Allison Day returns with high ambitions for her senior campaign. The forward averaged 11.7 points and 6.9 rebounds in 27 games, leading the Ramblers to a 12-15 record and an 8-10 mark in MVC play. The departure of Ellie Rice, a conference honorable mention selection last season, will hurt the team, but key depth pieces like Kat Nolan and Janae Gonzales return and should play large roles as the season progresses.

The Ramblers likely won't find themselves toward the top of the standings but could play spoiler against teams with more impressive pedigrees.

9. EVANSVILLE



Junior Abby Feit is set to lead a Purple Aces squad that finished 6-18 last season and scored just two wins in conference play. Feit's efforts were a bright spot for the smallest school in the conference as she finished fourth in the conference with 14.8 points per game and second in the conference with eight rebounds per game.

However, there simply aren't many proven names on a roster that has found itself toward the bottom of the league for several consecutive seasons. The Aces may fare well enough during a relatively light non-conference slate but will run into problems when MVC play begins against Northern Iowa on Dec. 30.

2. DRAKE



Reigning MVC Newcomer of the Year Grace Berg headlines the Drake roster that is equipped to compete at the top level of the conference. Berg, who redshirted the 2019-20 season after transferring from Missouri, led the Bulldogs with 15.9 points per game while also averaging 5.2 rebounds per game in 30 appearances.

Other key players for the Bulldogs include Maggie Bair, who won the sixth player of the year honors last season, and Sarah Beth Gueldner, who averaged nearly eight points per game and shot 42% from beyond the arc in a depth role last season. The loss of departing conference first-teamer Maddie Petersen is a minor setback, but the Bulldogs should fare very well in 2021-22.

4. BRADLEY



Bradley will rely on a talented crop of newcomers to offset the losses of first-teamer Lasha Petree and perennial starter Nyjah White, who transferred to Rutgers and Kansas City, respectively, following the conclusion of last season. Remaining is perennial threat Gabi Haack, who looked good in a 26-point performance against McKendree at Carver Arena last night. Freshman guard Caroline Waite was close behind with 24 points in a promising debut, while fellow guards Tatum Koenig and Chloe Rice also carded solid efforts. In the frontcourt, expect big roles from Seward County Community College transfer Sierra Morrow and returning sophomore Tete Danso. The Braves are easily among the Valley's best rosters this season.

6. VALPARAISO



The Beacons will be led by returning first-team selection Shay Frederick, who led the team in scoring with 14.5 points per game during her junior season. Starters Grace White and Caitlin Morrison return for their fifth and sixth seasons, which should give Valparaiso enough firepower to remain competitive with the top of the conference. White led the team with an average of 5.6 rebounds in 22 games last season, while Morrison averaged 9.3 points and 3.5 rebounds while starting all 25 games.

This will be a competitive team, though a tough start to Valley play that includes Missouri State, Northern Iowa, Drake, Illinois State and Bradley in consecutive games in early January will leave little room for error out of the gate.

8. SOUTHERN ILLINOIS



The Salukis will run through graduate student Makenzie Silvey this season on the heels of a terrific 2020-21 campaign, wherein she ranked fifth in the conference in scoring with an average of 14.7 points in 27 contests. The first-team selection also chipped in 4.8 rebounds and 2.8 assists over the course of the season, though the Salukis finished at 9-16 overall and 5-13 in conference play.

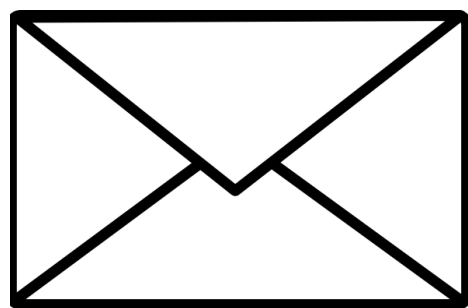
Don't expect them to fare much better this season, although fellow graduate Abby Brockmeyer will return to play a large role after being limited to just 12 games last season.

10. INDIANA STATE



Indiana State is entering its first season under new head coach Chad Killinger, who takes the reins from Vicki Hall. Hall was never able to establish a stable culture in Terre Haute; the Sycamores roster was made up entirely of newcomers during her second season in 2019-20, finishing just 5-25 overall.

The team finished 5-15 last season, with no players earning all-conference honors. Several players return from last season's team, including able scorers Marie Hunter and Sommer Pitzer, but there is plenty of work to be done before Indiana State ascends beyond the bottom of the MVC.



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MULTIPLE CONTENDERS, MULTIPLE BIDS? PREVIEWING AND PREDICTING THE MEN'S MVC

BY LARRY LARSON
Managing Editor

"The Valley runs deep" is a slogan that is tossed around year in and year out by Missouri Valley Conference basketball fans, touting the league's consistent strength in the realm of NCAA mid-major hoops.

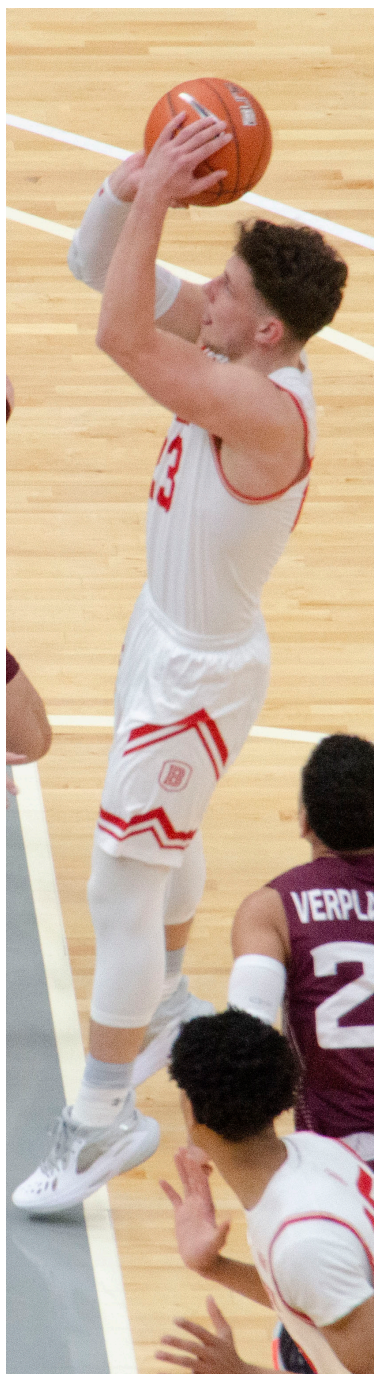
This season, the phrase might be more on the nose than ever.

Defending conference champion Loyola returns four starters from a Sweet 16 team that defeated No. 1 seeded Illinois last March. Preseason favorite Drake returns each of its starters from a squad that was selected for an at-large bid to the dance.

Meanwhile, Northern Iowa's AJ Green was selected as preseason player of the year without playing a conference contest last season, and Missouri State returns two first-team all-MVC selections.

What all this boils down to is that one of the nation's finest mid-major conferences has a chance to send multiple representatives to the NCAA Tournament for the second straight year. In fact, that's our first prediction: at least two MVC teams will secure bids to the 2022 NCAA Tournament.

How will the regular season shake out, though? Let's dive into what each team has to offer.



1. LOYOLA-CHICAGO

Coming off their second NCAA Tournament run of at least two tournament wins in the last four seasons, the Ramblers are primed for another season in the top tier of the Valley. The NCAA's blanket eligibility ruling for last season's seniors was kind to Loyola, who return a quartet that all played significant minutes in Lucas Williamson, Aher Uguak, Tate Hall and Keith Clemons as a result.

However, the team's two biggest pieces have departed: former head coach Porter Moser, for the same job at Oklahoma, and center Cameron Krutwig, for pro ball in Belgium.

With former assistant Drew Valentine taking the reins, and four seniors returning, the transition shouldn't be rocky in Rogers Park. Uguak and junior forward Tom Welch took nice jumps last season while starting point guard Braden Norris proved to be one of the league's best facilitators.

If the Ramblers want to repeat, they'll need somebody to fill the void of 15 PPG, 7 RPG and 3 APG left by Krutwig. Williamson will need to take a step up in offensive output, beyond last season's 8.8 PPG average.

With plenty of depth at their disposal, the Ramblers have the power to finish at the top of the MVC once more, with a floor of a top-four finish.

3. MISSOURI STATE

Head coach Dana Ford's Bears return the entirety of their starting five from a team that finished third in the conference last year. Chief among those five are 5th year senior forward Gaige Prim (13.7 PPG, 4.9 RPG) and defending scoring title holder Isiah Mosley (19.8 PPG).

In a conference that appears to be guard-heavy entering the season, Prim is considered the league's best big man after the departure of Krutwig. In the backcourt, Mosley combines with Ja'Monta Black (9.6 PPG) to cause some problems.

Not scary enough? Add Valparaiso transfer and junior swingman Donovan Clay into the mix, and opposing teams are going to have their hands full with Mo State.

If the Bears are to finish atop of the Valley this season, they'll have to play much better against top-tier teams. Last season, they finished 0-5 against Loyola and Drake, the two squads they trailed in the standings.

With the same core as last season and additions of Clay and sharpshooting IUPUI transfer Jaylen Minnett, Missouri State should be able to take the next step and could be a team to represent the conference at the Big Dance.

5. SOUTHERN ILLINOIS

Beyond the top four teams in the league, things get a little hazy. Head coach Bryan Mullins' Salukis could cut through that fog as a surprise contender.

SIU is yet another MVC team that returns all five starters — most notably junior Marcus Domask, who missed the final two-thirds of the season with a left foot injury after winning MVC Freshman and Newcomer of the year in 2020. In Domask's absence, point guard Lance Jones stepped up in a big way as the leading scorer, averaging 13.4 PPG.

With Domask healthy and Jones firing on all cylinders, the Salukis are a good team. If they want to launch themselves into the upper echelon of the conference this season, they'll need a step forward from graduate forward Anthony D'Avanzo (7.5 PPG, 3.7 RPG) and frontcourt pieces outside of Domask.

7. EVANSVILLE

Head coach Todd Lickliter has an experienced group on his hands entering his second full season at the helm at Evansville. Seniors Jawaun Newton (13.5 PPG, 2.2 APG) and Shamar Givance (13.3 PPG, 4 APG) make up one of the strongest backcourts in the conference.

Fifth-year Evan Kuhlman (9.3 PPG, 3.6 RPG) has proved to be a dynamic frontcourt player, with range and a good inside game.

If the Purple Aces get a step up from Kuhlman and the rest of the backcourt on the boards, they could surprise some folks and avoid the play-in round.

9. INDIANA STATE

Indiana State rolled the dice over the offseason by not renewing head coach Greg Lansing's contract and bringing in Josh Schertz to run the program. After finishing in the top four of the conference standings the last two seasons, it will be a rebuilding year in Terre Haute...

Schertz brings in a proven track record from DII Lincoln Memorial...

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2. DRAKE

Following an at-large selection to the NCAA Tournament and a 5-loss season, Drake returns all of its key players with the exception of Joe Yesufu. While the sophomore guard, now transferred to Kansas, was the team's best player down the stretch, the team will have more than enough firepower to make a run for the conference title.

Backcourt studs Roman Penn (11.2 PPG, 5.4 APG) and DJ Wilkins (10.1 PPG, 2.1 APG) and frontcourt starters ShanQuan Hemphill (13.2 PPG, 5.9 RPG), Tremell Murphy (10.1 PPG, 5.2 RPG) and Darnell Brodie (7.7 PPG, 7.3 RPG) are all back.

To replace Yesufu's pop off the bench, look no further than head coach Darian DeVries' son, Tucker. The 6-foot-7-inch guard has the size of a forward with shooter's touch, and will likely get big minutes right away as one of the conference's highest-touted recruits.

The biggest concern for the Bulldogs is staying healthy. Penn and Hemphill both missed significant time down the stretch of the season, likely leading to Drake's second-place finish behind Loyola. If the Bulldogs are at full strength for the full season, this squad has the bite to match the bark of being selected as the preseason favorite.

4. NORTHERN IOWA

The Panthers are back at full strength after missing superstar guard AJ Green for all but three games last season. Head coach Ben Jacobson also returns one of the best bigs in the league in Austin Phyfe, as well as leading scorer Trae Berhow.

While the Panthers are a solid, well-coached team without him, Green is the difference-maker. It's rare that a single player's influence can take a team from the middle of the pack to first place, but Green is that type of player. If he can return to his pre-hip injury, 2020 Larry Bird Player-of-the-Year form, Northern Iowa can win the conference.

Additionally, the players who stepped up in Green's absence, like guards Bowen Born and Nate Heise, picked up valuable experience and will be productive members of what could be a very deep rotation.

I'm waiting to cast true judgment on this Panthers team until we see Green's early production. However, everybody else around the Valley seems to be sold, as the Iowa native was selected as the preseason player of the year. If he lives up to the billing, the Valley has a fourth NCAA-caliber team.



6. BRADLEY

After a rocky campaign and a Thursday Arch Madness exit last year, Bradley comes into 2021-22 with a brand new look. Leading scorers Elijah Childs (14.2 PPG) and Terry Nolan Jr. (11.2 PPG) have departed, in addition to big minute players Sean East, Kevin McAdoo and Danya Kingsby.

Senior swingman Ja'Shon Henry (10.9 PPG, 4.6 RPG) and sophomore forward Rienk Mast (8.6 PPG) are primed for big campaigns, but the Braves will need more than that in a competitive MVC.

For the second straight year, Bradley's barometer will be the performance of its newcomers. If guards Terry Roberts and Mikey Howell and forward Malevy Leons adapt quickly, the Braves could crack the top five.

Bradley's start to conference play is likely to be rocky, but the team will find its footing down the stretch to avoid Thursday and become a potential dark horse in St. Louis. Sound familiar?

8. VALPARAISO

I was really high on this group after the preseason poll release, despite a newcomer-heavy roster. After losing their exhibition 87-78 to DII Ashland on Saturday night, my expectations have been tempered.

Valpo is led by three returning starters — sophomore guard Sheldon Edwards, sixth-year Eron Gordon and junior Ben Krikke. Head coach Matt Lottich added five transfers, including three former Wisconsin Badgers. If guard Trevor Anderson can stay healthy, he can provide a big impact. In a similar vein, if Kobe King doesn't have to deal with NCAA-related issues after leaving college for pro ball last year, he has the talent to be one of the best players in the conference.

Much like the school's new Beacons nickname, the team is more than promising on paper, but it might take a while for everybody to get acclimated.



10. ILLINOIS STATE

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