THE SCOUT ESTABLISHED 1898



By Mason Klemm

Sports Co-Editor

Just two years ago, Bradley women's basketball made the NCAA Tournament riding the hot hand of the program's leading scorer, Gabi Haack. One year later, they became the bottom-dwellers in the conference, with that hot hand succumbing to injury and six-year head coach Andrea Gorski retiring at the end of the season.

All of this means it's a new era on the Hilltop, and first-time head coach Kate Popovec-Goss is ready to take on that challenge.

"It's about the process, that's what we've emphasized," Popovec-Goss said. "We're really young, we're gonna make mistakes, we're gonna make young mistakes. I tell them all the time [that] I'm going to make mistakes. All we can do is prepare and control the controllables and learn how to win"

After a 4-24 record and just one win in Valley play a year ago, the Braves return eight players and one starter from that 10th place team. The departure of Haack as well as Tatum Koenig, Sierra Morrow, Abbie Draper and Chloe Rice — who combined for nearly 50% of the team's points — left Bradley with a skeleton of a basketball team. Luckily for them, that lone returning starter happens to be MVC Freshman of the Year Caroline Waite.

Averaging 13 points and nearly three 3-pointers per game, Waite was a bright spot in an otherwise dreary Braves season. The sophomore was the top-scoring underclassman in the conference and her mark of 72 threes was the fifth-best single season total in Braves history. She may be losing her supporting cast, but she thinks the change is a welcome one.

"It's a new atmosphere," Waite said. "We've built a lot of new chemistry and it's just a lot of new parts for our team that I think will make us very successful this year." Junior Tete Danso, one of three current players to play on that 2021 championship team, also has high hopes for the new blood.

"They're gonna contribute perfectly,"
Danso said. "They're all super hardworking, very coachable. That's a lot of [the] difference between last year's players and this year's players."

The chemistry may be there in practice, but time will tell if it can translate to game situations. Popovec-Goss knows this all too well and is aware that not everyone is going to gel right away.

"It's gonna take time," Popovec-Goss said. "It's something that we're working on, we're still continuing to work our lineups and find out who plays well together, specifically on both ends of the court because our defense is a [tough] matchup as well."

Headlining this year's crop of newcomers is sophomore guard Alex Rouse and junior guard Ruba Abo Hashesh. The Braves lost a lot of depth at the guard position and only inherited three returners from a season ago, so these two will be important pieces for Popovec-Goss's system.

"I'm really excited about our core group of guards," Popovec-Goss said. "Everyone knows about Caroline, but I think that Ruba and Alex have really stepped up to the plate in terms of the roles I've asked them to play."

Rouse comes to Bradley from Old Dominion, where she only appeared in eight games on a team that made the WNIT last season. On the other hand, Abo Hashesh hails from Sweden and spent the last two seasons at Iowa Western Community College where she was a Second-Team All-Region XI pick and earned NJCAA Region XI All-Tournament honors.

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By Jonathan Michel

Co-Editor-in-Chief

After a season-ending loss to Loyola Chicago in the first round of the Missouri Valley Conference Tournament in March, a hint of optimism for the next season shone through the gloomy clouds hanging over the Bradley locker room.

"I think if we can retain the roster and bring back a majority of these guys...it could be a fun team," head coach Brian Wardle said following the defeat.

Turnovers and inexperience derailed Bradley's bid for an MVC crown in 2021-22, but the Braves played strong as they finished in the top half of the conference for the fourth time in the last five seasons. It wasn't easy; Bradley started the year with one win in their first six games before going 6-1 and 7-1 in separate stretches later in the season. Senior forward Ja'Shon Henry also spent most of conference play on the bench with an injury.

However, Wardle's postgame wish went from a mere utterance in the depths of Enterprise Arena in St. Louis into a reality in Peoria.

To put the Braves' outlook for the 2022-23 in perspective using a simple countdown:

Four of their top five scorers return.

Three players – junior Rienk Mast, senior Malevy Leons and sophomore Connor Hickman – have at least a year of starting experience under their belt.

Two is where the Braves are ranked in the conference, according to the MVC Preseason Poll.

One? That's where Bradley has realistic hopes to stand come the end of Arch Madness.

"It's nice that we want expectations," Wardle said. "Obviously, it's a sign of respect to the talent we have in the gym."

Much of that talent will come from an experienced group of forwards that includes Henry, Leons and Mast. The trio combined for nearly half of Bradley's 70.4 points per game last year, along with helping the Braves lead the MVC in rebounding and opponent's shooting percentage.

"We just need to stay true to our habits and identity with defense and rebounds," Leons said. "I think if we do that, we will be fine."

Mast, a Preseason All-MVC First Team pick, figures to be a leader for the Braves both on the court and in the stat sheet after averaging 11.6 points per game and leading the conference with 8.3 rebounds per game last year. However, the junior suffered an MCL sprain to his right knee that will sideline him for the first four to eight weeks of the season. Barring any setbacks, Mast will return before MVC play ramps up since he does not need surgery.

"Rienk is a hard worker; Rienk is a workhorse," junior guard James "Pop" Weathers said. "Every time I come to the gym or go to study hall, Rienk is in the gym."

"Rienk is a great ball screen defender, great post defender, good talker, super disciplined," Wardle added.

Helping ease the temporary loss of Mast will be Henry, who decided over the summer to come back for a fifth season with the Braves as he pursues a graduate degree. The power forward was unfortunately bitten by the injury bug and missed 19 games after suffering a concussion against Saint Joseph's in a non-conference game last year. When returning to the floor in Wednesday's

see Mens's Basketball Preview on page



Women's Basketball Preview:

Newcomers on the court and on the sideline will have to trust the process

She averaged 7.5 points and four rebounds a game.

The Braves have time to get things ironed out before conference play, although they have three tough matchups to start the season with Missouri, South Dakota and Wisconsin on the docket. This is evident to Popovec-Goss, who wants to make sure her team is prepared for a full season of hoops.

"[We] don't want to be playing [our] best basketball in November, we should be playing our best basketball in February,"

Popovec-Goss said. "It's going to take us through the month of February to really find our rhythm but I'm excited about where we're going and you can start to see it come together now."

There's a first time for everything

The players are not the only ones introducing themselves to Peoria. A former recruiting coordinator at Northwestern, Popovec-Goss comes to Bradley after sporting a 92-60 record with the Wildcats that included an NCAA Tournament victory and the team's first Big Ten regular-season title in 30 years.

Heading her own program after four years in Evanston, she's ready to get to work.

"I'm just excited for the opportunity to mentor young people," Popovec-Goss said. "That's why I love to coach, and the opportunity to do it in a way that I feel is unique to me, to be able to call the shots and have the opportunity to manage not just a team, but my staff and to foster the relationships in the Peoria community. I'm just proud of my girls and I've really enjoyed coaching them."

Popovec-Goss takes over for the retired Gorski, who guided the Braves to consecutive 20-win seasons for the first time ever and the program's only NCAA tournament appearance. As someone who was recruited by Gorski, Waite thinks the squad will adapt well to a new leader.

"I think in this instance, the change is very good and everyone's been very positive and wanting to work hard because we all have the same goal and we really want to get to it," Waite said.

The Braves' head coach excels with the forwards, especially on the defensive end. Playing forward during her career, Popovec-Goss was instrumental in the development of two-time All-Big Ten selection Pallas Kunayi-Akpanah as well as first-teamer Abi Scheid, who finished second in the country in 3-point percentage.

While her affinity to the post position is clear, she loves everyone on the team and is optimistic about their chances this season. That is, as long as they stick to "the process."

"I've got a great group of 14 kids that are great student-athletes, and I think that the results are going to show themselves as we continue to commit to the process," Popovec-Goss said.

Bigs set to lead

With such a fresh batch of faces, it's important now more than ever to have leaders who

can guide the team throughout the trials of a season. For Popovec-Goss, she's found that piece in senior captain Veronika Roberts.

"I'm really proud of [Roberts]. She's our lone senior and I really challenged her when I took the job to be exactly that: a senior," Popovec-Goss said. "Be a voice, be a presence every single day and help guide people through what practice should look like because she's been in practice for four years and she understands the rigors of it. I think she's really stepped up to the plate."

While Roberts may not stuff the stat sheet, the 6-foot-1 forward plays the fundamentals for the Braves by setting the screens and being the main communicator on the court.

Another name that will help guide this team is the other captain, junior Isis Fitch. The highest returning point-scorer behind Waite, Fitch will look to take that next step up in her game and mentor the youth, even if she may not be the most vocal about it.

"Isis just embodies what it is to be a leader by example," Popovec-Goss said. "Every single day she brings 120% effort to the gym and I think that's something that everyone can learn from."

Danso has also taken a step up in filling her leadership shoes. While her role hasn't changed, it's evident that the extra year of experience makes a difference for Danso, especially when dealing with such a new team.

"I think I still have the same hustle in me," Danso said. "The only changes would be that I'm not an underclassman, so guiding in those newcomers and even if they're not freshman, just guiding them and kind of letting them know the program and the culture."

Down, but not out

The Braves were picked to finish 11th in the MVC's preseason poll, just above Illinois-Chicago who won two games last year while playing in the Horizon League. Valparaiso came in tenth and Evansville, who was Bradley's only conference win last season, checked in at ninth.

As is the case with most coaches, the preseason rankings do not matter to Popovec-Goss.

"[We] just need to worry about us," Popovec-Goss said. "It's always going to be about Bradley and if we just focus on the process of what we need to do, the wins take care of themselves."

Waite notices the placement but as far as she's concerned, it's just fuel to the fire.

"We're just using that as motivation," Waite said. "We know we're at the bottom but we have a lot to prove from last year and I know we all want to."

That same sentiment lives in Popovec-Goss too, despite not being here last season. Still, she knows how much her team cares about their improvement and only hopes for the best out of them each and every day.

"Where we finish is going to be a result of the work that we put in and that's all we can worry about," Popovec-Goss said.

Men's Basketball Preview:

Behind seasoned returners, it's time for redemption

exhibition game against Illinois Wesleyan, Henry looked no different than what most were used to seeing, with aggressiveness on both ends of the court.

The 6-foot-9 Leons is a shoe-in candidate for more recognition by opposing teams this season with a lengthy build on defense, three-level scoring potential on offense and an intense practice regimen over the summer. After transferring from Mineral Area Community College, Leons put up nearly 10 points and six rebounds per game in 2021-22, in addition to leading the team in 3-point percentage.

"I know what's coming now," Leons said. "I had the whole summer to prepare and I feel better."

Along with Leons, Hickman broke out of the gate early in his first year on the Hilltop, starting 23 contests last year. After improving throughout the course of the season, the sophomore looks to be a staple in the starting lineup and in the locker room.

"He is definitely our vocal leader right now," Wardle said. "Everyone can lead in different ways, but Hickman has definitely taken on that alpha role."

Joining Hickman in the backcourt will be a pair of transfers: junior Duke Deen from Troy and Weathers, a junior college product from State College of Florida. They'll look to fill the gap left by Terry Roberts, who led the Braves in scoring (14 PPG) and assists (4.1 APG) before transferring to Georgia in the offseason.

Deen was named the Sun Belt Conference Freshman of the Year after posting nine points per game and 3.1 assists per game at Troy and has the inside track to be the Braves' starting point guard this year. Weathers is forecasted to slide into the role previously filled by now-graduated point guard Mikey Howell as a more-than-capable complement at the "1" spot off the bench as he adjusts to the Division I level. However, both can provide similar impacts for the Braves in the upcoming campaign.

"I think both point guards we brought in are going to be big and I think they can take care of the ball and run the show," Wardle said. "They're both capable of scoring."

Also in the mix for significant playing time are sophomore swingman Zek Montgomery, senior guard Ville Tahvanainen and junior forward Darius Hannah, the latter of which has first dibs on the opportunity to replace Mast in the starting lineup for the non-conference slate. The wiry, but athletic Hannah saw a dip in production last year but came into the offseason with a vengeance.

"He was a young freshman and was still very young last year," Wardle said. "It's the hardest I've seen him work in the offseason so I'm hoping that carries over for him because he's had a good fall too and we're excited for more."

Tahvanainen started just under half of Bradley's contests last year and the shooting specialist put up a 36 percent mark from deep. Montgomery burst onto the scene last year with a 12-point effort in a key home win against Loyola, a type of effort that could very well be duplicated this season.

"The biggest thing that grew since last year was my confidence level and I took on extra work," Montgomery said. "I didn't go home during the summer, I stayed here and worked out."

As expected, the Braves were active in the transfer portal and picked up forward Goanar Biliew (12.3 PPG, 6.8 RPG, 67% FG's at Des Moines Area Community College) and guard/forward Christian Davis (12.9 PPG, 6.4 RPG at Le Moyne College).

Putting the pieces on paper together into a tangible product on the court is never easy; in fact many college basketball teams struggle with it. Bradley's solution? More team practices over the summer.

"Guys understand the system," Wardle said. "I thought having them all summer was big. Hopefully that carries over and you can see more consistent play from the very beginning of the season."

A quick start is imperative for the Braves, as they face No. 15 Auburn at the Cancun Challenge during the week of Thanksgiving. Wardle's squad will face off with another preseason AP Top 25 team in No. 10 Arkansas on Dec. 17.

Since raising back to back MVC Championship trophies in 2019 and 2020, attempts to reload didn't go as planned for the Braves. Veterans like Henry, Tahvanainen and Mast can attest to seasons ending in euphoria, followed by disappointment, then an oh-so-close feeling that lingered throughout the season.

The Braves' two recent conference titles established that every season, at least in the near future, has a reason for optimism. But as any college basketball team knows, that optimism doesn't always come to fruition, especially in the everunpredictable Missouri Valley Conference.

Contrary to the popular saying, time is not the Braves' enemy. Nearly a dozen players have at least a season's worth of it in Bradley uniform. Many of them carry lessons learned from the time finishing eighth in the conference. More time together in the offseason has given the Braves a head start in building stronger confidence in each other. And as the hands on the clock draw closer to the start of the regular season, the familiar refrain says that it very well may be Bradley's time.



New guard duo looks to make big splash for the Braves

Contributor

The Bradley men's basketball team looks to reload at guard after losing star point guard Terry Roberts to Georgia this summer. In his lone season with the Braves, Roberts earned first-team All-Missouri Valley Conference (MVC) honors while averaging 14.5 points per game (PPG) and four assists.

The loss of Roberts left a hole in the team, but fortunately, head coach Brian Wardle added two new point guards to fill the void.

"I think Duke Deen is going to be an impact player for us and Pop Weathers will have a significant role for us too," Wardle said. "I think both point guards we brought in are going to be big. They can take care of the ball and run the show. They're both capable of scoring."

Deen and Weathers are both juniors that hail from Louisiana and can offer a mix of scoring and playmaking.

Last season at Troy, Deen averaged nine points and 3.2 assists in just 23 minutes of action per game. The reigning Sun Belt Freshman of the Year, Deen also shot 34 percent from three and 82.3 percent from the stripe, which are both areas where the Braves struggled last year. The team finished 7th in the MVC in 3-point percentage and dead last in free throw percentage.

According to Deen, Braves fans can expect lots of great things from the 5-foot-8 guard this year.

"I feel like I can bring a lot of leadership, energy, shooting and point guard knowledge," Deen said. "You can expect someone that's going to be hyped. You can expect someone who's going to play hard and dive on the floor. Just hard-nosed basketball."

Weathers transferred in from the State College of Florida and was a star who much of the offense ran through. The 6-foot guard averaged 18.2 points, nearly five assists and 2.1 steals per game. Weathers' two-way ability will be a great addition to the Braves' defense, which was third in the MVC in scoring defense last season.

The point guard duo and Louisiana natives formed a tight-knit relationship over the summer through competition in practice

"Every day in practice we both push each other. He pushes me to my limit, and I push him. We just keep getting better and better every day," Weathers said. "We try to work out together. We just try to help each other out with little pieces of our game."

Entering a new environment can be tough, but the two new guards seemed to have transitioned from their old schools rather smoothly. One of the factors that allowed Deen to adjust quickly was the focus Bradley has on basketball and the sense of community Peoria brings.

"Troy was more of a football school; Bradley is more focused on basketball. How things get done around here is different," Deen said. "The community aspect is important. We didn't do a lot of community stuff at Troy. Seeing the actual culture behind Bradley basketball, it's amazing to see how many people are really invested and really trust in Bradley basketball."

With the help of his teammates, Weathers has been able to handle the rigorous schedule that a Division I athlete is challenged with.

"Transition[ing] from JUCO to a DI [is] a big jump," Weathers said. "From just the food aspect, working out, practice. You've got to time your schedule right. You gotta work out a lot, but it's been pretty easy. My teammates helped me along with it coming into my first year".

On the court, the duo got off to a good start in an exhibition against Illinois-Wesleyan. Both Deen and Weathers helped the Braves take care of the Titans 79-64 Wednesday night.

Deen got the start and put up seven points and four assists in 22 minutes of play. He struggled from the field, shooting 3-9, but led the offense very well and displayed great court vision. The junior was very efficient, using the pick and roll and finding open teammates in the corner or at the top of the key.

Weathers provided a spark off the bench, adding eight points on four-of-six shooting in 16 minutes. When Weathers was in the game, he provided energy and effort on both sides of the ball. His ability to weave in-between defenders and get to the rim was evident.

If the exhibition meant anything, it's that the future looks bright for the two newcomers. The duo looks to add to early success against Wisconsin-Parkside on Nov. 7.









All eyes on **Caroline Waite**

Rodrigo Perez Contributor



Anyone can take the wheel of a ship in calm water, but when the tide gets tough, someone has to step up. That was the situation for Bradley women's basketball last season when they finished 4-24.

Despite the difficult times, sophomore Caroline Waite stepped up for the Braves and delivered a performance worthy of the Missouri Valley Conference Freshman of the Year

The Bradley guard was something of a revelation last year, as she led the Braves while they treaded through a tumultuous season. A tough non-conference schedule, along with a season-ending injury to one of the program's best in Gabi Haack, made it difficult for the Braves to compete.

Now, one year later, Bradley women's basketball and the Iowa native Waite prepare for a fresh start with a new coach and a collection of new faces.

"New coach, new team, it's all new, but I think that it's a good change and we're all very happy to be here," Waite said. "We all get along really well and we all have the same goal, but we also know how to work towards it. Not for ourselves but for everyone on our team."

After being the top-scoring underclassmen in the MVC with nearly 13 points per game, Waite continues to better her game in order to keep her good momentum going. She'll have to do so, since the MVC is well aware of her capabilities.

"I have been working on the things that I need to improve on, I know I have some weaknesses," Waite said. "She [head coach Kate Popovec-Goss] has put me in a spot to be a leader while also focusing on communication and defense.'

Popovec-Goss had the opportunity to completely restructure the team and have them play basketball her way, with Waite being an important piece to the puzzle.

"My favorite thing about her is her basketball IQ. I love the fact that she thinks of the game at such a high level," Popovec-Goss said. "It's not an easy skill to have on the court."

Popovec-Goss has set up her defense in order to take advantage of Waite's strong basketball

The extent of her drive doesn't stop on the court or in the gym. Waite regularly comes into Popovec-Goss's office to discuss ways that she can improve her game and what her identity could be on the court.

"Every player has an identity, as a defensive player and as an offensive player, but that doesn't mean you're solely that," Popovec-Goss said. "I have been trying to get her to understand that you can be a scorer and also be a really good defender.

Going through tough times truly reveals people's true colors and, as the transfer portal rolled around and multiple Braves headed for the exits, Waite had other plans.

"This is my home and I had no reason to leave, and this is my team so I'm really glad I stayed," Waite said. "We all want to win and we have a lot to prove, so we're going to try to be the hardest working team."

One-On-One: Which Bradley transfer will make the biggest impact in year one?

Returning nine players from last year's 17-14 squad, head coach Brian Wardle brought in four transfers: guards Duke Deen and James 'Pop' Weathers alongside forwards Goanar Biliew and Christian Davis. As the season draws closer, the question remains: who will play the biggest role for the Braves?

Goanar Biliew Transfers His Impact

Thatcher Zalewski Contributor

welcome several new faces this season.

One in particular is Goanar Biliew, a 6-foot-8 forward who comes to Bradley after two impressive seasons at Des Moines Area CC. With the recent injury to big man Rienk Mast, the Braves will be looking for someone to step up, and that player can be Biliew.

Biliew will be looking to make a name for himself at Bradley in his first season with the Braves. Again, with the team looking for someone to step up, Biliew can be that guy due to his prior success leading Des Moines Area to a National Championship. With an overall JUCO record of 49-13, Biliew is a proven winner and will look to replicate that success at Bradley.

The Bradley men's basketball team will Last season, Biliew put up 12.3 points, 6.8 rebounds and 1.4 blocks per game for the Bears. Only an inch shorter than Mast, Biliew can fill in for him nicely while he recovers from injury. The forward and his long wingspan can be a defensive presence that the Braves use in close games to help seal the victory.

> The impact Biliew can bring to the team will be unmatched since he is very efficient both offensively and defensively. Last year, Biliew ranked 18th nationally in field goal percentage, shooting 62.1%. Adding that to the defensive skill set he possesses will be a great addition to the Braves.

The Cajun Sensation

Ethan Carbone Contributor

Duke Deen comes to Bradley from Troy University, which plays in the Sun Belt conference. In his lone year there, he accounted for nine points and more than three assists per game, which won him Sun Belt Freshman of the Year honors

After a year in the Sun Belt, the 5-foot-8 guard now comes to Bradley bringing his offensive ability that allows him to light up opposing defenses. While a bit on the short side, his speed allows him to blow past defenders on his way to the rim. As well as his ability to push the ball, Deen can also be a major factor beyond the arc for the Braves averaging nearly two threes per game with the Trojans.

Deen should be able to slot in right where the Braves need him at point guard after the loss

of Terry Roberts and Mikey Howell last year. There, he'll man one of the more valuable positions in college basketball.

With Bradley star big man Rienk Mast out for four to eight weeks, it'll be up to the guards to get a lot of the scoring load done. A chunk of that will be done beyond the arc and should fall upon Deen's shoulders.

Deen will have the most impact at Bradley. His ability to put the ball through the hoop and into his teammates' hands will allow him to stuff the stat sheet. That kind of player is crucial in today's game, and Deen will bring what's necessary for success. With his work ethic and natural ability, Deen will be the most impactful new addition to the Braves.



Calm, Cool and Connor: Hickman brings expectations into second season

Matt Lucas
Sports Co-Editor



Age often brings wisdom, but Bradley men's basketball's sophomore guard Connor Hickman is showing the old adage that age is just a number.

"He's very mature for his age; he acts like an adult," graduate forward Ja'Shon Henry said. "Credit to him that he's been able to show that at such a young age, that's only going to help elevate his career."

The graduate's support of his teammate is evident among the rest of the group. Hickman often led huddles and was a particularly vocal leader on the court during his first year. That kind of leadership isn't typically seen this early on, but it gave a good impression of the type of player the young guard was going to be.

"Everyone can lead in different ways but Hickman has kind of taken that alpha role," head coach Brian Wardle said. "His work ethic is number one. He's a smart player and he knows how to play now after having a big freshman year for us."

That big freshman year included the guard starting 23 of 31 games, while also becoming the first freshman to start the season opener at Bradley since 2016.

Being named to the All-MVC Freshman Team after averaging just under seven points per game, Hickman provided a crucial piece for the Braves during their 17-14 campaign. His season highs (both 15-point performances on the road at Drake and Missouri State) were a bright spot when the team needed him.

The award at the end of the year was acknowledged, but the sophomore has his eyes set on more this season.

"Making the freshman team last year was very big, [but] I'm trying to get on that first or second team," Hickman said.

To do that, Hickman will have to shine not only amongst the rest of the Valley, but also the rest of the team. Henry, junior forward Rienk Mast and senior forward Malevy Leons will all play a pivotal role for Wardle's squad. Guard transfers Duke Deen and James 'Pop' Weathers will also be important to the team's success down the stretch.

The mixed bag of talent that the Braves possess has helped them earn recognition. Early last month, Bradley was picked to finish second in the 12-team MVC. If the group is to finish there, Hickman may be a big reason as to why.

"This year I've definitely stepped up my leadership and as far as I think, I've definitely been consistent every day," Hickman said. "Having that consistent October hopefully leads into the season where I have consistent games."

An increase in his leadership role will be necessary on a team that includes four transfers and, at least for the first four to eight weeks, a group that will be missing Mast due to an MCL sprain. With the recent injury, Hickman knows what'll need to happen for the team to survive the first part of the season.

"Without [Mast], everyone has to step their game up," Hickman said. "You don't have to be 100 percent better. You don't have to double what you're doing. Everyone just has to be a little bit better."

To find out where Hickman gets his maturity and toughness from, you'd have to go back to his high school days. Playing for Bloomington South in Indiana, the guard had time to learn as he was sidelined with an injury in his senior season that required surgery. It allowed the Bradley commit to develop as a teammate and get a head start on his collegiate career.

Now, with his second season on the doorstep, the compilation of the lessons learned and experiences felt have combined to form what fans see on the court. It's too early to tell whether Hickman has taken the next step in his development as a player, but if the comments from his teammates mean anything, then Braves' fans should be anticipating an impactful year from the sophomore.

"You feel he's a physical presence," Henry said. "He's fast, he's quick, he can shoot, he can really help us. He's really just good luck."

When the season tips off on Monday, Hickman will begin his second season on the Hilltop. If it's anything like his first, the Braves will be in good shape.



Bigger and Better: Predicting the Men's MVC

Matt Lucas

Sports Co-Editor

With the entirety of the 2021-22 Missouri Valley Conference First Team departing in the offseason and Lovola-Chicago exiting the league, most expected the Valley to lose a step in 2022. However, the addition of Belmont and Murray State from the Ohio Valley Conference and Illinois-Chicago from the Horizon League makes this year a story of addition rather than subtraction.

Among the changes to the league is a 20-game season and a new format the men's tournament in St. Louis. With a new-look Valley, all 12 teams will be on an even playing field navigating the recent changes.

Despite the transfer portal's best efforts to deplete the Valley of its top stars, the MVC's strength is the top-level talent that chose to stav. Conference tournament runner-up and preseason favorite Drake is one of the oldest teams in the country. but will use sensational sophomore Tucker DeVries to drive its offense

Reigning conference champion Northern Iowa loses star A.J. Green and Second Team selection Noah Carter, but head coach Ben Jacobson brings back the Sixth Man of the Year sophomore Bowen Born to lead his squad.

Both Bradley and Southern Illinois were selected as the top two squads to challenge the Bulldogs and both teams returned three starters to help them in their pursuit of a Valley title.

For how we expect the Valley to Co-Editor-in-Chief Jonathan Michel and Sports Co-Editors Mason Klemm and Matt Lucas have compiled our rankings to bring you our comprehensive take on where each team will end up come March.

1. Drake



2. Bradley



Being tabbed as the MVC's preseason favorite, head coach Darian DeVries knows that his group is the team to beat.

Winning 25 games last year, the Bulldogs return three starters from that team but should take a large step forward. Led by DeVries' son Tucker (13.9 ppg), Drake also sees the return of graduate guards Roman Penn, Garret Sturtz and DJ Wilkins for yet another season.

With an average age of 21.5, Drake is one of the oldest groups in Division I. That advantage will help them as they navigate a new-look Valley. Time and time again, experience has been an important factor come March so DeVries' team should be locked and loaded for a title run

Anything less than a top three finish will be largely disappointing for this squad. With all the talent and experience that returns, there is no debate on why the Bulldogs are deemed the top dog.

3. Southern Illinois



Picked third in the preseason poll, fans in Carbondale should be excited for the talent that fourth-year head coach Bryan Mullins retained.

Finishing 16-15 a year ago, the Salukis return three starters and picked up a couple of meaningful transfers to construct an intimidating squad.

Forward Marcus Domask (15.1 PPG, 5.2 RPG) and guard Lance Jones (14.8 PPG, 1.9 SPG) both return for their senior seasons. Evansville transfer Jawaun Newton stays in the MVC and brings 12.7 points and 5.4 rebounds per game to SIU. Indiana transfer Xavier Johnson (12.1 PPG) will be another face to watch.

Games at Oklahoma State and Saint Louis will give the Salukis great opportunities early on. You can bet that Mullins and SIU are in good position to earn a first-round bye come Arch Madness.

5. Belmont



8. Indiana State

When Belmont left the Ohio Valley Conference in July and opted to join the MVC, the Bruins entered a far tougher field than they've seen the last

Belmont fans are set to see a new-look squad after finishing 25-8 last year. Head coach Casey Alexander enters his fourth year and will have to rely on his one returning starter from the prior season: 6-foot-6 senior guard Ben Sheppard.

Sheppard averaged 16.2 points per game last year and helped power the Bruins to an NIT berth. Now, the senior will be tasked with uniting a core led by strong transfers Keishawn Davidson and Drew Frieberg.

The Bruins have not won less than 20 games since 2010, but are looking for their first March Madness appearance since 2019. Make no mistake: despite the new faces, the Bruins will be a good team that will be a tough out in St. Louis. Expect Belmont to fight for a first round bye in March.



Bradley hasn't won the MVC regular season since 1996 but the squad eighth-year head coach Brian Wardle brings back will likely be the closest he's been to the top of the mountain in the regular season

Finishing 17-14 last season, the Braves return three starters and sport nine upperclassmen for the preseason's No. 2 team. Preseason first-team all-conference forward Rienk Mast will be the most important to the group's success, but the forward is expected to miss the first four to eight weeks with an MCL sprain.

Aiding in the Braves' pursuit for a title and postseason berth will be a collage of returning stars and transfers. Among the group are forwards Ja'Shon Henry and Malevy Leons as well as guards Connor Hickman, Duke Deen and James 'Pop' Weathers.

With two SEC powerhouses on the non-conference schedule this year, the Braves will have their chances to knock down some quality wins early. Expect the team to increase their production whenever Mast returns, but this is a quality and deep group nonetheless.

4. Northern Iowa



Reigning regular season champions Northern Iowa faces a fresh season without departed stars A.J. Green and Noah Carter.

Ben Jacobson, who begins his 17th year as the Panthers head coach, faces a challenging task at building around a team that returns one starter from their 20-12 campaign a season ago. If the Panthers are to finish towards the top of the league, they'll have to rely on sophomores Bowen Born and Nate Heise.

Both Born and Heise bring back averages of over seven points per game last year, but what is largely unknown is the status of redshirt senior forward Austin Phyfe. Phyfe has dealt with health issues in the past and is not cleared to resume basketball activities.

If he is unavailable for the season, the Panthers will have to look elsewhere for their man in the middle. Nonetheless, expect the winningest head coach in Panthers' history to get his group to the top half of the conference.

6. Murray State



Possibly the most intriguing addition to the MVC are the Murray State Racers. After former head coach Matt McMahon became the new leader at LSU, the Racers hired a familiar face in Steve Prohm.

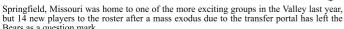
Prohm coached the Racers from 2011-2015 and compiled a 104-29 record before accepting the same position at Iowa State. Coaching the Cyclones to a 2-22 finish in 2020, both parties decided to mutually part ways. Prohm has now returned to the Racers and will have to reconstruct the team after their 31-3 record a year ago.

Junior D.J. Burns will be the piece Prohm will have to rely on as the only returning starter. Transfers Brian Moore Jr. and Quincy Anderson will also need to perform well if the Racers want to make a mark in year one in the Valley

Expect an up-and-down year for Murray State. There is enough talent to finish in the middle of the league but that all rests on how long it takes the roster and staff to get used to each other on the court.

7. Missouri State





Head coach Dana Ford begins his fifth season with the Bears but will have to make changes to keep momentum after the 23-11 finish last year. To help Ford is the lone remaining starter: senior guard Donovan Clay (8.4 PPG and 6.1 RPG in 2021-22).

Incoming transfers Bryan Trimble Jr. (10.4 PPG) from Akron and Kendle Moore (6.5 PPG) from Colorado State will look to be Ford's building blocks to aid Clay.

Despite the vastly different group in Springfield, expect Ford to once again get his group prepared for battle in a deep Valley. The Bears should be favored to finish in the top half of the league, but anything is on the table with so many new faces.

Retaining four starters from last year's 11-20 squad, the Indiana State Sycamores should take a leap forward in head coach Josh Schertz's second year at the helm.

Among the impressive list of returnees are senior Cooper Neese and redshirt senior Cameron Henry. Neese leads the pack with 15 points per game last season, while Henry came down with more than five boards while averaging nearly as many points as his counterpart

Other talented playmakers include sophomore Julian Larry, redshirt junior Xavier Bledson and Bradley transfer Jayson Kent. Freshman Robbie Avila is also a post player to watch to make an impact in his first year with the Sycamores.

While the team includes several talented stars, Schertz and the Sycamores will likely be in a fight in the middle of the MVC.



Bigger and Better: Predicting the Men's MVC

Matt Lucas

Sports Co-Editor

9. Illinois State



After firing 10-year head coach Dan Muller during an abysmal 13-20 record a season ago, Illinois State now welcomes a plethora of new players and new head coach Ryan Pedon, who comes over from an assistant role at Ohio State.

Losing guard Antonio Reeves (20.1 PPG) to the transfer portal was disappointing for Redbird fans during the offseason, but looking to heal the wounds is returning senior Kendall Lewis. Lewis will welcome in Western Illinois standout guard Coltan Sandage (13.4 PPG) and BYU transfer Seneca Knight (7.4 PPG) to help jump start the group.

Pedon will face an uphill battle in his first year in Normal, but a new sense of pride among the program seems to have things looking brighter further east on I-74. The non-conference schedule is very favorable but this team is young. Expect a rebuild-type season for the Redbirds, but a breakout is possible.

11. Illinois-Chicago



Entering their first year in the Valley, UIC hopes to create a spark in their new home.

Third-year head coach Luke Yaklich will have his hands full after returning just one starter from the team that went 14-16 in the Horizon League a year ago.

Sophomore guard Jace Carter will headline the returning group for the Flames after averaging over eight points and five boards per game. Sophomore forward Filip Skobalj and Idaho graduate transfer Tre Anderson will need to step up if the Flames want to make a strong impression in year one.

While UIC has a talented group coming in, the team is largely new to each other, and foreign faces in a foreign conference may make it tough on Yaklich and the Flames.

10. Valparaiso



Leading the Beacons into their sixth season in the MVC, head coach Matt Lottich needs to capitalize on the talent he returns.

Forward Ben Krikke and guard Kobe King both bring at least 14 points per game from last season's 14-18 campaign. Both veterans will have to lead the Beacons who return eight letterwinners, but lose three starters.

Valparaiso has only finished one season in the MVC over .500. Lottich retained the two biggest factors to create a second occurrence, but he'll need to hope that the lineup depth develops quickly. The Beacons are top-heavy but are not as deep as other teams in the Valley. This team will likely go as Krikke and King go.

12. Evansville



Looking for its first double-digit win season since 2018-19 and their first winning season since 2017-18, the Purple Aces are expected to be a cellar dweller in the Valley after another staff shakeun

Head coach David Ragland enters his first year in Evansville but will have to navigate a program that has been the punching bag in the conference lately.

The Aces return one starter from last year's six-win team. Junior guard Blaise Beauchamp brings back eight points per game and will likely team up with sharpshooter Antoine Smith Jr. The latter shot 45% from three last year, so the Aces do possess a scoring ability from the outside.

With 10 newcomers to the squad, Ragland will begin to rebuild the program this season. Evansville should again be towards the bottom two spots in the standings.

A new look means a new foe stands atop the women's MVC

Mason Klemm

Sports Co-Editor

It's been the story all offseason: how will the MVC change with three new teams?

On the women's side, at least, it completely uproots the conference.

The addition of the Ohio Valley's Belmont and Murray State – who both finished in the top three of the conference last season – as well as the Horizon League's Illinois-Chicago adds new depth and new challenges for the returning Valley members.

New faces seems to be the theme of the conference this year, as four new head coaches and a plethora of transfers will headline the fresh season.

Below, I preview the season ahead and predict who will be the next school to raise the championship trophy in Moline.

1. Belmont



Entering their first year in the Valley, it seems the upgrade in conference was necessary for the Bruins. They've won the Ohio Valley Conference regular season title in five of the last six years and totaled 11 championships in just 10 seasons in the OVC. As the only non-power conference team to reach the NCAA Tournament's Round of 32 in each of the last two seasons, the Bruins will look to add to that and build off of last year's three-point loss.

At the head of those efforts are their three leading scorers, all of which return for their junior years. Destinee Wells (16.7 PPG), tabbed Preseason Player of the Year by the MVC, is joined by Madison Bartley (11.7 PPG, 5.1 RPG) and Tuti Jones (11.6 PPG), with all three earning OVC First Team honors a season ago and combining for over 50% of the team's scoring and assists. The team graduated their other two starters, but emerging sophomore Tessa Miller and South Florida grad transfer Sydni Harvey should provide much-needed minutes.

In all five years of the Bart Brooks era, the Bruins have never finished below the top 35 nationally in 3-pointers made. While they may struggle on defense in what shapes out to be a tougher conference, it's nothing that "Splashville" won't be able to handle.

2. Drake



After making the WNIT in Allison Pohlman's first year at the helm, the Bulldogs feature two players on the MVC Preseason All-Conference Team and return their top five scorers – setting them up for success early on.

Coming off a 20-14 record and a 9-9 record in the Valley, Drake will be led by MVC Newcomer of the Year and first team selection Megan Meyer. The senior posted 12.1 points per game last year and was tied with forward Maggie Bair for the team lead, the latter of which led the team with 6.2 rebounds per game. They will be joined by fellow big Grace Berg – an MVC First-Teamer in her own right last season – and Katie Dinnebier with her team-leading 107 assists.

All around, Drake appears to be a strong contender for a Valley title. With the experience and the roster depth coming back this year, expect the Bulldogs to finish near the top of the conference this time around.

3. Illinois State



Last year's Hoops in the Heartland winner not only returns four starters from their championship season, but they add on the Division II Player of the Year Paige Robinson as well. Averaging 21 points per game on 47% shooting for Division II Drury, she'll have to step into the shoes of MVC Tournament MVP Juliunn Redmond.

As the Valley's leading scorer at 17.8 points per game, Redmond was an All-MVC First-Team member for the second year in a row and Robinson will need to adjust quickly to Division I in order to repeat that production. Helping that cause will be fellow first-teamer DeAnna Wilson, who led the team with 7.8 rebounds per game while adding nearly 13 points per contest.

It's hard to replace a player like Redmond but with the momentum on their side, it looks to be another good showing from the Redbirds.



A new look means a new foe stands atop the women's MVC

Mason Klemm

Sports Co-Editor

4. Missouri State



Missouri State has finished in the top four of the conference for the past eight years, so a coaching change should not change that. Yes, they lost four of their five starters from a year ago, but they also reloaded and brought in a pair of Power 5 transfers in guard Aniya Thomas (Kansas) and forward Kennedy Taylor (Colorado).

Thomas, part of a Kansas team who made the second round of the NCAA Tournament, averaged 8.5 PPG while starting over half the games for the Jayhawks. Taylor only averaged 2.4 minutes for the Buffaloes, but was also a part of an NCAA Tournament team in Boulder. This experience means the squad won't miss the departing seniors that led them to an 11-seed in the tourney last year.

The Lady Bears also return Sydney Wilson, one of just five players in the Valley to average at least 10 points, five rebounds and one steal per game last season. She's joined by fellow returner Ifunanya Nwachukwu (5.1 RPG), who put up 17 points against Ohio State in the NCAA Tournament. The team may look different, but expect the same firepower from the Lady Bears.

6. Northern Iowa



The Panthers look very different this year, losing three starters after finishing their 13th consecutive season in the top half of the MVC. In head coach Tanya Warren's 15th year, UNI will have to replace the production lost from the departures of leading rebounder Bre Gunnels (6.9 RPG) and leading scorer Karli Rucker (12.9 PPG).

They do return 11.9 PPG from senior guard Kam Finley, who also led the team in 3pointers. Leading rebounder Grace Boffeli is back too, but it'll be interesting to see who gets the rest of the starting minutes for the Panthers. Warren has been through this type of changeover before, so the streak should stay intact.

8. Southern Illinois



The Salukis surprised many preseason voters and clinched the MVC regular season title last season. Then, nine-year head coach Cindy Stein retired, leaving Kelly Bond-White to take the reins.

She comes into Carbondale inheriting just one starter from that top-seeded team: guard Quierra Love. The sophomore averaged 5.6 PPG and will need to take on a bigger role this year, especially after the team lost MVC Player of the Year Abby Brockmeyer and the program's all-time leading scorer in Mackenzie Silvy. The Salukis feature newcomers from all over the country, as Bond-White brought in six transfers to reload her squad.

They may prove everyone wrong again and win back-to-back titles, but on paper there's not much to back that up at this point in the season

10. Valparaiso



In one of its best years in the MVC, Valpo went 9-9 in conference play last season and will look to build off of that finish. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem like that'll happen.

Only two starters return from that sixth place team and only seven players overall are coming back. The biggest loss is MVC First-Teamer Shay Frederick, whose team-leading 11.9 PPG will be sorely missed. The returners include guard/forward Leah Ernest (7.7 PPG, 4.6 RPG) and guard Olivia Brown (6.6 PPG), but their three top point-scorers have all departed. Expect a rebuilding year for the Beacons.

12. Illinois-Chicago



Even with the departing of their head coach, the Flames still return all five starters from a year in which they won a total of two games. Coming from the Horizon League, UIC will have to rely on the wisdom of Illinois State grad Ashleen Bracey at the helm and Peoria native Jaida McCloud on the court.

A Richwoods High School graduate, McCloud led her team with 16.3 points and 6.2 rebounds per game on her way to an all-MVC Second Team honor. Unfortunately, the next highest scorer averaged just under 10 a game. This means they'll need heavy improvement from those around McCloud, which doesn't seem likely given the changes to the coaching staff.

5. Murray State



Coming off a school record 21 regular-season wins, the Racers will look to make strides in their first year in the Valley. They return four starters from a year ago, all of whom earned All-OVC honors.

The headline of that group is OVC Player of the Year Katelyn Young. Dominating the league with 20.1 points per game, the forward will need to turn in a similar performance to see her team thrive. She will have help, as Macey Turley, Hannah McKay and Alexis Burpo, who all averaged double-figures last year, are back. In total, the Racers return 85 percent of their scoring and rebounding efforts.

There's a lot of experience, but it's a harder conference and the program hit its high point last season. A lot of things need to go right for Murray State to finish high, so for now they're in the middle of the pack.

7. Indiana State



This team shocked many fans last season, picking up five wins in conference play and 11 wins total which were both more than the previous two seasons combined. Head coach Chad Killinger is into his second year in Terre Haute, and he'll look to build off the newfound success of the program.

The Sycamores return one of their top contributors in guard Del'Janae Williams, who led the team in points (12.5), assists (2.8) and steals (2.0) per game. She's joined by starters Mya Glanton and Natalia Lalic and the team gets forward Adrian Folks back, who led the team in points before going down to a season-ending injury. Getting through that period alone sets this squad up for success.

Killinger also went out and signed Alona Blackwell from Oakland, Ella Sawyer from Austin Peay and Chelsea Cain from Nicholls State, all three of which were All-Freshman or All-Newcomer team selections at their previous schools. This combination of returners and new faces will lead to another step up in the standings for the Sycamores this season.

9. Evansville



Last season was not the one that head coach Robyn Scherr-Wells envisioned in her first year with the Purple Aces, and she will look to turn things around in Evansville. The team returns four starters after winning just two games in the MVC last season, and it remains to be seen whether that'll make a difference.

Evansville is once again led by senior guard/forward Abby Feit, who averaged a team-leading 15.1 points and 8.9 rebounds per game last season on her way to a First-Team All-MVC selection. Those totals were good enough for fourth and second in the conference, respectively.

The biggest loss has to be guard Je'Naiya Davis, who was right behind Feit with 15 PPG. Besides that, the Aces bring back eight letterwinners from a year ago, setting them up for improvement this season. However, there's just not enough experience to see this team finishing near the top.

11. Bradley



The Braves only return one starter from a year ago, but that happens to be MVC Freshman of the Year Caroline Waite. At 13 points per contest, Waite was the top-scoring underclassman in the Valley last season and was 11th in the country in 3-pointers made per game (2.88). Finishing 4-24 a season ago, including just one win in Valley play, it will be a tough road ahead for the new-look Braves.

Head coach Kate Popovec-Goss, a former recruiting coordinator at Northwestern, had to dive into the transfer portal after inheriting a team with just three guards. The Braves reeled in Old Dominion's Alex Rouse and a pair of junior college players in Megan Barton and Ruba Abo Hashesh, among others, to pair with Waite in the backcourt.

It's always hard to say how newcomers will perform, but if Bradley expects to compete they'll need third-year improvements from forwards Tete Danso, Isis Fitch and Daija Powell. Either way, it'll be a year of rebuilding against the more experienced Valley squads.