

BRADLEY UNIVERSITY

## THE SCOUT

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## Women's Basketball Preview:

Popovec-Goss looks to keep building in year two

## Men's Basketball Preview:

Searching for revenge and a repeat

By Latif Love

Contributor

After a slow start to head coach Kate Popovec-Goss's era on the Hilltop, the Bradley women's basketball team looks to continue rebuilding a once-storied program with youth and experience.

Rome wasn't built in a day, and the team finished last season 4-28 including a stretch in which they lost 22 straight games.

Going into her second year, Popovec-Goss is preaching patience.

"You have to stay the course," Popovec-Goss said. "It takes time and patience to rebuild programs. This program has had a lot of success, but things take time."

Bradley has cause for optimism. The Braves return nine players, including four starters from last year's 12th place team. The lone starter to leave was standout sophomore Caroline Waite, who accounted for nearly 23 percent of Bradley's points last season.

"We wish Caroline the best," Popovec-Goss said. "Caroline is a really good player. If she felt like this wasn't the best fit for her, she should go find somewhere that's a better fit."

"My goal wasn't to replace her," Popovec-Goss added. "We added a lot of different pieces to fit the system that we're looking to build and play."

## New blood

Headlining this year's batch of newcomers are freshmen Claire McDougall, Halli Poock, Sheyene Neale and Armoni Strozier.

"This is a really talented group of freshmen," Popovec-Goss said. "It was the second-highest-ranked class in the Valley. The great thing about our freshmen is that they're going to get experience early. They're going to be mixed in with our veterans and have a chance to play."

The Braves also added junior wing Kaylen Nelson via the transfer portal, who appeared in 30 games at Old Dominion and anticipates an important role this season.

"She's [Nelson] a big wing that can rebound and defend at the guard position," Popovec-Goss said. "She has size and versatility. I am excited about her and all of our freshmen."

## Finding identity

The Braves need all the help they can get on the defensive side. Last season, Bradley ranked 11th in points allowed, 12th in opponent field goal percentage and 11th in opponent offensive rebounds. Since her time at Northwestern, Popovec-Goss has been well-regarded as a defensive-minded coach. In her second year at the helm, she looks to instill a defensive identity in her team.

"You're going to see a different brand of basketball this season," Popovec-Goss said. "Our goal is to be a great defensive team. We're going to be taking a lot of pride in that."

Getting defensive stops looks to be important this year for an offense that lost its leading scorer. This season, the Braves look to get stops, play with pace and move the ball.

Due to Waite's departure, Bradley will lean on a balanced scoring attack from returners Alex Rouse, Ruba Abo Hashesh, Isis Fitch and Daija Powell.

"We were the least dynamic team in the conference last year in transition," Popovec-Goss said. "For us to be successful, we have to get out and make plays in transition. A lot of our half-court stuff is based on ball screens and sharing the basketball."

"I think we have more depth on our roster this year," Popovec-Goss added. "We'll have a more balanced scoring attack. We have a lot more kids that can chip in points."

## Blocking out the noise

Despite returning nine players and fielding one of the best freshmen classes in the Valley, the Braves were ranked last in the MVC's preseason polls.

As is the case with most coaches, Popovec-Goss is not fond of these rankings.

"Sometimes we get caught up too many times with the doubters and haters," Popovec-Goss said. "I'm more concerned about what we are saying to each other. I'm not concerned with the outside noise. I don't care about preseason polls. They're exactly that: Preseason polls."

Popovec-Goss's players have also adopted her mindset. The team has focused on building continuity and growing from struggles last season.

"The chemistry with the newcomers is very good," junior guard Alex Rouse said. "We gelled quickly. It was easy. I want this team to be tough, stay together and prove ourselves right."

Bradley men's basketball enters uncharted territory this season.

Coming off the program's first regular season Missouri Valley Championship in 26 years, their first NIT appearance in 16 years and an impressive 16-4 conference record, the team takes on a new challenge in 2023-24: Doing it again.

"We're trying to run it back, but we also know how difficult it is to sustain success," head coach Brian Wardle said. "In the last four or five years we've had good success and won some championships, it's just a matter of consistent discipline in the details."

Despite the runner-up finish in the MVC Tournament and the loss to Wisconsin in the first round of the NIT, last season was considered by many to be a success. Now, with the transfer portal's roster upheaval, the question is how can the Braves bounce back to reclaim the Arch Madness crown.

Three starters return to the fold, the biggest of which is reigning Defensive Player of the Year Malevy Leons. As the team's lead returning scorer with 11 points a contest, Leons must step into an even bigger role as the focal point of the Braves' offensive and defensive scouting reports. Yet, like a car without wheels, the Braves can't function without the parts that surround it, even if their engine is running smoothly.

"Mal[evy] is a very good player, he does a lot of things for us," associate head coach Mike Bergen said. "But in terms of overall value to the team, he is just as important as everybody else."

The preseason first-team selection is joined by junior Connor Hickman and senior Duke Deen as returning starters. Hickman is coming off a year of improvement in his second season, where he had increased minutes that led to more points, rebounds and assists per game. His shooting splits did not improve, however, draining just under 40% of his shots and 34% of his threes, so his consistency will be important to the Braves' success.

Meanwhile, Deen is coming off his first year on the Hilltop, one where he averaged 9.6 points and a team-high 2.8 assists per game. He also led the Braves in 3-pointers (70) and was selected to the preseason All-MVC third team.

The expectations that come with this returning core are clear, so it's something the team doesn't need to discuss.

"Honestly, I really don't have a lot of expectations," Deen said. "We all know that we want to try to get back to the championship. I really don't think about it a lot, it's already instilled in our mindset. So I just try to go out there and compete to the best of my ability every day."

Bergen echoes this feeling, not wanting to put too much pressure on the squad.

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"If you start looking at goals or looking at trophies or things like that, I think you miss the things that are missing within your group," Bargen said. "We'll just worry about the process and improving upon things that are hurting us either in practice or gameplay and I feel like that'll be the path to success."

## Replacing roles

The Braves suffered a blow when MVC first-teamer Rien Mast, their leading scorer and rebounder a season ago, transferred to Nebraska and took all of his 6-foot-9, 240-pound frame with him. Without a clear, experienced successor to match Mast's production, Wardle says a big man committee might be in order, featuring the likes of senior Darius Hannah and sophomore Ahmet Jonovic.

In particular, Wardle likes what he's been seeing out of Hannah. The Milwaukee native is coming off the best season of his college career and has seemingly added some wrinkles to his game in the paint, although he will still showcase the blocks and high-flying dunks that fans have become accustomed to.

"The role might be a little different," Wardle said. "But Darius right now is by far our best one-on-one post player."

Wardle also says that the offense will run a little differently in Mast's absence, featuring more drive-and-kick and a faster pace to accommodate the smaller team. Basically everyone on the team has the green light to shoot, which was evident when they took 28 threes in their exhibition game win over St. Ambrose on Wednesday.

"When we got stagnant sometimes I used to just tell Rien to post up," Deen said. "We [are] just gonna try to push the pace a lot more and just run fast. Just add that aspect even more to our game now."

Deen also says there are a couple of guys who will be important if the Braves hope to replace the 3-pointers lost by the departure of Zek Montgomery (42% from three) and Ville Tahvanainen (37%).

"Ville's my guy, I love Ville, but we got two knockdown shooters in Almar [Atlason] and Christian Davis," Deen said. "They're gonna knock down a lot of threes for us, I promise."

Davis is entering his second year on the Hilltop after playing in 23 games last year, his first at the Division I level. The freshman Atlason, on the other hand, hails from Iceland and attended nationally-ranked Sunrise Christian Academy before coming to the Hilltop.

Atlason turned heads during last year's European Championship when he averaged 17.9 points, 10.7 rebounds and 3.1 assists per game to lead his home country to the semifinals. Slotting in at the four and five for the Braves, the excitement is palpable for the 6-foot-8 forward.

"Like I said he's a knockdown shooter and honestly he's a guard playing the forward position," Deen said.

Wardle and his staff also brought in 6-foot-10 sophomore Kyle Thomas, an Eastern Illinois transfer who is the nephew of former Brave Derrick Thomas, who played during the 1978-79 season. Among the newcomers, Thomas has the most Division I experience, appearing in 29 games last season for the Panthers and averaging 5.4 points and 3.8 rebounds per game.

Perhaps the most underrated loss of Bradley's offseason was Sixth Man of the Year Ja'Shon Henry. The do-it-all forward was a career Brave, so his experience being on two Arch Madness winning teams will surely be missed as will his presence in the post, with both him and Mast providing matchup nightmares for opposing bigs.

This is where Wardle and company hope Jonovic can slide in. Joining the team in the middle of last season, the 7-foot-1 Serbian worked hard in the offseason to get prepared to play college ball and the coaches are excited to see what he can do with a full season in Division I.

"He's really a physical presence for us," Bargen said. "But he also still is a work in progress. A young big, but he loves the work and I think that his future is very bright."

## Guards galore

Something Bradley prioritized in the offseason was bringing in help at guard, and they added a trio of ball handlers to fit alongside Deen and Hickman after losing Montgomery and James "Pop" Weathers to the transfer portal.

Sophomores Emarion Ellis and Trey Pettigrew and freshman Demarion Burch all provide depth for the Braves, and Wardle says each of them has the necessary skills to help them flourish.

"They all have really good days," Wardle said. "They all can get to the paint, they're all very good one-on-one players. That's what we wanted. We wanted big, strong guards that can make plays one on one and can create and they can all do that."

Pettigrew and Ellis, transfers from Nevada and Marquette, respectively, barely played at their previous stops, with the latter suffering a knee injury that sidelined him for the entirety of last season and caused him to redshirt. Both of them bring different things to the table, but Ellis in particular has impressed his teammates during practice.

"Nobody can guard [Ellis] one-on-one," Deen said. "Nobody stayed in front of him throughout the whole summer and fall so he's gonna be a big piece for us."

Burch comes to the Hilltop as a top-10 recruit out of Wisconsin. He's quick with the ball in his hands and aggressive on defense, something that can be done to a fault. In the exhibition, he was second on the team in points with 11 and picked up three steals, but he also threw away a team-high four turnovers and committed four fouls.

"He's extremely talented," Bargen said. "He's still trying to figure out what to do every day or how college basketball is different than high school, and so I think you see some of those peaks and valleys for him."

Overall, Wardle thinks it's an exciting group that will battle it out for the time on the court.

"It's been fun to watch them develop," Wardle said. "They all do something a little bit different, but it's gonna be interesting to see how it all plays out as the year goes on because it's very competitive."

The team also looks different on the sidelines after Wardle brought in former Bradley standout Darrell Brown Jr. as director of player development. A three-time All-Valley guard on the Hilltop, Brown helped the Braves capture back-to-back MVC Tournament Championships in 2019 and 2020 and now mentors this year's flurry of guards.

"He had a great work ethic and he's a very disciplined, smart player," Wardle said. "I said [to him] just carry over the things that made you successful as a player and that will help you be successful as a coach."

## Scheduling strength

If you want any hope of being considered among the nation's best as a mid-major, you have to compete against the nation's best. Bradley took that mantra and ran with it, as their non-conference games do not offer any room for error.

"We have a championship-level program with standards and expectations, so we have to play teams that we think are going to contend for championships and that's what we schedule," Wardle said.

To start, the Braves play in perhaps the country's most intriguing opening-day game, as they travel to Birmingham, Alabama to take on UAB. The Blazers won almost 30 games last year, made the NIT championship game and just made the jump to the American Athletic Conference before this season started.

Then, it's a rematch against Utah State, a team that thrashed Bradley last season 84-62 on their way to the NCAA Tournament. The Braves will take on the SoCal Challenge next before facing the reigning America East champions Vermont and a trio of Ohio teams in Akron, Cleveland State and Duquesne. All three finished in the top half of their respective conferences last year and Akron was picked to win the MAC in the conference's preseason poll.

"We try to play teams that we think will be in the top three in their league and be very competitive because that's the only way you get better and get ready for The Valley," Wardle said.

The Braves were picked to finish third in the MVC's preseason poll despite winning the league last year, and much of that has to do with the departure of Mast and the inexperience among the additions. Like most coaches, Wardle is unfazed by this.

"Preseason predictions don't mean much to me," Wardle said. "We [have] to just get better one day at a time and see where the season takes us because every season is a rollercoaster ride."

All the discussions, debates and discourse aside, Deen thinks the path to winning another championship can be dumbed down to one simple thing.

"It's about getting buckets at the end of the day," Deen said. "I know coach Wardle ain't gonna like that but it's about getting buckets."





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## From JUCO to the first team, it's Leons' time to shine

**Mason Klemm**  
Sports Co-Editor

Heading into the 2021 season, Bradley men's basketball needed a spark. They were coming off an eighth place finish in the Valley, a sub-.500 record for the first time in four years and the departure of much of the core that led them to back-to-back Arch Madness trophies.

That spark was found in the form of a skinny junior college graduate from the Netherlands, who learned to play basketball from his mother and fielded offers from multiple power conference schools but ultimately landed on the rebuilding mid-major in Peoria.

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

Two years later, that same feeling leads Leons into his fifth year of college ball, as he decided to return to Peoria to try and help Bradley reach the NCAA Tournament once again.

"He's a great leader through his discipline and through his work ethic," head coach Brian Wardle said. "He's one of our hardest workers, he has probably the highest motor on the team, he never gets tired and so I think you're just gonna see a guy that's a little more aggressive, more confident in his game playing with that motor and he's gonna produce more."

The guy who was once touted as "The Dunking Dutchman" has done more than just throw down the hammer as a Brave. Last season, Leons was the first player in conference history with 50 blocks and 50 steals in the same season. He was also the only player in Division I to add 200 rebounds on top of that. All this culminated in Leons winning the MVC Defensive Player of the Year award, becoming the fifth Brave to do so and the first since 2013.

"It was an honor," Leons said. "I know you don't get that without a team playing well and winning, so I appreciate my teammates for always working hard during practices and trying to prepare me."

His 11.1 points per game was good for second on the team last year, as was his six rebounds. He also knocked down 45 threes, showing his unique capabilities as a 6-foot-9 power forward.

Leons' role is even more important now after the departure of All-MVC First Team member Rienk Mast, the Braves' former leading scorer and rebounder. As Leons' fellow Dutchman, the two shared a special bond, playing against each other while growing up back home before playing together on the same court.

Although it was a bit of a shock when Mast left for Nebraska, Leons wishes the best for his friend.

"I'm just happy for him and hope he will do good," Leons said.

Leons is the next in line to take over the bulk of Mast's workload, although it won't be in the same form as his country brethren. Instead of posting up the opponent as Mast would do, Leons prefers to beat them off the dribble, using his three-level scoring to his advantage.

Wardle notices these abilities and thinks it's an area the former NJCAA Player of the Year has improved on a lot, hoping that fans will see some of these moves on the court.

"I think he's gotten better at making decisions with the ball," Wardle said. "He's always been a very good shooter, but his playmaking abilities improved this offseason so I think you're going to see him have more confidence and be a little more aggressive than he was last year, especially offensively."

Senior guard Duke Deen also sees Leons' improvement in this area and thinks it'll add another aspect to his game.

"I've been impressed with his ball handling," Deen said. "I always told him that he couldn't dribble so he's improved on that a lot and just making the right decisions."

While others may feel the pressure of leading a team in this way, especially coming off the year that Leons had, it's just business as usual for the always-stoic grad student. While he wants to improve on last year's totals, he figures that if he prepares the same way again, the results will speak for themselves.

"Just doing the same thing, keep working hard," Leons said. "Staying with a growth mindset [and] always trying to get better."

Deen echoed this sentiment and doesn't see any difference in how Leons conducts himself from last year to this year.

"Mal is Mal," Deen said. "He does what he does every day and it's the same dude every day."

It's not every day a community college player joins the Division I ranks. It's even rarer to see a community college player thrive at that level. Now, as a preseason First Team selection, Leons will try to lead the Braves to the promised land, something that may have seemed impossible two years ago.

## One-On-One: Most Impactful Freshman

### The Nordic sensation takes on the Hilltop

**Ben Kinealy** Contributor

After the tough end to Bradley's season last year, two freshmen hope to make their marks during the upcoming season.

One of these freshmen is the 6-foot-8 Icelandic native Almar Atlason, who committed to Bradley in April. The power forward comes from Sunrise Christian Academy in Bel Aire, Kansas where he helped the team achieve a record of 20-7 in his senior year, earning them first in the standings and a national ranking.

Outside of high school, Atlason competed for Iceland's under-18 FIBA team, where he put up 17.9 points per game, shot 41.3% from the 3-point line and had 10.3 rebounds per game. He was also selected for the FIBA Europe under-20 All-Tournament Team and had the opportunity to go to training camp for the Iceland senior national team.

Atlason has loved basketball since he was 12 and believes that if he can improve his game defensively he will have a huge impact in his debut season. It may take time for Atlason to adjust to head coach Brian Wardle's system, but once he does, he will be a player to look out for not only during this season but also for the next three years.

### Local prospect looks to shine in year one

**Michael Savoie** Contributor

There are four freshmen newcomers for the women's basketball team, but none will be more important to Bradley's success than guard/forward Claire McDougall.

McDougall, from nearby Washington High School, brings a winning pedigree to Bradley after leading the Washington Panthers to regional titles during her junior and senior years. McDougall's success can be greatly attributed to her ability to score and rebound. During her senior year, McDougall averaged a double-double with 17.5 points and 10.1 rebounds per game.

Her overall skill has been widely recognized throughout the Peoria area and through the state. In her senior year, McDougall earned First Team All Mid-Illini Conference honors, Girls Basketball All-Area Team honors by the Journal-Star and First Team All-State honors in Class 3A by the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association (IBCA).

As a freshman, McDougall looks to become a cornerstone of the Kate Popovec-Goss era and make an immediate impact come the first game. Bradley fans and Peoria area residents should anticipate this Washington local's performances under the Bradley lights.



# The Portal Rules All: Predicting the men's MVC

## MASON KLEMM & LATIF LOVE

Sports Co-Editor, Contributor

It was an offseason of turnovers in the Missouri Valley Conference, as all but one of last year's first-team players transferred, graduated or were drafted into the NBA. As a result, each team in the league had to deal with the loss and process of rebuilding that comes with running a mid-major program in the era of the portal.

While almost every team fell victim to the portal, those that used it to their advantage will be best set up going into this season. Taking from junior colleges as well as other Division I programs, including some in power conferences, the MVC mixed and matched its players to churn out the 12 teams in front of you today.

Still, it's important to consider the returners. Experience is key in this league and players who can't adapt to the conference's physicality fall flat on their faces. Having a year or two (or three) in the MVC can pay massive dividends and could be the difference between an Arch Madness trophy and a Thursday exit.

The Valley's coaches and media members once again picked Drake to go home with the title and reigning Player of the Year Tucker DeVries to defend his award. With a strong returning core, Ben Jacobson's Northern Iowa Panthers were picked second while last year's regular season champion Bradley came in third.



## 3. Northern Iowa

The Panthers' strength lies in their returners. Ben Jacobson brings back all five of his top scorers from a year ago, which doesn't even include former All-Freshman team member Nate Heise. With Heise slated to return from the injury that sidelined him for all but two games last year, UNI could be a powerhouse to keep an eye on.

Besides DeVries, the player to watch in the conference this season is Bowen Born. The Valley's second-best returning scorer (17.9 PPG) was selected as a First Team member this preseason and has earned league honors every season he's been at UNI. He's joined by Most Improved Player Tytan Anderson (12.6 PPG, 8.5 RPG) as well as Michael Duax (10.0 PPG), Trey Campbell (7.5 PPG) and Landon Wolf (7.4 PPG) in running it back in Cedar Falls.

This squad does return a lot, but they also finished eighth in the Valley last season with a losing record. The addition of 6-foot-11 junior Jacob Hutson may just be the piece the Panthers need. The Loyola-Chicago transfer will provide much needed size for his team, who only have one other upperclassman taller than 6-foot-8.

They'll be tested early in a Thanksgiving tournament that features seven power conference schools, which can only bode well for them down the line and could lead them back to the top of the MVC.



## 1. Drake

Despite losing three of their top five leading scorers, the Bulldogs are still a force to be reckoned with. Last year's MVC Tournament champions were a few minutes of poor shooting away from upsetting Miami in the NCAA Tournament last season, a team that went on to reach the Final Four. Drake is not bringing back the experience they were known for the past few seasons, but they have retooled and reloaded.

Headlining this group is reigning MVC Player of the Year Tucker DeVries. At 18.6 points per game, the junior leads all Valley returners and was once again picked to be Player of the Year this preseason. Other notable returners include sixth-year big man Darnell Brodie (7.3 RPG) and All-Freshman team member Conor Enright, who will undoubtedly inherit a bigger role now that Roman Penn and Garrett Sturtz have graduated.

What makes this team so enticing is their newcomers. Kyron Gibson is a UT Arlington transfer who averaged 11.2 points per game last season and should supplant the Bulldogs' veteran leadership in the backcourt. He's joined by Cal State Northridge transfer Atin Wright (16.7 PPG) and Patriot League Freshman of the Year Ethan Roberts, who shot over 40% from three and averaged 12.4 points a game at Army.

It's the newest-looking team Darian DeVries has ever had in Des Moines, but such is the norm in college basketball these days. With the squad mentioned above and a crop of talented freshmen, the sky's the limit for this group.



## 4. Belmont

Wherever they go, success follows the Bruins.

Following a 13th consecutive season of 20 or more wins, Casey Alexander's team heads into their second year in The Valley with a roster consisting of only two upperclassmen: fifth-year guard Keishawn Davidson, who made 26 starts for the program last season, and Lee University transfer Jayce Willingham.

First-team honoree Ben Sheppard went 26th overall to the Indiana Pacers, but luckily the Bruins return Freshman of the Year Cade Tyson. The guard/forward averaged 13.6 points and 4.6 rebounds per game last season, earning a spot on the preseason All-MVC First Team. They also return fellow All-Freshman team member Ja'Kobi Gillespie, who averaged nearly 10 points a game in what was mostly a bench role.

Inside, Alexander nabbed Vanderbilt transfer Malik Dia from the portal, who played in 20 games for the Commodores last season. Sophomore guard Isaiah Walker is also in line for a bigger role, already putting up double figures in multiple games on the team's tour of Spain back in August.

As one of the most decorated teams in college hoops over the last two decades, there's no reason to suspect the Bruins can't reach the top of the MVC. The only question is if this young team will be the one to get it done.



## 2. Bradley

In contrast to the Bulldogs, the defending regular season champion Braves will have to take on the new season without their leading scorer. First-team honoree Rienk Mast (13.8 PPG, 8.0 RPG) transferred to Nebraska, so this year it's Malevy Leons' team. The graduate senior was the first player in MVC history with 50 steals and 50 blocks in the same season on his way to winning Defensive Player of the Year, and his 11.1 points per game was second on the team.

Alongside Leons, Bradley returns guards Connor Hickman (8.6 PPG) and Duke Deen (9.6 PPG), who provide some much-needed leadership to reel in a host of newcomers. On the top of that list is freshman Almar Atlason, a Sunrise Christian Academy product who impressed many after averaging a double-double in the European Championship for his home country of Iceland.

The Braves also return key players Christian Davis, Darius Hannah and Ahmet Jonovic, a 7-foot-1 Serbian who will begin his first full season of Division I this winter. Rounding out the newcomers are a trio of guards: Nevada transfer Trey Pettigrew, Marquette transfer Emariion Ellis and freshman Demarion Burch, all three of which should see meaningful minutes this season.

Last year was a year of firsts for head coach Brian Wardle's squad, and despite losing their best player the Braves are set up well for a repeat.



## 5. Missouri State

Returning their top three scorers from last season, this could be the year the Bears figure it all out. Preseason first-teamer Donovan Clay is an all-around threat (11.9 PPG, 5.5 RPG, 3.6 APG) and could be in for the best season of his career with the talent that is stacked around him.

That talent starts with point guard Matthew Lee. The former Saint Peter's March Madness darling missed almost all of last season with a knee injury, but he is back and ready to lead the Bears offense. Preseason third-teamer Chance Moore is also back after a successful season off the bench (10.6 PPG), as is junior guard Alston Mason (9.9 PPG).

The freshmen class might be what makes this year's team so exciting. 6-foot-8 guard Tyler Bey is a four-star recruit coming out of Overtime Elite, while fellow guard Davion Hill is a two-time Pennsylvania Player of the Year winner. The Bears also attacked the portal, bringing in Xavier transfer Cesare Edwards and his experience coming from a nationally-ranked team.

Head coach Dana Ford has never finished below .500 in his five years in Springfield, and this year should be no different as they chase their first Arch Madness title since 1999.





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### 6. Indiana State

Last year, Indiana State surprised many by finishing in the top half of the conference and winning 23 games for the first time since 2013-14. Head coach Josh Schertz's third year in Terre Haute will look a little different, but the preseason poll still expects the Sycamores to stake their claim in the conference.

Offense was last season's team mantra. Indiana State led the MVC in scoring (79.31 PPG) and field goal percentage (48.3%), led by the trio of Cooper Neese, third-teamer Cameron Henry and Newcomer of the Year Courvoisier McCauley. All three have since moved on from the program, so it will be up to All-Freshman team member Robbie Avila (10.5 PPG) and All-Defensive player Julian Larry (6.9 PPG) to pick up the slack.

Avila, the 6-foot-10, 240 pound center, will be the focal point of the Sycamores this season, but expect former Bradley guard Jayson Kent and potentially junior guard Masen Miller to see increased time. They also brought in Southern Indiana transfer Isaiah Swope, whose 15.6 points per game and 42% mark from three last season earned him a spot on the All-Ohio Valley first team, and Aaron Gray, who averaged 12.4 points and 4.5 rebounds at Niagara last season.

The Sycamores have two Power Five teams on their schedule this season, so they will be tested before facing the gauntlet that is the MVC. With so many of their top players gone, Indiana State falls smack-dab in the middle of the conference.



### 9. Illinois-Chicago

The Flames' leading scorer Jace Carter (16.6 PPG) departed for Texas A&M, so UIC will rely on 6-foot-8 guard Toby Okani (11.0 PPG, 7.1 RPG) and junior forward Filip Skobalj (7.7 PPG) to fill his shoes. Skobalj is one of only three rostered forwards, as the team picked up guards Marquise Kennedy (Loyola Chicago), Drew King (Houston Christian) and Isaiah Rivera (Colorado State) in the transfer portal. All three averaged more than seven points per game at their previous schools.

In the era of the portal, UIC did well in retaining four sophomores who all played meaningful minutes last season. Guards CJ Jones and Steven Clay, forward Jaden Brownwell and center Cameron Fens combined for over a quarter of the team's playing time and each of them got to start at least three times.

The Flames struggled with rebounding last year aside from Okani, so the addition of more guards seems like a head scratcher from an outside perspective. Nonetheless, their experience should bode well for head coach Luke Yaklich's second year in the Valley, so look for them to slightly improve from their 11th place finish last season.



### 12. Valparaiso

The Beacons are the lone Valley team with a new head coach this season, as Roger Powell Jr. will try to bring to Valpo some of the success he had from his four seasons as an assistant at Gonzaga. In year one, his team will open with their backs against the wall with six freshmen entering the fold and only three returning scholarship players.

Among those returners, senior guard Connor Barrett is the team's leading scorer with just over four points a tilt. He's joined by fellow senior Jerome Palm and junior Darius DeAveiro, with the latter being the team's only experienced ball handler and the former hoping to use his 6-foot-10, 230-pound frame to his advantage. The team also dipped into the transfer portal, bringing in Ola Ajiboye from Central Michigan, Isaiah Stafford from Southern Indiana and Jaxon Edwards from MVC rival Murray State.

Long gone are the days of Kobe King and first-teamer Ben Krikke leading the team, so the Beacons will look to their young core to improve on their 10th place finish last season. It's hard to know where that core will finish with their lack of experience, so for now they round out the bottom of the conference.



### 7. Illinois State

The Valley could be in for a surprise with Illinois State.

Bradley's I-74 rival returns four of last year's top five scorers, including leading scorer Darius Burford (12.9 PPG) and the MVC's third-leading rebounder Kendall Lewis (7.3 RPG). Add to that four transfers, two of which came from Big Ten schools, and head coach Ryan Pedon has an experienced squad that could make some waves.

The team also brings in four freshmen to learn under the plethora of seniors. Johnny Kizinger, Wisconsin's co-Mr. Basketball, is joined by 6-foot-9 Chase Walker and the Tys: Ty Pence and Ty Blake. Jordan Davis, brother of Washington Wizards guard Johnny Davis, comes in as a transfer after starting 18 games at Wisconsin while 7-foot-1 Brandon Lieb spent last season at Illinois. Southern Illinois transfer Dalton Banks has Valley experience, adding to the firepower the Redbirds bring.

With one of the conference's highest number of returners, Illinois State is prime for their first .500 or better record since the 2018-19 season. Everyone knows experience helps you in March, so the level at which the Redbirds finish will depend on their ability to put it all together.



### 10. Southern Illinois

Not much is known about the new version of Southern Illinois that everyone will see in 2023-24. After a third place finish in the Valley last season, the Salukis will be without the services of All-MVC first-teamer Marcus Domask and third-teamer Lance Jones, their two leading scorers who both transferred to Big Ten schools.

All-Defensive Team member Xavier Johnson (7.0 PPG, 1.5 SPG) returns along with fellow starters Trent Brown (3.0 PPG) and Clarence Rupert (65% FG), but overall this team is a wild card under head coach Bryan Mullins.

What is clear is that the Salukis will still defend. After leading the MVC in scoring defense a season ago (61.4 PPG), Mullins went into the portal and grabbed Incarnate Word transfer Trey Miller, who had 1.5 steals per game last year. He's joined by 7-footer Cade Hornecker, who can cause problems for anyone driving into the lane.

Like most teams in the Valley, Southern Illinois had to reload, but they still feature nine upperclassmen to try and stay in the upper echelon of the conference. They lost too much to confidently say that'll happen, but you'd be a fool to count out Mullins and the Salukis.



### 8. Murray State

In the Ohio Valley, the Racers would probably be contending for another title with the roster they've constructed. But this is the Missouri Valley, which Murray State has learned all too well after finishing seventh last season.

Leading scorer and MVC third-team honoree Rob Perry is back (14.4 PPG), as is the MVC's leading minutes man Jacobi Wood (4.6 APG) to try and bring Steve Prohm's team back to the promised land of a conference championship. Joining them are fellow guards Brian Moore Jr. and Quincy Anderson, who will need to take on a bigger role this season with the departure of two starters.

As for the portal, Murray State needed to find size, so they brought in 6-foot-10 junior Malek Abdelgawad out of South Plains Community College. The Egypt native was ranked among the top 20 junior college players while at South Plains and has experience playing with the Egyptian U18 team. Add to that three freshmen who all ranked in the top 10 of their state's high school class and a couple 6-foot-7 transfers from Division I schools, and the Racers are well set up with their newcomers.

The team struggled on the defensive side of the ball last year, finishing 10th in the Valley in scoring defense (72.03 PPG), so they will need to shore up that department to compete with the rest of the conference. For now, they fall near the middle of the pack.



### 11. Evansville

It's David Ragland's second year at the helm of the Purple Aces, and once again he has his work cut out for him. The team brings in 12 newcomers, including eight freshmen, to try and build off of a 1-19 conference record last season.

Former Bradley guard Antonio Thomas joins a roster with a trio of fifth-years including Thomas, former walk-on Gage Bobe (39% from three) and last year's leading scorer Kenny Strawbridge Jr. (14.4 PPG). 6-foot-10 French forward Yacine Toumi is also ripe for another solid year, already picking up nine points, three blocks and three steals in the team's exhibition game win on Oct. 28.

Among the newcomers, Huntington University transfer Ben Humrichous, Ohio Valley Freshman of the Year Cam Haffner and top-five recruit out of Michigan Chuck Bailey III are some players to keep an eye on. Humrichous and Bailey have already made their presence felt, as the former picked up eight points, eight rebounds, three blocks and two steals in the exhibition game while Bailey finished as the team's leading scorer with 16 points.

There should be some improvement with another year under the tutelage of Ragland, but the roster mixup and a defense that finished last in the conference once again leaves much to be desired in the Crescent City.

BRADLEY UNIVERSITY

THE SCOUT

ESTABLISHED 1898

# Peak of the women's MVC is more even than ever

## Rodrigo Perez

Sports Co-Editor

Every season, the women's side of the MVC basketball landscape increases in unpredictability and the growth in quality is undeniable. The road to Moline runs through the regular season as we start another Scout rankings.

Let's take a look at the candidates.



### 1. Northern Iowa

After falling in the semifinals in tournament play, Northern Iowa is coming back with a vengeance.

The Panthers return as one of the strongest sides in the MVC, retaining their top three scorers from last season. Junior forward Grace Boffeli is back after leading in scoring with 16.1 points per game. The preseason Player of the Year also returns as the rebounding leader with an average 9.2 a game.

Returning alongside Boffeli is junior guard Emerson Green, who dominated in shots beyond the arc last season, registering a .422 percentage. To top it all off, the Panthers held onto junior guard Maya McDermott. With MVC preseason first team honors, McDermott was right behind Boffeli in scoring with an average of 14.7 points per game.

With last season's core players making a reappearance, it's hard not to pick the Panthers as the favorites in the MVC this season.



### 2. Drake

The eventual tournament champions, who took down the No. 1 seeded Redbirds and No. 2 seeded Bruins, return this season with their firepower intact after their NCAA tournament berth.

The Bulldogs preserved plenty of youth and experience from last season, only losing two of their starters. They return last season's Defensive Player of the Year Anna Miller, who put up a whopping 72 blocks. Miller also returns this season with MVC preseason second team honors.

Miller will be joined by a couple of preseason MVC first teamers in sophomore guard Katie Dinnebie and red shirt senior forward Grace Berg, who were an integral part of the Bulldogs' success last season. Both started every single game they played, meaning they have the experience to lead the Bulldogs back to the NCAA tournament.

With a challenging out of conference schedule, the Bulldogs are one of the most promising teams heading into this season and could have easily been picked first.



### 3. Belmont

Belmont, who finished 17-3 last year, also returns for their second season in the MVC.

Despite being one of the newer teams to the Valley, Belmont has already been successful. Tying their conference record with Illinois State, the Bruins come back as runners up from the Hoops in the Heartland Tournament.

However, a major part of the Bruins' core, including Destinee Wells, Maddison Bartley and Sydni Harvey, have moved on. Wells led the Bruins in multiple categories last season, including a scoring average of 19.5 points per game, 34 steals and a 3-point percentage of .455. Bartley and Harvey assisted Wells on multiple occasions.

After an injury cut her season short, redshirt junior guard Tuti Jones returns as an MVC second teamer. Before her injury, Jones was averaging 11 points per game and looks to make up for the lost time.

Alongside the guard will be the Bruins' leading rebounder, junior forward Tessa Miller, who accumulated 220 total rebounds and averaged 6.3 per game. Not just potent in the rebounding category, Miller also boasts an impressive .517 field goal percentage.

Since the Bruins lost a big chunk of their core from last season, I can only see them in the top five of the Valley.



### 4. Illinois State

After winning their first conference regular season championship since 2010, the Redbirds look to keep that good momentum this season.

Despite bringing back nine players, the Redbirds lost two starters. Paige Robinson is one player Illinois State will miss, as she led the Redbirds in scoring with 18.3 points per game. Mary Compton dominated in shots made from beyond the arc for Illinois State with an average of .422.

Grad student and MVC preseason first teamer Deanna Wilson was the second most productive Redbird behind Robinson. With an average of 13 points per game, Wilson looks to lead this Redbird side back to the MVC Championship game.

Alongside Wilson will be former Brave Caroline Waite, who led Bradley in scoring with 12.9 points per game last season. The Redbirds also bring in four freshmen that could have a chance to make some waves early in their collegiate career.

Despite losing a couple of important pieces, Illinois State restocked well this off-season and could give the other title contenders a run for their money.



### 5. Missouri State

After their WNIT appearance last season, it's hard to see the Bears having a down year.

With nine returnees, Missouri State has two preseason All-MVC second teamers and last season's MVC Freshman of the Year. The forward duo of sophomore Jade Masogayo and junior Kennedy Taylor return and earn second team honors this season after being a pivotal part of the Bears' system last year.

The Bears add youth and experience with five freshmen and three transfers, making them a top five contender for the regular season championship.



### 6. Murray State

Returning three of their five starters, the Racers look for improvement in their second season in the MVC.

The notable returner will be senior forward Katelyn Young, who led the Racers in scoring with 21.4 points per game. After her season with the Racers she was picked to be on the MVC first team as the lone Murray State honoree.

Returning alongside Young are seniors forward Hannah McKay and guard Bria Sanders-Woods, who each started in over 20 games last season.

The Racers also did a good job of bringing in some experienced reinforcements. Former guards Ava Learn from Purdue and Trinity White from Butler bring experience from different conferences.

Murray State have done a good job at improving their squad and will look to climb higher this season.



BRADLEY UNIVERSITY

## THE SCOUT

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# Peak of the women's MVC is more even than ever

Mason Klemm

Sports Co-Editor



## 7. Illinois-Chicago

Seven returnees and eight newcomers highlight this season's Illinois-Chicago team.

The Flames retained an important core from last season. Along with reinforcements in all areas of the court, Illinois-Chicago have brought transfers Keimari Rimmer from DePaul and Krystyna Ellew from Wisconsin. Chicago native Makiya Williams also joins from Marquette with two years of eligibility.

Coming back for the Flames is the senior trio of guards Jaida McCloud, Sara Zabrecky and Kristian Young. Young comes back after recording the most steals (57) for UIC last season.

Along with the transfers, junior Ky Dempsey-Toney and senior Danyel Middleton have a good opportunity to continue gaining minutes with the Flames. Despite not receiving any starts, Dempsey-Toney had one of the best field goal percentages with a .505 mark along with 31 blocks.

Expect a winning conference record for the Flames as they continue to traverse through the MVC.



## 8. Indiana State

Indiana State has seen an upward trend for the last couple of seasons, with double-digit wins being the main highlight.

Anna McKendree leaves a big hole to fill as she led the Sycamores in steals (71) and had one of the best 3-point percentages (.394). Another question is how the team will fill the absence of Del'Janae Williams, the Sycamores' most productive player who finished the 22-23 season with an average of 13.9 points per game.

With these absences, athletes like fifth year guard Ella Sawyer will get a chance to break into this Indiana State team. She won't be alone as former All-Freshman team member Bella Finnegan returns alongside regular starters like fifth-year forward Chelsea Cain and redshirt senior forward Mya Glanton.

The Sycamores are another team that were busy with recruiting, bringing in reinforcements in the form of former four-star prospects Savannah White and Chloe Williams.

Indiana State is bringing in a lot of new faces looking to build the future of the program. It might take a couple of more seasons for them to compete for the regular season championship.



## 9. Southern Illinois

One of the hottest offensive teams in the Valley last season, the Salukis return a good portion of their core along with their second year coach Kelly Bond-White.

Despite losing two starters, the Salukis bring back a bulk of their scoring with senior guard Quierra Love who ended the season with a .389 percentage from beyond the arc.

Those two starters are Promise Taylor and Ashley Jones. Replacing Taylor will be tough as she provided a lot of points for the Salukis with her field goal percentage of .595 while Jones led Southern Illinois in scoring with an average of 17 points per game.

The Salukis will have to prove that they can continue their scoring streak despite not having Taylor or Jones.



## 10. Valparaiso

After getting knocked out by Illinois-Chicago in the first round of the Hoops in the Heartland Tournament, Valparaiso returns three of their five starters from last season.

As most of their core stays the same, the Beacons will have to rely on guard Olivia Brown. She led Valpo in scoring with 12 points per game last season and excelled in shooting from the field with a .478 average.

Valpo did lose a big part of their defensive game, as Llysse Pitts and Maya Dunson dominated in blocks and steals. Still, athletes like senior forward Leah Earnest and junior guard Olivia Sims made a big impact last season coming off the bench.

There will definitely be opportunities on this Beacons team for some of the younger members to make a name for themselves.



## 11. Bradley

After finishing last season with a 4-28 record and losing one of its key pieces, Bradley will look to continue laying the groundwork for the Popovec-Goss era.

With junior Caroline Waite leaving the Hilltop for Illinois State, the Braves return four of their five starters from their first-round playoff game last season against Missouri State.

With one transfer and four freshmen, the Braves have to trust their young squad and dig deep into their bench. The only transfer, Kaylen Nelson, was an integral part of Old Dominion's WNIT run a couple of seasons back alongside fellow Brave Alex Rouse.

Out of all the freshmen coming into this Braves squad, Peoria area native Claire McDougall could swipe a spot for herself on this Bradley team.

The Braves were unlucky in a couple of their conference games last season and probably should have had a couple more wins, but they will still need to continue rebuilding to return to their former glory.



## 12. Evansville

Like Bradley, Evansville lost an important piece heading into this season.

Guard Abby Feit led the Purple Aces in multiple categories last season. A pivotal player on the defensive and offensive end of the hardwood, Feit was the core engine of an Evansville team that still struggled last season. Feit led in scoring with an average of 15.5 points per game and also dominated with her 28 blocks and 33 steals, the most on the team.

Only one starter returns for the Purple Aces as they are left with only four athletes from last season. Grad student Barbora Tomancova has to grab the reins as the only remaining starter from last season.

With 10 newcomers, the Purple Aces will take some time to rebuild this season. Whereas Bradley has at least four of their starters from last year returning, the Purple Aces have too many newcomers to put them above the Braves.



BRADLEY UNIVERSITY

## THE SCOUT

ESTABLISHED 1898

# Staff Picks: Who is the most exciting basketball player to watch this season?

By: Scout Sports Staff

## Ahmet Jonovic

By *Ethan Carbone*

Sophomore center Ahmet Jonovic towers over almost every player in the country. At a staggering height of 7-foot-1, he will be the tallest athlete at Bradley this year.

Height is something that Bradley lacked last season, as big man Rienk Mast only stood at 6-foot-9. On the other hand, Jonovic has the body type of your prototypical Big Ten big man. His development as a sophomore will be perhaps the most interesting thing to follow throughout the year.

## Demarion Burch

By *Umar Syed*

Everyone knows Spiderman is from New York, but what if I told you that Bradley has their own Spiderman on the basketball team from Milwaukee, Wisconsin? Meet freshman Demarion Burch.

Burch is a 6-foot-4 guard who is an elusive scorer and can certainly hold his own on the offensive and defensive end. As a junior in high school, Burch averaged 29.7 points and 4.8 assists per game, followed by 27.3 points and 4.9 assists per game his senior year. Burch also scored a career-high 51 points in one game during his junior year while scoring 44 points in a single game a year later.

As you can see, Burch will be a big scoring weapon for the Braves this year. So, if you want to see a ball player who is electric, a powerful driver in the lane and can hit the Steph Curry-like shot, then you should pay attention to Burch.

## Claire McDougall

By *Mason Klemm*

On a team that didn't have a lot to cheer for last year, the addition of Washington high school alumna Claire McDougall is sure to rile up Bradley fans and help women's basketball become competitive again in the MVC.

The accolades speak for themselves. McDougall was a Mid-Illini First-Team All-Conference selection as well as an All-State and All-Area pick. She led the Panthers to regional and conference championships during her time there, and she looks to bring that success to the Hilltop.

## Emarion Ellis

By *Rodrigo Perez*

One of Bradley's three transfers this season, Emarion Ellis comes to the Hilltop from Marquette with quite an interesting story. The Davenport, Iowa native was once the top-rated player in Iowa for the class of 2021, according to 247sports.

At Marquette, the redshirt sophomore played in 14 games, averaging 2.1 points per game in roughly 85 minutes of action. Soon after the start of his sophomore season, Ellis suffered a knee injury that rendered him out for the season.

Now fully recovered at Bradley, the former Marquette guard will be hungrier than ever to make up for the lost time. He's got something to prove, which makes him one of the most exciting players to look out for.

## Duke Deen

By *Latif Love*

This year, Bradley fans should be most excited to watch Duke Deen's second year.

In year one, Deen averaged nearly 10 points and three assists on 36% shooting from three. He was most effective in operating the pick-and-roll as a scorer and distributor. Despite often being the smallest player on the floor, Deen is scrappy on the defensive end.

Braves fans should look for a jump in production from Deen as head coach Brian Wardle leans more toward guard play this season.

