

BRADLEY UNIVERSITY

## THE SCOUT

ESTABLISHED 1898



## Men's basketball season Preview:

By Latif Love

## Co-Editor-In-Chief

The small press conference was quiet as the players filed in and took their seats.

The room was clouded by disappointment after the Braves blew a 16-point lead to end their longest season since 1954.

There were no tears – they'd shed those after a loss to Drake in the Missouri Valley Conference championship – just solemn looks and quiet responses.

This was more than the end of a season; the loss marked the end of an iteration of the Bradley Braves three years in the making.

Continuity has been the Braves' calling card. While other programs reshuffle their rosters every spring, Bradley has stayed the course. The Braves returned 10 players in 2023-24 and 11 more in 2024-25 – an impressive feat in an era of widespread player movement.

That all changed once that final buzzer sounded.

Following their postseason loss to Chattanooga, the Braves said goodbye to five key contributors, including four Bradley legends: Duke Deen, Zek Montgomery, Darius Hannah and Christian Davis. Each spent at least three years on the Hilltop, becoming foundational pieces on and off the court. Bradley also lost rising junior Almar Atlason to Miami (Ohio).

Head coach Brian Wardle knew what was coming. And he didn't waste time reacting.

"You can't relax," Wardle said after the loss. "You can't even reflect on the season much anymore. You gotta dive right into it. We've lost a lot, and we gotta get some vets and some older guys to mix in with our good young talent. We'll get to it as a staff probably tonight, actually."

Since that moment, Wardle and his staff have done precisely that.

## Reloading through the portal

The Braves used the transfer portal to quickly rebuild the team. After the five departures, the team was much younger and needed to add experience.

Bradley brought in three players: James Madison transfer AJ Smith, Wright State transfer Alex Huibregtse and Liberty transfer Kai Yu.

Smith is a 6-foot-7 wing who provides strength and is an excellent rebounder, slasher and defender.

Huibregtse is entering his sixth collegiate season and has shot 39 percent from three on six attempts per game.

Yu didn't get much playing time with the Flames, but at seven feet, he offers size and athleticism that could be key in specific matchups.

"I think Alex and AJ bring a wealth of experience," Wardle said about the new additions. "You can tell they've played a lot of minutes through their careers. They're mature. They know how to work and handle practice. I think they'll help us right away in that area."

"Kai Yu is a talented big man," he added. "He just probably needs more playing time and needs to hopefully get in the game a little bit this year."

It's not just Coach Wardle who sees the value of the newest Braves; their teammates have noticed it in practice as well.

"I feel like AJ and Alex are going to be a great part of what we've got going on," junior guard Demarion Burch said at Bradley's first practice. "AJ is big and strong, and he can defend. That's what we are looking for: defense and rebounding. Alex is going to make it easier for Quanny [Jaquan Johnson] and me to facilitate and get him open shots. Those guys have been great leaders for us."

Wardle added experience in the portal but also looked towards the future. What he saw in his DeLorean should have excited Bradley for years to come.

## Four Fantastic Freshmen

According to 247Sports, the Braves' freshman class was the best in the MVC and the highest-ranked recruiting class in the Wardle era. He brought in four perimeter players – Dietrich Richardson, Matthew Zobrist, Montana Wheeler and Jackson Seastrunk – who offer long-term upside but could also make an impact this season.

Richardson, a Peoria native, headlines the class. As a senior, Richardson was the second-ranked player in Illinois, averaging 18.5 points, six rebounds and five assists.

Zobrist grew up just 40 minutes east of Peoria, and his family has ties to Bradley. The 6-foot-5 guard is strong and physical, able to score from multiple levels off the floor.

Wheeler hails from Houston and is the type of guard Wardle loves to recruit. He's undersized and overlooked but fiery and hard-nosed. Wheeler marries scoring and facilitation in his command of an offense.

Seastrunk is Wheeler's teammate and a late addition to Bradley's signing class. He's a 6-foot-4 lefty who loves to score the basketball anywhere on the court.

"The freshmen have come in locked in and ready," Burch said. "They pay attention to details. They do all the small things that the coach wants and that will separate them from other freshmen around the Valley. We're going to need Matthew, Montana, Dietrich and Jackson. If they keep at it, it's going to be a great year for us."

Wheeler, in particular, has stood out and has seemingly earned a role as the first guard off the bench for Bradley. He initially flashed his potential in Bradley's exhibition vs. Green Bay, where he scored eight points and dished out two assists.

"He's an everyday guy," Wardle said. "He shows up every day. I don't have to motivate him to play hard and compete. He's just wired that way. He's going to get better and better."

The transfer portal addition brings much-needed experience, and the freshman class offers long-term upside, but the fate of Bradley basketball will likely hinge on five returners who must step into bigger roles.

## Returners ready for bigger roles

Those five returners are Burch, sophomores Jaquan Johnson and Timoty van der Knaap and seniors Corey Thomas and Ahmet Jonovic. They're the foundation of the team, the longest-tenured Braves with the most familiarity with Coach Wardle and the Bradley fanbase.

Burch was expected to take a leap after a strong freshman season in 2023-24, but sickness and a foot injury derailed his season. However, he was effective and efficient on the floor, delivering key performances down the stretch of the season.

After a healthy offseason, Burch is eager to step into a bigger role.

"I feel amazing right now," Burch said. "I picked up a routine over the summer. I'm just trying to pick up where I left off at the end of the season. I played pretty well in the last few NIT games we had at the end of the year. I feel like I'm in great condition to play 30 minutes a game. The expectations I have for myself; I still want to win at a high level, but I also want to do what I know I can do best. Coach has given me the opportunity to do that this year, so I'm all in."

Burch is joined in the backcourt by Johnson, last year's freshman phenomenon. Johnson was a spark plug off the bench, made the MVC's all-freshman team and broke the Bradley record for steals in a season by a freshman.

Many expect Johnson to have a breakout season and become one of the best players in the conference. He has been named on multiple breakout player lists by popular college basketball influencers, and will be the Braves' successor to Deen.

"The coaches and players from last year have given me that lift and confidence to be a better player this year," Johnson said. "I feel like I learned a lot last year, so that I can have a bigger role this year. I'm ready."

Thomas and Jonovic are set to replace Hannah and Davis, who were one of the best front-court duos in the Valley last season. Thomas had a role off the bench last year and flashed his potential in big games, and Jonovic started 18 of 37 games last season. The pair have big shoes to fill, but both have improved in the offseason.

Continue on A2

BRADLEY UNIVERSITY

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## Women's Basketball Preview:

By Mark Wagner  
Sports Co-Editor

### Men's basketball season Preview:

"CT [Corey Thomas] had a big role last year, but it should be even bigger this year, and he's ready for it," Johnson said. "He's been putting in a lot of work this offseason, especially on his body and becoming more of a vocal leader."

"Every morning he [Ahmet Jonovic] tries to get in before everybody to get some shots up," Burch added. "I feel like Meta's doing a great job trying to stay consistent and add stuff to his game. All of us have to step up, but we don't mind. There's no pressure behind it."

Van der Knaap played 82 minutes last season, but Wardle gave him opportunities during the Braves' NIT run last year. The sophomore scored eight points and grabbed three rebounds in his first career start against North Alabama.

"Timoty had a smaller role but played at the end of last year," Johnson said. "He's also going to have a bigger role, and he's getting a lot of confidence, so I feel like he's going to have a great season."

Bradley has a good mix of additions, returners and young talent with unrealized potential, but they are very different from the team last season. From their continuity off the court to the playstyle on the court, the 2025-26 Braves have a lot of work to do to reach the heights fans saw last year.

Preaching process, patience and preparation

Throughout the offseason, Wardle preached patience with this team. They are younger, have less continuity and many are stepping into new roles.

The Braves have a tough out-of-conference schedule with four top-150 opponents according to KenPom, followed by a grueling conference schedule from late December to early March.

They're going to take some bumps and bruises.

"This is a young, talented team," Wardle said. "We got really nice pieces. We need to mature, we need to grow. But this whole offseason has just been about learning from each other, understanding the program's standards, and understanding how we do things. That takes time. We're still learning, we're still growing."

"We're going to learn a lot about ourselves in November," Wardle said. "That's how many good teams were playing. So it's going to be good for us."

November is here, and with it came the Braves' first bruise.

In their first game of the season at the Field of 68's opening day marathon, Bradley fell 69-63 to St. Bonaventure.

The Braves lost, and were down 13 at one point but showed they can take a punch and deliver one back, eventually going on a run to take a 5-point lead into crunch time.

A few mistakes down the stretch cost them, but that can be fixed with patience, improved process and preparation. "This team has fight," Wardle said. "We'll get better. We have to clean some things up as coaches. It takes all of us to keep improving, and we'll get there."

Round 2 begins Saturday at 7 p.m. against Central Michigan, and this time, the Braves will be at their home ring.

### Women's Basketball Preview:

Two-hundred and seven days ago, Bradley women's basketball played their final game of the 2024-25 season, losing in the second round of the MVC tournament to Murray State. Now, the Braves enter their fourth year in the Coach Pop era.

With only four and six wins in head coach Kate Popovec-Goss's first two seasons in Peoria, the team improved to 14-19 last year with a 7-13 conference record and an 8-6 record at home. After a couple of months of practice, the team's vibes seem better than ever.

"I think one of the things this team is learning is that our standard is different from what it was a year ago at this time, and they're learning to respond to that," Popovec-Goss said. "I've been especially hard on this team, really challenging them in practice to attain a different level of performance because I believe that this team is capable of that."

This year's team has ten returning players compared to six last year, including difference-makers at the guard and forward positions, such as junior Claire McDougall, fifth-year Kaylen Nelson and graduate Tamia Perryman.

The Braves also brought in some exciting new additions, including Maya Foz and Kali Fortson. However, the biggest news of the offseason was when sophomore guard Mya Wardle announced she would be transferring to Bradley. The daughter of men's basketball head coach Brian Wardle spent her first season of college basketball at Eastern Kentucky, playing 32 games, all of them coming off the bench.

### Big changes

As a team, the Braves are looking as dangerous as ever.

In the MVC preseason polls, Bradley was placed seventh, a jump from 11th the year before. However, this team believes their ceiling is much higher.

"For us, were we pleased with our jump last year? For sure," Popovec-Goss said. "Are we excited that people have more respect for us in the league this year? Absolutely. But all that really matters is what we're building and what we believe we're capable of."

One of the bigger subtractions from the team was Soleil Barnes. Last year, Barnes led the team with 15.5 points per game while also totaling 4.7 rebounds and 2.8 assists per game. However, multiple candidates have stepped up to claim that pressure-packed leadership role, one of them being Perryman.

"I've got to make sure I do my part as well because, granted, I am a returner, but this is only my second year in Division I," Perryman said. "So, I'm also still learning a new role, too, because with Soleil leaving last year, I have a new role this year with Kaylen trying to work through everything but also help newcomers and everything and still be that extra leader, even though I'm not a captain."

While they more than doubled their win total from six to 14 in the 2024-25 season, the philosophy is mostly the same for the Braves.

"We have to raise our standard. We're really big on the process, we're not big on the outcome," Popovec-Goss said. "We feel like we can finish in the top five of our league, but we don't talk about that every day. What we talk about is 'what does that look like?' play by play, minute by minute, practice by practice to get there."

### Focusing on improving

Last year, the Braves' defense was the best in the Missouri Valley, allowing only 60.3 points per game. On offense, Bradley relied on a couple of top performers to score. Before the regular season, the team has had multiple chances to show what they have on both sides of the ball and identify what they can improve.

"One of our goals is to be one of the best defensive teams in the conference, and I think we've been struggling to have the same intensity on defense as much as we do on offense," Perryman said. "I think [last Wednesday] we emphasized defense a lot. So, I think that's a good sign for us as one of our goals at the end of the year. Yes, we made some mistakes, but they're very teachable mistakes and stuff that we can work on and hopefully bring it all together."

With the Red/White Scrimmage, an exhibition against Saint Louis and their first regular season game against Judson, out of the way, the Braves have already won twice, only one of them counting for their record, replicating the start of last season. With one of the most experienced rosters Popovec-Goss has had in four years, they have some advantages that will help them this time around.

Continue on A3



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**Women's Basketball Preview:**

"I think we saw it a little bit in our exhibition; as a coach, basketball is not a game you can control for 40 minutes," Popovec-Goss said. "They're not going to look at me every single minute of every single play and ask me what to do. They've got to go execute it themselves. They also have to be able to make adjustments in real time that in other sports, you're not always forced to make, and I think that's where experience comes in because our kids have confidence."

From the offseason to the preseason, the Braves went through a period of ups and downs, recruiting players and losing players. Now that the regular season is here, goals are being made in the locker room, both by the coaching staff and the players.

"[We want to] prove people wrong, because within the conference, we brought back the most people and we were there a lot of games that we lost by four to six points," Perryman said. "But that kind of gives us a little fire, like, 'y'all just don't know who we are about to be,' so I think that just gives us more fire every day."

Similarly, Popovec-Goss wants to hold the team to the highest standards they think are possible.

"I think we're capable of making a run in the postseason tournament," Popovec-Goss said. "I think all those things are there, but that's not really my focus. I think goals are something you talk about and then you really focus on the process of getting there and, for me, the biggest goal I have for this team is that they leave this season feeling like they met the standard that they believe they could meet. That's everything to me."



## Lions, and tigers and Braves, oh my!

Corey Thomas's journey to the hilltop

By Latif Love

Co-Editor-In-Chief

As you walk into Bradley's shootarounds, you're engulfed in action.

The sound of basketballs hitting the court all at once fills the gym, making it hard to concentrate.

Players are stretching, working on their ball-handling or getting shots up before the coach brings them together for practice.

Within the storm, there is a thunderous voice that rises above all the pandemonium.

"Yes sir, yes sir!" he shouts. "Here we go, boys, here we go."

He screams it over and over, to the point where you either want to run through a brick wall or tell him to shut up.

The voice belongs to senior big man Corey Thomas and embodies the growth he's experienced since joining Bradley 18 months ago.

"There's rah-rah leading, and there's meaningful talk leading, and I think he does both for us," head coach Brian Wardle said. "I think that's where he really learned. He was a good talker last year in practice, but he's learned how to have meaningful talks on the court and meaningful talks in the huddles. When I say 'meaningful,' I mean talking basketball. It's stuff that can help his teammates, so that's going to be very helpful."

It's the type of leadership necessary for a team that lost four players — Duke Deen, Darius Hannah, Zek Montgomery and Christian Davis — that helped build the team's culture and continuity over the last four seasons.

"My leadership has definitely grown a lot," Thomas said. "We got a lot of new young guys on the team who didn't really know what Bradley was like when they first got here. Just being here for a year and knowing what I'm heading into gives me the confidence to be a leader. Being able to let the guys know what the coach likes and doesn't like has helped me become a better overall leader on the court."

"I'm already a talker," Thomas continued. "I already don't know when to shut up. So it's been a pretty easy transition to use my voice to help my guys. Ultimately, that's all I want to do."

His teammates described Thomas as a great leader who is mature beyond his years, uplifting and supportive, but these qualities were formed long before Bradley.

**Curating Corey**

Thomas grew up in Buford, Georgia, with basketball in his blood. His mother and father both played at the junior college level, and his sister, 20 years his senior, spent seven years in the WNBA and played for the Los Angeles Sparks, Minnesota Lynx and Chicago Sky.

"My sister and I were the only two kids in our family," Thomas said. "I was on planes going to watch her play games since I was two years old and had already been in basketball and been around it all my life. She was the reason I wanted to go into basketball. I saw what she was doing. I saw how she handled herself and the things she got to do. That made me want to enjoy the process that she went through."

The forward grew up in an old-school household with older parents, which made him an old soul and helped him grow up faster.

"I always say my parents raised me like I was in the '80s," Thomas said. "Like, I listened to old school music when I was a kid, walking around the house. That's what my parents were playing on the radio and stuff. And I mean, I don't want to say that people were hardworking back then, but I just feel like those hard-nosed and fundamental tough qualities that they had when they were growing up, they wanted to instill them in me, and the only way they knew to do that was the way they were raised."

By the time he reached his junior year of high school, Thomas had interest from multiple Division I and Division II schools.

Then five games into the season, disaster struck.

He broke his leg.

"I had schools reaching out, it was supposed to be a decent year for me," Thomas said. "I had a couple of big games in the first five games we had, and so people started to take notice. Then, after it happened, they told me that they didn't really want to move forward."

"It helped transform me into the person I am today," Thomas said about the injury. "Not so much the basketball player I am, but the person I am. Once basketball is taken away from you, you have to find yourself outside of it, especially if all you know is basketball. It made me figure out how I wanted to live my life outside of basketball. It made me a more mature person than beforehand, and I think that helped my basketball game more than anything, as I grew up."

Thomas made a full recovery and had a solid senior year, but the interest from schools didn't return.

"It gave me motivation, knowing that, okay, y'all don't want me now, that's fine," Thomas said about his recruitment process. "I'm gonna just work my tail off, and I'm gonna get back to the point where y'all do want me."

**Lions and Tigers**

After high school, Thomas enrolled at Middle Georgia Prep, a postgraduate athletics program that, according to its website, has helped over 150 athletes secure athletic scholarships.

During his lone season as a Lion, Thomas averaged 11.2 points per game, 7.1 rebounds and 2.1 blocks. He was stellar, but most of the value he gained came off the court.

"It taught me how to handle myself as a man off the court," Thomas said. "I had to talk to college coaches every day, because it happens a lot. We traveled across the country, and I had to learn how to portray myself well in public for the program. I had to go to a new place I knew nothing about and still find comfort in my surroundings. It taught me a lot in those aspects."

Thomas's next stop was Cowley Community College in Arkansas City, Kansas — 14 hours from where he grew up. The senior was hesitant at first because he didn't know the resources or support system he would have so far away from home, but in two years at Cowley, he was able to build long-standing relationships while developing into a better basketball player.

"I didn't really think JUCO was for me, as a lot of people don't," Thomas said. "Everybody says that JUCO is about fending for yourself, but if you find a really good JUCO team and a good coach, the program is like a family."

The "good coach" for Thomas was Donnie Jackson, who was intrigued by Thomas's versatility but knew he needed to grow in some areas on and off the court.

"When I saw him, I still thought he was a little bit of a project, just because, you know, he was a little thin and still needed to get stronger and gain weight," Jackson said. "The appeal was his ability to stretch the floor shooting the ball, and then he was a great wall up rim protector guy and was fairly mobile for his size."

"When he got here, though, it was a little up and down, just trying to get him to learn the pace and strength of the game in junior college," Jackson continued. "I don't care what anyone says, I feel like JUCO is arguably the fastest level, as far as a transition phase. So it took him a little while to get up to speed. Then, I want to say the last eight or nine games of his freshman year, he started for us and showed some serious potential."

Thomas has shown flashes, but Jackson knew he had a lot more to offer if he could improve his work ethic and put on weight. In the offseason, they had a heart-to-heart conversation.

"My freshman year, Coach Jackson used to cuss me out and get on me a lot, but he also knew I was not a kid who was afraid of hard coaching," Thomas said. "So after the season, he told me he wanted me to be a big part of what he was doing the following year and basically said that he had goals for me, and if I didn't reach those goals, I didn't really care about being where I wanted to be. And so when he gave me that challenge, I told him; I'm coming back, and I'm gonna be one of the best players you got."

Thomas fulfilled his promise and then some.

He started 33 games and averaged 12 points, 10 rebounds and 1.8 blocks. His performance earned him all-conference first-team honors, and he was ranked as the 57th best junior college player in the country.

**Becoming Brave**

Thomas helped the Tigers reach the national tournament, which boosted his recruiting stock.

He'd finally made the coaches want him again.

Continue on A4

BRADLEY UNIVERSITY

## THE SCOUT

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## All-around performance in women's basketball opener against NAIA school

By Mark Wagner  
Sports Co-Editor

### Lions, and tigers and Braves, oh my!

"I went from like five offers to 21 offers in a week," Thomas said. "I had offers from St. Bonaventure, a few in the Southern Conference and Conference USA. The biggest reason I chose Bradley was the family atmosphere and environment they created during my visit. All the coaches and the players were at every activity we did, and I got to spend time with the players off the floor and experience the love they have for each other."

Even though the Braves accepted him with open arms, his transition to Peoria was still an adjustment. Thomas had to learn a new role after being the starter at Cowley and had to adjust to the physicality of Division I basketball. Things weren't easy, and at times he struggled with his confidence. Then, in one game, it all clicked.

"The biggest challenge last year was learning how to stay ready," Thomas said. "You can get your number called at any time. When I finally had a decent game against Murray State, it gave me the confidence to remember that I've been here before. Yeah, it's a different stage – it's a different level – but at the end of the day, it's still basketball, and I had to learn to have that confidence."

Thomas finished last season showing real signs of progress – finally looking comfortable within Bradley's system and understanding how to impact games in multiple ways. That momentum fueled a focused offseason in which he dedicated himself to becoming stronger, more physical and more consistent on both ends of the floor.

"The thing I wanted to improve the most – shout out to Coach Eddie – was my lower-body strength," Thomas said. "My legs were a big part of why people were easily able to move me a little bit last year. I've been working to fix that, and also just my defensive awareness and knowing when to be in the right spot and how to help the next guy."

It's a familiar pattern for Thomas: every stop in his career – from high school adversity to junior college stardom to carving out his role at Bradley – he's found a way to take a step forward. Each challenge has become another checkpoint in his steady climb.

"Well, he's stronger," Wardle said. "When you get physically stronger, your confidence goes up on the court. I think he committed to himself, putting on ten more pounds of muscle. He's just more comfortable and confident in the system and in how we train and do things. We're hoping for a breakout year for him."

Heading into his second season in Peoria, the Braves' coaches are betting that pattern continues. And if history is any indication, Thomas will deliver – stronger, smarter and ready to make his mark when Bradley needs him most.

Bradley women's basketball played their first game of the season on Tuesday, taking on NAIA outfit Judson at Renaissance Coliseum and winning by a convincing 61-point margin.

The Braves were close to triple digits on the scoreboard, putting up 94 points in 40 minutes. Every Bradley player who stepped on the court scored at least two points, though only two players scored ten or more.

"I was really pleased with how we played," head coach Kate Popovec-Goss said. "I felt for the most part, we played really disciplined. We shared the basketball; loved to see how balanced the stat sheet was. For us to put up 94 points and only have two players in double figures is a really weird statistic, but I think it just shows the versatility that we have on this team."

The team came out firing in the first quarter, attacking the Eagles from every angle. In the first five minutes, the Braves went on a 15-0 run before Judson made their first shot of the game from beyond the arc. At the end of the first ten minutes, Bradley led 26-10, giving the fans a small sample of what was to come.

Senior forward Amy O'Hara led the team with seven points with fifth-year guard-forward Kaylen Nelson close behind at four points. O'Hara finished the game with nine points and six rebounds, going 4-for-5 from the field.

The second quarter was the most one-sided frame of the night, as the Braves scored 29 points while holding Judson to just four. The defensive unit was strong throughout the game, totaling 40 rebounds, 16 steals, four blocks, and most importantly, only 33 points allowed.

"We weren't really focused on the score. It was our defensive effort," Popovec-Goss said. "If we can get stops, it's going to lead us to be able to score the basketball, especially with us being able to play faster this year."

That style of defense helped them tremendously, scoring 41 points off of rebounds and 17 on the fast break. That defensive potency gave the Braves a nice balance on both sides of the court.

"I really liked our defensive intensity for the most part, especially in that second quarter," Popovec-Goss said. "We held them to four points, and again, I think that if we can consistently defend, the offense is going to take care of themselves. That's always been my philosophy, that's what I recruit."

Sophomore guard-forward Lila Posthuma put up six points in the second quarter via two three-pointers, and senior forward Charlie Vick tallied five more. Quietly, however, freshman guard Maya Foz was brewing up a fantastic performance, which later made her the player of the game.

As one of Popovec-Goss's latest recruits from Ontario, Canada, Foz was recently taken out of the exhibition game against Saint Louis due to heavy cramping. Six days later, she put up seven points in the first half, ending the game with 14 and going 5-for-10 on her shots.

"I'm feeling really good, really excited for this season," Foz said. "I think we're a really good group, so it's really exciting to see how far we can go. I'm really happy with the choice I made, where I chose to come [here]. I really feel like this is the perfect choice for me."

The second half turned out to be more of the same.

The Braves outscored the Eagles 20-9 in the third quarter, making it 75-23 with ten minutes to play. Senior guard Lucia Llaveria put up her first points of the game in the third, leading the team with five points in that quarter. At this point, everyone who was active played and scored, creating fantastic vibes on the bench.

"Honestly, we were just excited for everyone," Foz said. "Anyone who was scoring, we were excited; it didn't matter who it was. We were just excited that everyone was scoring."

Once again, there was a new leading scorer in the fourth quarter. This time, it was freshman forward Kali Fortson, who had seven points in the final ten minutes to put her at eight points for the game.

In the end, Bradley won the game decisively, 94-33.

"I'm proud of my team. I think I challenged them going into this game," Popovec-Goss said. "The biggest focus this season is the competition is really ourselves and 'what standard are we trying to play to?', whether we're playing Judson, whether we're playing UConn, whether we're playing DePaul. It always comes back to Bradley and 'what are we trying to execute?'"

The Braves will face the Blue Demons of DePaul on Tuesday, this time at Carver Arena as part of a men's and women's basketball doubleheader.

"Our fan support has been wonderful," Popovec-Goss said. "It's been building throughout my time here, and we've had great crowds at these first two games. It's going to be really exciting for us, especially bringing a Chicago team into Carver Arena."

In what should be an exciting matchup, Coach Pop has a little bit of history with the Big East program.

"On the women's side especially, DePaul is a historic women's basketball program," Popovec-Goss added. "Doug Bruno [former DePaul women's basketball head coach], who I played against, got recruited by and coached against for a long time when I was at Northwestern, is a hall of famer in women's basketball. He is a legend I have a ton of respect for, and his longtime assistant, Jill, took over the program. But more than anything, I'm excited for the opportunity to compete against such a historic program and especially to do it in front of what I'm sure is going to be a great hometown crowd in Carver Arena."





# MVC Men's Basketball Preseason Rankings

## Jaylen harris & Jake aimone

### Contributors

With college basketball season officially underway, the Bradley Scout returns with our first edition of weekly power rankings for the 2025-26 season. With plenty of turnover in the Missouri Valley Conference, there's sure to be new contenders rising to the top of the conference.

Below, contributors Jake Aimone and Jaylen Harris have presented their power rankings for the first week of the 2025-26 MVC regular season based on preseason expectations and performances. It is important to note that power rankings are not the standings.



## 1. Illinois State Redbirds

The Redbirds are prepared to fly to the regular-season title, benefiting from exceptional stability among their top producers.

The personnel foundation is not to be ignored. Forward Chase Walker returns after earning all-MVC first team honors and being named captain of the MVC Most Improved Team. Guard Johnny Kinziger, an all-MVC second team selection, returns as the team's primary perimeter scoring threat, with the duo averaging 15.2 and 14.6 points per game, respectively. The return of forward Jack Daugherty, an all-freshman and all-bench team honoree, is critical. He'll provide crucial floor spacing, having made 47.6% of his long-range attempts last season.

The combination of returning star power, proven production and added depth from the portal confirms Illinois State possesses the highest overall competitive ceiling and the most robust floor in the conference.



## 2. Northern Iowa Panthers

Ready to carve their mark at the top of the conference are the Panthers.

They are well positioned to contend for the championship, given their unmatched roster stability. The Panthers return 11 players and 72.1 percent of their minutes played from the previous season—a figure that leads all of Division I men's basketball. This degree of cohesion can surely help ensure system execution and minimize variance, positioning the Panthers to excel in contests throughout the 20-game gauntlet.

The foundation of the returning guards includes third-team all-MVC selection Trey Campbell, along with veteran Ben Schwieger. Their established fluency with Coach Jacobson's system almost certainly guarantees stability. The Panthers have specifically addressed their physical size limitations through strategic recruiting, bringing in high-major transfers Ismaël Diouf and Marino Dubravcic.

This infusion of size dramatically improves UNI's capability to handle dominant frontcourts, suggesting a targeted effort to dismantle the interior attacks of conference rivals.



## 3. Murray State Racers

When thinking about Murray State, five words should come to mind: The sky is the limit.

The Racers enter a new era, retaining zero, yes, zero players from the previous season. This spot in the rankings reflects high confidence in new head coach Ryan Miller's calculated risk strategy: bypassing a traditional rebuild by immediately injecting the roster with star-level transfer talent.

Key acquisitions include sophomore guard Layne Taylor, who arrives as a proven 17.4 PPG scorer from Central Arkansas. Backed by positional size and high-major length acquired through senior transfers J.J. Traynor, Mason Miller and center Fredrick King, Murray State's ceiling is undeniable, with all the experience and talent being brought in.

The critical question remains whether the 13 newcomers can achieve seamless chemistry by the start of league play in year one of the Ryan Miller Era. Still, the talent-acquisition mandates this high preseason placement.



## 4. Bradley Braves

The Braves return a crucial veteran core, despite losing key players Duke Deen and Darius Hannah, which will be a challenge to adjust to. But the Braves also quietly invested in defense and stability this offseason.

Key returners include sophomore guard Jaquan Johnson and junior guard Demarion Burch, both known for their reliable play. The backcourt is further bolstered by graduate transfer Alex Huibregtse from Wright State, who can provide scoring maturity to this developing core. Anchoring the interior is senior forward Corey Thomas, who can give necessary rebounding and rim protection.

Most importantly, the roster returns a notable size addition, which was much needed for the Braves, 7'1" center Ahmet Jonovic, giving Bradley the defensive continuity and the reliable frontcourt required to remain consistently above the league's high-risk middle tier and finish in the top four.



## 5. Belmont Bruins

The Bruins are a reliable, consistent threat in Arch Madness, securing the fifth spot in our rankings. Belmont's strength lies in its established offensive system and the high continuity of a strong returning core that avoids the chaos of radical transfer portal overhauls.

The backcourt is operated by senior guard Tyler Lundblade, a veteran presence who previously played at TCU and SMU, leading the Bruins in 3-point shooting a year ago. The primary source of stability, however, is the formidable frontcourt pairing of sophomore forward Sam Orme and junior forward Brigham Rogers.

This duo offers reliable interior scoring, rebounding depth and critical positional length. Rogers will provide substantial interior muscle, while Orme will give the Bruins length and versatility. Their strong system fluency and high roster continuity mean they are well-equipped to capitalize on the instability and chemistry issues plaguing mid-tier rivals from the transfer portal, consistently positioning Belmont as a highly reliable team among the conference's contenders.



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# MVC Men's Basketball Preseason Rankings

Jaylen harris & Jake aimone

Contributors



## 6. Indiana State Sycamores

Under second-year head coach Matthew Graves, the number one scoring team in the Valley last year – with defense historically their primary problem – is attempting to become a more “international team,” reliant on new cohesion. While Indiana State suffered catastrophic departures, losing 68 percent of its scoring and 60 percent of its minutes played, their ranking is based on the hope of favoring the high quality of their portal haul over the severe losses.

The new core is structured by graduate center Markus Harding, a transfer from Central Michigan and a product of Canada's basketball system, providing a proven interior anchor. Junior guard Camp Wagner, a transfer from Rice, offers essential backcourt stability. Remaining returners, including guards Bruno Alocen and Sterling Young, can help integrate a roster that includes multiple international signees. If the transfers can gel quickly, the Sycamores will be able to secure a good seed in Arch Madness.



## 8. Southern Illinois Salukis

Following a 14-19 season, the Salukis look to bounce back as they have a healthy amount of returners, including five who played in at least 27 games. Headlined by Drew Steffe, who acquired a starting role near the midpoint of the season, head coach Scott Nagy wasn't as involved in the offseason as he was in his freshman campaign. Now, just because he wasn't as active doesn't mean he hasn't made significant acquisitions.

All eyes will be on the triad of newcomers: Isaiah Stafford, Quel'Ron House and Caden Hawkins. Stafford, a transfer from Valparaiso, missed last year due to a knee injury, but averaged almost 17 points per game the year before. House, a sophomore transfer from Jacksonville State, started in 22 of 29 games played and averaged over eight points per contest for the Gamecocks. Hawkins, a junior transfer from John A. Logan College, has Saluki royal blood coursing through his veins as his father, Shane Hawkins, is one of the greatest three-point shooters in SIU's history.

Combine the returning group with the trio of incoming guards, and Nagy has got himself an intriguing team with the potential to right the wrongs from last season.



## 10. Evansville Purple Aces

The transfer portal may have hit Evansville the hardest in the MVC. Unfortunately for the Purple Aces, four of their top five scorers from last year opted for the transfer portal. In response, head coach David Ragland hit the recruiting trail and reeled in some size and veteran presence. The size is provided by 6'11" freshman James Dyson-Merwe from Australia, and the veterans arrive in numbers; Keishon Porter, Alex Hemenway and A.J. Casey are all seniors or older.

On the flip side of that coin, Evansville is thrilled to welcome back 2024-25 MVC Defensive Player of the Year, Connor Turnbull. Factor in returning Joshua Hughes who was top five in blocks last year, and the Purple Aces are primed to be a tough defensive out on every possession this season. However, the question for them this season is how long the apparent “defense wins championships” motto will last.



## 7. Drake Bulldogs

Placing Drake in the lower half of the rankings in the MVC, especially after last season's NCAA tournament bid, feels criminal. However, Drake not only lost their leader, head coach Ben McCollum, but also watched the players who orchestrated the upset over Missouri in the first round walk. With that being said, Eric Henderson has built this year's team from the ground up.

Starting off with some familiar faces, Henderson brought Owen Larson with him from South Dakota State and acquired seven footer Isaiah Carr from Denver due to his performance against Henderson and the Jackrabbits. Other notable additions include sharpshooters Jaeshon Thomas from Charlotte and Braden Appelhans from New Mexico, premier defenders Jalen Quinn from Loyola and Wilguens Exacte from Bowling Green, and Gatorade Players of the Year in their respective states Griffen Goodbary from South Dakota and Bryson Bahl from Nebraska should round out a new core of Bulldogs.

Drake's performance this season depends on how quickly and effectively this group of players can mesh together.



## 9. University of Illinois Chicago Flames

Clearly in a rebuilding phase, UIC only has three players returning from last year's squad. Furthermore, two of those three are redshirt freshmen with only three games of experience between them. The final member, however, Ahmad Henderson II, led the MVC in free-throw percentage (.899) last season. Undaunted, head coach Rob Ehsan dialed in and recruited 12 new athletes ranging from freshmen to graduate students.

Beginning with the seasoned vets, Ehsan hauled in four graduate students — Abdul Momoh, Josiah Hammons, Sam Silverstein, and Tai Walters-Whitaker — and a redshirt senior, Chris Walker. Walker looks to light up the scoreboard in the Windy City as he averaged 11.5 points and hit 43 percent beyond the arc last year for the Binghamton Bearcats. Ehsan also recruited four young bucks in Nano Barrantes, Rashund Washington Jr., Andy Johnson and AJ Morgan. Barrantes and Washington earned all-state honors twice in their prep careers.

Seeing as 80 percent of their roster is fresh to the system, it will be interesting to see how quickly they can adapt to Ehsan's play style and build chemistry amongst themselves.



## 11. Valparaiso Beacons

After last year's incredible improvement in terms of their record, head coach Roger Powell Jr. and the Beacons watched helplessly as the past two MVC Freshman of the Year players, Cooper Schwieger and All Wright, departed. Coincidentally, the Beacons will be relying on young talent this season as ten of their 17 players rostered are sophomores and younger with seven of them being freshmen. Not to mention, four of their transfers are coming from Division II and the NAIA.

Two bright spots appear in the transfers of Isaiah Barnes and Owen Dease. Both are redshirt seniors with plenty of playing time, and they both produced nine-plus points per game last year. Yet, when you add it all up, the vast majority of the Beacon's personnel have zero experience at the Division I level. Whether this young, inexperienced team will find success in the MVC remains to be seen.



BRADLEY UNIVERSITY

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# MVC Women's Basketball Power Rankings: Who's on Top and Who will Drop

By Micah Gatewood & Cristina Solano

## Contributors

The Scout presents our first edition of Missouri Valley Conference women's basketball power rankings for the season. Contributors Micah Gatewood and Cristina Solano ranked the 11 teams in the conference, and though the season has started, these rankings are primarily focused on offseason moves and preseason performances. It is important to note that power rankings are not the standings.



## 1. Belmont Bruins

For the second time in four seasons, the Belmont Bruins have been selected to win the conference title. With their guard-heavy roster, there's a lot of depth and knowledge between their returners and newcomers.

With their nine-year veteran coach, Bart Brooks, who has a record of 215-47 over the past 13 seasons, the Bruins are the team to watch this upcoming season.



## 2. Murray State Racers

Murray State may not start at number one this season, but it remains a team no one wants to face. After claiming both the regular season and MVC tournament titles last year, the Racers return one of the league's most dominant players in Katelyn Young, who has surpassed 3,000 career points, a milestone few MVC players have ever reached.

Their 83-62 championship win over Belmont proved just how explosive their offense can be when it's clicking. The Racers set a new conference record with 86.8 points per game, powered by their fast-paced style and sharp shooting. Even though they start in the second spot, Murray State's combination of experience and offensive firepower makes them a legitimate repeat title threat.



## 3. Drake Bulldogs

The Bulldogs are fresh off a fourth-place finish and are looking to climb higher this year. Senior guard Abbie Aalsma leads the young team, averaging 9.7 points, and recently scored 22 in the season opener against Eastern Illinois.

The Bulldogs are a very poised defensive team but struggle on offense, averaging 17 turnovers last season. However, with the talent they have, and a strong core of veterans, the Bulldogs are an under-the-radar team that others should keep an eye on.



## 4. Illinois State

Illinois State landed within the top five-ranked teams last season for very good reason. The Redbirds ended the season with a record of 24-13 while going 9-1 when playing at home. Forwards Neveah Thomas and Addison Martin were voted the MVC's players to watch. Martin was an All-MVC newcomer her first year and surpassed 1,000 points last season against Southern Illinois. Alongside Thomas averaging 12.1 points and seven rebounds, and the efficient scoring of the team as a whole, the Redbirds are a dangerous team to face.



## 5. Northern Iowa Panthers

UNI is an under-the-radar but solid team. They have a relatively young team but elite upperclassmen who control the way with efficient scoring and IQ. Seniors Maya McDermott, who averaged 18.3 points and was named to the All-MVC first team last season, and Kayba Laube, named to the All-MVC third team, lead the way this upcoming season. If the Panthers can improve their field goal percentage and utilize their scorers, they will be in good shape to be a threat this season.



## 6. University of Illinois Chicago Flames

UIC has shown steady improvement since joining the MVC and now finds itself pushing toward the middle of the standings. Senior guard Makiyah Williams provides leadership and scoring, averaging 11.2 points per game last season and earning a spot on the all-MVC third team.

Despite occasional struggles on defense, the Flames have proven they can hang with stronger teams. They pushed Illinois State deep into the fourth quarter in their February matchup. The Flames' biggest challenge this season will be building consistency on both ends of the floor, but with growing experience and offensive potential, they could surprise a few of the top-tier programs.





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## 7. Valparaiso Beacons

Valparaiso has shown quiet but steady progress over the past two seasons. They are defensively tough and have a growing sense of chemistry under coach Mary Evans.

To move up in the standings, Valpo will need more scoring consistency from its backcourt and improvement in rebounding. They’re not yet a top-tier threat, but they have discipline and defensive focus to play spoiler against stronger teams in the MVC.



## 8. Bradley Braves

Bradley continues to rebuild with promising young talent that’s beginning to find its rhythm. Their roster features several underclassmen who gained valuable minutes last season and are ready for bigger roles this season. While the Braves lacked offensive consistency last season, their young core shows flashes of potential in transition play and outside shooting.

The challenge this year will be closing out tight games, something that cost them multiple wins last season. If their recruits can provide scoring support and steady defense, Bradley could surprise teams and climb toward the middle of the standings.



## 9. Evansville Purple Aces

Evansville is still deep in a rebuild but showing slow signs of progress. The Purple Aces have added height and athleticism to their lineup, helping them compete on the boards. Last season, they struggled offensively and fell short in several winnable games. However, their energy and determination remain their biggest strengths.

Head coach Robyn Scherr-Wells has emphasized development and toughness, giving younger players valuable court time. If the Aces can generate more scoring from the perimeter and improve ball control, they may finally begin climbing out of the bottom of the standings.



## 10. Indiana State Sycamores

Indiana State has been working through growing pains, but is starting to show flashes of progress. Players like Savannah White have been key defensive anchors, ranking among MVC leaders in blocked shots. Four different Sycamores recorded double-digit blocks last season, showing an improved defensive presence in the paint.

Despite their 2-18 conference record in 2024-25, the Sycamores have begun to establish a stronger team identity centered on hustle and grit. If they can develop reliable scoring leaders and improve late-game execution, they could make a meaningful step forward this season.



## 11. Southern Illinois Salukis

The Salukis aren’t conference contenders with their 4-26 record a year ago. However, they aim to make a change with their newcomers and reach a higher rank.

Graduate forward Indya Green, who averaged 12 points, and sophomore transfer guard Alayna Kraus, who received MVC all-tournament honors, are the players to watch for the MVC. If the Salukis want to see change, they need to focus on their field-goal and three-point percentage. If they improve on those two areas, they can see themselves higher in the ranks for the MVC.





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# Staff Picks: Basketball breakout player

By: Scout Sports Staff



Bradley basketball is back underway as both the men and women's regular seasons have tipped off. The Scout Sports staff has made our picks for who we think the top breakout players will be this season.

## Timoty van der Knapp

By Ethan Diamond

While Timoty van der Knapp didn't make much of an impact in his freshman season at Bradley, his sophomore campaign is certainly set to be an impactful one.

Despite playing over 10 minutes just once in the regular season last year, van der Knapp logged two starts in the NIT, with his most productive round coming in the first round against North Alabama. In that game, van der Knapp played for 20 minutes, scoring eight points off 3-for-8 from the floor and picked up three rebounds. Van der Knapp also saw significant action in Bradley's opener against St. Bonaventure, logging 22 minutes and picking up four rebounds.

If the scoring can come along, van der Knapp could solidify himself as a top breakout player for Bradley this season.

## Demarion Burch

By Jake Aimone

With Duke Deen gone, someone has to fill the gap as the leader of the Braves. Enter Demarion Burch. Not only is Burch eight inches taller than Deen, but he's been playing under him for the past two years. Additionally, he's seen considerable playing time over his freshman and sophomore years.

Burch is poised to be the main point guard and will most likely, barring an injury, start every game this season. The Braves will be relying on the explosive lefty to not only rack up the minutes this season, but to also lead the way in the offensive attack.

## Corey Thomas

By Jaylen Harris

Corey Thomas is poised for a breakout senior season when looking at the significant roster turnover. As one of the few returning contributors for Bradley, the 6'10" forward will see a major increase in opportunity and minutes. Thomas is a highly efficient scorer who shot 53% from the field and 37% from three-point range in his junior year. This versatile skillset – size with floor-stretching ability – makes him an ideal fit for the Braves' offense, positioning him to become a key offensive focal point and one of the MVC's most improved players.

## Montana Wheeler

By Latif Love

Wheeler has impressed to begin the season. He made his mark in Bradley's exhibition against Green Bay and then provided a spark in their first game of the season against St. Bonaventure. He's usually the small-led player on a court, but also the toughest. He has an outstanding balance of scoring and playmaking and has looked confident in his shot. It's rare for Coach Wardle to trust freshman guards early in the season, so he has to have proved himself in practice already. Wheeler could be this year's Jaquan Johnson.

## Mya Wardle

By Mark Wagner

After the exhibition against Saint Louis, Bradley fans found out exactly what Mya Wardle can do on the court against Division I opponents. Coach Pop has shown she's not afraid to give the freshmen and sophomores a chance to shine, and despite Wardle coming off the bench in all of her Eastern Kentucky appearances, this sentiment applies to her too.

When put in the right environment, the Peoria native can be a starting-caliber guard, which is what she has been at Bradley so far. It's only been two games, but if Wardle continues her fantastic form, her breakout won't be far away.