

New Faces Help Coyotes Put Pieces Back In Place

Additions Allow Returning Players To Move To More Natural Positions

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VERMILLION — Sure, there will be new adventures all season for the South Dakota men's basketball team, but some of the puzzle pieces will fit into their natural spots.

Whether it's guards, forwards or centers, the Coyotes figure to have players working back into their natural positions.

"We were really small last year, I think everyone knew that," said coach Dave Boots, whose team is 3-5 and 0-2 in the Summit League through Dec. 9. "It was a challenge for us to defend last year, and also rebound."

"We relied an awful lot on the perimeter."

That likely won't be the case for the Coyotes, in their first year of Summit League action.

A year ago, USD started with two newcomers in the paint — then-freshman Trevor Gruis and transfer Ricardo Andreotti. Fellow transfer Charlie Westbrook was put in the slasher role — the "three" spot — and a trio of guards trickled in and out of the starting lineup.

Enter Allen Saint-Gelais, a 6-foot-7 junior transfer from Laramie (Wyo.) County Community College. The long and athletic Frenchman will settle into the role occupied by Westbrook last year, which means everyone else falls back into their natural fits.

"Ricardo and I are pretty interchangeable, and now we're a year older and we're more comfortable together," Gruis said this week. "Getting Allen was huge for us, because he's a perfect three."

"Rebounding was really tough for us last year, but that's what Allen does so well, plus he's a little bigger body out there for us."

Senior Louie Krogman (15.0 ppg this season) will assume the post guard duties, while Westbrook (16.0 ppg, 3.6 rpg), also a senior, will move to the off-guard position. Freshmen Nimrod Hilliard and Brandon Bos will also see significant minutes at guard, as will junior Jordan Boots (5.6 ppg).

Gruis (14.0 ppg, 6.1 rpg) and Andreotti (3.8 ppg, 6.8 rpg) settle back into their post positions. Unlike last season, the Coyotes have some depth in the paint, with sophomore Jared Bartling and junior transfer Nick Mabbutt.

Whoever is on the court for USD will be facing better opponents in the Summit League. After three years in the Great West Conference, the Coyotes join a conference that not only has an NCAA Tournament bid, but better teams top to bottom.

"Competition wise, it'll be better teams. That's what I look forward to, seeing better players, and having those challenges every single night," Gruis said.

The Coyotes open Summit League action at home Dec. 28 against Southern Utah, followed by a Dec. 30 matchup with Oral Roberts. Though USD is not eligible for the post-season tournament in Sioux Falls, it won't slow the team's desire to win.

"I've always enjoyed the beginning to end of a conference schedule," coach Boots said. "Playing everyone, that's the thrill of a conference. Every one will be so important, you can win your way into being a contender."

Based upon the pre-season poll, Summit League coaches don't expect USD to be a contender. The Coyotes were picked to finish last.

"We don't have anything to lose," said Gruis, who believes the selection was "probably where we should be as a newcomer."

"We can make a name for ourselves right away if we win more games than people thought."



COYOTES | RICARDO ANDREOTTI

Nations

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— was slotted with the newcomers.

"When these kids come on campus, he was their host guy," James said. "Ricky was able to relate to those guys in ways we couldn't get to. He's like the grandfather to those guys, he cooks for them, makes sure they're on task."

Once the five players got to Vermillion and began their life at USD, they were able to adjust quickly, because, as Saint-Gelais said, "It's always easier to know you have people from other countries."

Added Mabbutt, "They put us in a room with a few guys who've been here before, so it makes it easier on us new guys. All the guys are welcoming. We're a tight-knit bunch."

Even though four of the newcomers spent time at junior colleges — mostly in small towns like Vermillion, there's still quite a difference between, say, Guadalupe and rural South Dakota.

"Most of the time, the people from Europe or South America have a whole other culture; they don't see things the same way," said Saint-Gelais, who spent one season at Division I Grambling State (La.) before leaving for Wyoming.

"When I was at Grambling, I was the only one from a different country, so that was tough on me."

So far, the four newcomers have adjusted well, James said. Saint-Gelais has seen the most time this season, averaging 13.4 minutes a game. Bos has spelled Nimrod Hilliard and Louie Krogman at the point guard spot, while Mabbutt has seen brief time at the forward position.

The youngest of the group, Bos, said the adjustment to D-I basketball has been made easier by the presence of his fellow foreigners.

"I get along really well with the other foreign guys, and the whole team has a really good bond, so that made it nice for me coming out here," he said.

And "out here" certainly applies to Vermillion.

Mabbutt, who still has family in England as well as Seattle, Wash., has found ways to stay in touch with his British relatives.

"Thank god for Skype," he said, smiling. "I'd go insane if I didn't have that."

COMMENTARY | ESD GIRLS' BASKETBALL

Depth Of League Will Make For An Exciting League Race

BY JEREMY HOECK
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If you put every Eastern South Dakota Conference (ESD) girls' basketball team in a hat and had to draw one out to be the champion, an argument could be made for any number of teams.

That's how deep the conference is again this season.

And nobody knows that better than Watertown and Yankton. The Arrows won the regular season league title over the Gazelles last season, but Watertown didn't even qualify for the state tournament. Yankton did but finished eighth.

For good measure, Brandon Valley — a team Yankton beat three times — won the state title.

A little frustrating, wouldn't you say?

"I don't know what the top is and what the bottom is, and I think that should tell you a lot," Yankton coach Doug Pesicka said of this season's ESD race. "I don't think you'll see the champion win 11-12 conference games, just because of how competitive it is."

Not only is the league competitive, but it's loaded with talent.

Each of the conference's top-tier teams boasts a Division I-caliber superstar: Chloe Cornemann (Yankton) and Kerri Young (Mitchell) are headed to South Dakota State, while Tia Hemiller (Watertown) and Heidi Hoff (Brandon Valley) signed with the University of South Dakota.

Hemiller, Young and Hoff earned first team Class AA All-



Jeremy HOECK

State honors last season, while Yankton's Emily Fedders — a senior this season — was named to the second team. Brandon Valley junior Allison Koehn also returns after earning All-Tournament honors last season.

In other words, every conference game figures to be a dog fight.

"There aren't any gimme games, unfortunately," Watertown coach Pat McClemons said. "I can't ever remember seeing our league this strong."

The last time the ESD made such a splash at the state tournament was in 2009, when Watertown won the title over Brandon Valley. That year, Pierre was third, Aberdeen Central was fourth and Huron took seventh.

Since then, teams like Yankton and Mitchell have begun to rise to the top of the conference. In the case of the Kernels, their rise coincided with the development of Young, Megan Farnham (Jr.), Macy Miller (So.) and Dana Misiaszek (Sr.)

"No team in the league will lay down," Mitchell coach Wes Morgan said. "Even when we weren't

very good, we scared some teams. I just think it'll be fun; like it's always been."

No longer will Mitchell sneak up on people. There's a good chance the Kernels will be ranked No. 2 or 3 in many of the pre-season polls, even with Miller out until January following an ACL injury.

In the case of Yankton, which will also likely be ranked, one of the keys for the Gazelles will be their size. Mikala Hora (Jr.) is 5-foot-10, while Kelsey Fitzgerald (Jr.) is a legitimate 6-foot — not to mention Sarah Ekeren (Sr.) and Kelsey Butler (Jr.), both at 5-10.

Saying that he believes Fitzgerald will have the biggest impact, McClemons said he would select Yankton as the pre-season ESD favorite.

Yankton's coach wasn't quite ready to go that far, but Pesicka said his team has the experience necessary to be a tough team to beat.

"We have guarded optimism," he said with a smile. "We think we'll be one of those competitive teams; one of those teams when other schools see us on their schedule, they know they'll have a tough one."

One team that, despite their third place finish at state, figures to be in the mix again is Aberdeen Central. The Golden Eagles are perhaps the longest team in the ESD — with seven players at least 5-foot-10.

The newest piece to that puzzle is Faulkton transfer Sam Knecht, who at 6-foot-2 will give

"Someone asked if we were going to go undefeated in the conference, and I just had to laugh. It'll be a fight, no matter who you play."

Mitchell Coach Wes Morgan

ESD teams headaches all season.

McClemons joked that because of Aberdeen's size and depth, "Their practices may be better than some of their games."

With such a loaded conference, not to mention the out-of-ESD contests against Sioux Falls and Rapid City schools, the champion of the ESD could very easily have five losses.

It would take an even more remarkable season to go through the slate with 1-2 losses.

"It's really cliched, but you seriously have to play one game at a game," Pesicka said. "If you

start looking ahead, it'll scare the heck out of you."

When the dust settles, you can expect to see the same teams fighting for the league title — Watertown, Yankton, Aberdeen Central, Brandon Valley and Mitchell.

Just don't expect to see sparkling records by the time playoffs begin.

"Someone asked if we were going to go undefeated in the conference, and I just had to laugh," Morgan said. "It'll be a fight, no matter who you play."

Hockey

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combined varsity and JV roster, the team will need everyone to contribute on the ice, even the backup goalie.

"One of our goalies will have to skate at times," Stoll noted. "JV and varsity, they'll be the same kids."

While Stoll expects the team to take some lumps in their first varsity season, he is hoping the experience and doubled ice time helps build the squad for the future.

"Hopefully we can win some JV games. We might get lucky and win some varsity games, too," he said. "I think it should be fun."

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