



BASKETBALL PREVIEW

SPECIAL SECTION

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'Dogs return four starters

Estridge, Fandja to lead men, who open season Saturday

BY JACK NICHOLL
Assistant Sports Editor

The men's basketball team has another year under its belt.

Eight of the team's 15 players are sophomores, including three transfers. Even the lone freshman on the roster, center Vesko Filchev, has a year of experience after taking a medical redshirt last season.

The multitude of second-year players should help improve on the team's 5-22 campaign in 2007-08.

"Last year a lot of us were just going off of our own personal AAU experience or high school experience, and that was not the level of what the MIAA expects of you," sophomore forward Ethan Freeman said. "It forces the team to compete. So now we know what it takes — in practice and in conditioning you know you have to keep in shape or else you're not going to keep up in the game."

Freeman started in all but three games last season, and he was the leading freshman scorer with 7.4 points per game. Sophomore guards Alex Henderson and Stefan Garrison and sophomore forward Mark Misiewicz each contributed in at least 20 games.

Schrader said he has no set starting five and he is unsure who will start the season-opener against William Woods University (Mo.) this Saturday. In the exhibition matchup against Drake University (Iowa) on Nov. 1, senior forward Patrick Fandja, Freeman, senior guard Banks Estridge, junior guard Gabe Landau and sophomore guard Garrison were the starters.

Schrader said the team will run the same motion offense it did last year.

"We can be patient, but we run every chance we get," Schrader said. "And then if we don't get a shot in transition then we take the best shot we can. I feel comfortable if we are playing in the 50s or the

80s, as long as we are executing our offense."

The team is led by Estridge and Fandja, both of whom played in every game last season, with Estridge starting every game. Estridge was second on the team with 12.3 points per game.

The big loss from last year was the graduating of forward Nick Certa, who led the team with 14.6 points per game and was tied for second on the team with 5.9 rebounds a game. He accounted for 24 percent of the team's scoring.

"We have the shooting to replace him, but you're not going to see just one guy step in and take up all his points," sophomore center David Scott said. "He was also a rebounder, and we have rebounding this year in our fours and in our fives. So it's not like just one person is going to replace him."

The good news is that Certa was the only major loss. The other two seniors, Josias Flynn and Ryan Robinson, combined for just 2.5 points a game.

The loss of Certa has had little effect on Estridge's role as a leader.

"Even last year I was more of a vocal leader," Estridge said. "So I haven't changed too much going into this year as far as exerting myself vocally. I think just patience has been my biggest thing because we've got a lot of new guys, a lot of guys who know they can play."

With Filchev and Scott back in the lineup, the team has two options at center who are at least 6-foot-11. Freeman, Fandja and sophomore transfer forward Andrew James also will provide a presence down low.

Filchev, who used to play on the Bulgarian junior national team, said he still is adjusting to the American style of basketball because he only played in the five games last year.

Sophomore transfers Brandon Griffin and Brian Nwelue also will add to the team. They played together in high school in Texas. Freeman said they bring athleticism to the team.

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Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index
Senior forward Banks Estridge is the leading returning scorer at 12.3 points per game. The men return four starters from their 5-22 campaign last season.

Men can defy poll

Don't expect Banks Estridge to get fired up about the men's basketball team's last-place preseason ranking in the MIAA coaches poll. It's nothing the senior guard hasn't seen before.

"It's kind of been the same way all four years that I've been here — we haven't really been ranked higher than last or second- or third-to-last," Estridge said before practice Monday. "... We know we're better than that."

This is the second time in Estridge's Truman career that the Bulldogs have entered the season ranked last in the preseason conference poll. In that four-year span the Bulldogs never have been ranked higher than eighth.

Yet in two of the past three seasons, the Bulldogs have finished with winning seasons and at least a .500 record in conference play.

"They've been wrong before, they can be wrong again," head coach Jack Schrader said of the rankings.

They might be wrong again this year.

Don't let the Bulldogs' 5-22 record from 2007-08 fool you. Despite losing the most games in a season since the 'Dogs lost 23 games in 2001-02, Truman was competitive in most of its games. Thirteen of the Bulldogs' 22 losses were by 10 points or fewer.

This year, the men have more production returning to the lineup than almost any other team in the MIAA. The 'Dogs return four of five starters and their top three contributors off the bench.

Yes, Truman did lose two-time All-MIAA performer and last season's leading scorer Nick Certa, plus two role players off the bench. But even so, 72 percent of the offensive production from last season's roster returns to the team this season.

Only two MIAA teams have as much offense returning from last season as Truman — the University of Central Missouri and Fort Hays State University. Those teams are ranked second and fourth, respectively, in the preseason MIAA coaches' poll.

The largely inexperienced 2007-08 Bulldog squad took its lumps last season but gained the experience it needed. Now, last season's contingent of key freshmen — Sophomore

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COMMENTARY



Blake Toppmeyer

Bulldogs face adversity

New women's basketball head coach Michael Smith sat in his office Monday afternoon talking about championships. Twice as head a coach Smith has guided a team to a regional championship.

"I've got two rings," he said. "... There is nothing better than being able to cut down a net. It's the greatest feeling in the world and nobody can take that feeling away from you."

Unfortunately for Smith and his players, they won't get to experience that feeling this season. This year's women's team has more question marks than that crazy guy who is always trying to give away free money has

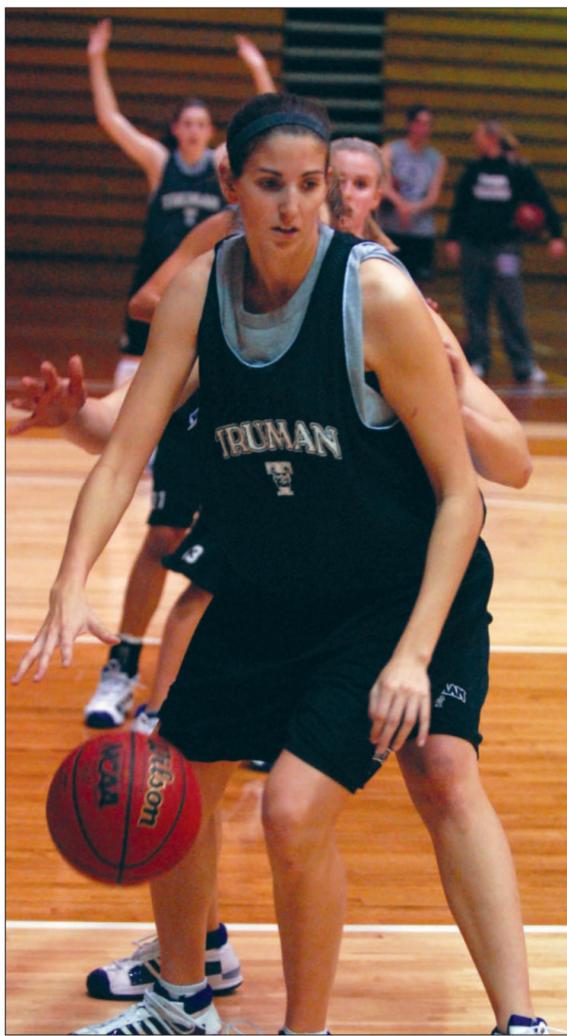
on his suit. There is no need for the athletic department to go out and buy some new scissors this year.

Smith knows this. Even before his first game on the bench, Smith is one of the most honest coaches at this University. He admits his team needs work.

"We're going through growing pains right now, and that's because of our lack of experience," Smith said. "And that's not the kids' fault."

The national title can wait — right now Smith is trying to build a program. It won't be easy, but Smith thinks he can do it. To accomplish this

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Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index
Sarah Gordon dribbles near the basket during practice on Tuesday. She is one of many players who did not play often last season.

Women feature untested roster

Two-time All-MIAA forward Mueller lone starter to return

BY BRENT FOSTER
Staff Reporter

The good news is the women's basketball team returns two-time All-MIAA senior forward Georgia Mueller. The bad news is the Bulldogs have the task of replacing the other four starters from last season's 16-13 squad.

That task begins Saturday evening when the Bulldogs kick off the regular season at 5 p.m. in Denton, Texas at the Texas Woman's Pioneer Premier against Cameron University (Okla.).

"Our biggest problem right now is our lack of experience," head basketball coach Michael Smith said. "It's killing us. There's no other word for it. I'm racking my brain everyday trying to figure it out."

Mueller averaged 22 points and nine rebounds per game last season while garnering first team All-MIAA honors. Her efforts helped lead the team to its first winning record since the 2001-02 season. The Bulldogs have not had a winning record in conference play since 1999-00.

But after Mueller, the rest of this year's team made minimal contributions last season because four seniors garnered the majority of the

playing time. Other than Mueller, the nine players returning from last season's squad combined to average fewer than 25 points per game.

Mueller is the only Bulldog returner who saw significant playing time last season. She led the 'Dogs in minutes per game with just more than 32. But after Mueller the next leading returner in minutes is junior guard Laura Joya, who averaged 16 minutes per game.

"We've got juniors and sophomores right now that are really freshmen because they've never gotten to play the college game, significant minutes," Smith said. "That's been our biggest adversity right now — our lack of experience."

Smith said it is because of the lack of game experience that he has not seen enough solid play from the rest of the team to come up with a definite starting lineup to join Mueller.

"There's been no separation," Smith said. "That's unusual. That's bad. That's a bad thing. ... I look down the bench and I'm like 'Please tell me it's going to get better.' You know in a good way, just because I want somebody to stand out besides Georgia."

Smith said he expects junior Julie Guinn expects to join Mueller in the starting lineup at point guard. Guinn averaged four points per game last season before injuring her knee late in the season. Smith also said Joya and

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