

Women's PSAC West to feature fierce competition

By Steve Cukovich

Assistant Sports Editor

The Indiana University (Pa.) Crimson Hawks and the Warriors of East Stroudsburg have been picked to finish number one in their respective divisions in the Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference (PSAC) preseason coaches poll with The Rock projected to finish sixth in the west.

Green and White sophomore guard Brooke Hinderliter was the top PSAC West freshman last season as she averaged 10.5 points and 4.8 rebounds per game. Head coach Bobby McGraw led his team to a 9-19 overall record last season which landed them eighth in the division, but with additions like St. Francis transfer, redshirt sophomore Madison Johnson, McGraw likes what his team has to bring to the table.

"This is the best team chemistry I've had here in my four years as head coach without a doubt," McGraw said. "This team really enjoys being around each other. When you have chemistry and skill you have a chance to do something pretty special."

Indiana, who defeated California University 84-79 last season in the PSAC Championship game, led by head coach Tom McConnell was able to take first place in the west coaches poll after receiving eight of the nine first place votes. All five starters from last year will return including junior Carolyn Appleby who posted an average of 14.7 points per game and senior guard/forward Megan Smith who helped out with 14.1 points a game.

In second would be California who posted a 30-4 record behind the top offense in the PSAC with 80.6 points a game was able to earn them the top spot coming out of the west last year behind head coach Jessica Strom. The team will return three

starters including last season's conference leading scorer, senior forward Seairra Barrett who was able to earn her team an average of 18.6 points and 6.8 rebounds a game.

"We don't talk a lot about offense," Strom said. "Most of our offense comes from our defense; its the same expectations as last year."

Third in the west brings Edinboro University behind head coach Stan Swank who finished fourth in the division last year with a 21-9 overall record. In one of the top offenses in the conference, the Fighting Scots led by senior forward Ciara Rosten was able to collect 11.9 points a game, while the team averaged 70.5 points.

Seton Hill clocks in at number four in the west led by head coach Mark Katarski who lead his team to a 16-13 record last season while he watched senior guard Jenna Kaufman dominate and rack up 15.2 points a game against their opponents.

"I hate talking about individual players," Katarski said. "It's a one year season, no one has a head start. What happened last year has no effect on this year."

At number five comes Gannon University who returns all five starters as well such as senior guard Maggie Mitchell who tallied 17.3 points per game last season which landed her fifth in the conference for scoring. The Golden Knights ended their season with a 9-19 record placing seventh and missing the PSAC Tournament for the first time in five years.

After The Rock, at number seven sits Clarion University who made the playoffs last season at the number six seed with a 15-14 overall record. Returning starters include junior guard Jordan Bekelja who averaged 11 points a game and senior

guard Amesha Harden-Pullium with 9.8 points per game.

Sliding in at number eight would be the University of Pitt-Johnstown behind head coach Mike Drahos. The Mountain Cats posted an 8-20 record with a team that included seven freshmen players with most of them seeing a lot of court time.

"They made major strides," Drahos said regarding his seven freshmen last year who are now sophomores. "Importantly they got experience and hopefully we are more battle tested coming into this season."

Rounding out the west lands Mercyhurst University who landed a 24-8 record last season putting them in third place in the west, saw many of their starters graduate this off-season and added six freshman to their roster. In fact the Lakers have just one senior and two juniors on their roster, making them one of the most inexperienced teams in the PSAC.

Coming out of the east, the Warriors were picked number one receiving seven of the nine first place votes behind head coach Diane Decker. Senior guard Imani Brown and junior guard Noelle Powell who earned first team all-conference honors last season as they combined for 26.3 points per game. They ended with a 19-9 record last season and fell to California in the quarterfinals of the PSAC Tournament.

Second from the east and receiving the other two votes of the possible nine was West Chester University who finished with a 10-17 record behind head coach Kiera Wooden. The teams leading scorer senior guard Porscha Speller averaged 13.7 points and 5.8 rebounds per game last season as she received first team all-conference honors.

Up next Kutztown University comes in at number three led by head coach Janet

Malouf posting a 13-18 overall record last season. The reigning PSAC East Freshman of the Year, guard Sierra Taylor, will look to continue her dominance as she averaged 11.2 points per game in her rookie year.

In fourth is Bloomsburg University who is coming off a 11-17 season after a poor start, but then winning 10 of their final 15 games. Junior guard Alyssa Mack lead the team in scoring with 13.2 points per game. Head coach Alison Tagliaferri's team lost in the quarterfinals last season to Shippensburg University.

Shippensburg comes in at number five after finishing number one in the east last season with a 24-7 record which joins East Stroudsburg as the only Eastern teams to finish with a record above .500. Behind head coach Kristy Trn and the Raiders will look to overcome their 67-58 semi-final overtime loss to IUP last season.

At number six is Millersville University is led by longtime head coach Mary Fleig who earned her 600th career win last season when the team posted a 10-19 record earning them the six spot in the PSAC tournament. Senior guard Alayah Hall lead the team last season in scoring as she registered 13.1 points per contest.

Starting the bottom third of the east comes Lock Haven University who finished with a 10-16 record behind head coach Jennifer Smith. After their leading scorer graduated, junior guard Madison McHale may be the one to fill that roll as she finished second on the team in scoring with 10.3 points per game. Cheyney University comes in next after posting a 6-17 record last season, while Mansfield finishes off the east in ninth after posting a PSAC worst 5-21 record last year.

MEN'S BASKETBALL PSAC-WEST PRESEASON STANDINGS

1. IUP
2. GANNON
3. MERCYHURST
4. SLIPPERY ROCK
5. CALIFORNIA (PA.)
6. UPJ
7. SETON HILL
8. EDINBORO
9. CLARION



WOMEN'S BASKETBALL PSAC-WEST PRESEASON STANDINGS

1. IUP
2. CALIFORNIA (PA.)
3. EDINBORO
4. SETON HILL
5. GANNON
6. SLIPPERY ROCK
7. CLARION
8. UPJ
9. MERCYHURST

PSAC pegged as one of Division II's toughest conferences

By Justin Kraus

Sports Editor

With exhibition games in the books, The Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference men's basketball teams will start non-conference play this weekend, and will start conference play next week.

"There are some quality coaches, there is stability in a lot of places," Indiana (Pa.) head coach Joe Lombardi said. "Year-to-year, talent may fluctuate, but they will always be well-coached. I think that's one of the biggest reasons the PSAC is one of the strongest conferences in the country year in and year out."

Lombardi along with the other PSAC coaches expect the conference to be even more competitive than it was last year.

"Overall, there are going to be a lot of improved teams in the west," Lombardi said. "One thing I can guarantee is that they will make improvement from one year to the next."

Leading the way for the PSAC-West division will be the Indiana (Pa.) Crimson Hawks, who received eight of the nine first-place votes in the PSAC-West preseason poll. IUP will be following up a stellar 2016-17 campaign, where the team went 21-2 in conference play and 28-4 overall. Indiana (Pa.) lost in the second round of the NCAA tournament last year to the eventual national runner-up, Fairmont State. IUP is also ranked no. 6 in the Division II basketball national preseason rankings.

IUP will be returning four starters, including the 2016 PSAC-West player of the year, junior forward Jacobo Diaz.

"There's general hopes and there are specific hopes [for us]," Lombardi said. "Specific hopes are to make the NCAA tournament, the general goals we try to keep small

to a day-by-day focus. We hope that will lead to success in the future."

Placing second in the PSAC-West preseason poll is the Gannon golden knights, who finished second in the division last year with a 15-7 record in conference. Gannon's season came to an end last year in the PSAC playoff semifinals, falling to Kutztown 91-85 in overtime.

Gannon returns a full cupboard from last year with three of their top four scorers coming back, including senior guard Zay Jackson, who averaged 17.1 points per year, and made the third-most triple pointers in the PSAC last year.

Reilly himself will have something to look forward to, as he is nine wins shy of 450 on his career.

"Gannon has some very good core players coming back," Lombardi said.

After finishing the regular season 14-14 and 11-11 in conference play last year, the Mercyhurst Lakers fell in the PSAC quarterfinals to the aforementioned crimson hawks. Mercyhurst was selected third in the PSAC-West preseason poll, mostly thanks to returning the bulk of a team that held opponents to 68.8 points per game, namely senior big man Lorenzo Collier, who averaged 13.2 point per game.

Finishing the top half of the PSAC-West preseason poll in fourth place is Slippery Rock. Slippery Rock returns four overall players and three starters, while adding seven transfers that can play immediately. SRU led the PSAC in defense last year, holding opposing teams to 65 points per game. Senior center Christal Malalu is the best two-way returner for the Rock, having averaged 7.7 points and 6.9 rebounds per game last year.

"Slippery Rock added a lot of new talent, and they had a pretty good showing at Pitt," Lombardi said. "That bodes well for them moving forward."

"Our goal every year is to reach the NCAA tournament, and we're going to bring that attitude to practice" Slippery Rock head coach Kevin Reynolds said.

California (Pa.) is coming off of a disappointing 10-18 2016-17 campaign, and was picked fifth in the PSAC-West coaches poll. Cal will be looking to build upon their 9.1 three-pointers per game they sank last year.

"The surprise team [in the PSAC west] might be California (Pa.)," Lombardi said. "They were probably the most improved team over the course of the season last year, so I expect them to be even more improved this year."

After a stellar 19-11 overall and 13-9 conference (third-place in PSAC-West) record last year which ended in a PSAC tournament quarterfinals loss, the University of Pittsburgh-Johnstown mountain cats are expected to have a drop off this season. UPJ was selected sixth in the PSAC-West coaches poll, despite returning all-PSAC senior guard Dale Clancy.

Seton Hill, Edinboro, and Clarion were picked seventh, eighth and ninth, respectively to round out the PSAC-West.

Expected to lead the PSAC-East this year will be the no. 8 nationally preseason ranked Shippensburg raiders. Shippensburg won their second ever PSAC title last year, and fell in the second round of the NCAA tournament. The Raiders return four starters, and the NCAA Atlantic region coach of the year, Chris Fite.

Shippensburg received all but one PSAC-East preseason poll number one vote, the other went to East Stroudsburg, who was ranked third. Kutztown was ranked second in the preseason after losing in the PSAC championship game last year. West Chester, Lock Haven and Mansfield were picked fourth, fifth and sixth respectively in the middle of the pack. Bloomsburg, Millersville and Cheyney rounded out the PSAC-East preseason rankings.