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If not for Richard, Prairie Stars would be poorer

Gamble expects senior to go from role player to leader

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The University of Illinois Springfield men's basketball team is depending on Richard Oruche, and the 6-foot-3 senior guard is expecting a lot from himself.

A role player last season, Oruche will look to continue to contribute but in a larger quantity.

"He was more of an energy guy last year because we had some very good players on our ballclub," UIS coach Kevin Gamble said. "He didn't get the time he felt he could get, but the time that he got we wanted him to come in with high energy, guard the best player and just be one of those guys that puts it all on the floor when he gets out there."

Gamble is asking Oruche to do all that and more this season. He will fill a prominent role on a team dealing with the departure of eight seniors and the arrival of nine newcomers.

Oruche is one of only five returning players who saw substantial playing time last season. He moved into the starting lineup in mid-December and is the sole player back who started last season. Forwards Matt Reynolds, Ryan Thornton and Carl Hayes and guard Zach Lewis played sparingly.

Last year's seniors provided the majority of the offense. UIS needs scoring from wherever it can get it in 2009-10. Oruche, the Stars' leading returning scorer and rebounder with 11.7 points per game and 4.2 rebounds, is the likeliest source.

Oruche graduated from Bensenville Fenton High School — located in Chicago's western suburbs — as its all-time leading scorer with 1,196 points. He averaged 19.3 points as a senior.

This season is the first since he was in high school that Oruche has played on a team that needs him to score points. He walked on at Northern Illinois after graduating from Fenton in 2005.

"I had a lot of offers from (NCAA) Division II and junior colleges," he said. "It's all about the exposure you get. I went to a small high school, so I didn't really get the exposure that some people did.

"Some people that I felt like I was better than, they went to Division I. So I felt like I could play at that level. That's why I decided to go straight there."

He was a redshirt his freshman year and spent two seasons at NIU. He left the team when Ricardo Patton replaced Rob Judson as head coach.

"The new coach (Patton) was going in a different way with the program," Oruche said. "I figured my time was done there and I'd be better off going somewhere where I felt like I was more needed and fit into their program."

It appears he has found that at UIS. In anticipation of what is to come, Oruche worked with a trainer.

"I realized I was going to have to contribute this year, so all the distractions I had like partying this summer, I put them to the side in order to focus on basketball," he said.

"People had different roles on the team last year. I didn't have to contribute as much. Now I feel like I do."

He'll get his first chance Saturday when the Stars take on the University of Illinois at Chicago in an exhibition game at 3 p.m. at UIC Pavilion.

"We're going to look to Richard do a lot of things for us," Gamble said. "We look at him as a leader on our team. We know he can put the ball in the basket, but other teams know that too, so he's going to have to set guys up and do a little bit of everything as far as defense, offense and rebounding.

"Since he's such a good athlete, he can go in and rebound with some of the bigger guys."

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UIS PRAIRIE STARS

COACH: Kevin Gamble (8th season, 119-66 record)

2008-09 RECORD: 21-9 (10-4 in American Midwest Conference)

KEY LOSSES: F Nick Livas (14.4 points, 8.7 rebounds, 31 3-pointers, 2.4 assists), G Jeremy Winters (13.6 points, 5.5 rebounds), PG Kelvin Johnson (10.6 points, 4.6 assists), G Jacob Motteler (10 points, 32 3-pointers), F Ralph Woodson (6.2 points)

2009-10 CONFERENCE PREDICTION: 5th in North Division of Great Lakes Valley Conference, according to coaches' poll

OVERALL OUTLOOK: With nine newcomers joining five returnees, this year's team will definitely have a new look. UIS said goodbye to eight seniors last March after an 84-79 season-ending loss to Columbia College in the semifinals of the Midwest American Conference Tournament. Changes abound for the Stars, who have jumped from competing in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics to NCAA Division II. "There are 15 teams in our conference," UIS coach Kevin Gamble said. "In a lot of conferences, there might be one or two teams where you say, 'Hey you have a pretty good chance of winning that ballgame.' Whereas in the GLVC, every team is going to be tough to play against. Some are better than others. From top to bottom, this is going to be one of the toughest conferences in the country." Leading the Prairie Stars' transition is 6-foot-3 senior guard Richard Oruche. He is the leading returning scorer (11.7) and rebounder (4.2) and the only player who saw substantial playing time.

FRONTCOURT: The Stars have a different look in the post. "We don't have the power guys inside," Gamble said. "Last year we had a big guy in the middle, Ralph Woodson, that took up some space. Our big guys this year are not power guys. They're finesse big guys, which means we're going to have to rely on our guards to do a lot more things as far as help rebounding and defensive pressure and things of that nature." The Stars' 6-foot-7 senior forward DeAndre Miranda and 6-foot-6 junior forward Justin Sims are threats in the middle. Miranda played with the NBA's Shaun Livingston at Peoria Central before playing at Central Florida Community College. Sims averaged 20 points and was the MVP for Lewis and Clark as a freshman year. Six-foot-4 freshman Chigozie Umeadi, Oruche's cousin, will help in the frontcourt.

BACKCOURT: Lincoln College transfer Brandon Farmer, who played at Lincoln High School, and senior Derrick Tribble are vying for the starting point guard position. Farmer was named to the National Junior College Athletic Association all-tournament team last winter after helping Lincoln College place third at the Division II tourney. "Farmer is a little bit more gritty whereas Tribble is a little bit more pesky," Gamble said. "With our offense, we don't really rely on one guy to score all our points. We're more team oriented, but they do bring different styles."

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