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Prairie Stars to have new look on basketball court

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It's only been two weeks since University of Illinois Springfield Prairie Stars men's basketball coach Ben Wierzba was hired, and he's still in the getting-to-know-you phase with his team.

"They see me every day," Wierzba said. "We're getting familiar and getting used to each other.

"I was always excited to be a head coach. After working with these guys the first day or two, I was even more excited. Their ability, effort and skill level have been very encouraging."

Wierzba isn't the only person new to the program. Newcomers — nine in total — outnumber returning players.

Five players return from the 2009-10 squad that compiled records of 11-13 overall and 7-11 in the Great Lakes Valley Conference.

Brandon Farmer, a senior guard who is the leading returning scorer, averaged 10.3 points last year and he is the only full-time starter back. Senior forward Chigozie Umeadi and senior guard Kendall Burrage started in some games. Three-point threat Ryan Thornton, a senior guard, is back along with senior guard Steffen Spinks, a California native who redshirted last season.

Northern Illinois University transfers Mike Fakuade and Keith Smith join junior guards Lester Hart and Jermaine Love-Roberts along with freshmen Brandon Snowden, Kyle Clevenger, Jaime Burkhard, Emeka Umeadi and Cliff Meece as newcomers to the UIS men's basketball team.

Fakuade, a Chicago Von Steuben High graduate, started 15 games for NIU and averaged 3.5 points and 3.0 rebounds. Smith, who attended Chicago St. Ignatius College Prep, was only on the court for 20 minutes for NIU last season.

Hart, a Decatur Eisenhower graduate, returns to basketball after sitting out a year. He played for Parkland College during the 2008-09 season.

Love-Roberts is coming off a stellar junior college season. He led Prairie State in scoring at 18.3 points, and his 5.8 rebounds, 2.8 assists and 2.6 steals per game earned him a spot on the National Junior College Athletic Association Division II All-America third team. He's the first Prairie State player to garner All-American honors. The Park Forest Rich East graduate was a track athlete at Southern Illinois-Carbondale in 2008.

Snowden, an Oak Lawn Richards graduate, was a fourth-team pick on the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association Class 3A/4A all-state team last season. The guard missed 13 games due to a hand injury.

Clevenger, a forward/guard who attended Urbana, was an honorable mention all-state selection.

Meece comes to UIS from Champaign Centennial, where he was a reserve forward for a team that placed fourth at the Class 3A state tournament.

Guard Emeka Umeadi is the younger brother of Chigozie Umeadi and cousin of last year's leading scorer Richard Oruche, who now plays overseas. Emeka was a four-year varsity player at Bensenville Fenton.

Burkhard and Spinks are the only players on the roster not from Illinois. Burkhard played for Fort Wayne (Ind.) Northrop.

Wierzba and the players are working toward the start of practice Oct. 15.

"We're conducting individual workouts four days a week, lifting three days a week and conditioning a couple days a week," Wierzba said.

UIS will start the season with a pair of exhibition games at Illinois-Chicago on Nov. 3 and Iowa on Nov. 7.

The Stars' season opener is at home against Lake Superior State on Nov. 12 in a GLVC/GLIAC Challenge game.

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