



UIS men prove they can compete

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The men's basketball team has carried the banner for the University of Illinois Springfield in its first year in the Great Lakes Valley Conference and NCAA Division II.

While other UIS teams have struggled to get wins, Prairie Stars coach Kevin Gamble and his squad posted a respectable season after making the move from the lesser National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics.

"We have big shoulders," Gamble joked.

The Stars' season wrapped up Saturday with a 69-60 loss to Wisconsin-Parkside. UIS compiled records of 11-13 overall and 7-11 in the GLVC, and had a 9-5 record at home.

"I thought we did well considering what we had," Gamble said. "Outside of Richard Oruche, we didn't have any proven guys who could play at this level. Some of the guys stepped up and did well. We competed with a couple players who weren't recruited to play at the NCAA Division II level, but they played like they were."

Oruche, one of five seniors, was Mr. Everything for the Stars. The guard, who transferred from Northern Illinois University in 2008, led UIS with 19.8 points and 5.8 rebounds per game. He averaged 2.3 assists per game and had an 80.5 free-throw shooting percentage. Oruche, the GLVC's No. 3 scorer, was in double figures in all but one game.

From the outset of the season, UIS showed it could score. The Stars averaged 77.1 points per game, ranking them seventh out of 15 GLVC teams.

UIS gave several conference foes a run for their money. A 69-64 upset of Quincy, ranked 18th in Division II at the time, gave the Stars a marquee win on Feb. 13. In their first foray into GLVC play, they posted a 115-114, double-overtime victory over Missouri S&T. They rallied from a 12-point first-half deficit to a 77-71 win over Lewis by shooting 56.7 percent from the field after halftime. UIS had close contests with a handful of other league opponents, including a 59-53 loss to 2009 GLVC champion Northern Kentucky and a 71-67 loss to 19-8 Bellarmine.

UIS would have qualified for the GLVC tournament had the Stars been eligible to compete in the event. They placed fourth in their division despite being picked to finish fifth in a preseason poll. The school is only a provisional member and will not become a full member until the 2010-11 academic year, when they will be eligible for postseason play.

The sole missteps in GLVC competition occurred in losses to Southern Indiana (110-68) and Quincy (94-69 in the first meeting).

"In all the other conference games, we competed and we felt we had a chance to win the ballgame in the end," Gamble said. "We were in most of those games for 30 or 35 minutes. We competed with the Northern Kentuckys, Kentucky Wesleyans, Bellarmine and Drury's."

Upgrades needed

While they had the fight, Gamble feels there were two things the Stars lacked. One was defensive consistency and the other was an inside threat.

"We needed a true post presence," he said. "(Junior) Justin Sims is more of a finesse player. (Senior) DeAndre Miranda is more of a defender and rebound guy."

Needless to say, Gamble will address this need while recruiting for next season. The earliest date players can sign with the team is April 15.

In addition to Oruche, the Stars are losing the defensive presence of senior Miranda (5.5 rebounds), the 3-point shooting of Zach Lewis (9.3 ppg), the experience of three-year starter forward Matt Reynolds and the quickness of guard Derrick Tribble.

UIS should return four players who made starts. Junior point guard Brandon Farmer was second on the team in scoring at 10.3 points. Sims was the Stars' No. 4 scorer at 9.3 ppg. Freshman forward Chigozie Umeadi (5.1 ppg) and junior guard Kendall Burrage (4.3 ppg) saw their minutes and roles increase as the season progressed.

Junior Ryan Thornton drained 53 3-pointers and averaged 7.5 points off the bench.

This season was a total team effort. That proved to be a successful formula in its first year of NCAA play.

"It was a good year," Gamble said. "Nothing to be ashamed of."

Key returning Prairie Star

- Brandon Farmer (junior guard), 10.3 points per game, 95 assists
- Justin Sims (junior forward), 9.3 ppg, 4.4 rebounds per game
- Ryan Thornton (junior forward) 7.5 ppg, 53 3-pointers
- Chigozie Umeadi (freshman forward) 5.1 ppg, 2.9 rpg

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