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Prairie Stars hit road for GLVC games

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With their minds and bodies rejuvenated, the players on the University of Illinois Springfield Prairie Stars men's basketball team are prepared to tip off Great Lakes Valley Conference play.

The UIS players are coming off an 11-day break from games. The stretch included three days completely off for Thanksgiving.

The Stars (3-2) resume play in their GLVC opener tonight at Drury (4-1) in Springfield, Mo.

UIS has played just once on the road this season in a regular-season game, a 76-68 loss to Lincoln University on Nov. 20.

"We played five games in nine days, so the past two weeks we've had some time to work and get better," UIS coach Ben Wierzba said. "That's what we need. They had several days to get rested up, rejuvenated, healthy and better. We've had a good week and a half of practice.

"I'm excited to get out there and see what progress we've made in the last two weeks."

The Stars hope their road struggles from last season don't carry over.

UIS put together a 7-11 GLVC record for the 2009-10 season with a 2-7 road record and a 5-4 mark at home.

Tonight is the first of back-to-back GLVC games for UIS.

The Stars face Missouri S&T (3-2) on Saturday in Rolla. Missouri S&T opens GLVC play tonight against Quincy, which received votes in this week's NABC Division II national coaches poll.

Four GLVC teams are ranked in the national poll. Bellarmine is No. 3 behind Cal Poly Pomona and Findlay, which hosts UIS on Tuesday. Kentucky Wesleyan is No. 11. Northern Kentucky is ranked 20th and Southern Indiana is No. 22.

The Indianapolis Greyhounds are the only GLVC women's basketball team with a national ranking. Indianapolis is No. 11 in the USA Today/ESPN Division II Coaches Poll.

"There's a lot of parity in the league," UIS women's basketball coach Marne Fauser said. "On any given night, either team can win. The conference is pretty strong from top to bottom."

The UIS women's team is coming off a 76-61 non-conference win over Blackburn.

"I thought we played well for longer stretches in that game," UIS women's basketball coach Marne Fauser said.

The Stars take a 3-1 overall record into their GLVC opener against Drury tonight prior to the men's contest.

UIS won just three games all last season. Contributions from multiple players have helped the Stars match the total number of victories for the 2009-10 season.

Senior forward Paulina Pogorzelski leads UIS in scoring with 13.3 points. Junior guard Bailey Beale is second at 12.8 and freshman guard Megan Bergerud third at 10.8.

"I like our balanced scoring," Fauser said. "I like how we're continuing to push the ball and attack the basket."

Marcia Martinez can be reached at 788-1547.

UIS men's basketball

WHO: University of Illinois Springfield Prairie Stars (3-2) vs. Drury Panthers (4-1)

WHEN: 7:30 tonight

WHERE: O'Reilly Family Event Center, Springfield, Mo.

COACHES: Ben Wierzba (1st season, 3-2); Steve Hesser (7th season, 128-53)

LAST MEETING: Drury 75, UIS 62

NOTABLE: The Stars play the first of 18 Great Lakes Valley Conference games when they open the season tonight against Drury, which was picked to win the GLVC West Division. . . . UIS has had a lengthy layoff. The Stars haven't played since losing 76-68 to Lincoln on Nov. 20. Drury picked up a pair of wins Friday and Saturday against Ferris State and Urbana. . . . Wierzba has gone with the same starting lineup the first five games featuring forward Chigozie Umeadi (13.8 points, 5.6 rebounds), guard Brandon Farmer (10.6 points), guard Steffen Spinks (7.6 points, 4.4 rebounds), guard Jermaine Love-Roberts (7.2 points, 4.4 rebounds), forward

Ryan Thornton (6.2 points, 8 3-pointers). Thornton is questionable for tonight's game due to illness. . . .Six-foot-7 junior forward Michael Fakuade made his debut for the Stars against Lincoln after missing a pair of exhibition games and four regular-season contests with a leg injury. He collected 17 points and 16 rebounds. . . . Drury's leading scorer is sophomore guard Alex Hall at 20.2 points. Five players are averaging in double figures for the Panthers. . . . A women's game between the Stars (3-1) and Drury (2-4) precedes the men's contest at 5:45 p.m.

QUOTABLE: "Right off the bat, we're playing one of the best teams in the not only the conference, but the country. They've got one of the best players in Alex Hall and he can just flat-out score. This is exciting. This is the first year playing for a postseason conference tournament. (Today) is 1/18th of a conference championship."

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