

Men's basketball prepares for season, focuses on chemistry

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Staff Writer

Players streak to the basket for a lay-up or pull up and shoot a jump shot. Junior Kevin Smith elevates for a 180-degree jam. The sound of swishing nets fills the gym.

This is Guilford basketball. The Old Dominion Athletic Conference (ODAC) preseason poll ranked Guilford's men's basketball team ninth out of ten teams, ahead of Eastern Mennonite. The team's roster lists only four returning players - none of whom were starters. With so many unknowns, judges hesitate before ranking Guilford any higher.

Gone are seven players from last year's team who finished with a 15-11 season. They take with them 64 points, 30 rebounds, and 15 assists per game - not including the experience that comes from playing together for four years.

To surpass expectations, Guilford will have to receive strong contributions from its

large group of first-year and transfer students.

Junior forward-guard and co-captain Robbie Poteat commented on the incoming group. "The first-year class is really big, yet also very quick. We have some tall guys and the guards are all incredibly athletic," he said.

There is a down side to having so many talented newcomers.

"One thing that worries me this year is that with all the excessive talent, I don't want anybody to get discouraged because they are not getting the playing time they would on another team," said Poteat.

New players showcased their athletic ability and penchant for scoring during the inter-squad scrimmage on Nov. 6. They got up and down the court very quickly and several of the men exhibited extraordinary leaping ability.

"We've got an extremely good offensive team," said Poteat. "We have five or six guys that can go out and score 20 points on any given night."

Junior center Genaro Lawhorn agreed. "On offense we have a two-headed monster with me and Brandon Clifford," he said. "Inside we're scary. We get guys double- and triple-teaming us, and we kick it out to the shooters. We have guys who are pure shooters."

The offense will rely on post play with two big guys in the middle. As they draw more attention, they free up opportunities and space for the smaller players outside. This takes coordination and the ability to play together.

If there is one concern for the team, it is chemistry. Lawhorn commented, "Early in the season we might struggle with playing together, but we're working on it every day."

One thing that will help is the presence of Coach Tom Palombo. Last year, his first year with the team, Palombo shared the conference Coach of the Year award with Bob Johnson of Emory and Henry.

"Chemistry is critical," he said. "Sometimes the teams with the best players don't

win. The teams that play the best together win, and that's chemistry."

On the court, it affects how well the guys play defense together. The players must be comfortable with each other for the defense to excel.

"No matter what, we are going to have guys who compete," Palombo said. "If you're willing to compete, you can play defense and rebound," which will be the key to starting the Quaker's fast-break offense. When the defense begins playing well, this team will be exciting and fun to watch.

Everyone on the team is optimistic about the upcoming

season.

"We're going to compete every night," Palombo said. "There will be no off nights for Guilford. We will go after teams and we will play hard every night."

Lawhorn added his own positive on the season, saying, "I am anticipating us doing great things this year and winning the ODAC tournament. We want some of those pretty rings."

The season began Nov. 10 when the Quakers beat the Italian Junior National Team 74-60 in the Alumni gym. The game was particularly challenging, as NBA scouts were watching the Italian squad. ☿

Return of "Cracker Box" basketball games in the Alumni gym

Emily Place

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The flyers were everywhere: "Come support the men's basketball team, and recreate the fun Cracker Box atmosphere from years ago!" To the current students at the college, the term "Cracker Box" probably makes no sense, but to many alumni, it is something that can only be experienced.

In the 1960s and 70s, basketball here was big.

"We played in national tournaments in 1966 through 1970, as well as 1973, 1976 and 1989," said Jack Jensen, who coached the basketball team from 1965 to 1999. In 1973, the team won the national championship. Four of the players from that era, Bob Kaufmann '68, M.L. Carr '73, World B. Free '77, and Greg Jackson '74, went on to the National Basketball Association (NBA).

"It was a tremendous advantage to play on our home court," Jensen said. "During one run, we won 55 of 56 games played in Alumni gym."

In the times before cable TV and ESPN, students and community members attended events like this

with a vigor that is not as common today.

"Playing and watching a game in a small gym is much louder and more electric than watching in a larger environment," said Randy Doss '82, Vice President for Enrollment.

Jensen agreed. "There were times when it got so loud that the players couldn't hear instructions during time-outs," he said. Back then, even with a seating capacity of 933 people, the gym was standing-room-only for all games.

"Archie Andrews, who took up tickets, was a fire marshal, and he had a counter," Jensen said. "When it got to 933, no more people were admitted."

No one meant no one, not even the president. "On some of those occasions, our president, Grimsley Hobbs, arrived 15-30 minutes prior to the game and he was turned away," Jensen said.

To make sure they got into the gym, many people would arrive early, sometimes even an hour and a half before the tip-off.

"There were games with High Point and Elon when it was full at 6:30 for an 8 p.m. game," said Jensen. "You couldn't get in even if you arrived 30 minutes before game time."



TALEISHA BOWEN/GUILFORDIAN

The Quakers beat the Italian Junior National Team 74-60 in their season opener Nov. 10

Although most games are currently held in the Ragan-Brown Field House, the athletic department chose to have Wednesday's game against the Italian Junior National Team in the Alumni Gym out of respect for its past and the many great players who played there.

"It (was) an opportunity for the community to come back if they wished to see a game in this special place," Doss said.

Current basketball head coach Tom Palombo agreed. "I think it (was) great for students and faculty members, especially those faculty that attended games in the '70s," he said.

The game also introduced the newly renovated Alumni Gym, with new windows, paint, and floor surfacing.

The Italian Junior National Team was the first international team to ever play against the college's men's basketball team. Adding to the list of unforgettable moments occurring in the Alumni Gym, the game in the "Cracker Box" was expected to bring back the electric atmosphere of the past. ☿