

2004-05 Washington State Men's Basketball Outlook

Last season, the Washington State University men's basketball team won 13 games, the most Cougar victories in seven seasons. In 2004-05, WSU looks to take the next step toward building a foundation for the future.

"The rebuilding process is clearly not an overnight thing, not if you want it to last," Cougar Head Coach Dick Bennett said. "We're in the phase where we're trying to build the nucleus of players who are fitted to what we want to accomplish on and off the floor. We are doing that with our recruiting as well as with our kids who remain."

Bennett, a master of rebuilding programs, enters his second season after directing WSU to as many wins in his first campaign as the Cougars produced in the two previous seasons combined prior to his arrival on the Palouse.

The Cougars return six letterwinners who combined for 97 starts last season. Senior guard Thomas Kelati (Walla Walla) is the leading returning scorer at 11.1 points per game. Last season, he started 28 of 29 games and finished second in the Pacific-10 Conference with a .444 percentage from beyond the arc and fifth in the conference with 2.45 3-pointers per game. He earned Pacific-10 Honorable Mention. His 71 treys last season rank seventh on the Cougar single-season list. He enters this season with a .431 career mark from long range, second all-time at WSU, and is sixth on the Cougar all-time 3-pointer list with 151.

Senior guard Jeff Varem (Benue, Nigeria) made 14 starts and showed flashes of brilliance last season. He scored in double figures 10 times, including a 22-point effort to go along with seven rebounds in a home win over USC. Consistency was a problem for Varem though, as he tallied four points or less in five outings.

"You would expect the scoring load to fall on the shoulders of Thomas Kelati and Jeff Varem, but I don't think either one of them is a dominant scorer," Bennett said. "We need more balance than we had last season."

Senior forwards Shami Gill (Mission, British Columbia) and Chris Schlatter (Lafayette, Calif.) will be two of the players Bennett counts upon to pick up the scoring slack. Last season, Gill and Schlatter made 28 and 21 starts, respectively, but combined to score just 10.5 points per game.

"Every one of the returning guys has to have a more consistent offensive game," Bennett said. "They all lacked that last season."

Gill led WSU in 2003-04 with 5.3 rebounds per game and finished 16th in the Pac-10. Schlatter finished second to Gill among Cougars in total rebounds with 110.

"If Shami Gill has the same effort as last season, with the some improved strength, he will remain very valuable," Bennett said. "The same is true about Chris Schlatter. I never expect guys to improve in feet and yards. I just want inches."

Other returnees include senior guard Isaiah Simmons (Tacoma) and junior guard Randy Green (Renton). Simmons joined the team as a walk-on last season and played in 15 games, including one start. His effort earned him a scholarship for his senior season. Green played all 29 games, made five starts and shot .333 from 3-point range.

The Cougars will have a new point guard this season in freshman Derrick Low (Honolulu). His prep accolades include "Mr. Basketball" as the top player in the State of Hawaii each of his last three seasons at Iolani School where he led his team to three straight State titles.

Low will have big shoes to fill after Marcus Moore departed following a brilliant four-year career. Moore left WSU ranked in several career categories, including assists per game (second, 4.15), steals (third, 168), assists (fourth, 423), scoring (fifth, 1,458) and 3-point field goals (fifth, 152).

“The older kids are going to have to make it possible for Derrick to play like he can,” Bennett said. “He is more of a distributor than a scorer. Marcus Moore is a huge loss because he did everything for us with the ball from baseline to baseline. You can never overestimate the loss of a player like him.”

In addition to Low, there are a half dozen other new faces in Pullman this season, all freshmen. Among them are centers Chris Henry (Santa Ana, Calif.) and Robbie Cowgill (Austin, Texas).

Henry has the most size among the newcomers at 6-foot-9, 248 pounds. He averaged nearly 11 points as a senior at Mater Dei High School. Cowgill is the tallest of the freshmen at 6-foot-10. He was a second team All-State selection as a senior at Westwood High School after averaging 20 points, 13 rebounds, and three blocks per game.

The other new member of the front line is Daven Harmeling (Grand Junction, Colo.), a 6-foot-7, 215 pound forward out of Fruita Monument High School who averaged 21 points and eight rebounds as a senior.

The backcourt additions include Josh Akognon (Petaluma, Calif.), Kyle Weaver (Beloit, Wis.) and invited walk-on Alex Kirk (Prosser).

Akognon is the best shooter in the trio and ranked fifth in California last season with 30 points per game at Casa Grande High School. He recorded six games with 40 or more points, including a 54-point effort in his second-to-last prep outing. He has the ability to back up Low at the point guard position.

Weaver averaged over 18 points per game at Beloit Memorial High School and the Knights to the Division I State quarterfinals.

Kirk is a good ball handler who tallied 7.8 assists per game last season and registered a 3.8 to 1 assist to turnover ratio at The Hill School, a prep institution in Pottstown, Pa.

“Any number of our freshmen can contribute,” Bennett said. “I have been pleasantly surprised by each of them. Having said that, we won’t know what we have until we play games.”

Bennett added, “Your expectations need to be high, but I don’t want to be ridiculous. I’m not prepared at this point to say how high we can reach.”

One reason for Bennett’s caution may be the Cougars’ schedule. WSU plays six of its nine nonconference games on the road, including one at 2004 Final Four participant Oklahoma State. The Cougars also play BYU at the Delta Center in Salt Lake City and host Gonzaga, both 2004 NCAA Tournament teams.

The rest of the nonconference slate includes road trips to Kansas State, Portland and Wyoming as well as home dates against Montana State and Georgia Southern.

“At this stage of rebuilding, you have to pay an initial price and go on the road,” Bennett said. “The schedule is perhaps too rugged at this phase, but I didn’t want to wait another year.”