

BIG 12 CONFERENCE PREVIEW

NORTH

Axtell, Chenowith help to replenish Jayhawks

BY MATTHEW HANSEN
Staff writer

Kansas Jayhawks
1998 record: 23-10 (11-5 Big 12)
Coach: Roy Williams

Frontcourt: Alumni of the KU frontcourt include current NBA players Paul Pierce, Raef LaFrentz, Scott Pollard, Greg Ostertag and Danny Manning. At least one current player is projected to join them in the NBA.

Eric Chenowith, a preseason All-American, led KU in scoring and rebounding as a sophomore last season. Senior Nick Bradford will start alongside Chenowith and provide solid scoring and rebounding.

Backcourt: Point guard Jeff Boschee won the Big 12 Freshman of the Year last season and should continue to improve with age.

Kenny Gregory and Texas transfer Luke Axtell might both start, providing Kansas with two more scoring options. Gregory averaged 11 points per game, using his 41-inch vertical leap to play above the rim. The 6-foot-9 Axtell scored 13 points per game for Texas in 1997 while making 68 3-pointers.

Outlook: By Kansas standards, the team is coming off a down year. Last season's 10 losses were the most for a Kansas team in the 1990s.

However, with the loss of only two seniors and the addition of a highly touted recruiting class, Williams said the Jayhawks will be better this season.

Missouri
1998 Record: 20-9 (11-5, Big 12)
Coach: Quin Snyder

Frontcourt: The loss of Albert White, who led the team in scoring, rebounding and assists last season, to the NBA leaves a huge void at the position. Jeff Hafer is the only frontcourt player

who averaged more than three points per game last season. However, help is on the way in the form of recruits: forward Kareem Rush and center Tajudeen Soyoye.

Backcourt: New Coach Quin Snyder said that Keyon Dooling, the team's sophomore point guard, is already the team leader.

Shooting guard Brian Grawer is the team's returning lead scorer. He averaged 9.6 points per game last year.

Outlook: Snyder sees his young team taking its lumps early in the year, partially due to a non-conference schedule that includes games with Indiana, Iowa, Illinois and Kentucky. He also sees the team improving tremendously by the time Big 12 play rolls around. MU is 1-1 already this year.

Nebraska
1998 Record: 20-13 (10-6)
Coach: Danny Nee

Backcourt: The Huskers' type returner is senior Cookie Belcher, leading the league in steals last season in addition to averaging 12 points per game for NU. The shooting guard's season is in doubt after wrist surgery in the off-season.

Sophomore Cary Cochran is the Huskers' only other returner at guard. Cochran shot 40 percent from the 3-point line last season and is expected to play significant minutes off the bench.

Danny Walker will take over point guard duties.

Frontcourt: Larry Florence is the only returning starter in the frontcourt. The senior forward averaged 10 points per game last season.

Coach Danny Nee will rely heavily on junior college transfers Steffon Bradford and Kimani Ffriend to fill 1998 Big 12 Player of the Year Venson Hamilton's shoes. Bradford earned junior college All-American honors last season.

Outlook: Nee is excited about his newcomers, five of whom will see playing time this season.

"Our new players have a lot of talent and a passion for the game. With the additions, we have the potential to be a great team."

Iowa State
1998 Record: 15-15 (6-10)
Coach: Larry Eustachy

Frontcourt: Junior forward Marcus Fizer has the opportunity to become one of the most decorated players in school history by the time he leaves ISU. Fizer is already nearing the 1,000-point plateau with 986 points in his first two seasons.

Experience surrounds Fizer down low. Juniors Martin Rancik and Stevie Johnson both started more than 25 games last season.

Backcourt: Coach Larry Eustachy said Jamal Tinsley, a junior college transfer, will fit in well with the Cyclones.

"I expect Jamal to start for us. ... He is really unselfish with the basketball. I think he'd rather pass than shoot, which is rare these days."

Tinsley will move in alongside senior Michael Nurse, who is a returning starter at the point.

Outlook:

The statistics say there is reason for optimism in Ames despite last year's 15-15 record. Iowa State returns four starters and 78 percent of its scoring from last year.

Colorado
1998 Record: 18-15 (7-9)
Coach: Ricardo Patton

Frontcourt: Will Smith and Jamal Mosley both return to start at forward, solidifying the position for the Buffs. The pair combined for 18 points and 11 rebounds per game last season.

Backcourt: Coach Ricardo Patton said

Jacquay Walls, CU's top returning scorer, is ready to have a breakout senior season.

"So far this year Walls has more dedication, has been making better decisions and has a hunger that was missing last year," Patton said. "He is as good as any point guard in the conference."

Walls came on for Colorado at the end of last season, averaging nearly 16 points per game over the team's final 13 contests.

Outlook: "We are going to be the smallest team in the Big 12, so we need to play bigger than we are and rebound better than we did last year," Patton said. "We also have a lack of depth. I think our starting five can play with anyone, but we can't lose any of them or we're in trouble."

Kansas State
1998 Record: 20-13
Coach: Tom Asbury

Frontcourt: Senior forwards Tony Kitt and Josh Reid will anchor the frontcourt and entire team this season. Reid has made his mark for the Wildcats beyond the 3-point arc. He hit 55 3-pointers last season. Kitt will rebound the team with scoring and rebounding. He averaged almost eight rebounds per game last season.

Backcourt: Senior Cortez Groves is the only K-State guard who started a game last season. The senior can play both guard positions and has shown an ability to score points in bunches, with three 21-point games.

Outlook: Despite losing seven letter-winners from last year's team, Coach Tom Asbury said he is confident in his team's chances this year.

"We thought last year would be a senior-dominated team; and our seniors did have a good year. We won 20 games. Our younger players, though, were some of our best players. ... We may get off to a slow start, but by the time we hit the conference schedule we should have a pretty good ball club."

SOUTH

Texas, OSU could vie for South conference title

BY JOSHUA CAMENZIND
Staff writer

Texas Longhorns
1998 Record: 19-13 (13-3)
Coach: Rick Barnes

Frontcourt: Center Chris Mihm and forward Gabe Muoneke solidify one of the best frontcourts in the Big 12. Coach Rick Barnes calls them "two of the best players in the country." Chris Owens and William Wyatt are both newcomers who should contribute immediately.

Backcourt: Ivan Wagner returns for the Longhorns at point guard. Wagner is one of the most athletic players in the conference and competes in the high jump for the UT track team. William Clay was named to the Big 12 All-Bench team last season. Freshman Chris Ogden and Roosevelt Brown were the top two high school prospects in Texas.

Outlook: The Longhorns will be looking to defend their Big 12 Championship after finishing 13-3 in the league and hoping to go further in the NCAA tournament after losing to Purdue in the first round.

Much of their success will depend on the newcomers easing the pressure in the post on Mihm and Muoneke. Barnes likes the way his team is meshing early on.

Oklahoma Sooners
1998 Record: 22-11 (11-5)
Coach: Kelvin Sampson

Frontcourt: OU features Eduardo Najera at power forward and a committee of centers. Najera was a second-team All-Big 12 selection after averaging 15.5 points per game. Coach Kelvin Sampson believes that Renzi Stone, Victor Avila, and Oleg Reztsov will be able to produce a double-double among them.

Backcourt: Tim Heskett ranked second in the league in 3-point shooting, hitting 47.3 percent of his attempts. The rest of the backcourt is untested with two junior college transfers and two freshman.

Outlook: Najera has shown that he is a more than capable leader after his performance against Michigan State in the NCAA tournament last year. Sampson always seems to field a good team no matter what the situation, but he realizes that this year's outcome will rely on the newcomers.

Oklahoma State Cowboys
1998 Record: 23-11 (10-6)
Coach: Eddie Sutton

Frontcourt: Desmond Mason gained confidence with his 54 points in two NCAA games and was named to the Big 12 preseason first team. Glendon Alexander averaged 9.4 points per game last season and made the Big 12 tournament team.

Backcourt: Point guard play will not be a problem with Doug Gottlieb handling the ball. Gottlieb led the nation in assists last season with 8.8 points per game. Joe Adkins is a long-range gunner who ranks third in school history in 3-pointers made.

Outlook: Mason should emerge as a star with

Gottlieb distributing the ball. Other players will have to fill their roles to help ease the scoring load.

Texas Tech Red Raiders
1998 Record: 13-17 (5-11)
Coach: James Dickey

Frontcourt: Sophomore Andy Ellis will start at center. Ellis was named to the Big 12 All-Freshman team last season. Senior Cliff Owens is Tech's second leading returning scorer, averaging 10.4 points per game. Owens is injured but should be ready for the conference season. Brodney Kennard was the team's leading shot-blocker last year with 37.

Backcourt: Second-team All-Big 12 selection Rayford Young will carry the scoring load after averaging 16.4 points per game. Transfer Moses Malone Jr. will be eligible to compete in the second semester. He will bring talent and height to the guard position. James Ware is the favorite to take over the point guard position.

Outlook: Health was the No. 1 key to the season, said Coach James Dickey. Tech also has four junior college transfers from last season who must produce. Dickey said that inconsistency is the name of the game.

Texas A&M Aggies
1998 Record: 12-15 (5-11)
Coach: Melvin Watson

Frontcourt: Jerald Brown has started 66 of 80 games in his Aggie career. He is the only returning starter after averaging nearly 6 points per game. Paul Jacobs and Aaron Jack are two

seniors who will provide strength in the forward and center position. Center position includes freshman Andy Slocum and redshirt freshman Larry Jackson.

Backcourt: Guard positions are shaky after losing two starters and three contributors. Louisiana Mr. Basketball Bernard King should contribute immediately after averaging 28.9 points, 11.3 assists and 8.3 rebounds per game.

Outlook: The inexperienced backcourt will put more pressure on the frontcourt to produce. Brown is the pronounced leader of the team after arriving at A&M with little confidence. A new arena should help the Aggies get fan backing.

Baylor Bears
1998 Record: 6-24 (0-16)
Coach: Dave Bliss

Frontcourt: Jamie Kendrick will be the mainstay of the group after averaging 9.8 points per game. The senior started all 30 games last season for the Bears. Junior college transfer Terry Black was selected as the Big 12 Preseason Newcomer of the Year. Redshirt freshman John Flippen will likely start at center with another redshirt, Steven Othoro backing him up.

Backcourt: Tevis Stukes will return to the team for his senior season after averaging 17.8 points in non-conference play last season. David Jones provides height at the two position while transfer DeMarcus Minor will contribute right away.

Outlook: The Bears lost 10 players from last season, but return Kendrick and Stukes, who will be looked to lead the team. BU has only one non-conference road game.