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## NAU coasts to victory in home opener against Park University Gilbert

Nathan Ecker

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NAU men's basketball opened its season at Rolle Activity Center Monday night with a dominant 100-49 victory over the Park University Gilbert Buccaneers.

The Lumberjacks entered the game ranked fifth in the Big Sky Conference preseason coaches' and media polls, their highest placement since the team was ranked fourth in 2015. That season saw the Lumberjacks finish with a 23-15 record before losing in the Big Sky Conference

tournament semifinals to No. 1 seed University of Montana.

The team's record was also good enough for a berth into the CollegeInsider.com **Postseason Tournament**, where it lost in its first postseason championship to the University of Evansville.

Senior guard Trent McLaughlin, who was named the **Big Sky's Preseason Most Valuable Player**, kicked off a 13-0 run to begin the game, including scoring the team's first eight points.

McLaughlin, driving through the paint, found the game's first two points at the charity stripe after a narrow miss at the basket. The 6-foot-6 guard then reminded fans of his ability to shoot from beyond the arc, draining 3-pointers on back-to-back possessions.

The Lumberjacks' top scorer finished the night with 27 points while going 7 of 15 from the field and 4 for 9 from 3-point range. He was also 9 for 10 at the free-throw line and secured six rebounds.

McLaughlin refused to boast about his night on the court, instead giving credit where it was due to his teammates and coaches who have put him in spots to succeed.

"I feel great out there," McLaughlin said. "My guys are really looking for me, and they're putting me in spots on the floor to be successful, and same with the coaching staff. A lot of our sets are designed to get me in a comfortable position, but then, we got guys that can really pass and are really selfless players."



Senior guard Trent McLaughlin (24) dribbles the ball toward the three-point line during the nonconference game against Park University Gilbert at the Rolle Activity Center, Nov. 4.

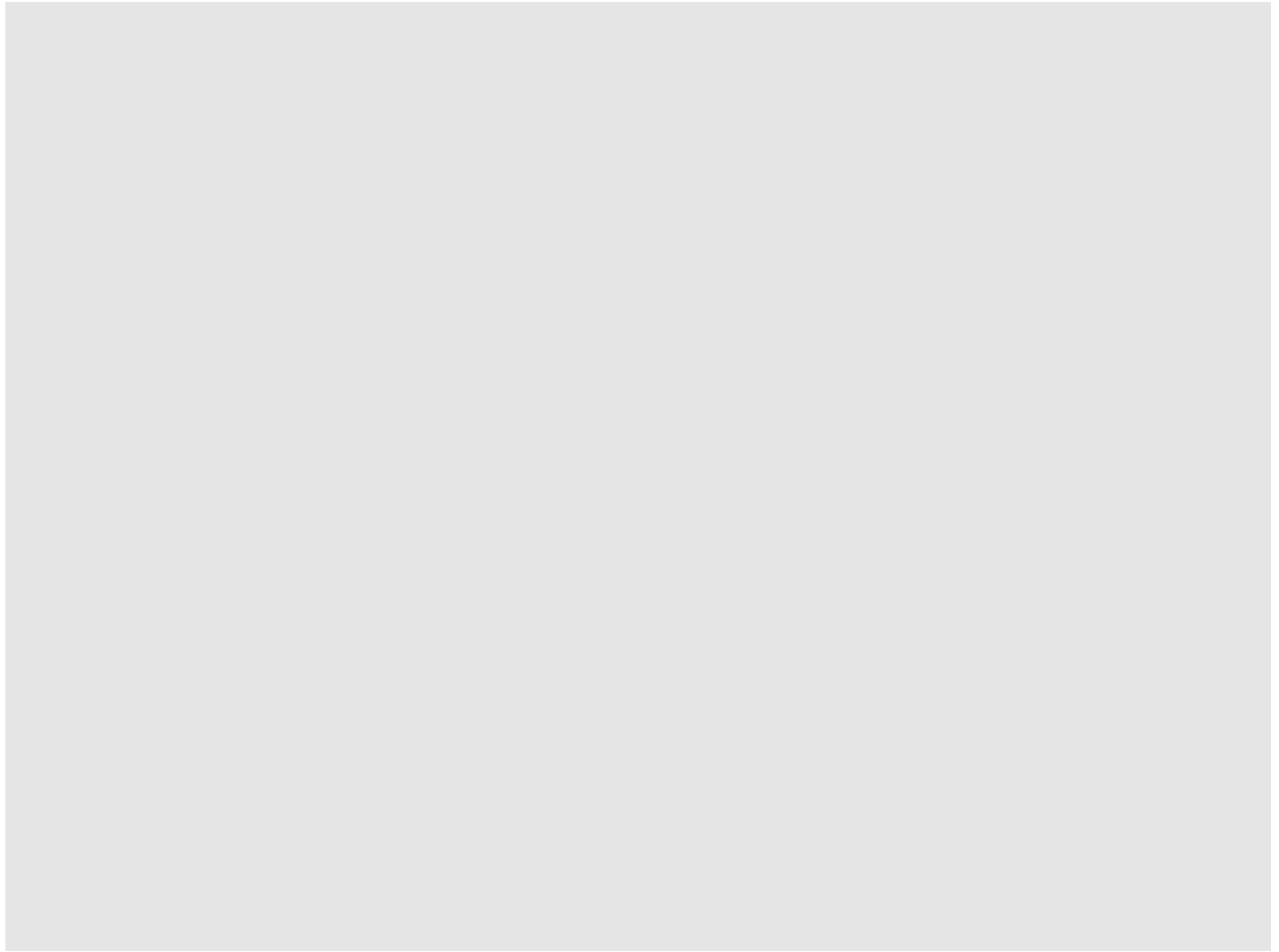
Redshirt junior guard Jayden Jackson joined the 3-point parade next, scoring his first points on a second chance opportunity courtesy of an offensive rebound from senior center and Lumberjack newcomer Ali Ragab.

The run continued as redshirt junior forward Carson Towt reintroduced himself after a limited 2023-24 season with a post-up move under the basket for two points.

Towt made waves on the scoreboard in his first game back since the team's Big Sky Conference championship game against Montana State University in March 2023. He capped his night with a double-double, scoring 16 points and wrapping in 11 rebounds.

McLaughlin highlighted Towt's importance to the team and significant impact that he and redshirt sophomore forward Jack Wistrick — who was also lost to injury last year — have on the way NAU plays.

"Losing [Towt] and [Wistrick] last year was kind of a big letdown for us, so seeing both of them back on the court made our team really happy," McLaughlin said. "Offensively, they're big men that can pass and get us into different splits, but then defensively, they bring size, offensive rebounding, defensive rebounding, we can get out in transition. They kind of just change our whole team."



Senior center Ali Ragab (22) jumps to grab the ball and score against Park Gilbert defenders in their matchup at the Rolle Activity Center, Nov. 4.

Park-Gilbert soon scored its first points of the game, but not before the Lumberjacks took control and held the Buccaneers from scoring for the first four minutes, six seconds of game time.

NAU stayed in front the whole game, leading by more than 20 points for the final 10 minutes of the first half and the entirety of the second half.

At halftime, the score stood at 52-23 and only continued to expand when the teams came back from the locker room.

For head coach Shane Burcar, the game was an opportunity to dig into his lengthy bench and get looks at many of the **highly anticipated additions** the team made over the offseason.

Junior forward Leigh Rickwood-Pitt, senior forward Monty Bowser, junior guard Dillan Baker and Ragab all got extended playing time in the Lumberjacks' blowout victory.

All four players were the first to be subbed in from the bench.

Baker saw his first bucket as a Lumberjack drop through the net via a crisp 3-pointer from the right wing, extending the lead to 31-9. He finished his night with seven points and four rebounds while going 2 of 8 from beyond the arc.

The 6-foot-10 Rickwood-Pitt finished with three points and as many rebounds in 10 minutes of playing time. Ragab saw the same amount of time but contributed four points, two rebounds and two assists in his minutes.

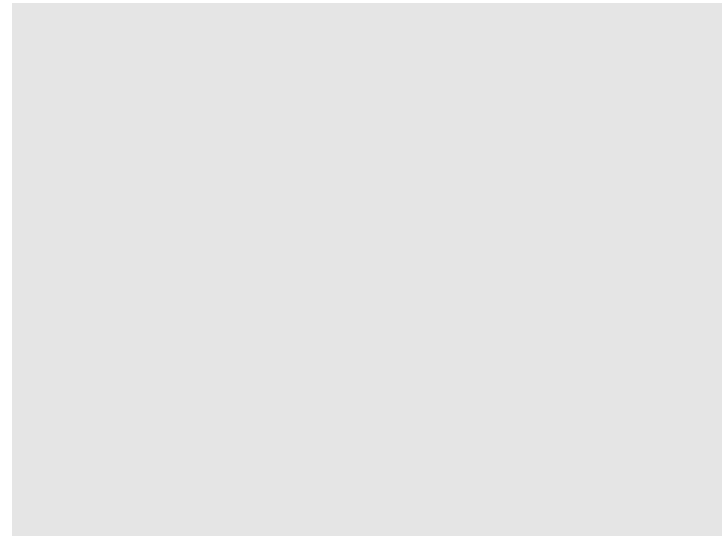
Bowser scored three points and brought down three rebounds but made the most of his time on the floor with two **massive assaults on the rim**. The University of California, Berkeley product showcased his ability to defy gravity and, after coming up short on his first attempt, successfully threw down a jam in the closing minutes of play.

Burcar and McLaughlin appreciate what a deep bench means for them going forward, with Burcar specifically being grateful that the way the roster is constructed can mean good things for the teams' long term success.

"It makes our coaching staff look a lot better when we're healthy, have depth like that and guys competing," Burcar said.

On the players' side, McLaughlin said he believes their newfound depth could help them make a tournament run this season.

"What makes our team special this year is that we have multiple guys that can have a big game," McLaughlin said. "If we have some guys starting who aren't performing, we have guys like Dylan Baker, Monty Bowser that can come off the bench and provide us with minutes in big games that

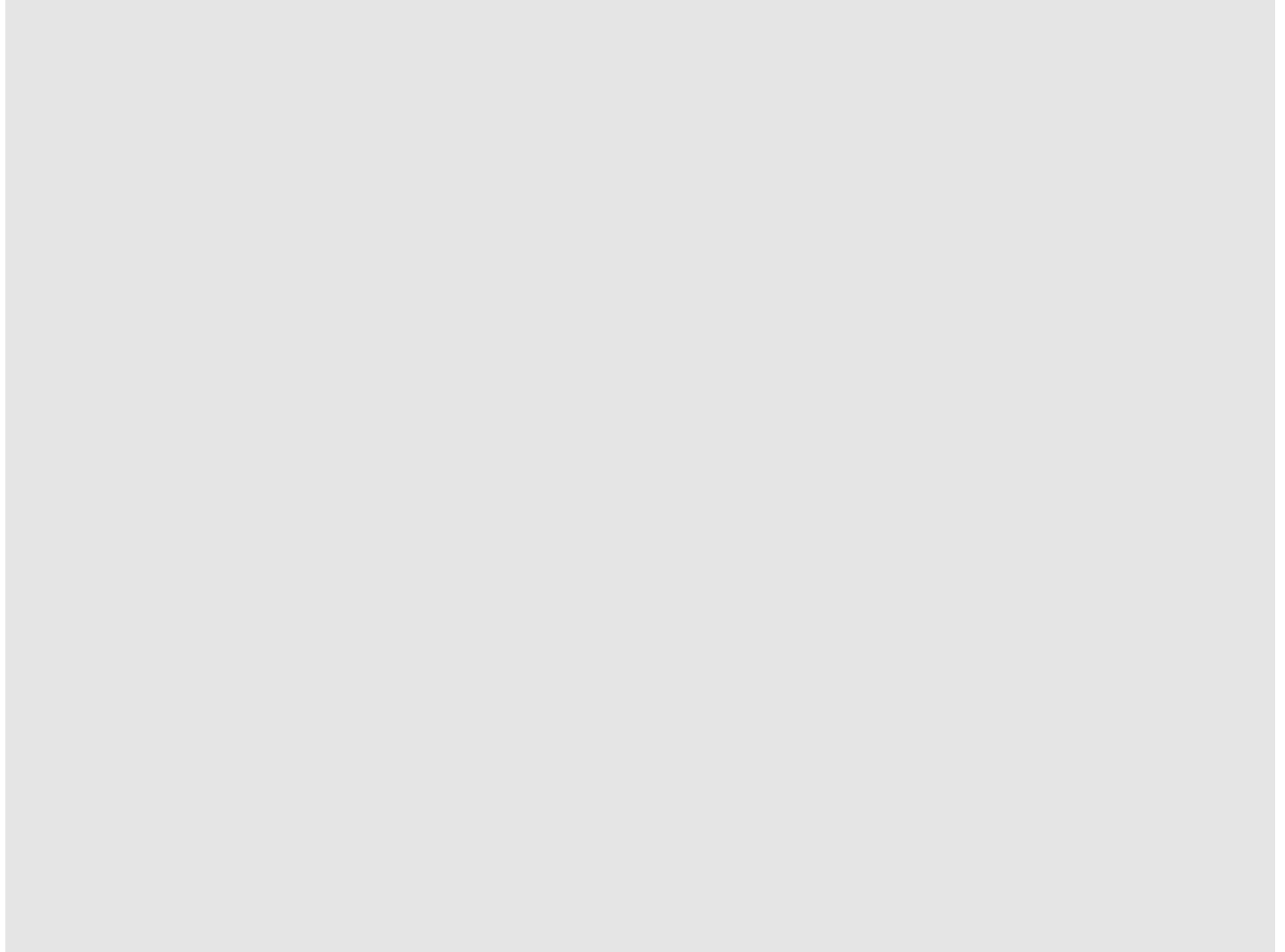


NAU men's basketball head coach Shane Burcar draws on the whiteboard plays for the offense and defense against Park Gilbert at the Rolle Activity Center, Nov. 4.

can get us over the hump.”

Outside of the newest team members, a player who is not new to NAU, junior guard Ryan Abelman, had a respectable performance as he notched his first career start as a Lumberjack.

In 22 minutes, Abelman scored 10 points to go along with five rebounds. He was 2 of 4 from 3-point range but showed an ability to penetrate the middle of the floor and knock down mid-range shots.



Junior guard C.J. Ford (0) dribbles the ball past senior guard Mahlik Lindsey (12) during their nonconference game against Park University Gilbert at the Rolle Activity Center, Nov. 4.

Burcar welcomed the big win but said he knows there is improvement to be had. The team will be a better version of itself, he said, when it fully embraces the brand of basketball the coaches preach, especially in regards to defensive aggressiveness.

“We talk about effort, toughness and attitude all the time, and we have that, one through 14,” Burcar said. “When we can understand that we might get beat on it, but this is what we’re doing. We’re playing NAU basketball. This is the style we’re playing, and when we can get to that level and the other team knows what we’re doing, that’s when we have a chance to be really good.”

NAU will continue its season at home on Friday against Nelson University, formerly known as Southwestern Assemblies of God University.

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Nathan Ecker

Assistant sports editor