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What to expect from the 2024-25 NAU men's basketball season

Nathan Ecker
Sep 10, 2024

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NAU head coach
Conference
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NAU men's basketball tips off in less than two months, meaning the time has come to project what the future holds for the 2024-25 season.

The Lumberjacks' 2023-24 season ended in the first round of the Big Sky Tournament with a **narrow defeat** against Idaho State University, a team they split the two-game season series with. Those games included a double-overtime victory on the road that showcased a sense of urgency

recent NAU teams have found in short bursts.

NAU fought to a 14-19 overall record and 7-11 Big Sky Conference record during a season where injuries, a lack of position size in the paint and loss of offensive identity hampered the momentum that followed an unlikely run to the 2023 Big Sky championship game.

The now-professional basketball prospect **Jalen Cone**, who led the Lumberjacks in 3-point percentage and points scored in 2022-23, transferred to the University of California, Berkeley (Cal) for his final year of eligibility and left NAU with little veteran presence at the guard position.

Junior redshirt forward Carson Towt and sophomore forward Jack Wistricill, who each stand at 6 feet, 8 inches tall, were lost to injury last season. This meant the 6-foot-10 junior transfer forward from Pepperdine University, Carson Basham, was the only active player with size who could defend and score in the paint.

In their absence, Basham gave the Lumberjacks much-needed playmaking abilities, earning quality playing time as the year progressed. He became a starter during conference play and secured 222 rebounds on the season while finishing second on the team in points scored. His play solidified an NAU offense that was short on power underneath the rim. However, as of Aug. 24, head coach Shane Burcar ruled Basham **academically ineligible** for the upcoming season, yet again causing a shortage of size around the basket.

Despite NAU finishing with a team winning percentage under .500, other Lumberjacks showed promise, too.

The now-senior guard Trent McLaughlin took another step up as a high-volume shooter, finishing fifth in the Big Sky in points scored and leading the team in 3-pointers. Redshirt junior Jayden Jackson also showed signs of leadership as a sizable guard, and redshirt junior forward Diego Campisano introduced an ability to make big shots off the bench, a quality that NAU rode to glory during its Big Sky championship run.

Several players showed improvement, but the Lumberjacks' downfall came on the defensive end. Fourteen of the teams' 19 losses were by double-digits. NAU's 416 turnovers on the season were the third worst in the Big Sky behind Eastern Washington University and Sacramento State University. Opposing teams also shot a whopping 47% from the field against NAU.

Rebounding was a weak point, as NAU ranked ninth out of 10 Big Sky teams in defensive and team rebounds. The Lumberjacks' minus-5.2 rebound margin was the worst in the conference and **ranked** 332nd out of 350 teams in the country.

This summer, the program scoured the transfer portal to ensure the same issues would not arise when it took the floor for the first time on Oct. 21 against Justice College.

Rather than depend on Towt or Wistricill's return and the growth of players like McLaughlin and Jackson, the Lumberjacks bolstered their roster with players from around the country. The additions included two guards and three forwards, all of which bring size to a historically small NAU squad.

Dillian Baker, a 6-foot-6 NJCAA All-American junior guard from Pima Community College in Tucson, was one of the first off-season additions. In his first two seasons, Baker averaged 16.9 points and 2.4 assists per game. He was an efficient shot maker, shooting 74% from the field and 42% from 3-point range.

Baker's size and offensive talent make him an intriguing watch at the Division I level. Beginning the season with a lighter nonconference schedule may also give Baker a softer landing, allowing him to mesh into an offense that allows its guards freedom to be playmakers in and around the key.

Joining Baker from Thatcher, Arizona is junior forward **Leigh Rickwood-Pitt**, a 6-foot-10 Australian native whose numbers improved significantly as his playing time doubled over his two years at Eastern Arizona Community College.

In 33 games played, Rickwood-Pitt secured 206 rebounds and recorded 14 blocks. His size alone does not make him a lock in the Lumberjack rotation, but he can provide much-needed depth behind Towt and Wistricill. Rickwood-Pitt could see the court more if he proves he can exploit mismatches and control the paint.

Three players from Power 4 conferences — the Big 12 Conference, the Atlantic Coast Conference, the Big Ten Conference and the Southeastern Conference — also joined the Lumberjacks, two of whom have the potential to make an immediate impact in the Lumberjacks' rotation.

Monty Bowser, a 6-foot-7 redshirt senior forward from Cal, and **Jeremiah Bembry**, a 6-foot-5 redshirt sophomore guard from West Virginia University, may not be immediate starters but offer the Lumberjacks size depth at their respective positions.

Bowser's stats at Cal were not mind-blowing, but he can drive to the hoop in a way that may mesh well with the likes of Towt, Jackson and other NAU guards who have proven they can dish the ball out after drawing in opposing defenses.

Bembry has received little playing time in his college career, only playing in eight games at West Virginia and redshirting his first year at Florida State University. Nonetheless, similar to Baker, Bembry has the opportunity to take advantage of what could be more playing time while the Lumberjacks look for a reliable rotation early in the season.

Along with Bembry, 7-foot redshirt senior center Ali Ragab joined the Lumberjacks from West Virginia. Ragab, an Egypt native, redshirted his only year with West Virginia, but beforehand, averaged 3.3 points and 3.5 rebounds in two years with Division II Gannon University. As with the other newcomers, Ragab's playing time is not guaranteed, but his length, strength and experience will be tested as the Lumberjacks look to solidify the center position.

These additions put NAU in an adequate position to succeed this season by providing quality depth in the case of injury and, more importantly, size for a team that has had a noticeable lack thereof in recent years. Players like Bembry and Bowser may also improve from an increase in playing time alone.

A winning season is well within NAU's reach, but it will depend on if the transfers can come together with the current Lumberjacks and if core seniors McLaughlin and Towt can continue to trend in a positive direction on the offensive and defensive sides of the court.

Aiding in the Lumberjacks' potential success is the loss of multiple all-conference players on teams who finished top five in the Big Sky standings. Aanen Moody from the University of Montana and Dillon Jones of Weber State University are now in the professional ranks, creating an opportunity for NAU to make a push toward conference relevance.

However, being a top three seed in the Big Sky at season's end may be setting expectations too high.

Montana State University will return with the likes of senior Brian Gorake and junior Brandon Walker, last season's 11th- and 12th-ranked Big Sky scoring leaders. The Bobcats are also coming off their third consecutive year as Big Sky champions.

Northern Colorado University lost seniors Saint Thomas and Dejour Reaves, both of whom finished top 10 in scoring in the Big Sky. However, the reigning Big Sky No. 2 seed replenished its roster with a large recruiting class, including high-scoring Swedish native **Viktor Lukic-Gavric**. Lukic-Gavric finished second in points scored in the 2023 FIBA U18 European Championship **A division** while playing for the Swedish national team.

Eastern Washington finished as the Big Sky No. 1 seed and entered this season with a new head coach with a reputation for winning. **Dan Monson** became Eastern Washington's 20th head coach fresh off an NCAA tournament appearance in March and after leaving Long Beach State University as the winningest coach in the school's history.

A lighter nonconference **schedule** and more home games than last season, 16 compared to 12, could also determine where NAU lands. Opponents such as Pepperdine, Stanford University and Oral Roberts University will offer tough tasks, but none too daunting if the Lumberjacks show an ability to limit opposing offenses and stay within striking distance on the scoreboard.

Nathan Ecker

Assistant sports editor