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## Lumberjacks build on home court success

Nathan Ecker  
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Own Flagstaff.

That has been the mantra for NAU men's basketball and head coach Shane Burcar during the 2023-24 season.

The Lumberjacks are 5-0 at home this season, marking the longest home winning streak for Burcar during his five years leading the team. NAU achieved three of those wins inside the J. Lawrence Walkup Skydome, including a 19-point victory over Big Sky No. 5 Portland State University. The remaining victories came early in the season at Rolle Activity Center while the Skydome played host to football.



Head coach Shane Burcar wraps up practice ahead of the team's home matchup against Weber State University, Jan. 30

Since July, the team has spoken about the importance of defending home court.

The Lumberjacks went 6-8 at home during the 2022-23 season, with six of those losses being by five points or less. A subpar home record pushed NAU to ninth in the Big Sky Conference, but late-game heroics and breakout performances carried the team to its first conference championship appearance in 15 years.

"I think we matured a lot from that last year, and we never gave in," Burcar said. "We weren't pointing fingers at anything."

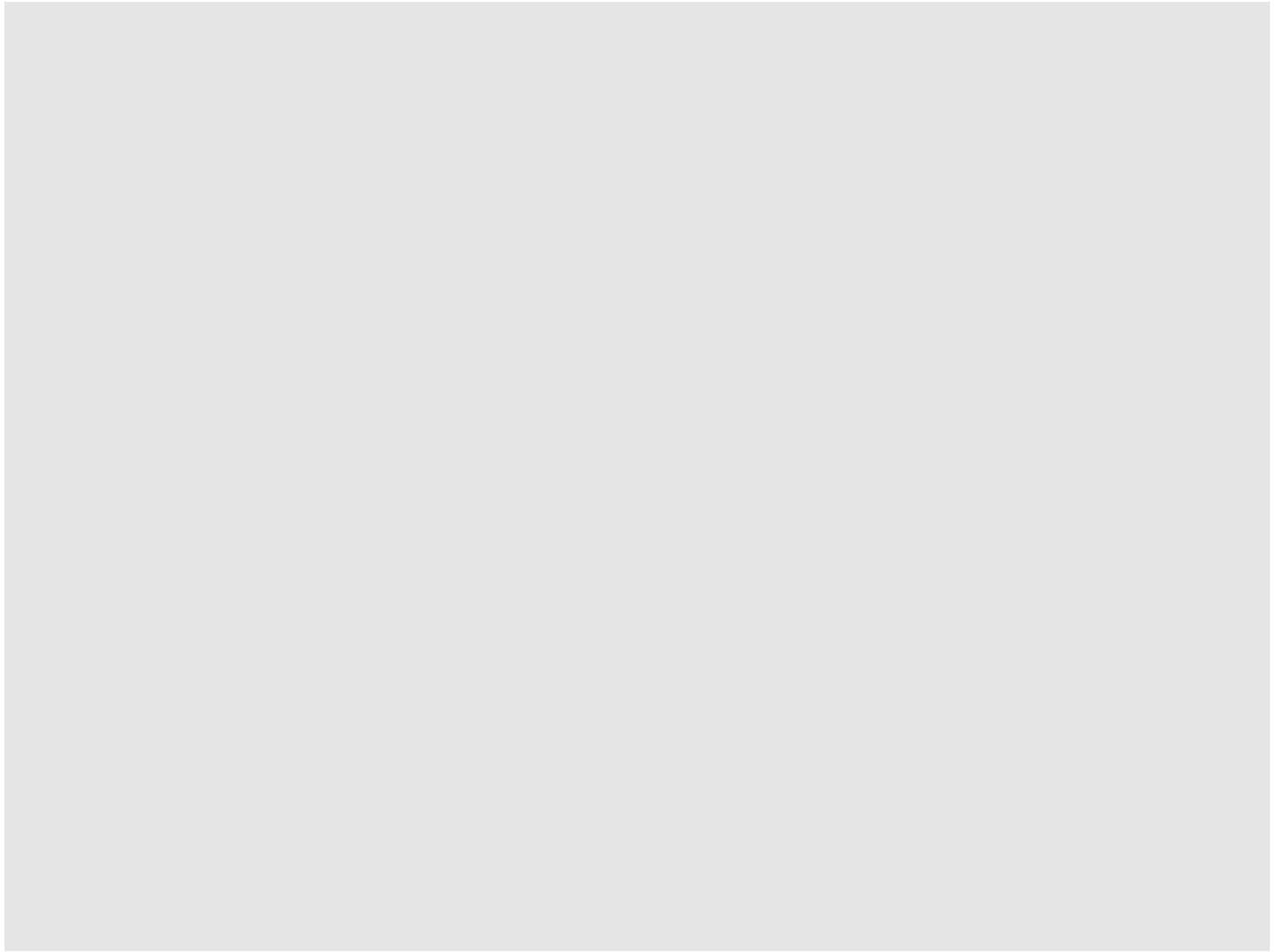
Last season's miraculous conference tournament run allowed the Lumberjacks to savor an otherwise difficult season. Close losses and bad bounces stung the team that was set to lose multiple starters over the off-season through graduations, **transfers** and injuries.

Despite that, the returning roster, including junior guard Trent McLaughlin, sought to build off NAU's success in the conference tournament.

Winning at home became a key point of contention as Burcar prepared his team over the summer. If NAU were to show it could improve year over year, he said, losing a majority of its home games, especially during conference play, was unacceptable.

However, the team has fewer opportunities at home than they may prefer this season, with just 12 scheduled home contests compared to 14 in previous years. Nine of these games are against conference opponents.

"A bad year at home has to be 7-2, and a great year has to be 9-0," Burcar said regarding home conference play.



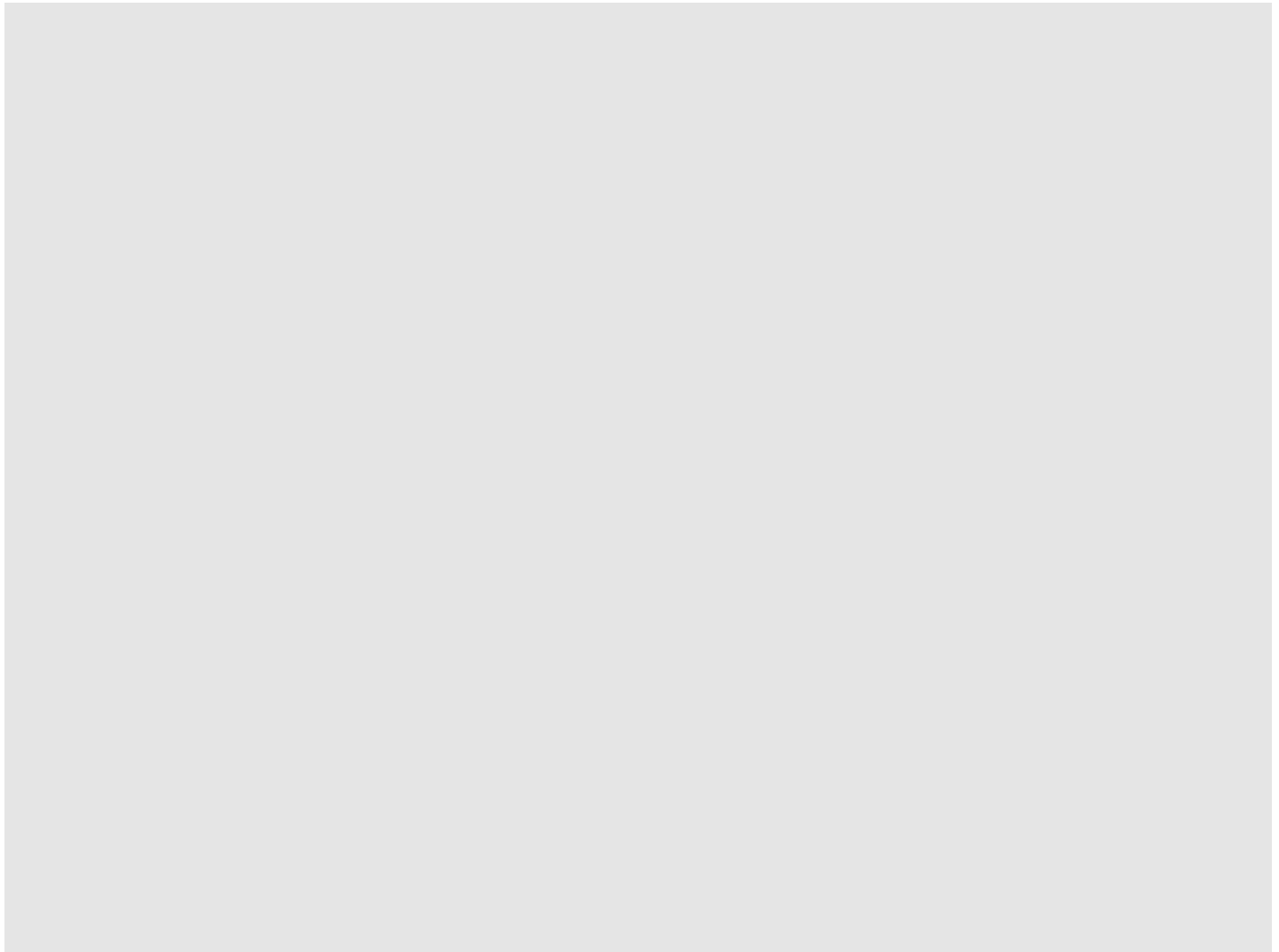
Head coach Shane Burcar commands his team during practice at the J. Lawrence Walkup Skydome before a home matchup against Weber State University, Jan. 30

Domination is the name of the game after Burcar's predominant upperclassmen became the face of a developing NAU squad. McLaughlin and junior forward Carson Basham have anchored the Lumberjacks on both ends of the floor, each putting up career-high performances at home.

McLaughlin leads the team with an average of 15.6 points per game and 1.6 steals heading into the upcoming home stand against Big Sky opponents. The third-year guard also drove the Lumberjacks to victory in their last home matchup against Sacramento State University, securing a career-high 31 points while going eight for 10 at the charity stripe.

He attributed some of his success this season to his coaches and teammates but said he recognizes the local crowd for the energy they provided during NAU's home winning streak.

“When we’re able to come here and defend the home court with the great fans there has been, it brings a lot of energy to us and gets us going,” McLaughlin said. “The people of Flagstaff are a lot more involved, and they want to see us be successful, and I think that with them coming out and showing support, it just helps us on the court.”



Junior guard Trent McLaughlin (24) gets in position for a defensive set during practice, Jan. 30.

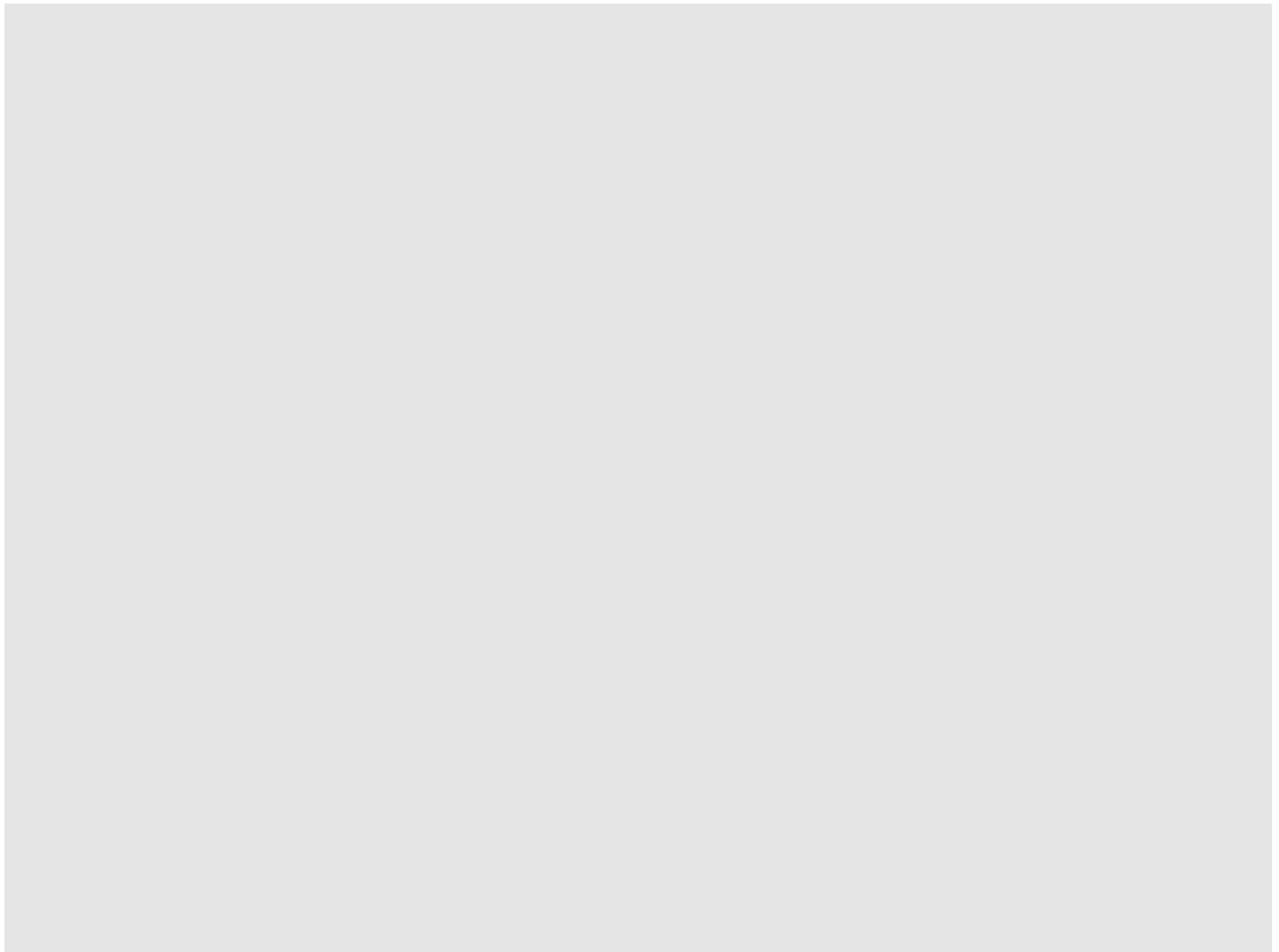
McLaughlin’s teammate, the interior defending Basham, has had to adjust to mountain life after **transferring** from Pepperdine University during the off-season. Although the recently received forward calls Phoenix home, he said he was unaware of what to expect from basketball in the Skydome.

“It’s definitely different,” Basham said. “I haven’t played in anything close to this in Division I basketball, but it’s our style, and I kind of love it.”

In quick work, Basham has become accustomed to the ebbs and flows of NAU basketball. He did not begin the season in the starting line-up, but he now leads the team in rebounds with 134 over 21 games. Junior guard Liam Lloyd is second on the team with 87.

The AZ Compass Prep product has proven his worth to the home crowd with career-high performances in two home games. On Jan. 6, Basham secured 13 rebounds in a victory over University of North Dakota, and on Jan. 18, he tallied 21 points and swatted six blocks against Portland State.

Burcar confessed the newly acquainted forward has lived up to the hype since being the Lumberjacks' premier signing last spring. He said Basham has shown more strength in previous weeks with impressive intensity.



Junior forward Carson Basham (5) defends freshman forward Tichyque Musaka (6) during a live scrimmage at practice, Jan. 30.

These are attributes Basham showed less of earlier in the season, but after some assimilation, Burcar said Basham has grown into the player the coaching staff has expected.

“I’ve got great coaches that believe in me that have pushed me really hard,” Basham said. “Some of it's comfortableness, like getting used to the team, getting my confidence up, knowing my role. Everything is kinda feeding into it, and I’m just growing with the team.”

Basham has been a huge 6-foot-10 presence in the paint, something McLaughlin admitted the team has been lacking. **Injuries** to redshirt junior forward Carson Towt and sophomore forward Jack Wistrick cut into the team’s depth beneath the basket, but Basham’s performance on the court has allowed Burcar and the Lumberjacks to worry less about who will be cleaning up around the rim.

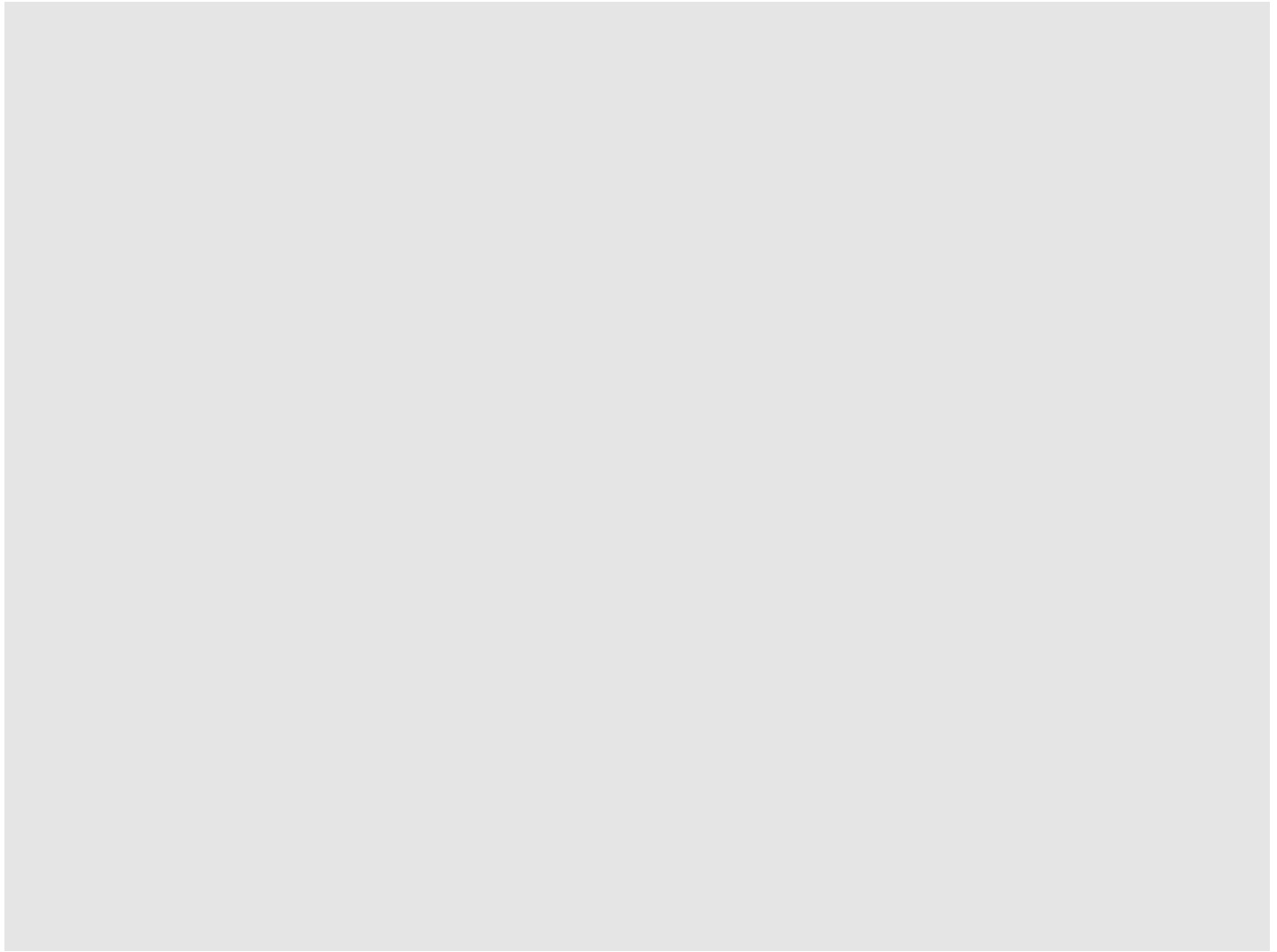
### **Defending home court**

The most significant determination of success for Burcar this season was turning words into reality when speaking about dominating in Flagstaff. Home-court advantage was his focus for months before the season began, and now the fifth-year head coach said he is seeing dividends on the court and in the stands.

“The fans are very significant to our success,” Burcar said. “Doesn’t matter if you're in Lawrence, Kansas or Tucson, Arizona, that home-court advantage means something, and since I’ve been here, it’s been the strongest I’ve seen it and the loudest.”

Burcar noted the Lumberjack Marching Band has accounted for some of that difference. They moved from behind the north basket to along the west baseline, allowing the clanging of instrumental metal and banging drums to travel across the court and into the Skydome stands. Although the band's movement has changed the acoustics in the stadium, some players say it is the fans that have contributed to the electric home atmosphere the most.

McLaughlin and company said they have been impressed by the crowd’s ability to match the team’s intensity. The ambiance of the Skydome reminds Burcar of an ASU crowd during his time living in Phoenix. The fans would be loud at the beginning of the year and get rowdier as the season progressed.



Freshman forward Tichyque Musaka (6) rests during an NAU team practice in the J. Lawrence Walkup Skydome, Jan. 30.

Burcar's praise of the crowd comes with hope as he develops a program that has had little regular season success in recent history. Just as he wants to provide Flagstaff with compelling basketball, he said he sees a larger crowd as a testament to his team's hard work.

The head coach said seeing people care about NAU basketball and support his players gives him the greatest pleasure outside of winning the home games fans pour in to see.

The more they win, the more people will come, Burcar said, referencing a philosophy the team hopes will carry through the next two weeks of conference play and into the last portion of the season.

"In conference, you gotta defend home court and then go out and get as many as you can on the road," McLaughlin said. "Right now, we're defending home court, and it's just going to lead to success in the tournament, hopefully."



The previous season produced many undesirable results, though multiple players who saw minutes in such games have returned and are determined to show improvement at home. Burcar credits this attitude and his team's success this season to the fact that everyone is older. If not the crowd, player development has been the key to improvement.

Now, players and coaches are seeking growth and hoping Flagstaff will be there to support them along the way.

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