

Two-way guard Kraus excited about Sea Bears debut after all-star season with Bisons

‘One of the best defensive players’

BEN LITTLE

MASON Kraus won't have much time to relax between final exams and training camp.

After a career season with the University of Manitoba Bisons men's basketball team, Kraus joins the Winnipeg Sea Bears this spring.

Kraus was selected in the second round of this year's Canadian Elite Basketball League (CEBL) draft. A Canada West first-team all-star last season, he becomes the fourth Bison to be drafted in the league's history.

"It's super exciting," said Kraus on being drafted. "There's a bunch of skilled, really good guys that played in the NBA, played (NBA G League), played overseas, kind of like what I'm striving to become."

Kraus plans to play professionally after he graduates next year, mentioning Europe — specifically Germany, where he has family — as an ideal destination.

He said Sea Bears head coach Mike Taylor could help him get there.

"I'm just excited to be able to try and contribute on a team that (Taylor's) a part of and just learn from (him)," said Kraus. "He's a mastermind of the game."

Kraus led the Bisons in a number of categories last season, including points with 450, assists with 130 and steals with 63. The 6-3 guard also finished second on the team in blocks with 18, and third in rebounds with 123.

Kirby Schepp, head coach of the Bisons men's basketball program, said Kraus's presence at both ends of the court helps him see the game differently.

"He is all over the place, whether it's shutting down the other team's best player, or just making plays," said Schepp. "His ability to know what's going to happen before it happens on the floor is tremendous."

Schepp has coached the Bisons for 16 seasons. He's also coached at the national level, working with NBA players like Andrew Wiggins, Anthony Bennett, Dillon Brooks and Nik Stauskas.

He said Kraus's ability to defend is unrivalled.

"I don't know that I've ever coached or even worked with a player who makes plays at the defensive end more than Mason," he said.

Schepp said U Sports are seen by many as a road to the professional level, and the CEBL has bridged that gap, providing dozens of student-athletes a professional contract to add to their resum .



SUPPLIED PHOTOS

Mason Kraus was selected in the second round of this year's Canadian Elite Basketball League draft.

Simon Hildebrandt, a two-time draft pick of the Winnipeg Sea Bears and former Bison, is a prime example of success after the CEBL.

Hildebrandt played all 20 games last season with the Sea Bears, scoring more than 100 points. This year, he transferred to High Point University, where he played in the NCAA Tournament.

Hildebrandt said Kraus is one of the best teammates he's ever had.

"He'll be a leader, he'll defend... he'll score buckets, he'll move the ball, he'll rebound," said Hildebrandt. "He's definitely a guy you want on your team."

Hildebrandt averaged nearly 17 points a game in two seasons with the Bisons — an accomplishment he said, came with Kraus's help.

"He's such an unselfish guy," Hildebrandt said. "He's such a phenomenal passer and he's one of the best defensive players that I've ever played with in my career."

Kraus, who played in front of an average of 700 people at Manitoba's Investors Group Athletic Centre last season, will soon play for more than 8,500 at Canada Life Centre.

"I'm a player that plays off emotion, so I'm super excited to play in a gym that's packed," said Kraus. "The Sea Bears have the best fanbase in the CEBL."

Above all else, Kraus is most excited to go one-on-one against former NBA and G League professionals.

"Honestly, I'm more excited for that than playing the games," said Kraus. "Just seeing how I match up."

Kraus and the Sea Bears open their season at home on May 16 against the Edmonton Stingers.



Point guard Mason Kraus (left) battles for the ball as the Manitoba Bisons took on the Regina Rams this past U Sports season. He led the Bisons in points with 450.

ROAD-ICE ADVANTAGE

Tough regular-season travel schedule has Jets prepped for post-season away games

MIKE MCINTYRE

ROAD, sweet road?

They may not enjoy the same creature comforts of home, but the Winnipeg Jets have proven they can pack up their winning formula along with their toothbrush and other travel accessories and continue to enjoy success when skating in enemy territory this season.

A league-leading, franchise-record 26 wins occurred outside of Canada Life Centre. They'll be looking to add to that total tonight as they visit the St. Louis Blues for Game 3 of the best-of-seven playoff series.

"We try not to change how we play. I would like to think that how we play at home is how we play on the road," Jets head coach Scott Arniel said Wednesday following a full team practice in downtown Winnipeg, where the Jets took Games 1 and 2 by scores of 5-3 and 2-1.

"There isn't two different ways to play as we are pretty consistent on how we go out and attack the opposition and how we defend. So, I think it is just as simple as that."

It's no secret the Jets have one of the toughest travel schedules every year in the NHL given their location, which requires plenty of extra air miles compared to the majority of their rivals. Staying true to their systems and structure under less-than-ideal circumstances is a huge reason they finished on top of the league standings.

"I think it's the depth of our lineup," Jets defenceman Josh Morrissey said of seemingly having road-ice advantage.

"When you go on the road, sometimes it's easier to just simplify your game, and I think that's something we've done a good job of. Playoffs, we're gonna have to continue to try to do the same things that made us successful on the road this year."



JEFF ROBERSON / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILES

Winnipeg Jets' Kyle Connor (right) skates past St. Louis Blues' Ryan Suter during a Jets road game this regular season. Connor has had both game-winning goals for the Jets in the first-round series.

Beating the Blues in their own backyard won't be easy, although the Jets did it twice during the regular season. Does that give them a bit of a psychological edge?

"I think it goes out the window. It's a new animal," said Jets forward Mark Scheifele, who leads all Jets players with five points (two goals, three assists) through five games.

"Especially come playoffs, we know their fans are going to be rowdy and loud and excited as well as their players. It really doesn't come into effect, the previous stuff. We're just ready

to get playing again and hopefully get some wins down there."

St. Louis reeled off 12 consecutive victories at Enterprise Center to close out the campaign. Their last loss occurred Feb. 22 — against Winnipeg in the form of a 4-3 shootout decision.

"It's playoffs now. We have to start a win streak in the playoffs," Blues coach Jim Montgomery told reporters Wednesday.

St. Louis was actually a pretty lousy home team when the Jets paid that last visit right after the 4 Nations Face-Off, falling to 12-14-3 that night. The

incredible run they'd go on propelled them into the final Western Conference wild-card spot and a first-round date with the Presidents' Trophy-winning Jets.

"They did their job at their home. Now it's our turn to do our job here in front of our fans," said St. Louis forward Zack Bolduc.

"I hope it will be like usual lately, like (the) last two months," added veteran winger Pavel Buchnevich. It will be an amazing crowd, going hard when you make the hits. It brings energy to the building and everybody pumped up, goose bumps and stuff."

One of the things to watch for is how Montgomery might handle matchups now that he has the last change. The Jets have been playing Scheifele's line against the trio of Buchnevich, Robert Thomas and Jimmy Snuggerud. Adam Lowry's shutdown trio was then deployed at home against Brayden Schenn, Jake Neighbours and Jordan Kyrou.

It's safe to say that, so far, Winnipeg has the edge. St. Louis has scored one five-on-five goal so far, which came off the stick of fourth-line centre Oskar Sundqvist. Regardless of whether the Blues try to switch things up, Scheifele said he welcomes the challenge on both an individual and team level.

"You don't have last change, so you just go out and play against whoever you're playing against and do what you can. I think our whole squad, top to bottom, has done a great job at that," he said.

● ROAD-ICE CONTINUED ON D2
● MORE HOCKEY ON, D2, D3, D5