

WOMEN

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against Drake University (7 p.m.) and then head to Lawrence, Kansas to take on the University of Kansas (2 p.m.) on Sunday. The latter game can be seen on www.ESPN3.com.

They then wrap a busy week on the west coast with games at Portland State (Wednesday, 9 p.m.) and at Pac-10 Washington (Thursday, 9 p.m.).

"That regional game (against Drake) is important and we lost an overtime battle at the Pentagon (in Sioux Falls) last year so we feel we'd like to go in and get back to start things off," Williams said. "They are picked to finish third in the Missouri Valley and they have a lot of talent, so it's a tough way to open the year. We are really excited about playing at Kansas. I got to play at Phog Allen Fieldhouse and that rich tradition is a special place for any basketball fan.

"It's a difficult non-conference schedule when you talk about playing a Pac-12 team on the road, a Big-12 team on the road, a Big East team on the road, and then penciling in two of the top three Missouri Valley teams and the Big Sky pick in (North Dakota). There is really not a lot of leeway for us. It's going to be a challenging schedule and a good test for this group and will better prepare us for Summit League."

One thing they'd like to

do is have a more complete body of work from start to finish. Last year they went 7-7 in league play and finished fourth before getting hot at the right time to win the league tournament. The previous year they had lost in the Summit finals after going 10-6 in league action.

With all the returning talent is a better Summit performance in the cards? "Right now we aren't worrying for the end of the season, but we put an emphasis on the next game on our schedule," senior forward Lisa Loeffler said. "We just worry about what we are going to do in that game and then move on to the next game and add it all up in the end."

The players are buying into the defensive mantra and have the depth to go all out.

That depth is not an issue with the players despite the limited amount of run to go around.

"We are putting a huge emphasis on defense and to be one of the hardest working teams," senior guard Raeshel Contreras said. "Our team, honestly no one is worried about playing time. Everybody knows their role and what they bring to the table. We are pretty good about that."

That's big considering the team spread the wealth to the tune of having over a half-dozen players having led the team in scoring at least once during the previous campaign.

One of the bigger focal points this season will be on the defensive side of the



A few adjustments to an already loaded USD squad could see the women celebrating another NCAA Tournament appearance and Summit League Tournament title.

ball. Last season the Coyotes struggled to keep the other team from scoring in bunches and that's something Williams has put a premium on.

"We're always looking to raise the bar in our program," Williams said. "We'd like to have more sustained success for longer periods and that's where we have to lock in and fall in love with the process. Committed to becoming a better defensive team and that we can buy games on that side of the court, if we can buy into that I believe we can be put into position where we will have less games slip through our hands."

"A year ago we led the league in offensive point production, but we also had 12 games where we gave up 80 or more points," Williams said. "That's something we'd like to change. When we

say we want to raise the bar one of those ways is being a better defensive team and we believe we are capable of doing that."

The Coyotes do lose Polly Harrington (12.4 ppg, 5.6 rpg) who gave quite a bit to the USD inside presence, but the team returns firepower in players like Nicole Seekamp (15.5 ppg), Contreras (12.8 ppg), and Loeffler (6.8 ppg, 4.7 rpg).

"We are all confident and not going to put too much pressure on ourselves," the senior forward Loeffler said. "We are just going to go out there and play together. The fact that we have all been together for a year and literally spend 24-7 together only helps our chemistry on the court."

The players know they have to replace Harrington's presence, but feel duly equipped.

"(Harrington) was definitely a big piece of our team, but Margaret McCloud has really stepped up and making really big plays in practice," Loeffler said. "As much as we will miss Polly, our posts that are coming in will definitely help us out."

The team's unity has helped spark the squad to their strong finishes at season's end.

"We are so close that we can tell each other what we need to get better at and we just have come together," Contreras said. "We always find a way to pull together and find a way to pull it out at the end. That's the biggest thing."

Williams cited last year's rally win over North Dakota State as a signature moment that told the tale of this current Coyote squad.

She also admits the late run was a pleasant

surprise.

"That showed special perseverance from the group and they scratched and clawed so I knew it was going to be a team that said never say die and never give up," Williams said. "I could have never predicted what was going to happen down the stretch. It's a game of inches and one single shot there and Raeshel's shot rims out (in Summit League tournament quarterfinal win over Western Illinois last year) and we are going home and none of the special moments that came after that game for us would have never happened. We understand all you can do is control the process."

Williams sees the Summit as a league that could present multiple challenges to the crown with South Dakota State still expected to hang around near the throne, while Western Illinois, Denver, and IUPUI could be title threats.

The Coyotes were picked to finish second in the league – behind SDSU – by Summit coaches.

North Dakota State, Omaha, and Oral Roberts may also come together, of teams by the time the league tournament rolls around in March up in Sioux Falls.

"One of the coaches in our media day teleconference said that when we had to sit down and submit preseason rankings there was nobody that deserved the last spot," Williams said. "It's a hard year with a lot of parity."

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"The hardest part is that it's new for everybody," Smith said. "Not just new for the players, but for the coaches, and director of operations. It's all brand new. So you have to explain everything from Ground Zero with all those people and work your way forward."

"To be honest there isn't anything I don't enjoy. I have the experience of being a head coach, but the biggest difference is you don't have all the obligations away from basketball where you have more at that at this level. But I like doing that stuff. I like showing your enthusiasm and getting people excited about what you are doing."

Smith also is well aware of some cultural changes that need to be made.

The surprising part is we need to change the mindsets with some of those things," he said. "This is big-league basketball. There are 32 leagues in Division I and the Summit League is ranked smack-dab right in the middle at 16th. So we have to make things happen."

So far so good according to the players.

"It's going smoothly, we love what the new coaches are offering to us, our guys are getting along really well and our chemistry is building," senior guard Brandon Bos said. "It's almost like our eight new guys have been here for a couple of years."

Bos also appreciates the way the team learns the Smith game.

"At every practice each coach provides their input and they pull you aside, tell you what you did wrong, and how to fix it," Bos said. "I really like the way practices are run and the structure and what we do. Our coaches have a lot of knowledge...it's been really good."

Smith learned a thing or two under Miles to help his progression back into the top seat.

"Everything's important...nothing's important," Smith said. "If you see eight rabbits and you try to catch eight rabbits, you probably aren't going to catch any rabbits. If you walk after one or two you have a good chance at catching those. We have to identify what's most important for our program and our team for the success we need to have."

"Second, everywhere I have been didn't have a basketball tradition, and we

have a rich tradition here at South Dakota. We struggled a little bit with the transition (from Division I) which a lot of schools do. What I have learned is you win with people first, so you have to do a heck of a job recruiting. You don't have to recruit the kind of player, but the kind of person you want. What's his integrity? What's his IQ level? Is basketball important enough to him or not? Is Vermillion a place they can fit and do well? That's something we've done well everywhere we've been."

One of the newcomers is James Hunter, a 6-10 senior center and graduate transfer from Washington State and he for one has been pleased with his decision to come to Vermillion.

"I really liked the style and thought it would be a good fit," Hunter, a Sydney, Australia native, said. "I went to Gillette (Junior College) in Wyoming and so I knew the coaches through that. I got in touch with them and liked the way (Smith) was talking, and I liked his system, ideas, and principles."

"It's very big man oriented which I like."

Hunter is also optimistic about what the team has to offer.

"We have everything we need to be to be competitive," Hunter said. "The biggest difference in the league is size. Where you get a lot of 7-foot-2 guys in the Pac-12, but it should be physical, so I will have to wait and see."

"I like the guys and I like

it here."

Smith has seen his team in a few scrimmages and so far, so good.

"We have been practicing for (four weeks) and the guys have really bought in," Smith said. "We have eight returners and if you watched us play or practice, it would be hard to tell who the returners are and who the new guys are. They have done a really good job jelling."

That is important for a team trying to find a way to win the close games, something that if it goes wrong, can test a team's mettle.

"Last year we had a lot of close games where we couldn't finish," said Bos. "We had about five league games which we lost by only a couple of points so we could have easily been on the other end of those. We just need to do a better job of closing out games this year."

"That experience should help motivate us and be helpful."

Smith will employ an ideology more than a system of play, one conducive to the ebbs and flows of each contest.

"Our style of play is the winning style," Smith said. "If we have to win 44-42 or 87-81, that's what we have to be built to win every, which way."

"We have a lot of depth. We have about four or five guys whose playing time is pretty safe and then we have guys five through 12 that are pretty even. It's been a lot of competition."

Offensively the Coyotes will be a motion-based attack and defensively will use man and zone looks dependent on matchups.

Those philosophies will be put to the test from the start when Utah Valley plays host to the Coyotes in Orem, Utah. They went 20-12 in 2013-14 and won the Western Athletic Conference regular season crown.

"Nobody wins in Utah Valley," Smith said. "Dick Hunsaker does a great job. His teams are very disciplined and he's been there for how many years and they know that system inside and out."

Then it's on to Palo Alto, California and a date with the Cardinal.

"Stanford has arguably the best player in the Pac 12," Smith said of Chasson Randle. "You play those major conference teams and their players are bigger, longer...when you think you have the space to make a play, they close it down



Craig Smith, right, is welcomed last spring as the new USD men's basketball coach by the school's athletic director David Herbster.

FILE PHOTO

quick with their size and their athleticism."

The Summit League will also offer plenty of challenges as it has morphed from a top heavy league to now a deeper well of competitors for the title.

"There are a lot more teams that can win it and a

lot more depth to the league," Smith said. "It's very balanced and if you don't win at home you will really be losing ground."

"At the end of the day I'd rather be a good team playing great at the end of the year rather than a great team playing good."

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