

ASU Men Ready To Meet Expectations

Written by Charles Cochrum
Thursday, 10 November 2011 12:27

Expectations are high as Appalachian State University men's basketball prepares to open the 2011-12 season on Friday. The Mountaineers open the campaign at home against Lees-McRae with a 7 p.m. tip-off for the regular season.

Appalachian returns four starters for 2011-12, including all-Southern Conference performer

and 2011 Preseason SoCon Player of the Year Omar Carter. Senior forwards Petey Hausley and Andre Williamson and sophomore point guard Mitch Woods welcome the return of redshirt senior Isaac Butts, who sat out the 2010-11 campaign while recovering from an offseason knee surgery. The 6-10 center started 35 games as a junior and led the team in rebounds before suffering the setback in the summer of 2010. Butts enters the 2011-12 season just 16 rebounds shy of cracking ASU's career top-10 list.

The Mountaineers will have to replace the most prolific scorer in program history with the graduation of guard Donald Sims. The guard took over the Appalachian career scoring title and worked his way to 2,000 points in four seasons in the Black and Gold. He also led the team in assists a year ago and was one of just two players to start all 31 contests.

Forward Nathan Healy and point guard Griffin Shaw also return from last season's squad and are surrounded by several new faces in 2011-12. After sitting out the 2010-11 season in accordance with NCAA transfer rules, 7-0 center Brian Okam and point guard G.J. Vilarino are ready to suit up for the Mountaineers as sophomores.

A pair of junior teammates transferred to the High Country from Texas' Midland College in shooting guard Rodney Milum and wing Jamaal Trice, who began his collegiate career at Connecticut.

Freshman guards Tab Hamilton and Mike Neal round out second-year head coach Jason Capel's active roster. Sophomore Jay Canty transferred from Xavier over the summer and will redshirt in 2011-12 before using his final three years of eligibility at ASU.

Justin Gaine and Bobby Kummer return for their second seasons on the Mountaineer bench and are joined by assistant coach Kellen Sampson, who helped Stephen F. Austin to the nation's best scoring defense, allowing just 56.7 points per game a season ago.

Both the SoCon's coaches and media predicted a second-place finish for the Apps this season, behind only defending North division champion Chattanooga.

In addition to the solid squad on the court, GoASU TV returns to bring fans all the action from the Holmes Center this season. For those that can't make it to the game, the online live and on-demand video service will broadcast all non-televised home games, including pivotal Southern Conference matchups against Chattanooga, College of Charleston and Davidson as well as non-conference action against local rivals such as Campbell and ETSU.

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POINT GUARDS

A potential strength for the Mountaineers this season will be the point guard position, as 2-of-3 players return from last season, including 67.4 percent of the squad's assists from the primary ball-handlers. As always, the Mountaineer point guards will have plenty of options running the offense, as the athletic wings and dominant post players will help spread the defense for the Apps' attack.

Incumbent starting point guard Mitch Woods made 17 starts in 26 games despite battling injuries throughout his rookie campaign. The Naples, Fla. native finished second on the team with 63 assists (2.4 per game) in 20.8 minutes per game. Woods used his height and solid frame to average 3.0 rebounds per game. Though just a freshman, he showed an ability to remain poised and composed in pressure situations with the ball in his hands and led Appalachian with a 1.4 assist-to-turnover ratio on the year.

Also returning this season is sophomore Griffin Shaw, who saw action in eight contests as a freshman in 2010-11. Shaw averaged a point per game and added an assist and a rebound as well. Seven of his eight field goal attempts on the season came from behind the three-point arc. A new addition to the active roster this season is G.J. Vilarino, who sat out last season after transferring from Gonzaga, where he played in 25 games as a freshman. With the Zags, the 6-1 Texas native averaged 2.3 points per game despite playing just 7.8 minutes per contest. A solid all-around guard, Vilarino scored 19.5 points with 5.1 rebounds and 4.0 assists per game as a senior at McKinney High School. Vilarino will push the returnees for playing time throughout the season.

Freshmen Tab Hamilton and Mike Neal primarily played the shooting guard position as preps, but both are comfortable with the ball in their hands and provide additional depth at the point. Junior transfer Rodney Milum is another option at the point as he dished out more than an assist per game last season at Midland College.

Appalachian loses Marcus Wright, who started in Woods' place 11 times last season, as well as Donald Sims, who periodically shifted from shooting guard to point guard throughout his career. Sims led ASU with 112 assists last season.

WINGS

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The shooting guard and small forward wing position will look significantly different for the Mountaineers in 2011-12 as only Omar Carter returns and ASU will be without 2010 SoCon Player of the Year Donald Sims for the first time since he stepped on campus in 2007. Sims started 102 games in four seasons at ASU.

Arguably the top returning player in the league, Carter showed off his versatility throughout his junior season, working in three positions on the floor and filling in every role needed to help the program. The all-conference performer scored 16.3 points per game and is the top returning scorer in the SoCon. He ranked second on the team with 5.8 rebounds per game last season and was an all-around contributor in every facet of the game. Between his two seasons at Charleston Southern and last season's 505-point output, Carter has scored 1,357 collegiate points.

Filling the vacancies on the wings will be a mix of transfers and freshmen that give Jason Capel's Mountaineers a great deal of versatility for different lineups.

After beginning his career at Connecticut in 2008-09, Jamaal Trice played last season at Midland (Texas) College and helped to lead the squad to the NJCAA national championship game. The Los Angeles native averaged 8.3 points and 2.7 rebounds and converted 47 percent of his field goal attempts. Prior to his year at UConn, Trice played one season at Mount Zion Christian School in Durham, N.C.

Trice doesn't come to the High Country alone, as MC teammate Rodney Milum also transferred to ASU over the summer for his junior year. The sharpshooter was Midland's second-leading scorer last season at 9.7 points per game.

A pair of freshmen also enter the mix at shooting guard, as Tab Hamilton and Mike Neal fill out the position. Hamilton starred last season at Fishburne Military School after transferring from Winston-Salem's West Forsyth High School. Neal played at Oak Ridge Military Academy last season after transferring from Northern Guilford High School in Greensboro.

Jay Canty will sit out the 2011-12 season after transferring from Xavier.

In addition to Sims, J.R. Archer and Jeremi Booth also graduated in the spring. Freshmen Ryan Kilmartin and Anthony Thomas also departed after combining to play in nine games last season.

FORWARDS/CENTERS

Three post players return from 2010-11, including the team's leading rebounder and blocker in

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Andre Williamson, while a pair of redshirts provide welcome size and depth to the positions this year.

With Isaac Butts missing last season to a knee injury, Williamson stepped in to fill the low post, rather than play his more comfortable power forward position. Responding to the challenge, Williamson finished the season third in the Southern Conference in field-goal percentage (56.2) and blocks (1.5). His 8.7 points per game ranked third on the team and his 46 blocks place him 10th on ASU's single-season list. He enters 2011-12 fifth all-time in program history with 116 career blocks.

Petey Hausley made 17 starts for the Apps last season in his first year with the program and averaged a solid 7.0 points per game, along with 3.4 rebounds and a stout 54.7 field-goal percentage. He was one of four Mountaineers to score 200 points and haul in 100 rebounds in 2010-11.

Nathan Healy provided a spark in 30 games as a sophomore, averaging 3.8 points, 3.3 rebounds and 1.0 assists per contest for the Apps. A versatile forward, Healy stepped outside the arc to knock down 12 three-pointers on the season and swiped 18 steals to give the Apps a different look throughout the course of games.

Butts returns after a solid junior campaign in 2009-10. The big man filled the paint and averaged more than eight points and eight rebounds per game for the second season in a row. His 79 career blocks rank eighth on ASU's career list and his 59.1 career field-goal percentage is the fourth-best in ASU history. 2011 marks the first time since 2008 that Butts enters fall preseason camp at full health.

Redshirt sophomore Brian Okam also makes his Mountaineer debut in 2011-12 after transferring from Rutgers following his freshman campaign in 2009-10. The 7-0 center shot 45.5 percent from the field in 16 games for the Scarlet Knights.

Anthony Breeze graduated prior to exhausting his eligibility after averaging 4.7 points and 3.1 rebounds last season in 14 games with three starts. ASU also looks to replace sophomores Jacob Lail and Josh Nirenberg, who combined to appear in 12 games last season.

THE SCHEDULE

ASU's schedule is highlighted by 14 games in the Holmes Center and a showdown against in-state rival East Carolina in Charlotte's Time Warner Cable Arena.

In a stark contrast with the 2010-11 road-heavy non-conference schedule, the Mountaineers open the season at home against Lees-McRae on Nov. 11 and play six home games in the

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season's first six weeks. Following the opener, the squad makes a two-game Volunteer State road trip to ETSU (Nov. 15) and Tennessee Tech (Nov. 19).

ASU returns to host in-state rival East Carolina in Charlotte on Nov. 22 and hosts Milligan (Nov. 26) before opening Southern Conference play with a visit from UNC Greensboro on Dec. 1. The Apps close out December league play at Georgia Southern two days later.

The Mountaineers travel to Minnesota on Dec. 6 for the second meeting between the programs before hosting a return game from ETSU on Dec. 10. The Apps then take on defending ACC champion North Carolina on Dec. 17 in Chapel Hill in the programs' first meeting since the inaugural game at the Holmes Center in 2000. Appalachian hosts Campbell on Dec. 22 and closes out the calendar year and the bulk of non-conference competition with a Dec. 30 game at Miami (Fla.).

January begins with the squad's final trip away from the Carolinas to face Samford (Jan. 5) and Chattanooga (Jan. 7). As the spring semester begins, ASU hosts Furman (Jan. 12) and South Division favorite Davidson (Jan. 14) before taking on defending SoCon champion Wofford in Spartanburg, S.C. in a rematch of last season's SoCon quarterfinal.

ASU plays nine of its final 15 regular-season games at home, including a visit from Western Carolina on Jan. 21. ASU's second meeting with UNCG comes at the Greensboro Coliseum on Jan. 26, prior to a three-game homestand, including Elon (Jan. 28), Samford (February 2) and College of Charleston (Feb. 4).

The Mountaineers travel to Elon (Feb. 6) and Furman (Feb. 9) before returning home for another three-game stay. Appalachian hosts Wofford (Feb. 11) and Chattanooga (Feb. 15) before seeking a third-straight BracketBuster win on Feb. 18.

For the first time since 2006-07, the Apps close out the regular season on the road with trips to The Citadel (Feb. 22) and Western Carolina (Feb. 25) before heading to the Southern Conference Championship on March 2-5 in Asheville, N.C.