

Minnesota West men's basketball team trying to piece together the puzzle

[Aaron Hagen](#) Worthington Daily Globe
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WORTHINGTON — Add completing puzzles to the list of hobbies for Minnesota West men's head basketball coach Justin Heckenlaible.

Because, in a way, that's what he's going to have to do this season for the Bluejays.

With a mere three returning sophomores this year, a large group of freshmen will have to take the reigns for Minnesota West in the 2008-09 campaign.



Aaron Hagen/Daily Globe Minnesota West's Aaron Delany looks for an open teammate during a game last season. Delany is one of three returning players this season for MW.

"They've come together pretty well," Heckenlaible said. "That's the other challenge when you have the large amount of freshmen with different programs and different backgrounds. I actually got this from Ron Wood — he said it's like a big puzzle piece figuring out where the pieces are to go. They've been really good as far as team chemistry, and have been hanging out off the court as well."

The group of 13 players will have time to come together, beginning tonight at Dakota Wesleyan.

"We're so young, so a lot of it is that we need to play," Heckenlaible said. "We scrimmaged a couple of weeks ago and we've gotten a lot better since then, but we just need to play and see where we're at."

Aaron Delany, Devon Harrell and Lon Eichenberger are the three returning players this year, and all three will have to contribute more this season.

"They've done a nice job and they are good leaders," Heckenlaible said. "Obviously, they are the only ones that have been through it. They know what to expect, but they are going to have to play a little bit bigger role this year."

With the graduation of Eddie Marrs, the Bluejays are without their leading scorer from last year.

"We've had our leading scorer the last four years returning, or at least someone who's scored a lot," Heckenlaible said. "Right now, I think Aaron averaged four or five points. We have a lot of guys that I'm very confident in. But who's going to be our leading scorer? I have no idea."

Along with Harrell, Eichenberger and Delany, the seventh-year coach will look to his young team to come up with the scoring night in and night out.

With a slim roster after last season, Heckenlaible hit the recruiting trail hard in the offseason, signing 10 freshmen this year.

"The last couple of years we've been pretty balanced," Heckenlaible said. "But this year it just didn't work out. We obviously had a large group of sophomores that play a ton, so it's kind of a cycle. But we have a lot of

really capable freshmen that are going to be fine as far as stepping up and playing right away. We have all the confidence in the world in them.”

Leading the group of talented freshmen is Jordan Buddenhagen, who will likely start at point guard this season.

Along with Buddenhagen, Cory Lesnar (6-foot-5) will start in the post for MW. With Lesnar in the post, Stevie Statz (6-5) and Spencer Kor (6-5) will also see time in the post.

The tallest player on the roster, Josh VanDuyn, listed at 6-8, will have an opportunity to play quality minutes.

“Offensively he’s getting better every day,” Heckenlaible said of VanDuyn. “The biggest thing with him is that he’s going to get banged on because he is a little bit undersized as far as weight, but he’s been working hard in the weight room. I definitely think he’s going to be a kid that’s going to come on as the year goes.”

While the Bluejays don’t have an overabundance of height, Heckenlaible is confident that MW will be able to compete against taller, more physical teams.

“This is my seventh year, and we’ve always been undersized, and we’ve always been able to compete,” Heckenlaible said. “Unfortunately, some nights it just wears on you at the end and the other team just takes over. But we’ve been fine. Some of these guys are pretty physical. Maybe we can have an advantage and make them adjust to us if we go with this offense.”

This season, the Bluejays are looking to run a more up-tempo offense.

“We’ve kind of changed our offensive philosophy — we’re doing some dribble-drive-motion, kind of like what Memphis did last year,” Heckenlaible said. “It’s kind of been the new thing and I think it’s really worked well for us when we do it well.”

To run the offense, perimeter players such as Bailey Ellison, Logan Korkow, Chad Johnson and Dan Stryzinski will all be players that will need to fit in with the system, as will transfer John Jones, who will sit out the first semester and will be ready to go after Christmas.

But before MW can get up and down the court, it will have to take care of business on the opposite end of the court.

“You say you want to get up and down and run, well first of all, you have to get stops defensively, and two, you have to rebound — then you can run,” Heckenlaible said. “You can say you want to be up-tempo, but you have to do the first two things. When you’re taking the ball out of bounds every time, it’s hard to run.”

While the Bluejays are hoping for easy layups this season, the 3-point shot has become more difficult. The 3-point line has moved back a foot, to 20-9, creating a tougher shot from the outside.

“Teams have really struggled this year shooting it from the perimeter,” Heckenlaible said. “Which I didn’t know for sure, but until we play a real game (tonight), we’ll have to see. I have a feeling, at least to start with, the percentages are going to be down.”

MW will open its season tonight before returning home this weekend for a pair of games at the Sanford Regional Hospital Classic.

“We’ll have a chance every night, and we just want to get better every night, and get better at what we’re doing and figure out what we’re going to do,” Heckenlaible said.