



Grand Canyon University Lacrosse 2009

When Grand Canyon University decided to add lacrosse to its athletic program, not everyone involved actually realized the magnitude of the task involved.

GCU coach Adam Marshall soon learned that 18 isn't enough. That's about how many players the Antelopes had to kick off their first season in 2008, in which they went into games shorthanded, short on experience and short in winning at the big-time level.

A year removed from the school's first season in which the Lopes went 1-10, the Marshall Plan is in full effect. Now Grand Canyon has a full squad with some beefed-up talent and better goaltending.

"Right now we're kind of trying to find ourselves," Marshall said. "We're trying to see who can lead us. Once we get past that step, I think we could surprise some people."

Grand Canyon's leading scorer Pat Murphy returns following a season in which he had 19 goals and 24 points in NCAA competition last year. Murphy and fellow attacker Billy Lloyd, who had 13 goals and a team-best seven assists for 20 points, anchor an offensive bunch of returners that has an influx of new talent waiting for faces to emerge.

"Obviously Pat plays with a lot of passion," Marshall said. "That's something that can't be replaced. Billy has a gift around the goal, just a knack around the net."

Gritty veterans Danny Tussy, Stu Harris, Troy Merkle and Ryan Jackson are the best the Antelopes have to offer in the returning mix of grind-it-out stick men. Tussy led the Lopes with 35 ground balls last year. He also scored five goals. Jackson scooped up 18 ground balls, while Merkle had 12 and Harris seven.

"Stu has kind of become an all-around player, like Tussy and Jackson," Marshall said. "He kind of already has it."

After a year in the program when wins didn't dot the Lopes schedule the way some may have believed wouldn't be so difficult, optimism looms for greener pastures. And not just in terms of the well-manicured grass adorning the GCU Lacrosse Stadium surface.

"All the guys that were around last year, it was such a struggle," Marshall said. "But for those who were around, (winning at season's end) is something they can carry with them forever. That's something they can carry into this year. It really elevated the level of pride."

When you think about what it took to win at the NCAA level, it was a lot more than the school may have bargained for by just putting a team on the field. That, itself, was a struggle. But now the Antelopes have the numbers. They have some experience and more talent filtering through the gates at the lacrosse complex on the northern-most

part of campus, meaning shuffling in tired, banged-up bodies won't be as much of an issue.

Or at least it shouldn't.

"Just the fact that our guys can have a much better experience this year (will help)," Marshall said. "It's hard to play college lacrosse with 15 players. I think we're very fortunate to get through last year, and I think the guys who were around can appreciate this year much more. We're not gonna be in trouble because we don't have enough people."

Quality people.

Quality scorers.

Better goalkeeping.

More toughness.

Quality recruits.

GCU has all of that this year.

Freshmen defender Eddie Minear and midfielder Jordy Patterson, the offensive player of the year at the Arizona high school level in 2008, add instant credibility to a recruiting class that is the result of Marshall and assistant coach Bill Lowe scanning the country in search of upgrades.

Scott Franks, a junior college transfer, will shore up an attacking line that is improving daily. "Scott's gonna help our offense a lot," Marshall said. "He's kind of like a triple threat out there. He can shoot, pass and dodge. He's like a point guard out there in basketball. He's gonna be dangerous for defenses."

Jacob Hippensteel, a freshman attacker from Chandler, Ariz., offers size and speed to a growing number of players who can tickle the back of the twine.

"He's becoming more intelligent every day," Marshall said. "He just gets better every day, so we're excited about him."

Grand Canyon is waiting on some of its new players to clear eligibility, but one thing goes without saying, the recruiting job in year two is leaps and bounds ahead, for many reasons, than year one.

"The potential and talent level is getting there," Marshall said.

Four goalkeepers are competing for a starting job – an area Marshall considers an upgrade without hesitation.

"It's a competitive position," Marshall said. "Everybody on the team is confident with all the goalies. We've got four guys who are all working together. We can't have a bullpen, but I don't think we're gonna be hurt by whoever's in net."

No matter whom the Antelopes put out there this year – at any position – there's one thing that can't be disputed: it can always get better. And it's getting better. Besides, going north from a one-win season is almost inevitable.

"Everybody's excited for the start of the season," Marshall said.

Season number two of the Marshall Plan is ready to unfold ...