

GCU Women's Basketball 2009-10

Amid a sea of statistics from the 2008-09 basketball season, the loneliest number stands out for Grand Canyon Head Coach Trent May.

One.

That's the number of players who played in all 28 games for the Antelopes, who fought through a series of injuries to claim their third consecutive Pacific West Conference championship and earn a berth in the NCAA tournament. Even with a winning record (16-12 overall, 9-3 PWC), it was a season of what might have been for GCU. Leading scorer Samantha Murphy missed the first six games with a hand injury. Point guard Rosalyn Nelson, a three-year starter, missed the last five after seriously injuring her knee. Senior forward Ashley Hardin played in only two before a knee injury finished her year.

"We haven't played with a full deck since I've been here," says May, who nevertheless is 35-22 in two seasons after succeeding Craig Wiginton as head coach. "But we're progressively getting better as a program. Not just any player can come and play at Grand Canyon anymore. We expect a lot."

Expectations are high all over again for a veteran team that returns Murphy (19.2 ppg), Hardin and possibly Nelson (15.5 ppg), along with seniors Stacy Haddow (11.6 ppg, 6.3 rpg, 28 starts) and Dana Iverson (8.3 ppg) and junior Kristi Girdley (6.2 ppg). Hardin took a medical redshirt last season, but Nelson is still recovering from surgery in April and might need to take one of her own this season. She has been the floor leader for a turnaround at GCU that began with a 23-4 breakthrough in 2006-07.

"She wants to be 100 percent," May says of Nelson, who was the conference Player of the Year in 2007-08 and first team All-PWC last season along with Murphy. "I don't blame her for wanting to finish on a strong note. We still have a good opportunity to win without her."

Senior transfer Shareka Purnell, who played at Division I Arkansas-Little Rock, and freshman Kayla Fisher of suburban Chicago are capable point guards if Nelson can't go. For scoring, the Antelopes again will rely heavily on Murphy, a 5-foot-8 junior guard from Xavier Prep in Phoenix who shot 50 percent from the field, 42 percent from three-point range and 82 percent from the foul line.

"She's a hard-nosed competitor with an unconditional work ethic," May says. "She's fierce."

The early schedule should be fierce as well. Among non-conference opponents, the University of California-San Diego, Seattle Pacific and Alaska-Anchorage all are ranked in the preseason Division II top ten, and Western Washington and Northwest Nazarene have strong regional teams. Dixie State and Hawaii Pacific figure to be the toughest among the Antelopes' Pacific West rivals.

Is it too early to apply the D-word — for dynasty — to a GCU team seeking a fourth consecutive conference title?

"That word is great to hear, and I'd like to be a part of that," May says. "Maybe that's us in our conference. But our goals need to be national now. I love the direction we're going in. In terms of support from our school's administration, you can't ask for anything more."