

UMBC Outlook, 2008-09

UMBC head men's basketball coach **Randy Monroe** is very fond of classic movies. So, it was no surprise that his theme for the 2008-09 men's basketball season came from the Sidney Poitier/Bill Cosby remake of the 1950's classic movie, Let's Do It Again.



What the Retrievers would be trying to repeat is simply the best season in the school's 42-year men's basketball history. UMBC won a school-record 24 games, captured the America East regular-season and tournament titles and made the university's first appearance in the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Championship. In addition, the 2007-08 team set numerous single-season records, most notably scoring the most points in program history, and the squad was the nation's leader in assist-to-turnover ratio.

Recent history says that UMBC has a chance. Albany (2006, 2007) and Vermont (2003, 2004, 2005) both repeated as champions this decade.

"Coming back from Raleigh, I was already thinking about what we need to do to consistently remain successful," Monroe said. "The returning players had a taste, and they feel good about trying to do it again. We are all looking forward to the opportunity."

The good news for the swelling legion of Retriever fans is the return of both of UMBC's first-ever First-Team America East All-Conference players, senior point guard Jay Greene and senior forward Darryl Proctor. The experts are not questioning the production, tenacity and leadership of that duo and emergence of junior wing Matt Spadafora. The concerns begin and end with the loss of a trio of players – Ray Barbosa, Brian Hodges and Cavell Johnson – that produced nearly 60 percent of the Retrievers' offense from the championship season.

"You don't replace those guys and I don't want my guys thinking they have to," Monroe said. "This group has to create their own identity. They must understand that the 2008-09 team is their team. It's a new time and a new team."

Super Seniors

Jay Greene and Darryl Proctor have a lot in common. They are certainly both undersized at their respective positions in the Division I basketball arena. Both have constantly been told that they couldn't succeed at the highest level of collegiate basketball. Most importantly, they are perfect examples of Coach Monroe's philosophy of "not allowing others' perceptions of you to become your reality."

The Retriever mentor feels that the dynamic duo can raise their game even another notch in their final go-around. "I look for them to provide more scoring because they are capable of it. They are both intelligent enough to know what we need. I trust them to make sound decisions. They are first-team all-conference players because they are capable of doing special things on the floor."

Lost in the glory of last season was the disappointment of senior forward Uwem Eshietedoho. After working diligently to rehabilitate a leg injury which he suffered in the spring of 2007, his playing season lasted just five games, as he broke his right leg in a game at West Virginia. His latest rehab has been curtailed by setbacks, but the Florida native refuses to give in and will try to display his high-energy style of play in his final season.

Point Guards and Wings

Jay Greene (8.8 ppg, 7.2 apg) had two very solid seasons for the Retrievers, but dramatically elevated all aspects of his game last season. The numbers tell much of the story, but his teammates and coaches continually relate the rest—that Greene’s selfless play and leadership was a prime factor in the team’s success. The 2007 Cousy Award nominee was the only player in the country to be ranked in the top five in the nation in assists per game (7.2) and assist-to-turnover ratio (3.47). He also became more efficient in shooting the basketball, elevating his 3-point field goal percentage by nearly nine percent to .414, fourth in America East. In short order, the 5-8 dynamo will become UMBC’s all-time assists leader and is on pace to add 1,000 career points to his resume.



If league coaches could have voted for a most improved player in the conference last year, 6-5 junior Matt Spadafora (5.9 ppg, 3.0 rpg) would have gotten a great deal of consideration. He was putting together a solid campaign, but he really stepped up when sharpshooter Brian Hodges was sidelined by injury in February. Spadafora started the final 12 contests and averaged 10 points per game in the America East Championships. The Philadelphia-area native is a tireless defender who was tabbed along with Greene and Proctor as tri-captains for the upcoming season.

Frank McKnight is hoping to replicate Spadafora’s 2007-08 ascent in his own sophomore campaign. He got a taste of the action, competing in 19 games last season, but he has shown tremendous dedication to improving his conditioning and shooting in the offseason. The 6-1 southpaw will work almost exclusively at the off-guard position as the coaching staff looks for more options from behind the three-point arc.

To say the least, 6-3 sophomore newcomer Bakari Smith is anxious to get his UMBC career underway. He did not compete at the junior college level in 2007-08, so he would have three years of eligibility for the Retrievers. Coach Monroe describes Smith as a “cerebral player who really breaks the game down.” He has multiple guard skills, and although he will primarily contribute at a wing slot, he could serve as Greene’s back-up at the point position.

Sophomore Rodney Adkins earned a slot on the team as a walk-on last season and the 6-0 Connecticut native will also try to earn minutes at the point guard slot. Red-shirt freshman Marcos Tamares is developing his perimeter skills after a full season of practicing with the Retrievers. Like McKnight, the 6-6 New York native has reported in much better physical condition this season.

Freshman Chauncey Gilliam has an opportunity to make an impact in his first campaign at the collegiate level. He prepped at one of the nation's top schools, Brewster (N.H.) Academy, last year and captained the Leap (N.J.) Academy teams the previous two seasons. Coach Monroe describes the 6-4, 215-pound southpaw as "a tenacious athlete, who likes to mix it up in the trenches. Like Proctor, he doesn't have a true position, but seems to find a way to get things done."

Former Carroll County (Md.) Player of the Year Brett Burrier will earn a slot on the team as a walk-on. The 6-6 wing is an outstanding distance shooter who prepped at Mercersburg (Pa.) Academy last season.

The Frontcourt



There were approximately 4,500 student-athletes that competed in NCAA Division I men's basketball last season. **Darryl Proctor** (15.1 ppg, 8.4 rpg) was ranked amongst the top 100 in three distinctly different categories—shooting percentage, rebounding and steals. He stands barely 6-4 but managed to record 13 double-doubles last season. His offensive arsenal is varied, ranging from quick post moves to a highly effective fade-away jumper. Just days after UMBC's season ended in March, the power forward was already thinking about his senior season and has shed about 20 pounds from his 2007-08 playing weight.

Still recovering from last season's leg injury, 6-8 senior Uwem Eshietdoho will attempt to contribute on the court as much as possible in his final campaign.

The emergence of Justin Fry (3.9 ppg, 2.6 rpg) will be critical for UMBC's success this season. The lean, 6-9 junior was a contributor last season but took a back seat to Cavell Johnson from a production standpoint. Fry has all the tools to be effective at the high or low posts and the grittiness to battle bulkier opponents in the paint, but he must take his excellent practice habits to the court on a more consistent basis.

Sophomore Rich Flemming is expected to play a key role in the frontcourt this season. The 6-7 Fairfield transfer played in 25 games for the Stags in 2006-07 and Coach Monroe sees a big upside for the Pennsylvania native.

"He is the best athlete on team. He runs and jumps extremely well, can rebound and can finish around the goal. If he practices with passion and energy all the time, he could be a very good player for the next three years," Monroe said.

Like his classmate Gilliam, freshman Jake Wasco may also get some looks early in his UMBC tenure. The 6-9 post toughened and sharpened his skills in the tough Philadelphia public school and summer leagues. He has made dramatic strides in his development, but plays with a calmness that belies his youth and inexperience.

Two transfers, 5-9 guard Chris De La Rosa (Siena) and 6-11 post Robbie Jackson (Marshall) will practice with the team this season. De La Rosa will have three years of eligibility remaining, while Jackson will have two.

Monroe does not expect to have to make a complete overhaul in the style of play which the Retrievers employed last season. “I like what I am seeing from the new players. They are playing hard while trying to learn. The other things will take care of themselves. We will continue to change defenses, look to run when we can, but also get into our sets. I don’t expect to change too much.”

Final Take

It appears that UMBC will once again be cast as an underdog in the America East race. Coach Monroe and his forces have relished this role in the past, tying for fourth after an eighth-place pre-season designation in 2006-07 and capturing the crown after a fifth-place selection before last season.

“I really like this group. I have the utmost confidence in the leadership of Jay, Darryl and Matt, and their leadership will spread throughout the team,” Monroe said. “Some people are counting us out, but those guys have a lot of pride and the new guys want to do well. I really think we’ll be there at the end.

“We can be very good in a different kind of way. If we enjoy the process, work hard and work smart, we can be very successful.”

