

Men's Basketball looks for improvement in 2009

By Nick Phillips
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This season's UNCP men's basketball team is ready to begin a new season, tipping off action on Nov. 7-8, as they traveled to Iowa to face a pair of opponents.

The Braves are hoping that the experience gained on the trip will help them as they dig deeper into their schedule this season.

The 2008-2009 edition of the team did not have a great year to the average eye. But what their final record, 6-21 overall, 3-17 Peach Belt Conference, does not show is that the Braves played many close games that went down to the final minutes. The Braves lost 11 games by less than 10 points, including six losses by less than five points.

Learning to win

"We had a lot of exciting, close games, that didn't always go the way we wanted, but hopefully we can build on some of that momentum," head coach Ben Miller said.

It was a season of change for the Braves, as they learned Miller's new offensive and defensive systems, while playing with a relatively young team. Of the 14 players on last year's roster, six were either freshmen or sophomores.

"There's a little more experience this year. We still have a relatively young team, but the returning guys, even the guys who redshirted, have been through a year of practices, so the system isn't new to everybody," Miller said of this season's team.

Experience is a word that was stressed by



Miller, as everyone in the program now has a year's worth of knowledge – the players of the system and head coach, and the head coach towards his players.

Adjustment year

Miller was impressed with the community and its warmth to him and his family.

"After being here for a year now, it's really been great to get to know the people here. The administration, the coaching staffs, the students, everyone here has been great," Miller said on his first season.

Last season, Miller helped start a student section at the English E. Jones Center for the Braves home games, while helping the students

decide their student section name. The Bravehearts now inhabit the Jones Center for both men's and women's home contests complete with Braveheart student section shirts.

"I was impressed by the students last year, because obviously we didn't win a lot of games. When we got into conference play, our student section was great; I was impressed by the turnouts," Miller said.

Season ahead

"Personnel-wise, our team has changed. We lost some good players in the seniors that graduated, but we've also added some good players," Miller said. "We were able to redshirt six guys last year, which was nice."

Several key players return for the Braves this season, including senior Brandon Thomas, who led the Braves in rebounding, averaging 7.6 per game, and blocked shots.

Sophomore Marcus Heath logged the most playing time for the Braves, as a freshman, while averaging 9.7 points per game as well. Fellow sophomore Tyler Egli averaged 5.5 points per game, while also finishing with a .346 shooting percentage from behind the three-point line last season.

"Our defense is always going to try our foundation," Miller said. "At times last year we were effective with our pressure defense and other times we gave up easy baskets."

"Putting that together as a team is going to be very important to us, as well becoming a very much improved rebounding team," he said.

As a team, UNCP allowed an average of 79.5 points per game, with opponents shooting for .480 from the field.

UNCP also looks to continue to improve on its 35.1 team rebounds per game average from a year ago.

Offensively, UNCP only averaged 70.6 points a game, and shot for a .425 percentage on the floor.

"Offensively, we have a lot of weapons and a lot of guys that can score," Miller said. "The key is going to be unselfishness, and a commitment to team execution."

The Braves will look to improve and combine both defense and offense to produce more wins this season.

Favorable schedule

In Miller's first season, the Braves only had a total of two non-conference games at home. This season, UNCP was able to schedule six home games in November alone.

"We have a non-conference schedule that will give our students and people in the community a great opportunity early to see our team," said Miller of the team's early schedule.

Miller credited assistant coach Corey Thompson for his hard work in scheduling good matchups throughout the season.

That non-conference home schedule includes the home-opener against regional rival Fayetteville State on Nov. 16.

The most important thing for the Braves is gaining experience and improving, something that both practices and games do for a team.

"The most important thing for our guys is focusing on daily improvement," Miller said.

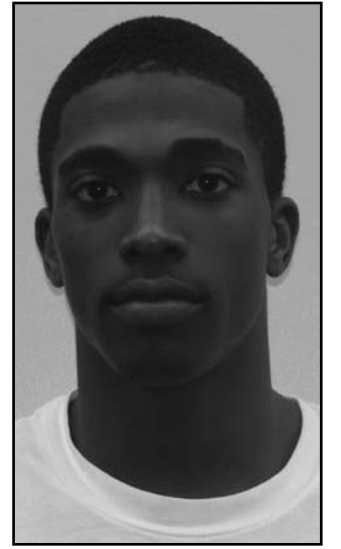
With that daily improvement, expect the Braves to find themselves on the winning end of more games in the 2009-2010 season.

Key Returners



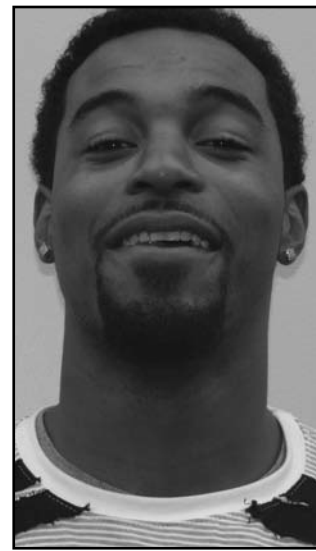
Thomas

Last season, Brandon Thomas finished the season averaging 12.7 points to finish second on the team. Thomas also finished with 7.6 rebounds per game. Thomas had 110 defensive rebounds last season.



Heath

In 2008, Heath averaged over nine points per game with the Black and Gold and finished with four assists per game. Heath started 23 games last season. Heath was third in the PBC in free throw percentage.



Smith

As a sophomore last season, Jason Smith averaged 6.2 points and 2.4 assists for the Black and Gold. Smith played in 20 games for the Braves, averaging 21 minutes per night. Smith also had 22 steals last year.



Robinson

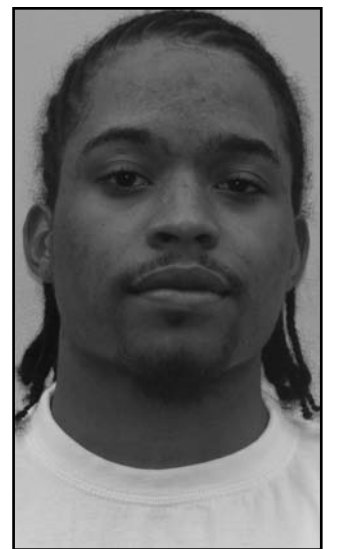
During the 2007 season, the Winston-Salem native saw action with the Black and Gold at the forward position, playing in nine contest while totaling 11 points and 11 rebounds for the Braves two seasons ago.

Impact Freshmen



Brackett

At Wilson High School, Shamel Brackett averaged 21 points, six assists and over four rebounds a game. The Florence, S.C., native was a finalist for the Mr. Hoopzone Award and was an all-star selection.



Cooper

As a guard at North Edgecombe High School, guard K.J. Cooper averaged over 21 points a contest. Cooper left North Edgecombe as the program's all-time leading scorer and earned team the 2008 team MVP.

Meet Coach Miller



Miller

UNCP men's basketball head coach Ben Miller enters his second season with the Braves in 2009.

Before his career at UNCP, Miller spent 18 years as an assistant coach under some of the nation's premier college coaches. For nine years, Miller was an assistant coach at Kansas University, working under current head coach Bill Self. Before working under Self, Miller was part of Roy William's staff, who is now the head coach at the University of North Carolina.

During his time in Kansas, the Jayhawks earned 10 NCAA tournament berths and went to three Final Fours in Miller's tenure. The team also won six Big 12 championships.

Most recently, Miller was an assistant and associate head coach at Missouri State, where he helped lead the Bears to two 22-win seasons and a second place finish in the Missouri Valley Conference in 2005.

2008 Results

6-21 Overall Record

3-17 Peach Belt Conference Record

Last Place Conference Finish

Key Games

Nov. 6 at Iowa State
First exhibition game of the season

Nov. 15 Fayetteville State
First home game of the season

Dec. 5 at Clayton State
First Peach Belt Game

Jan. 20 at Augusta State
Matchup with last season's top PBC team

Feb. 27 Flagler
Senior Night