

sports

Men's basketball: Making history one game at a time

A timeline of the second best run in program history

BREE GANNON
@BreeGannon

Terry Bradshaw once said, "When you have something to prove, there is nothing greater than a challenge."

The greatest challenge the Ashland University men's basketball team has faced is being better than they were in previous seasons.

13-0. The second best start to a season in program history since 1991 when the team went 15-0. The start showcased the determination and hardwork the team has put in.

"I'm very proud of our guys, I think they have worked hard for it," head coach John Ellenwood said. "When you get on win streaks like that I think sometimes it is very easy to get caught up in the win streak and not focus on the task at hand and the next game. I think our guys had a good attitude just focusing on the next game and opponent and not really worrying about where they are in the history books."

Before the season officially started, the team announced the arrival of two Division I transfers from Bowling Green State University in junior guard Rodrick Caldwell and sophomore forward Derek Koch.

The Eagles started their season with an away game against Lake Erie where they won 72-57. Junior center Drew Noble put up 16 points in the win while redshirt-sophomore wing Aaron Thompson added nine rebounds. Caldwell added five assists.

Thompson's rebounds every game are good enough to put him as the rebounding leader each game in the GLIAC. Thompson currently still holds the top spot with 9.8 rebounds per game and says his success does not only define him as a hardworking player but also the team.

"I work hard but it's a team effort out there," Thompson said. "A lot of time everybody is boxing out but I come in for the clean up and it just so happens to work out in my favor. I try not to pay attention to the numbers, I just go out there and play as hard as I can every night and if it works out like that, it works out like that and I'm happy with that."

Win number two came on the season's home opener on Nov. 11 against Ohio Dominican. The Eagles were down heading into half-time by nine points but came out on top and ended the game with a close 66-60 score. Caldwell led the team in points with 22 while Noble led in rebounds and assists with seven and six, respectively.

The win against ODU was one of five straight home games and the next on the schedule was Ohio Christian. The 89-57 win marked win number three for the team and this game was led by Koch who put up 22 points, 12 rebounds and four



AU ATHLETICS

Teammates Drew Noble (left) and Aaron Thompson (right) celebrate in the air with a chest bump during a game earlier this season in Kates Gymnasium.

assists.

Win number four came just before Thanksgiving over Seton Hill and ended with a 73-62 score. Noble finished with 25 points while Thompson added 14 rebounds.

After the short Thanksgiving break, the Eagles hosted Lake Superior State for their first conference game of the year. The team achieved win number five with a 82-68 finish and it was Thompson who finished with a career high 27 points and 10 rebounds.

Next up, the Eagles had a tough battle in the defending national champions, Ferris State. The last time these two teams played in Kate's Gymnasium was during the 2017-2018 season where the Bulldogs won in an intense battle with a close score of 97-91.

This year, the Eagles came back victorious and won in another close finish and knocked off the defending champs, handing the Bulldogs their second conference loss. The 91-88 win marked the sixth straight win for the Eagles and once again Noble led the offense with 33 points and Thompson led with 14 rebounds. Senior guard Ben Haraway added three assists to the totals.

The team's 6-0 overall and 2-0 conference start landed them at No. 19 in the NABC Division II Coaches' Poll. The ranking was the first time the team had been included in the coaches' poll since the end of the 2015-2016 season where they were slotted at No. 12.

At this point in the season, the

Eagles led the GLIAC in scoring margin, field goal percentage, free throw percentage and rebounding. Thompson was also named the team's first GLIAC South Player of the Week after averaging 19.5 points, 12 rebounds, 2.5 steals, 1.5 assists and one block in the games against Lake Superior State and Ferris State.

Win number seven came after a road game trip to Grand Valley State where the Eagles defeated the Lakers 74-63. It was Caldwell that led the team with 22 points matching his season high. Thompson had 10 rebounds while Haraway added six assists.

Another road game win came after the Eagles defeated Davenport 72-60. Caldwell led the team to their eighth win with 19 points while Noble added 10 rebounds and Haraway had three assists.

The 8-0 start jumped the Eagles in the National Coaches' Poll to No. 16 and they were one of 11 teams left in D-II that remained undefeated. The back-to-back road wins left Ashland as the only undefeated team in the GLIAC and one of two undefeated teams in the Midwest Region.

Cladwell was named the GLIAC South Player of the Week after averaging 20.5 points, 4.5 rebounds and 1.5 assists against Grand Valley State and Davenport.

Win number nine came on Dec. 15 in a homestand against Lawrence Tech with a 86-55 win. Noble led the offense with 19 points while Koch followed with 12 rebounds. Senior forward Phil Frentsos achieved a career-high 14 points in his time off the bench and shot 6-for-7 from the field.

The Eagles entered the double digit win column in the team's first 100 point plus game of the season. The Eagles defeated the Kentucky Christian Knights 110-56. Caldwell had 17 points, five assists, four steals and three rebounds. Coming off the bench, senior guard Jay Slone scored a career-high 11 points.

The second best start in program history (10-0) landed the Eagles at the No. 10 spot in the National Coaches' Poll right before Christmas. The Eagles' success made them the only team in the GLIAC to be ranked.

Win number 11 came after an 87-64 win over Westminster in the final game of the 2018 calendar year. The Eagles held the Titans

to a 34 percent shooting and forced 19 turnovers. Noble led the offense with 24 points while Thompson had 15 rebounds.

The first game of the 2019 year became the fewest allowed points given up in a GLIAC game in program history when the Eagles defeated the Michigan Tech Huskies 67-44. Noble finished win number 12 with 19 points while Thompson had 11 rebounds.

Lucky number 13 came after a close 67-60 win against Northern Michigan. Many Eagle players helped aid the offense for the team but it was Noble who led in points with 26 as well as five assists on the night. Haraway followed closely behind with 23 points and a career-high six 3-pointers for eight attempts. Thompson also added a career-high 16 rebounds and five points.

The 13-0 overall record and 6-0 GLIAC start marked the second best start in program history after the 1991 team won their first 15 games before losing to Bellarmine by 14 points. It also gave the team a No. 6 ranking in the National Coaches' Poll which is the team's highest ranking since they were ranked No. 3 on Feb. 18, 1991.

Unfortunately, all things must come to an end and the Eagles undefeated streak was snapped after losing to the newest GLIAC member Parkside in a road game. The Rangers defeated the Eagles 68-61 in their first ever meeting. A high amount of turnovers and points coming off the Ranger's bench forced the Eagles into a corner. Noble led the team with 17 points while Thompson had 11 rebounds.

After the season's first loss, the Eagles went on to face the Purdue Northwest Pride where they restarted their winning streak after a 81-57 finish.

The Eagles are currently ranked No. 8 in the National Coaches' Poll and sit at the top of the GLIAC standings with a one-game lead over Davenport. The team has been in the top 10 for the third straight week and Ellenwood is proud of his team but knows what is to come from their opponents.

"It is a great honor and we work hard for that stuff," Ellenwood said. "I tell our guys you cannot get caught up and rest in your laurels but at the same time that is what you play the game for, to be honored like that and rewarded for your efforts. It's nice to be there but

we understand that we are going to get a little bit better effort now out of everybody that we play because of that ranking."

The overall team ranking represents the success of the team as a whole but some players have their own individual statistical rankings as well. Besides Thompson's rebound statistics, Noble also holds the No. 6 spot in the GLIAC in points per game with 17.3. Noble credits his teammate's for helping aid in getting him to spots where he can score.

"We have a great system in place here, obviously I have great teammates around me so it definitely helps that I don't have to take all the pressure," Noble said. "I can take a lot of doubles because then other guys will score and the system we have in place definitely helps me get to the positions where I like to score. My teammates get the ball to where I like to score as well and they have a lot of assists to get me to those good spots to score."

Noble and Thompson also commented on the top 10 ranking and how they think it will pave the mindset for the rest of the season.

"It was really big for us because I felt like when we were coming in as freshman, the team before us was one of the best to come through here," Noble said. "They were top 10, made the national tournament and won the GLIAC. We came in and it has been our goal to get back to that place where they left off and continue that on so it was a really big deal for us and something we were talking about all summer and in the pre-season; it's great to be here now."

Thompson also added that the team is rising to the occasion despite the expectations that are following them.

"We are kind of like, I don't want to say living up to expectations but, coming in with those expectations on our back," Thompson said. "We are kind of coming in with a target already on our back and it seems that we are rising up to the occasion."

The end of the season for the men's basketball team is nowhere near in sight but they are always improving on their team and individual skills. Coach Ellenwood said that one thing they are improving on is working on their defense and offense to fit the personnel of the team.

They are also sharpening the skills of the team and working towards getting rid of individual weaknesses to make the team stronger. Even though the team still has 13 games left to play, Ellenwood's goals for the rest of the season are clear.

"We want to get into the conference tournament and that is an objective that we want," Ellenwood said. "We want to host a conference game, and that is always big if we can be the No. 1 seed and host the whole thing, that would be huge. We would love to play in the postseason in the NCAA and we would like to win the conference. Those are all really high objectives but we have to stay focused on the next game in order to do that."

The Eagles are currently sitting at 14-1 overall on the season and 7-1 in the GLIAC.

The door on one historic run may be closed but the door for another run for the record books is in the beginning stages of being opened.

The Eagles are back in action on Saturday Jan. 19 in Kates Gymnasium for a GLIAC matchup against Northwood with tip-off at 3 p.m.



AU ATHLETICS

Senior Ben Haraway (left) and junior Rodrick Caldwell (right) bring the ball up the floor in a game at Kates Gymnasium earlier this season.