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ISU still hungry after tasting some success

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TERRE HAUTE — If you had to summarize Indiana State's men's basketball season into one thought, it might be this.

The Sycamores got a taste.

ISU got to sample the morsels of success. It avoided the play-in round of the Missouri Valley Conference tournament and found out what it's like to not play Thursday at Scottrade Center for the first time since the second month of George W. Bush's first term. By achieving its first winning record since 2001, ISU also got into the postseason — sure, the College Basketball Invitational is no one's destination point — but the Sycamores did get to sample at least some version of what the postseason can be all about.

So in that sense, ISU's 17-15 campaign was a success, but its success that ISU coach Kevin McKenna is realistic about. By no means did the 2010 season represent a plateau the Sycamores are satisfied with.

"If you're a competitive basketball you want to be in the postseason environment, you want to keep playing, but we don't want to be playing in St. Louis on a Tuesday. We want to be playing on a Thursday or a Friday at a [NCAA] regional site," McKenna said.

ISU achieved its winning record despite having a season that was marked by near-constant upheaval, much of it injury-related once the MVC season began.

Jake Kelly was ruled eligible by the NCAA in early October, but was eventually waylaid by an ACL tear in the conference opener at Southern Illinois. Kelly played one game over the NCAA limit to gain a possible medical waiver to play another year.

ISU primarily depended on Harry Marshall and Lathan, when they could play. Marshall was suspended twice in the first two months of the season (missing one game) and Dwayne Lathan was initially ineligible due to a NCAA infraction that occurred before he transferred from Louisiana Tech.

Lathan suffered a high ankle sprain at Bradley in early January and missed most of the remainder of the month. In the second game of his return, he broke his hand against Illinois State. On the last meaningful play of the ISU victory, Marshall suffered a stress fracture and ultimately missed five games.

ISU was left to play with an eight-man roster for five games, but the Sycamores managed two MVC wins during that stretch. The victories were crucial in helping ISU achieve a winning record and a 9-9 MVC mark.

The Sycamores lost four of their last five games — Marshall was only healthy for one of the games as he drained a 33-footer in overtime in a key victory in the regular season finale against Missouri State.

Marshall, Rashad Reed and Josh Crawford have exhausted their eligibility, but ISU figures to be in good shape at several positions.

If Kelly makes a healthy return from his knee injury, ISU's point guard spot is set. Redshirt freshman Jake Odum should see minutes there too, along with true freshman Steve McWhorter. The combination of Lathan, Jordan Printy, Aaron Carter will see time at shooting guard. Redshirt freshmen Logan and Lucas Eitel could also see time at the guard spots.

Lathan, Carter and Koang Doluony can play the 3-spot. Carl Richard, redshirt freshman R.J. Mahurin and true freshman Jake Kitchell can play power forward. Along with returnees Isiah Martin and Brant Leitnaker, 6-foot-9 South Plains Junior College center Myles Walker — who averaged 11.6 points and 6.7 rebounds — will be counted on to anchor the center position.

ISU has 53.1 points per game returning to the fold, but that's no reason for any of the Sycamores to rest on any laurels.

"They can't be the same player they are now. We have to improve. If we're going to improve as a team, those guys have to be dedicated and get in the weight room and assume some leadership roles," McKenna said. "I think we have those kind of guys, I think they will dedicate themselves, I think they will motivate each other, but its got to be on them. It's not something we talk about, it's got to be something we do."

After ISU's loss to Saint Louis in the CBI on Tuesday, Martin said that he and Lathan had already discussed plans in the postgame locker room to get in the weight room the next day to get ready for next season. The taste made the Sycamores hungry, but only hard work will give ISU the feast it seeks in 2011.

"We have to get stronger and our camaraderie needs to be better. We talk about family all year, and we did a good job of that, but we need to keep it up," Martin said.

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