

REVAMPED

WYOMING BASKETBALL
PREVIEW 2025-26

ROSTER

COWBOYS LOOKING TO CONTEND IN SUNDANCE WICKS' SECOND SEASON



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ON THE COVER:

Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle
University of Wyoming guards Naz Meyer, from left, Leland Walker and Jared Harris highlight 12 newcomers on the Cowboys' roster.

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WYOMING

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Forward Neil Summers dribbles during the University of Wyoming's media day Oct. 9, 2025, at the Arena-Auditorium.

Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

By Alex Taylor | WYOSPORTS

It was a busy offseason for Sundance Wicks and his coaching staff.

The second-year University of Wyoming men's basketball coach added 12 new players this offseason, including seven transfers and five incoming freshmen. The Cowboys' new-look roster features a mix of six upperclassmen and nine underclassmen.

UW returns just two

scholarship players from last year's 12-20 team, which finished with a 5-15 mark in the Mountain West. The Cowboys were bounced in the first round of the MW tournament for the third consecutive March.

The Cowboys lost eight of their top 10 scorers from a year ago to graduation or the transfer portal. Only six players on this year's roster have played a game at the Division I level.

RETURNERS

MATIJA BELIC, F
Senior, 6-7, 239, #7
Previous school: University of California, Santa Barbara
Hometown:
Belgrade, Serbia

Belic is the Cowboys' lone returning starter. He appeared in 22



games, with 16 starts after missing time with a shoulder injury. He averaged 5.6 points and 3.1 rebounds, while shooting 41.9% from the field. Belic scored a career-high 13 points to go along with five rebounds, two blocks and two steals against Air Force last winter. He spent two seasons at Santa Barbara, and made the NCAA Tournament in 2023. Belic has represented Serbia at multiple FIBA Championships. His father was a former member of

the Yugoslavian National Team. “I like what we had last year, especially with the coaching staff and coach Wicks,” Belic told WyoSports. “... I liked the vision. I don’t think we achieved what we wanted to last year, so I wanted to come back, be in the same place and try to do a better job this year.”

ABOU MAGASSA, F
Sophomore, 6-7, 217, #10
Previous school: Saint Louis
Hometown: Morsang-sur-Orge, France

Magassa made an immediate impact as a freshman last season. He appeared in 31 games, with 14 starts, averaging 3.2 points and 3.7 rebounds. He was named the MW freshman of the week after scoring a career-high 10 points to go along with five rebounds against New Mexico. He led the Cowboys with a 72.4% shooting mark from the field. Magassa redshirted in his lone season at Saint Louis before transferring to UW.

“Last year, (Wicks) gave me a lot of



playing time as a freshman,” Magassa told WyoSports. “I think, if you want to get better, you can’t just leave every year, you know? You have to have a certain consistency, so that was my goal. Also, I like the plan he had for the team and for me. I just trusted him.”

GARRETT SPIELMAN, G/F
Redshirt freshman, 6-7, 201, #14
Hometown: Sheridan

Spielman enters his second year as a walk-on for the Cowboys. The Sheridan High graduate was a first team All-Class 4A selection for the Broncs, averaging 14.4 points and 6.8 rebounds as a senior. He also earned all-state honors in golf. His sister, Samantha, is on the Cowgirls golf team.

“Garrett is like a young Sundance,” Wicks said. “He’s just full of piss and vinegar and has no idea what the hell he’s doing half the time, but he does it with great enthusiasm, and I love that. That’s what you want out of guys in your program. He’s a culture carrier, right? He has the flag, and he

plants it in the ground. He carries the culture, he’s an everyday guy that likes to show up and do the work, he encourages his teammates,



Troy Babbitt/UW athletics

University of Wyoming guard Naz Meyer dunks during an exhibition against the College of Idaho on Oct. 25, 2025, at the Arena-Auditorium.

and he has obsessive enthusiasm. That’s what you want.”

INCOMING TRANSFERS

URIYAH ROJAS, G
Junior, 6-3, 206, #0
Previous school: Chaffey College
Hometown: Rancho Cucamonga, California

Rojas burst onto the scene at Chaffey College last season, averaging 25.5 points, 7.7 rebounds and 4.9 assists. His breakout performance earned him All-American honors from the California Community College Athletic Association. He appeared in 59 games over the past two seasons, scoring more than 1,100 points, with 121 3-pointers. He scored a career-high 54 points against Victor Valley.

“We got a steal in Uriyah,” Wicks said. “... I felt like he was vastly under-recruited and overlooked for the season he had, not to mention



the fact that he had helped Chaffey College go 50-11 in his two years there. Winners win, and Uriyah wins. ... Guard rebounding and ball security are two very underrated weapons that allow you to push pace and put pressure on the opposing teams. ... Uriyah has a very complete game, and will be a special weapon in our system.”

DAMARION DENNIS, G
Sophomore, 6-1, 166, #1
Previous school: Texas A&M-Corpus Christi
Hometown: San Antonio

Dennis made the most of his playing time at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi. He finished 48.3% from the field and 38.7% from deep in 17.9 minutes per game. He averaged 6.7 points, 1.9 rebounds and 1.3 assists while starting nine contests. He graduated from Veterans Memorial High in San Antonio as the program’s all-time leading scorer.



Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

Guard Adam Harakow palms a ball during the University of Wyoming’s media day Oct. 9, 2025, at the Arena-Auditorium.

“Dennis was identified by our staff as one of the most efficient players in the country this season, per his usage,” Wicks said. “Dennis is a full-time dog. He helped lead TAMCC to 20 wins this season, but the first thing that stood out to us on tape was how he would pick up opposing handlers the full 94 feet. Dennis is a defensive disruptor and an offensive connector. ... You just don’t stumble across players who play the game as efficiently and aggressively as Damarion Dennis.”

KHADEN BENNETT, G

Junior, 6-4, 205, #3

Previous school: Quinnipiac

Hometown: Mansfield, Texas

Bennett appeared in 49 games over the past two seasons at Quinnipiac, earning 20 starts. He averaged 10.3 points, 4.3 rebounds and 1.6

assists last season, and he scored a career-high 23 points against Sacred Heart. Bennett finished with 39 3-pointers as a sophomore. He played for his dad, Brandon, at South Grand Prairie High in Texas, earning District 8-6A offensive player of the year honors after averaging more than 15 points, seven rebounds and four assists per game.

“We believe that toughness is a talent, and Khaden has a ton of it,” Wicks said. “(Bennett) is exactly the tough-minded winner that the Wyoming faithful will fall in love with. ... He is a Swiss Army knife in the form of a basketball player. He can hurt you from the arc, keep the dominoes falling when the advantage is created and take advantage of (switches) with his bulky frame.”

LELAND WALKER, G

Senior, 6-1, 181, #5

Previous school:

Florida Atlantic

Hometown:

Indianapolis

Walker brings plenty of experience to Laramie, having



25 points in 375 points, 375 assists, 99 steals and 101 games played in his career. He started all 33 games for Florida Atlantic last season, averaging 9.2 points, 4.5 assists and 2.7 rebounds. He had 14 games with at least five assists. He spent his first two seasons at Eastern Kentucky, earning All-Atlantic Sun Conference honors as a sophomore.

“Leland has been a winner everywhere he has been,” Wicks said. “He is a three-level scorer and a floor general who naturally excels at pushing pace, and he has never had a season where he has been under 100 assists. I loved watching his film and seeing him orchestrate the offense for FAU last year. It is easy to find scoring, but not so easy to find a willing leader in today’s game who connects it all. Leland balances both worlds successfully.”

KIANI SAXON, F

Graduate, 6-8, 226, #8

Previous school: Missouri Western

Hometown: Auckland, New Zealand

Saxon joins the Cowboys from Missouri Western with new assistant coach Will Martin, who was the Griffons’ head coach. Saxon averaged 7.2 points and 3.9 rebounds in 23.9 minutes per game during his two seasons at Missouri Western, shooting 54.2% from the field. He started all 31 games last season, averaging 6.4 points and 4.2 rebounds. He has 61 career starts.

“The first thing we need to understand about Kiani is that he has been developed at a high level by coach Will Martin,” Wicks said. “It is very easy to vet a young man when he comes from a coach you trust and a program that has had competitive excellence. ... He has high feel, high skill and a high level of care. He is the ultimate connector, and will be an easy plug-and-play guy for the Pokes.”

JARED HARRIS, G

Sophomore, 6-2, 186, #9

Previous school: Memphis

Hometown: Silsbee, Texas



Harris was a highly-touted recruit coming out of high school. He earned a four-star ranking and was rated the No. 86 player in his class by On3.com. His steady improvement earned him a spot at Memphis, but he averaged just three minutes in 16 games as a freshman.

“Jared has the ability to be a very impactful player for us with his ability to play both ways and all the natural gifts he possesses,” Wicks said. “What I loved most about our vetting of Jared Harris was that everyone we talked to absolutely loved the young man as a human being, first and foremost. High character and a crazy-high ceiling, Jared has that rare mix of athleticism, aggression, skill and the will to win. Most importantly, he has a chip on his shoulder and is ready to prove himself at the highest level.”

ADAM HARAKOW, G/F

Junior, 6-7, 218, #13

Previous school: Lake Superior State

Hometown:

Edmonton,

Alberta

Harakow spent the past two seasons at Division II Lake Superior State in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. He’s appeared in 63 career games, averaging 11.8 points and 4.4 rebounds last year. He added 37 3-pointers while helping the Lakers to the Elite 8 of the DII NCAA Tournament. He scored a career-high 31 points against Michigan Tech, finishing 11-of-16 from the field, with four 3-pointers to go along with eight rebounds.

“The Division II level has been good to the Pokes in the past couple seasons, and we are going to keep trending upward with the addition of Mr. Harakow,” Wicks said.. “... What stuck out to us the most about Adam was his competitiveness and his ability to play fast and physical while also being a threat from behind the



arc. The lefty has size, switch ability and physicality.”

INCOMING FRESHMEN

NAZ MEYER, G

Freshman, 6-7, 194, #2

Hometown: Los Angeles

Meyer proved his ability to score at a high level, recording 35 points with seven 3-pointers against Western Reserve in the national prep championship in 2023. He averaged 19.4 points, 8.4 rebounds and 2.4 assists at Agoura High in California before moving to New Hampshire. He earned a three-star rating from Rivals.com.

“What I love about Naz is that he is a Swiss Army knife as a player,” Wicks said. “He has a deep toolbox and can fix any issue we might have in a hurry. At 6-7, Naz is the ultimate connector. He can defend any position, he can play any position offensively, and he can connect with any type of human culturally. Pokes fans are going to love his competitiveness, his electric playmaking ability and his willingness to leave it all on the court for his team.”

GAVIN GORES, F

Freshman, 6-10, 224, #11

Hometown: Cumberland, Wisconsin

Gores was the 46th-ranked power forward in his class, and the sixth overall recruit from Wisconsin. He averaged 34.1 points per game as a senior, including a career-high 51 points, with nine 3-pointers in a win over Regis. He finished the year shooting 56.3% from the field, while averaging 14 rebounds. Gores graduated from Cumberland as the school’s all-time leading scorer.

“Gavin is a winner, and he is as driven as any player we have ever recruited,” Wicks said. “Gavin is that rare breed of size, athleticism, skill and killer instinct that is almost



impossible to find. At 6-10, he can stretch it, rack it and feel the game in ways most can't. In my opinion, he will be a matchup nightmare in the coming years, and will create advantages for us in a multitude of ways. There is no ceiling for Gav."

TALAN TAYLOR, G
Freshman, 6-4, 158, #32
Hometown: Idaho Falls, Idaho

Taylor joins the Cowboys as a walk-on after averaging 14 points and 4.3 rebounds at Hillcrest High in 2024. He earned all-area honors after leading Hillcrest to a deep run in the state tournament. He made more than 100 3-pointers in his final two prep seasons, shooting 41% from deep as a junior. While he had options to get playing time at one of the lower levels of college basketball, he decided to join the Cowboys to learn under Wicks and his staff.

"Being given the opportunity to come play here just felt like a dream come true. It's a full-circle moment for me, and that made my decision pretty clear that I wanted to be here," Taylor told WyoSports. "I want to be the best teammate I can be. I want to play my role, whatever my role may be."

SIMM-MARTEN SAADI, F
Freshman, 6-9, 242, #35
Hometown: Tallinn, Estonia

Saadi prepped at Sunrise Christian Academy in Wichita, Kansas. There, he averaged more than 14 points,

seven rebounds and two assists. During the under-20 European Championships, he averaged 11.9 points, 6.6 rebounds and 1.9 assists while representing Estonia. He's one of six players to play Division I basketball from Estonia in the past two seasons.

"Simm is one of those players who will always make opposing teams question, 'What just happened?'" Wicks said, "He has an extremely high skill set, great feel for the game and a toughness that travels. The Estonian National Team forward has an advanced knowledge of how the game of basketball should be played and the sacrifices that need to be made to compete and win at the highest level. Simm has some genetic metrics that matter, he has huge hands and a 7-foot-plus wingspan to go along with his quick and efficient jump shot."

NEIL SUMMERS, F
Freshman, 6-9, 290, #45
Hometown: Laramie

Summers is the reigning Wyoming Gatorade player of the year for boys basketball. He helped Laramie reach the Class 4A state title game in each of the past three seasons. Summers averaged 16.7 points, 9.6



Troy Babbitt/UW athletics

University of Wyoming guard Jared Harris makes a pass during an exhibition against the College of Idaho on Oct 25, 2025 at the Arena-Auditorium.

rebounds and 1.9 assists per game as a senior. He finished the year shooting 58% from the field and 31% from 3-point range.

"When we got the job (last) May, there was one Wyoming native son I knew we had to have, and that was Neil Summers," Wicks said. "... Seldom

are you able to find a player with Neil's size and skill that can play inside and outside. He has an unreal feel for the game. How do you judge feel? The answer: by one's ability to pass the ball. Neil will be able to connect our offense in a five-out setting, while also being able to play point guard in the post."

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AZTECS

HEAVY FAVORITES DURING FINAL SEASON IN MOUNTAIN WEST



By Alex Taylor | WYOSPORTS

Fifteen players earned All-Mountain West honors in March.

Only two of those 15 return to the league this season. San Diego State's Miles Byrd and Utah State's Mason Falslev were both second-team selections a season ago, and they earned preseason All-MW honors after returning to their respective schools.

The MW lost five of its 15 all-conference selections to Power Four schools, including New Mexico's Donovan Dent (UCLA), Nevada's Nick Davidson (Clemson), SDSU's Nick Boyd (Wisconsin), UNLV's Dedan Thomas (LSU) and Wyoming's Obi Agbim (Baylor).

The MW's 12 teams lost a combined 109 letterwinners this offseason, including 48 starters. That's an average of 9.1 letterwinners lost in the offseason per team, and four starters each.

It'll be the final season in the MW for five schools, and the first season for another. Grand Canyon comes over from the Western Athletic Conference, while Boise State, Colorado State, Fresno State, Utah State and San Diego State will all depart for the Pac-12 next year.

SDSU garnered all 26 first-place votes in the MW preseason poll to earn the top spot with 312 points. Utah State was second (275), followed by Boise State (260) and Grand Canyon (224).

New Mexico was fifth (182), UNLV was sixth (174), and Colorado State



Associated Press

Utah State guard Mason Falslev (12) looks to shoot past San Diego State forward Magoon Gwath (0) during the second half of an NCAA college basketball game Saturday, Dec. 28, 2024, in San Diego.

and Nevada tied for seventh (164). Wyoming (ninth, 96), San Jose State (10th, 82), Fresno State (11th, 65) and Air Force (12th, 30) rounded out the preseason poll.

TOP DOGS

Last year was a down one for the Aztecs by their own standards.

While they finished 21-10 overall and 14-6 in the MW, they lost their opening game in the conference tournament for the first time since 2007.

That dropped SDSU to the First Four of the NCAA Tournament, where its season ended with a blowout loss to North Carolina.

The Aztecs are the most stable MW program entering the new season. Ninth-year head coach Brian Dutcher returns four starters, including Byrd, who was voted the conference's preseason player of the year.

Reese Dixon-Waters and Magoon Gwath joined Byrd on the

preseason All-MW roster.

For the first time since 2022, Utah State retained its head coach going into a new season. The Aggies were picked second in the preseason poll after finishing 26-8 and 15-5 in Jerrod Calhoun's first year.

UCLA dismantled Utah State 72-47 in the first round of last year's NCAA Tournament. The Aggies lost to Colorado State in the MW tournament semifinals.

Falslev is Utah State's lone returning starter, but Drake Allen, Karson Templin and Tucker Anderson return after contributing as role players last season. Falslev averaged 15 points, 6.3 rebounds, 3.7 assists and 2.3 steals while shooting 49.7% from the field and 39% from deep.

Boise State continues to be one of the more consistent programs in the MW, but it continued to struggle getting over the hump during Leon Rice's 15th season. The Broncos made a run to the MW tournament title game as the No. 5 seed, but a loss to Colorado State kept them out of the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2021.

Boise State returns two starters, including preseason All-MW forward Andrew Meadow. The Broncos will look to erase Rice's 0-5 record in March Madness.

Grand Canyon made a strong debut in its first MW preseason poll, despite losing 11 letterwinners and four starters from last year's 26-8 team. The Antelopes won the WAC tournament for the third consecutive year, but Maryland bounced them in the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

Preseason All-MW selections Jaden Henley and Brian Moore Jr. lead Grand Canyon.

Henley averaged 12.5 points per game last season for UNLV, and Moore scored 18.1 points for Norfolk State.

MIDDLE OF THE PACK

Winning is costly.

Just ask New Mexico, which lost its head coach, 12 letterwinners and five starters after its 27-win season

a year ago. The Lobos won the MW regular-season title with a 17-3 mark in league play.

Following Richard Pitino's departure to Xavier, New Mexico hired Eric Olen from the University of California San Diego. The Lobos have 14 players and return zero production from last year's roster. Guard Deyton Albury, a Utah State transfer, was New Mexico's lone selection on the preseason All-MW lineup.

UNLV also has new leadership after firing Kevin Kruger in March. Josh Pastner, who spent seven years in the same position at Georgia Tech, replaced Kruger.

The Rebels return one player from last year's sixth-place team, but High Point transfer Kimani Hamilton is expected to lead the way after earning a preseason All-MW nod. UNLV hasn't made the NCAA Tournament since 2013.

Colorado State knows all about New Mexico's pain this offseason. The Rams lost head coach Niko Medved after making an improbable run to claim the MW tournament title. Medved took over at Minnesota, and his assistant, Ali Farokhmanesh, replaced him.

The Rams return just one starter after being seconds away from a Sweet 16 appearance a season ago.

Nevada split seventh place in the preseason poll with the Rams after losing 10 letterwinners and four starters. The Wolf Pack picked up Fresno State transfer Elijah Price, who earned preseason All-MW honors.

Nevada is coming off a disappointing 17-16 campaign, including an 8-12 mark in league play.

THE REST

Sundance Wicks was one of the last coaching hires in the country for Wyoming last May, which led to a 12-20 mark and a 5-15 record in the MW. The Cowboys lost 12 letterwinners from last year's team, including Agbim, who was last year's MW newcomer of the year.

Wicks supplemented the roster with seven incoming transfers. The



Associated Press

San Diego State guard Miles Byrd, left, breaks away from San Diego forward Santiago Trouet during the second half of an NCAA college basketball game Saturday, Dec. 7, 2024, in San Diego.

Cowboys will look to make a run in the MW tournament after being eliminated in the opening round in each of the past three seasons.

San Jose State continues to

struggle with retention, as it lost seven scholarship players from last year's 15-20 team. The Spartans made it to the quarterfinals of the MW tournament after beating

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2025-26 COWBOYS BASKETBALL SCHEDULE

DATE	OPPONENT	TIME	DATE	OPPONENT	TIME
Nov. 8	vs. Cal State Fullerton	TBA (MWN)	Jan. 17	at Fresno State	TBA (MWN)
Nov. 11	vs. Austin Peay	TBA (MWN)	Jan. 20	vs. Boise State	TBA (MWN)
Nov. 15	vs. Portland	TBA (MWN)	Jan. 24	vs. San Jose State	TBA (MWN)
Nov. 19	at Sam Houston State	TBA (TBA)	Jan. 28	at Utah State	TBA (CBSSN)
Nov. 23	vs. Norfolk State	TBA (MWN)	Jan. 31	vs. Colorado State	7:30 p.m. (FS1)
Nov. 26	vs. Denver	TBA (MWN)	Feb. 3	at San Diego State	TBA (CBSSN)
Nov. 30	at Texas Tech	TBA (TBA)	Feb. 7	vs. Utah State	TBA (CBSSN)
Dec. 6	vs. Dartmouth	TBA (MWN).	Feb. 14	at Colorado State	TBA (MWN)
Dec. 9	vs. South Dakota	TBA (MWN)	Feb. 17	vs. Fresno State	TBA (MWN)
Dec. 15	at South Dakota State (Sioux Falls)	TBA (TBA)	Feb. 21	at Grand Canyon	TBA (MWN)
Dec. 20	vs. Grand Canyon	TBA (MWN)	Feb. 24	at Boise State	TBA (MWN)
Dec. 30	at Air Force	TBA (MWN)	Feb. 28	vs. Air Force	TBA (MWN)
Jan. 3	at New Mexico	TBA (CBSSN)	March 3	vs. Nevada	TBA (MWN)
Jan. 6	vs. UNLV	TBA (CBSSN)	March 7	at San Jose State	TBA (MWN)
Jan. 10	at Nevada	TBA (MWN)	March 11-14 Mountain West Tournament in Las Vegas		
Jan. 14	vs. San Diego State	TBA (CBSSN)	Bold indicates Mountain West game		

the Cowboys for a third time last season.

SJSU returns four letterwinners and has 12 newcomers.

Fresno State’s only time in the headlines last season wasn’t for its performance on the court. Three

former players were permanently banned from the NCAA for sports betting, which distracted fans from the Bulldogs’ 6-26 record.

Fresno State won just two conference games last season. It returns one player in Zaon Collins,

who averaged 12.4 points and 4.6 assists.

Air Force was one of the worst teams in the country a year ago, finishing with just four wins and a 1-19 record in MW play. The Falcons lost 21 of their last 22 games to end

the season.

Air Force continues to see the consequences of not being able to add transfers. The Falcons lost 10 lettermen and three starters, and all 10 of their newcomers are freshmen.

MOUNTAIN WEST PRESEASON

PRESEASON ALL-MOUNTAIN WEST TEAM

- F, Andrew Meadow, Boise State
- G, Jaden Henley, Grand Canyon
- G, Brian Moore Jr., Grand Canyon
- F, Elijah Price, Nevada
- G, Deyton Albury, New Mexico
- G, Miles Byrd, San Diego State
- G, Reese Dixon-Waters, San Diego State
- F, Magoon Gwath, San Diego State
- F, Kimani Hamilton, UNLV
- G, Mason Falslev, Utah State



MW PRESEASON PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Miles Byrd, G, San Diego State

MW PRESEASON NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR

Brian Moore Jr., G, Grand Canyon

MW PRESEASON FRESHMAN OF THE YEAR

Elzie Harrington, G, San Diego State



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MAINTAINING CULTURE

Magassa, Belic returning leadership for Cowboys



Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

Forward Abou Magassa is looking to build off a promising first season at the University of Wyoming.

By Alex Taylor | WYOSPORTS

Abou Magassa didn't know what he was going to do.

Halfway across the world from his hometown, his basketball future was as murky as ever.

The Morsang-sur-Orge, France, native contemplated a one-way trip back home when he got a phone call from University of Wyoming men's basketball coach Sundance Wicks.

"When coach Wicks gave me the opportunity to play, I was very, very grateful," Magassa told WyoSports last month. "Very grateful."

Magassa transferred to UW as a redshirt freshman last offseason. He played in 31 games for the Cowboys, including 14 starts.

He averaged 3.2 points and 3.7 rebounds while earning Mountain West freshman of the week honors once.

Magassa's career with the Cowboys almost never happened. His first year in the United States was riddled with adversity during a short stint at Saint Louis University.

"When I was at Saint Louis, I didn't know I was going to redshirt. I learned it before the first game, then I didn't play the whole season, then my coach got fired," Magassa said.

One year later, Magassa is one of two returning scholarship players for the Cowboys. He joins returning starter Matija Belic, who is entering his senior year.

"The (continuation is why I came

back)," Magassa said. "Last year, coach gave me a lot of playing time as a freshman. If you want to get better, you can't just leave every year, you know? You have to have a certain consistency. So, that was my goal. Also, I like the plan he had for the team and for me. I just trusted him."

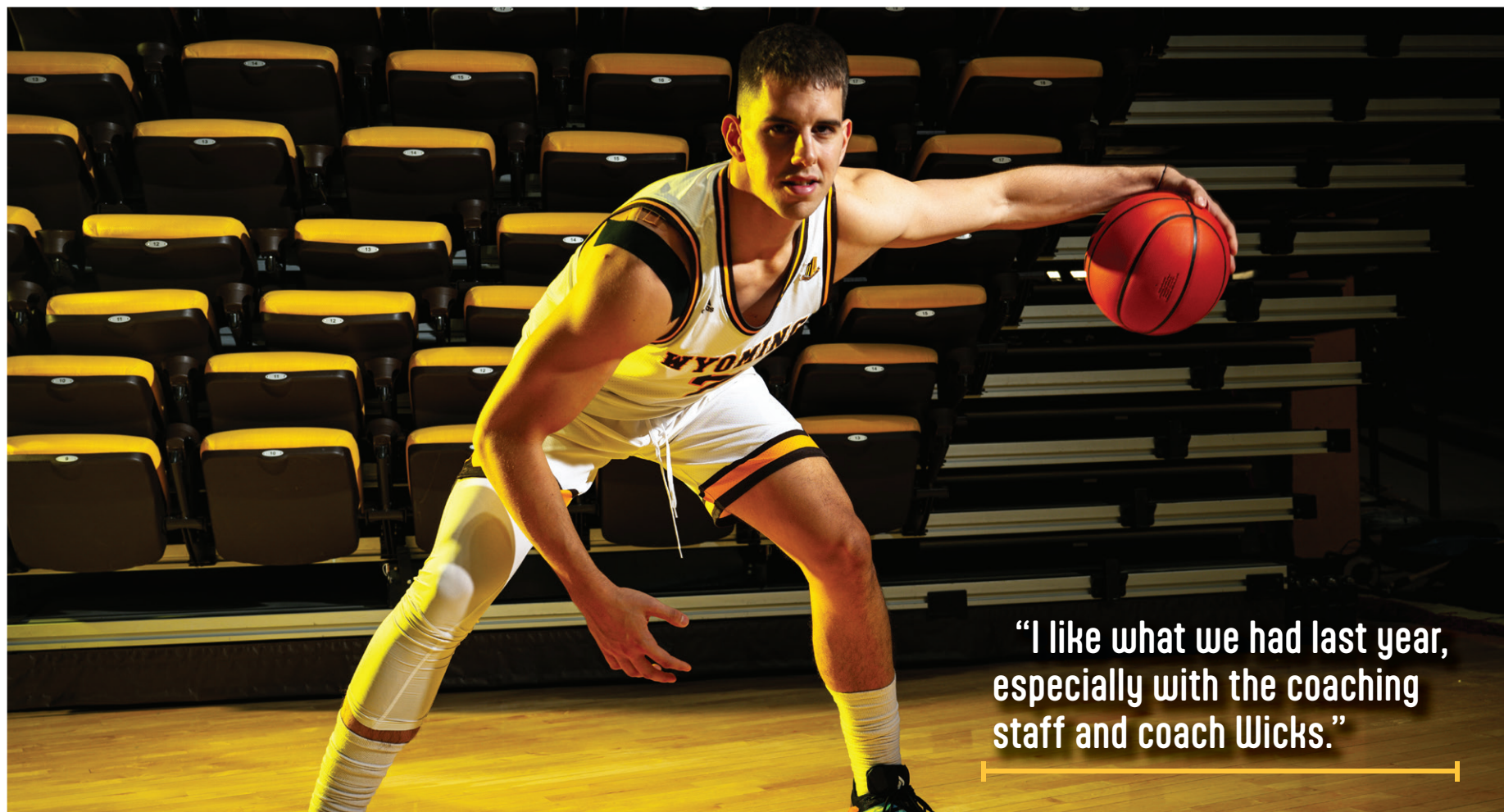
Magassa's trust in Wicks isn't a one-way street. Wicks, who's going into his second year as UW's head coach, values Magassa and Belic's loyalty as a way to continue building a winning culture in Laramie.

"(Magassa) is catching his stride right now," Wicks said. "Abou was in the 99th percentile, if not the best finisher, in the United States of America inside the restricted arc.

So, you're talking about finishing at the basket. He's an elite finisher. He's got great hands. He has to take that next step for us, though, because he's heavily counted on.

"There's two guys that are going to be heavily counted on, and it's the returners. It's Abou and Matija. (Magassa) is going to have to take the next step for us, from a leadership standpoint, and from an everyday accountability standpoint.

"I don't want him to be a guy who plays 20 minutes one game and two minutes the next. He had a lot of inconsistency in minutes last year, but I think that was because he was a redshirt freshman, and it was his first time playing in college. Now, he knows what that feels like every single day."



“I like what we had last year, especially with the coaching staff and coach Wicks.”

Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

Forward Matija Belic wants to end his career on a high note going into his second season with the University of Wyoming.

As an upperclassman, Belic knows he'll be relied on for leadership. While he missed time early last season with an injury, he's the Cowboys' leading returning scorer at 5.6 points per game after playing in 22 games with 16 starts.

“I like what we had last year, especially with the coaching staff and coach Wicks,” Belic told WyoSports. “... I liked the vision. I don't think we achieved what we wanted to last year, so I wanted to come back, be in the same place and try to do a better job this year.”

“... It was a tough year, with a lot of ups and downs, individually and team-wise. I had a lot of injuries last year, and a lot of issues with that. I'm just trying to stay healthy this year, first of all, and do a better job for the community, for Laramie, and for the state of Wyoming. I think we could do that this year.”

“... People love Wyoming basketball here, and I think they

deserve better this year.”

Nick Whitmore, who's going into his third year as an assistant coach for the Cowboys, believes a sophomore jump is a reasonable expectation for Magassa. While he showed flashes at times, he struggled to stay on the floor consistently as last season churned along.

“In year two, expectations go up,” Whitmore said. “... For us, (our expectation) is him becoming really reliable and dependable, and I think he's taking those steps. It's different for him this year, because we need him to be really good. That's an adjustment for him, because he's not a freshman anymore. Now that he's a sophomore, he needs to come in and be a leader and help us get to where we need to be.”

Whitmore's also relying on Belic as a leader due to his experience. The senior played in the NCAA Tournament during his previous

stop at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

“He's really taking a step in the right direction in terms of leadership and taking on that role,” Whitmore said. “He's just such a great example in terms of drill work. Being on the court, he's always in his stance, and he's always talking. Off the court, he's a really high-character guy.”

“So, for our younger guys that haven't done it, it's great to have somebody who can say, ‘I've done it at a really successful program at UC Santa Barbara, and I've gone through the Mountain West.’ He knows what's coming. He's done a really good job with our freshmen, in particular, and taking them under his wing.”

With 12 new players on the Cowboys' roster, Magassa and Belic want to tell the tales of what they learned last winter. They also want to expand their roles in order to get

UW back to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2022.

“This is my last year as a college player, so I really want to exit through the big door,” Belic said. “As a European, I know that, if I have a good year, but we have a bad year, record-wise, as a team, it doesn't really matter. Especially overseas, they're looking for winners, and that's what's most important here.”

“... As a senior, I want to finish with a great year in as many ways as we can. Hopefully in the upper half of the Mountain West, and we're obviously reaching for the top, but hopefully clinch a spot in the NCAA Tournament. I've been to the NCAA Tournament during my freshman year, and I want to finish there my senior year, too. None of us can do it individually. We can only do it as a group, and I feel like we can do that this year. I really do.”

PUSHING THE PACE

Cowboys want to breathe life back into Double-A

By Alex Taylor | WYOSPORTS

It was no secret Sundance Wicks wanted to play slow last season.

The second-year University of Wyoming men's basketball coach admits the strategy of limiting the opposing team's possessions was done out of necessity. That's because he was one of the last coaching hires at the Division I level last offseason.

That wasn't the case for Wicks and his staff this time around. The Cowboys added 12 new players, including seven transfers and five freshmen. His recruiting strategy in the spring centered around breathing life back into the Arena-Auditorium.

"You have to look at who you have on your roster, and really decipher whether or not you can or can't (play fast)," Wicks said last month. "We tried (last) summer to push the pace with our guys. We just couldn't get that thrust. We didn't have that natural thrust, right?"

"There's a natural ability for people to just be able to get out and go. It's like putting a guy back on punt return. I like when they talk about punt returners and they're like, 'That guy's dynamic. Watch out. Don't kick him the ball, because he could break something.' For us, that's when you watch our guys play, and it's like, Khaden (Bennett) can break one. Jared Harris can break one. Leland (Walker) can break one. (Damarion) Dennis can break one. Uriah (Royas)

can break one. They can punt return, and that's the gift.

"Those guys have natural gifts. They can play with speed in the open court, so, when you have some punt returners out there, it allows you to play faster."

The Cowboys struggled on both ends of the floor last winter, finishing 10th in the Mountain West in scoring at 67.2 points per game. They were also eighth in points allowed at 71.2.

UW was ninth in the conference with a scoring margin of minus-4.

What did Wicks learn during his first season as the Cowboys' head coach?

"I can't slow it down here, right?" Wicks said. "To slow it down, you have to have a little bit more talent and a lot more toughness than some of the teams you're going to play. For us, we recruited speed and skill. ... You want more speed than you want size, because size is great, but if size can't move and can't defend, what does it matter?"

"So, we have to have some speed to be able to put some pressure on people, and then we have to use the Arena-Auditorium, aka, the Double-A, aka, the altitude advantage to our advantage. If we can use that to our advantage, that's one of the things that we are gifted just by being here. Why wouldn't we use it?"

"But it's not fast and free. It's fast and fearless, right? Free is, 'I'll just do whatever I want, and we'll see



Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

University of Wyoming guard Damarion Dennis is looking to make an immediate impact after transferring from Texas A&M-Corpus Christi.

what happens.' The fearless is, 'We're going to attack relentlessly with some intentionality behind it.' If we have to have a different pace, we can have that, but the first goal is to put pressure on the opposing team when they come in here."

The 3-pointer should continue to be a main driver for UW's offense. The Cowboys were in the top half of the league in 3-point percentage (34.2%) last season, and the majority of their incoming players have above-average numbers from

beyond the arc.

While he wants to play faster, that doesn't mean Wicks wants to abandon his philosophy as a defensive-minded coach.

"The importance of valuing the basketball and how important a possession game is," Wicks said. "What I learned, personally, was that you have to continue to harp on a couple things: Shot selection and taking care of the basketball. Those things are extremely important. You have to win the possession game.



Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle
Guard Uriyah Rojas is one of seven incoming transfers for the University of Wyoming this season.

... We were in a lot of games, but we were lopsided in the possession game.”

On top of pace of play, Wicks learned the value of recruiting the right people to Laramie. In today’s transfer portal era, it’s important for the Cowboys to attract players with characteristics that go beyond the stat sheet.

“We’ll never outbid people. That’s a good thing and a bad thing, right?” Wicks said. “There’s teams that’ll outbid you, and they can go buy some players, but for us, when a guy commits to us, they’re coming here for the right reasons. It’s never going to be monetarily backed.

“That’s the thing that Cowboys fans should know is that all these guys coming here, I don’t want to say they’re taking a pay cut, but there’s probably places that offered more. They came here for the right reasons. The opportunity. They like Wyoming. They want a chance to play and compete, and not because they’re getting a handsome ransom out here. That’s really important to know going into all this. These guys are loaded with the right qualities as human beings.”

Wicks referred to UW as the “last puppy at the bowl” in terms of recruiting after he was

hired last May. Now going into year two, the Gillette native feels confident in his staff’s ability to lure the right type of players onto his roster.

“Everybody uses the speed-dating analogy in the portal, but that’s what it was last year. It was literally speed dating,” Wicks said. “... We probably do a really good job of negatively recruiting ourselves, and I don’t mean that in a bad way. We’re going to tell you who we are, what’s going to happen in Laradise, how it’s going to be in winter and the type of things you’re going to have and not going to have here, so, that (way), we don’t sit here and get into, ‘Well, you said it was going to be like this.’ You know, straight up from the jump, what’s going to happen in Laradise and what it’s going to be like.

“There’s positives to all this, but if you say yes to this, you just have to remember what you committed to. There were no lies, and we’re not dancing on some sort of thing that was false. We’re truth tellers. So, I think that really helped in this process to get the right type of human beings and the right character. Guys who care first, who have a high-care factor and who have great character.”



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CULTURAL DIVERSITY



Cowboys continue embracing international pipeline

Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

Forward Kiani Saxon, from left, guard Adam Harakow, forward Simm-Marten Saadi, forward Matija Belic and forward Abou Magassa all have international roots for the University of Wyoming.

By Alex Taylor | WYOSPORTS

The Arena-Auditorium is more than 7,000 miles from where Kiani Saxon grew up.

Matija Belic and Simm-Marten Saadi's journeys took them more than 5,000 miles from their hometowns, with Abou Magassa's checking in just under the 5,000-mile threshold. Adam Harakow played his high school ball nearly 1,000 miles north of the University of Wyoming's campus.

Recruiting internationally has become a major cornerstone for both the UW's men's and women's

basketball programs. The Cowboys have five international players on this year's roster, while the Cowgirls have nine.

Second-year Cowboys coach Sundance Wicks believes it's a testament to how much the game of basketball has grown across the globe.

"Diversity is important in the locker room," Wicks said. "Just in cultural differences, it helps us all become better humans. We learn about different cultures, we learn about where people are from, and we learn about different religions or faiths.

"To me, it's just exciting to have unique personalities in our locker room, and they are high-character kids. I don't care where you're from. Even each state has its own unique culture, right? (California) kids are different than the New York kids, and they're different from Chicago kids and different from Wyoming kids. So, being from Estonia or Serbia or France or Canada or New Zealand, it's really unique, and it's really cool to have around for us."

The Cowboys' international players include Belic (Belgrade, Serbia), Magassa (Morsang-sur-Orge,

France), Saxon (Auckland, New Zealand), Saadi (Tallinn, Estonia) and Harakow (Edmonton, Alberta). Belic and Magassa return for the Cowboys, while Saxon, Saadi and Harakow joined the program this offseason.

While each international player brings a unique skill set to the Cowboys, having one-third of the team's roster made up of players born outside of the United States allows them to band together as they assimilate into a new culture.

"It just makes it easier for me, and I think for them, too, not being



Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

University of Wyoming forwards Kiani Saxon (New Zealand), left, and Abou Magassa (France) wear flags from their home countries during the team's media day Oct. 9, 2025, at the Arena-Auditorium.

the only international player," Magassa told WyoSports last month. "Everybody has a different background, and everybody is coming from anywhere around the world. That's very good."

Nick Whitmore, who is entering his third season as a Cowboys assistant coach, is the team's primary international recruiter. Evaluating talent overseas was one of the biggest keys for his success as a high school head coach in Asheville, North Carolina.

As a head coach, he recruited players from 11 countries.

"A lot (of the differences in international players) is skill set. It's a lot of pass-handle-shoot guys," Whitmore said. "Abou is a little different, because I think he came

a little bit later to basketball, but obviously, he's got physical gifts. A lot of the mental stuff, too, with how they approach the game. The youth system is different over there. I think it's more structural. In a lot of ways, they come in more prepared to handle some of the rigors of college basketball."

The Cowboys and Cowgirls have had a long history of recruiting international players to Laramie. That pipeline has allowed both programs to build a strong reputation when a new recruiting cycle comes around.

"It's huge," Whitmore said. "The (international) kids that we've had, they've had great experiences. You can go down the list in the three years I've been here, but they've

loved it. I think a lot of it is, it's a really easy transition from certain countries. Now, there's some that aren't as natural ... but it's huge having a cohort of guys that are going through it together.

"A lot of that was my prep-school experience. Roughly 30% of our student body at Asheville was international students. So, for me, it's easier to help these guys when they get here, because I understand, 'Hey, you don't get to go home for Christmas,' or, 'You don't get to see your family, and you're in a place where it's a different culture, different food, different cuisines,' and all those kind of things. So, I always try to be empathetic and mindful of that stuff."

Saxon describes international

basketball as a more team-oriented philosophy. The Missouri Western transfer is looking forward to seeing how that meshes with the 10 American-born players on the Cowboys' roster.

"You combine that (international mindset) with all the skills that all the American players have, and it creates a really good recipe," Saxon said. "So, hopefully we can grab that by the horn and see how it goes."

Added Belic: "That's good that we have a lot of international guys. ... When we combine each other together, we really complement each other in a good way. It's a good thing to have both (international talent and talent from the United States)."



Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

Chris Thomas, from left, Chris McMillian and Will Martin were all hired as assistant coaches for the University of Wyoming this summer.

Cowboys coaching staff bonding over common goal

By Alex Taylor | WYOSPORTS

Twelve new players wasn't the only change for the Cowboys this offseason.

On top of adding seven transfers and five incoming freshmen, second-year University of Wyoming head coach Sundance Wicks added three new assistant coaches to this year's staff. The additions include Will Martin, Chris Thomas and Chris McMillian.

They join returning assistants Nick Whitmore, Nic Reynolds and Tim O'Flannigan.

"Hiring is the most important thing you can do. You have to hire the right people," Wicks said last month. "I always hire the person, not the position. They always say to hire people that will have your back, no matter what, right? Sometimes, you

see these people hire just random strangers, and I'm like, 'How do you even know what that's going to be like in the locker room? How do you know what that foxhole is going to be like?'

"... One thing everybody says when they come on visits or whoever has been around us, they compliment how awesome of a staff we have. I agree. It's the best staff I've ever hired."

Martin joins the Cowboys after spending the past five seasons as the head coach at Missouri Western. He was an assistant coach under Wicks for two years when the latter was the head coach for the Griffons from 2018-20.

Thomas is coming off a head-coaching stint for Croatia's KK Cibona Zagreb of the Adriatic Basketball Association. He's worked

with eight All-Stars during his stops in the NBA.

McMillian is a familiar face for Cowboys fans. He won two Mountain West titles as a player at UW while appearing in 125 games. He still ranks fifth in career assists (434) and ninth in steals (136). He's in the top 10 in school history in assist and steal averages during a single season.

McMillian most recently assisted Central Michigan.

"This staff has been great," Whitmore said. "There's no egos, and everybody is really focused on how we get our team better and how we make this program the best that it can be."

"We've got such a diverse group of experiences and backgrounds. Chris Thomas was a head coach. Will Martin was a head coach. Coach Reynolds has experience with his brother, (Nick), being here on the court, and he knows

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coach Wicks really well. Then, with (McMillian) coming back, it's been awesome to have an alum. He's somebody that's gone through this. Tim O'Flannigan, he's the best in terms of keeping things organized and keeping us all moving in the right direction.

"It's nice to be part of a staff where everybody's pulling in the same direction. I've been fortunate where I've worked for a lot of really good (staffs), but this one, in particular, feels very cohesive."

The Cowboys spent the past six months getting up to speed with their new-look roster. They have just two returning scholarship players in Abou Magassa and Matija Belic, but both have been impressed with the coaching staff's ability to come together quickly.

"I'm very close to most of them, and I think we have a great staff," Magassa said. "They have a lot of experience, and we have coaches that have coached at the pro level and in different conferences. The goal for me – I want to be a pro. So,

having people who know and have been there and they did it, that's one of the reasons I stayed."

Added Belic: "It's been great so far. They may be young, but they bring a lot of experience. Coach Thomas brings a lot of experience from the NBA, and from overseas with pro teams. Coach Martin brings experience from Kentucky. Coach (McMillian) also brings a lot of experience, and he was here as a player, so he was in our shoes. He knows what it takes to win being a Cowboy. I really love this coaching staff, and I feel like it's a great coaching staff to lead this group."

The collective willingness to share different opinions is what sticks out the most to Whitmore about this year's coaching staff.

That includes during recruiting season, which was a busy time for the Cowboys in the spring.

"Having a full cycle to go through (the portal), we were able to find guys that are really in tune with what coach Wicks wants, and what we want here at Wyoming,"



Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

University of Wyoming head coach Sundance Wicks is looking to make a splash going into his second season.

Whitmore said. "It's such an awesome fan base here, and such an awesome place to live. I love it here, so it's really good to see guys embrace it, and want to hang out and be involved in the community.

"I think we've taken a step

forward in terms of team cohesion and the kind of guys we want. We had a great group last year, but it was late in the cycle. This year, we could really evaluate and dive into the character and skill sets that we wanted."

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NEW-LOOK

Cowgirls look to fill vacated spots entering season

University of Wyoming guard Kati Ollilainen (14) drives against San Diego State during the Mountain West tournament championship game March 12, 2025, in Las Vegas. *Troy Babbitt/UW athletics*

By Matt Atencio | WYOSPORTS

The past two seasons have seen the University of Wyoming women's basketball team enter preseason practice with the starting five and rotation pretty much set in stone.

That won't be the case this time around.

The Cowgirls entered the offseason needing to find replacements for four starters, including Tess Barnes, Ola Ustowska, MW player of the year Allyson Fertig and defensive player of the year Emily Mellema.

Their absence left a big hole in the

roster. Those players combined to score 42.1 of UW's 65.12 points per game last season, and each player logged 23 minutes or more of game time.

While their losses sting, UW coach Heather Ezell is confident the Cowgirls will be able to make up for the lost production.

"It's obviously going to be tough to replace that much scoring and leadership," Ezell said during the school's annual media day. "But we have a lot of pieces that were still in the room last year. They might not

have always been seen, in games and things like that, but they were in practice every day. They went against those guys every day, and they did learn and were able to be a part of that."

This year's team will look markedly different from last year's squad that lost a heartbreaker in triple overtime to San Diego State in the Mountain West championship game.

The Cowgirls return eight letter-winners from last season in Logann Alvar, Lana Beslic, Mykin Hamlin, Heider Kalsdottir, Karoline Lundin,

Payton Muma, Kati Ollilainen and Madi Symons. However, only Ollilainen and Symons played an average of more than 10 minutes per night.

In addition to the returners, UW brings in six newcomers this year. That list includes four freshmen in Liv Blomkvist (Sweden), Katie Harrington (Australia), Jane Rumpf (Denver, Colorado) and Peyton Wholford (Smithville, Missouri). They also bring in Aurore Eying and Henna Sandvik, who transferred from St. Bonaventure and Indiana, respectively.

The newcomers and returners hunting for bigger roles has Ezell excited about the future of the program.

“All of our newcomers, and even our sophomores, have really stepped up into a role where they’re eager to learn, and they’re excited to get on the court and battle,” Ezell said. “I’ve been happy with, honestly, everybody that has been on the court and getting after it. We’re in a constant battle right now, and it’s fun to watch.”

One player the Cowgirls will count on this year is three-year starter and 2025 All-Mountain West honoree Malene Pedersen. The Aabyhoj, Denmark, native finished second on the team in scoring last season (14.0), while playing the second-most minutes per night on the team (32.3). She was also selected to the 2026 preseason All-Mountain West team.

Pedersen has been excellent for the past three seasons for the Cowgirls, but this will be the first where she is the primary scorer on the team. With more teams shifting their defensive game plans to limit her on the court, Pedersen will face new challenges that she previously hasn’t seen.

It’s something Ezell and the staff have discussed with her.

“She’s going to be the top of every scouting report,” the coach said. “That’s the biggest piece of understanding the moon around her, and that’s where everybody has to be on the same page and understand all the reads. If everybody does the right thing, then someone’s going to be open because they’re probably going to send two people at her.”

With only one spot in the lineup truly set in stone, the Cowgirls have been hyper competitive in practice going back to summer camp. Ezell said practice has been a battle every day, but the team is starting to come together and figure out how to work together.

The intensity at practices is as high as it has ever been, which has made it that much more enjoyable.

“We’ve switched up teams every day when we play against each other so we’re playing with and against different people who are all competing at one of the highest levels,” Symons said. “It’s making everyone better, and it’s only going to help us in the long run.”

UW was picked to finish sixth in the Mountain West by the league office during its media day in October after receiving 194 points in the poll. The Cowgirls kicked off the season Nov.



Troy Babbitt/UW athletics

University of Wyoming guard Malene Pedersen, right, drives toward the basket during a Mountain West tournament semifinal game against Fresno State in Las Vegas.

4 against Saint Mary’s at the Arena-Auditorium. Conference play begins Dec. 17 at home against San Jose State.

As the start to the regular season was gearing up, the team was beginning to come together. However, Ezell admitted the staff wasn’t quite sure where everyone was going to fit in just yet. Those battles for positions have carried over from the summer and fall camps, and will likely continue through the early

part of the season.

“We’re not going to know (even) by the first exhibition game. There’s no way,” Ezell said. “We’re still learning, and being that young, we’re still not even 50-60% of where we should be.”

While it may take a while to find out what the main starting rotation will be, Ezell remains confident that the team will figure it out. Her message to the team through camp and into preparations for the season has been a simple one: Get better each day.

2025-26 COWGIRLS BASKETBALL SCHEDULE

<u>DATE</u>	<u>OPPONENT</u>	<u>TIME</u>			
Nov. 11	at Texas Arlington	TBA (TBA)	Jan. 17	vs. Air Force	2 p.m. (TBA)
Nov. 14	at Santa Clara	7 p.m. (TBA)	Jan. 21	vs. Utah State	6:30 p.m. (TBA)
Nov. 21	at North Dakota	Noon (TBA)	Jan. 24	at Utah State	TBA (TBA)
Nov. 25	vs. Chadron State	1 a.m. (TBA)	Jan. 28	vs. Fresno State	6:30 p.m. (TBA)
Nov. 29	vs. South Dakota	1 p.m. (TBA)	Jan. 31	at Grand Canyon	TBA (TBA)
Dec. 7	at Colorado	TBA (TBA)	Feb. 4	vs. New Mexico	6:30 p.m. (TBA)
Dec. 14	at Minnesota	4 p.m. (TBA)	Feb. 7	at Colorado State	TBA (TBA)
Dec. 17	vs. San Jose State	6:30 p.m. (TBA)	Feb. 11	vs. UNLV	TBA (TBA)
Dec. 20	at Fresno State	TBA (TBA)	Feb. 14	at Boise State	2 p.m. (TBA)
Dec. 31	at New Mexico	TBA (TBA)	Feb. 21	at Colorado State	2 p.m. (TBA)
Jan. 3	vs. San Diego State	2 p.m. (TBA)	Feb. 25	vs. Air Force	TBA (TBA)
Jan. 7	at Nevada	TBA (TBA)	Feb. 28	at San Diego State	TBA (TBA)
Jan. 10	vs. UNLV	2 p.m. (TBA)	March 3	vs. Grand Canyon	TBA (TBA)
Jan. 14	at Boise State	TBA (TBA)	March 7-11	Mountain West Tournament in Las Vegas	

Bold indicates Mountain West game

CHAOS

INFILTRATES MW WOMEN'S HOOPS – BUT SOME THINGS UNCHANGED

By Adam Engel | WYOSPORTS

Transfer portal chaos and a few coaching changes infiltrated Mountain West women's basketball ahead of the 2025-26 season.

But in a college basketball world full of unknowns and ever-evolving rosters, UNLV's status as a consistent Mountain West powerhouse never fluctuated.

Voters selected the four-time reigning conference champions as the preseason favorites for the third consecutive year, despite returning five players and one starter – Aaliyah Alexander.

"We have a lot of new faces, so leadership is going to be a big thing for this team," Alexander told the MW Network at MW's Media Day. "(Head coach) Lindy (La Rocque) has definitely encouraged me to step into that leadership role.

"I have just been trying to implement those leadership qualities every day at practice."

Alexander's 10.8 points per game in 2024-25 were third-best on the team.

Meadow Roland, the 2024-25 MW freshman and sixth player of the year, also made the All-MW preseason team.

La Rocque added five transfers and three freshmen, including Mariah Elohim, who started 31 games for Fresno State.

Roster turnover became the main theme for the University of



Boise State senior guard Natalie Pasco was voted to the preseason All-Mountain West team. She averaged 12.5 points past season. *Boise State athletics*

Wyoming as six players, including four starters, particularly MW player of the year Allyson Fertig and MW defensive player of the year Emily Mellema, graduated.

"It obviously changes with a lot of new kids, but they are all excited," Cowgirls head coach Heather Ezell said. "They are ready to get after it.

The biggest thing is nobody on the team is satisfied, and everybody is ready to get to work."

The Cowgirls, who finished as MW tournament runners-up in 2025, slid to sixth in the preseason poll, as senior guard Malene Pedersen represents UW's only returning starter.

"It motivates me a lot," Pedersen said. "Even though we have a new team, we still have a great opportunity to get all the way to the Mountain West championship.

"Even though we've got a new group, looking at last year, they kind of know what to expect in that we are a team that has high

expectations for ourselves, and we want to have big goals.”

No. 2: San Diego State

The Aztecs return just two starters and four letterwinners, but added three MW starters from a season ago, including Carlie Latta (Utah State), Sofia Kelemen (San Jose State) and Maria Konstantinidou (Fresno State).

Sophomore guard Noami Panganiban returns as the squad’s top scorer. The preseason All-MW selection averaged 10.3 points per game.

Nat Martinez, another sophomore returning starter, averaged 7.4 points per game.

“Kim (Villalobos), AD (Adryana Quezada) and the rest of the seniors really showed us not to take things for granted,” Martinez told the MW Network during MW Media Day. “Just playing each game like it is our last game and having the same mentality of going back-to-back is our standard now.”

SDSU’s Kendall Mosley won MW **preseason freshman of the year** after she was the 2024-25 6A MVP for Prosper High in Texas.

The Aztecs also added senior guard Nala Williams, the 2024-25 Division II player of the year with Cal State Dominguez Hills.

No. 3: Colorado State

Colorado State gathered one first-place vote as the Rams returned four starters, including All-MW preseason honoree Hannah Ronsiek, Marta Leimane, and All-MW freshman selections Kloe Froebe and Brooke Carlson.

Ronsiek is the team’s leading returning scorer at 9.1 points per game with a team-leading 44 steals and 27 blocks.

Head coach Ryun Williams reinforced his squad with transfers Madelyn Bragg (Division II Northern State), Lexus Bargesser (Indiana) and Lexi Deden (Montana State).

No. 4: Boise State

Boise State, with MW **preseason player of the year** Tatum Thompson, occupied fourth in the preseason poll with a first-place vote.



UNLV coach Lindy La Rocque holds up the net after the team’s win over San Diego State in an NCAA college basketball game for the championship of the Mountain West women’s tournament Wednesday, March 13, 2024, in Las Vegas. *Associated Press*

Thompson led the Broncos a season ago with 13.2 points per game. Natalie Pasco, a senior guard, also was named to the All-MW preseason team after she averaged 12.5 points a year ago.

No. 5: New Mexico

Two voters selected New Mexico first as the Lobos entered the season fifth in the preseason poll.

Destinee Hooks, a preseason All-MW selection who averaged 15 points per game in 2024-25, highlights a unit of six returners on a roster mixed with international and junior college talent.

New Mexico guard Joana Magalhaes looks to build off her All-MW freshman season.

No. 7: Grand Canyon

MW newcomer Grand Canyon embarks on a new era of Lopes ball after former head coach Molly Miller left for Arizona State and five players graduated, all of who scored anywhere from nine to 16 points per game.

Winston Gandy takes over as



UNLV forward McKinna Brackens, center Erica Collins, forward Meadow Roland and guard Kenadee Winfrey, from left, celebrate from the bench during the first half of the team’s first-round college basketball game against Creighton in the women’s NCAA Tournament, Saturday, March 23, 2024, in Los Angeles. *Associated Press*

head coach after he assisted national power South Carolina.

Gandy attracted a plethora of Power Four transfers, including MW **newcomer of the year** Chloe Mann,

who spent her freshman season at Cincinnati.

Ale’jah Douglas, who averaged 14 minutes per game in 2024-25, is GCU’s top returner.

Gandy's roster includes nine transfers and one other returner.

No. 8: Air Force

Air Force continues to trend upward, thanks to a first season from head coach Stacy McIntyre that resulted in the program's second winning season and a Women's National Invitational Tournament appearance.

Preseason All-MW senior guard Milhanie Perry will lead the cadets after she averaged a team-high 15.7 points per game as a junior.

Jayda McNabb (7.9 points per game and 6.7 rebounds per game), Alexis Cortez (4.6 points per game) and Keelie O'Hallaren (9.6 points per game) also return as starters.

Five freshmen enter the fray.

No. 9: Fresno State

You thought Grand Canyon's transfer-heavy situation was unique? Just wait until you hear about Fresno State.

Just three returners fill Fresno State's roster, including top returner Danae Powell (5.2 points per game in 28 appearances).

A mass exodus occurred after former head coach Jaime White retired after 11 seasons.

FSU head coach Ryan McCarthy arrived from Division II Alaska Anchorage and brought five Seawolves with him. McCarthy went 309-67 across 13 seasons in Anchorage and bolstered the Bulldogs with four Division I transfers.

"We are just so new," McCarthy told the MW Network during MW Media. "Even though we do have five ladies that came down from UAA, we have a really new team, and I think we have a lot to prove.

"This will just be an opportunity for us to grow during this preseason –

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PRESEASON POLL

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| 1. UNLV (19 first-place votes), 281 points | 7. Grand Canyon (1), 177 |
| 2. San Diego State (3), 240 | 8. Air Force, 132 |
| 3. Colorado State (1), 236 | 9. Fresno State, 95 |
| 4. Boise State (1), 210 | 10. Nevada, 92 |
| 5. New Mexico (2), 207 | 11. Utah State, 54 |
| 6. Wyoming, 194 | 12. San Jose State, 44 |

compete at a really high level."

No. 10: Nevada

Nevada, picked 10th in the preseason poll, also must recuperate from a transfer portal party.

Seven return, including Izzy Sullivan, whose nine points per game are tops among returners.

Cheyenne McEvans, who averaged 13.4 points per game at Florida A&M, statistically leads a crew of four transfers.

No. 11: Utah State

Wesley Brooks' first season as Utah State's head coach didn't bring immediate success in the win column.

The Aggies managed four wins a season ago, which tied its win total from 2022-23. Only a three-win campaign in 2005-06 was worse in the 21st century (USU did not have a team from 1988-2002).

Still, the former Ohio State assistant coach, lured in seven transfers, including McDonald's High School All-American Aaliyah Gayles, who joins the Aggies after playing sparingly across three seasons at Southern California.

"We are very excited that the

season is upcoming," Brooks told the MW Network on Thursday.

"Very excited about our team. Very excited about the momentum that our program has right now. So, we are just ready to get going and go compete."

The top four scorers left, but USU returns senior guard Jamisyn Heaton, who averaged 8.9 points per game, and sophomore guard Elise Livingston, who notched 5.6 points a game.

No. 12: San Jose State

Jonas Chatterton, a former Oklahoma assistant, takes over as San Jose State's head coach, eager to improve a squad that went 10-22 a season ago.

SJSU's top five scorers from 2024-25 left, but junior guard Rylei Waugh (7.2 points per game) and senior guard Amira Brown (7.1 points per game) return.



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POWER



Cowgirls senior guard prepared to lead squad

University of Wyoming guard Malene Pedersen is embracing her new role as a leader going into her senior season.

Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

By Adam Engel | WYOSPORTS

Malene Pedersen doesn't care much for outside noise.

The pressure? Not a factor.

The University of Wyoming senior guard just prefers to play basketball her way, slashing through defenders, hitting the deep 3-pointers and helping her teammates along the way.

But the focus – from opponents, teammates and spectators – remains on Pedersen during the final chapter of her college career.

Pedersen always led in the shadows and solidified herself as one of UW's most dependable scorers since she landed in Laramie. But plenty of roster turnover means the offense is

finally hers. No longer second in the spotlight to some of the league's best.

It's all Pedersen as the only returning starter on a team with nine returners after the Cowgirls lost six players, including four starters from the 2024-25 Mountain West runner-up team.

"It is definitely exciting," Pedersen said. "I have just done my best so far this season to take what I have gotten from the previous players and help this year's team just to grow in that aspect. Whatever I learned from the older players, I am trying to give to the new ones so we can get as good as possible and just see how far we can go."

MW player of the year Allyson Fertig graduated. Same with Emily Mellema, the MW defensive player of the year.

Pedersen's 14 points per game a season ago make her the top returning scorer. It's not close, either.

Kati Ollilainen, a senior guard, averaged 3.7 points per game a season ago – the second-most among returners.

"(Pedersen) has been huge," Ollilainen said. "She's a role model, but also a (great) teammate. She was helping me a lot my first year when I came here because she was kind of from the same area as me. But she's been a great leader for us this year, and we can learn

a lot from her on the floor with the little things she does."

Pedersen's senior season has become a culmination for one of the program's most accomplished players. The Denmark native saw immediate success after she redshirted during her freshman year at Kansas State.

"Right now, we are just focusing on getting better at practice every day, and then when the pressure might come when we start playing games, then we will take it from there on," Pedersen said. "I am just in constant communication with my coaches about that and being that leader."

"If the attention might be a lot on me, then I will just read the games



“She has actually grown our motion to cuts that we never thought and just continue to expand the way that we play.”

University of Wyoming guard Malene Pedersen dribbles during the team's media day Oct. 8, 2025, at the Arena-Auditorium.

Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

and see how it goes, and just try to find other ways to produce for the team.”

Pedersen won MW freshman of the year honors in 2022-23, thanks to her 11 points per game and 81 total assists, which led MW's freshmen as she started every game that season.

“We always knew she had that capability, but the way that she adapted to our motion so quickly, we never expected,” UW head coach Heather Ezell said.

Ezell added Pedersen expanded UW's motion offense to “cuts that we never thought,” which creates more spacing and separation for scoring opportunities.

Pedersen's shooting successes continued as she strengthened her 3-point game as a sophomore. Her 34 made 3-pointers ranked second on the squad.

Her 29.7 minutes played also led the team in 2023-24. Her 14 points per game as a junior ranked 11th in the MW, and her 24 steals were second on the team.

Now, Ezell said, the key becomes maintaining consistency in all three scoring phases.

“The biggest thing is she continues to add to her game each year,” Ezell said. “I think players see that she never relaxes. She is always trying to get better.”

Pedersen isn't focused solely on

scoring.

Improving her teammates became a priority as four Cowgirls earned their first taste of college basketball.

The offense, too, without a senior-heavy roster, could expand in different ways. Enter Pedersen and her leadership skills.

“It is a lot of teaching for us as coaches to kind of get back to the basics and really teach them the motion,” Ezell told the MW Network during MW Media Day. “Probably growing the motion a little bit, too. Adding some new actions. Getting to some new things that we didn't maybe do as much last year, because obviously, we had such a core with all those seniors and

somebody like Allyson Fertig.

“We were just able to do things differently. Now, we get to expand.”

Only two returners – Ollilainen and junior forward Madi Symons – started at least one game in 2024-25.

“(Pedersen) takes it on,” Ezell said. “She knows that everybody is watching her. Everybody is looking up to her. She comes in every day knowing that everybody is going to watch her in every drill. Everything she is doing. So, in a sense, she knows that she has almost gotta be perfect.

“She is constantly in our young players' ears and helping them along.”

OLLILAINEN

embracing bigger role with COWGIRLS

By Matt Atencio | WYOSPORTS

Last year was a natural progression of development for University of Wyoming junior guard Kati Ollilainen.

The Helsinki, Finland, native saw an increased role off the bench for the Cowgirls and posted new career highs in nearly every category.

With new spots in the starting lineup up for grabs this season, Ollilainen is ready to put her last two years of development to the test, as she will be tasked with an even bigger role with the Cowgirls.

It's something she's embracing with open arms.

"Being an upperclassman, it's exciting to be in that role," Ollilainen said. "I'm just trying to be my best every single day and just get better. There's a lot I can still learn, but I feel like I can also help the other girls right now, too."

In a year in which the Cowgirls are tasked with replacing four starters and six seniors, Ollilainen's return is critical.

Of the returning players on the roster, Ollilainen sits second behind senior guard Malene Pedersen with just over 563 minutes played while averaging 16.6 minutes per game — the most of any non-starter last season. During that time, she averaged 3.7 points and a pair of rebounds, while dishing out 40 assists and recording 10 steals. She shot just over 40% from the field.

Ollilainen was one of only three

players to appear in all 34 games for the Cowgirls last season. She made her first start in the Mountain West opener against Utah State on Jan. 1, posting 11 points on 4-of-8 shooting in place of an injured Ola Ustowska.

Six months removed from the end of her sophomore campaign, Ollilainen has a positive outlook on how last season went for her.

"I was just trying to do my best every single game," Ollilainen said. "Some games I played a lot more, and some I didn't play as much, but I was just trying to do my role as best I could. I was happy that (Cowgirls coach Heather Ezell) trusted me and believed in me so I was able to get those minutes on the court."

Over the past two seasons, Ollilainen has made significant strides in moving beyond the player she was when she first moved to the United States. Chief among them has been learning UW's offense and how she factors into it.

Ezell has also been impressed with her growth behind the scenes.

"The leadership is the biggest piece for her," Ezell said. "Coming in as a freshman and sitting behind Emily (Mellema certainly helped),

and now, she's taking over that leadership role."

Ollilainen echoed Ezell's statement, saying the role UW's former starting point guard had in her development as a player and a leader has been important.

"I was really fortunate to have that kind of person in front of me," Ollilainen said. "Competing with and against her every single day just made me better. Being able to play alongside her was helpful, and now I can hopefully try to use some (of) what I learned from her this year."

Moving to a new place is difficult for anyone, but it's even more challenging for a college athlete who moved roughly 4,500 miles from a different country. But Ollilainen quickly found herself fitting in and making friends with the other incoming freshmen in her class.

One of those was Coeur D'Alene,

Idaho, native Madi Symons. The two quickly became friends and started rooming together last season.

But who is the messier roommate, and who is the clean one?

"We're both not really that clean, but I would say I'm messier, probably," Symons said with a laugh.

Like everyone on the team, Ollilainen's main goal isn't just to make it back to the MW championship game for the third consecutive year. It's to win the conference tournament trophy for the first time since 2021.

Outside of that, Ollilainen wants to continue developing on the court.

"My No. 1 goal is to just be more vocal and a leader," Ollilainen said. "I want to try to do that as best I can with the team, and have everybody understand what we are trying to do."



Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

University of Wyoming guard Kati Ollilainen is using lessons learned from former teammates to propel her forward.



University of Wyoming guard Kati Ollilainen dribbles during the team's media day Oct. 8, 2025, at the Arena-Auditorium.

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University of Wyoming forward Madi Symons dribbles during the team's media day Oct. 8, 2025, at the Arena-Auditorium.

SYMONS

in line for increased role with

COWGIRLS

By Matt Atencio | WYOSPORTS

Playing a college sport is an incredibly taxing endeavor.

Not only do athletes have to balance practice time and travel schedules, they also have to juggle the responsibilities of being a full-time student.

University of Wyoming junior Madi Symons has been no stranger to those pitfalls. But she has been afforded an opportunity that many other student-

athletes don't get. Both of her parents have been involved with basketball throughout her life as coaches.

Her father, Corey, is the men's basketball coach at North Idaho College in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. He has been with the program for 18 seasons, and has been the head coach for the past eight.

Her mother, Nicole, was also the head girls basketball coach at Coeur d'Alene High before stepping down in 2024,

according to the Coeur d'Alene Press.

The pair have been instrumental in helping Symons navigate the pitfalls of playing the sport of basketball.

"They have helped push me," Symons said. "I'm very grateful for them, because they never forced basketball on me, and they kind of let me do it on my own. But if I wanted to go to the gym at midnight, if I wanted to go at 5 in the morning, they would always be there."

"They would open the gym for me, and they gave me every opportunity I needed to be successful. I give all my credit for where I am today to them."

Those lessons learned from her family have paid off in a big way.

Over her first two seasons in Laramie, Symons has appeared in 63 of the Cowgirls' 65 games. Last season was a continuation of her freshman campaign.

She appeared in 32 games with four starts while averaging 11 minutes per game. That included a career-high 35 minutes against Gonzaga, where she slotted into the starting lineup after Tess Barnes missed the game with an injury.

She finished the season with 1.3 rebounds per contest, while recording 14 total steals and three blocks off the bench.

"She's always gonna be a kid that does all the dirty work," UW coach Heather Ezell said. "You always know that Madi is going to give you her best, and she's going to come in every day and work. If I can continue to get her to do all that, she's going to play a big role for us."

Symons' efforts extended far beyond the box scores. She served as UW's "do-it-all" player off the bench last season, and was tasked with coming in to play defense, rebound and help give players like Barnes and Allyson Fertig a break.

It's a role that doesn't get a lot of glamour and can be difficult to fill, but it was one Symons welcomed.

"It was a challenge, but it also was a great opportunity, and that's how I looked at it," Symons said. "It's not super common at the Division I level for underclassmen to play a lot of minutes or to have bigger roles. I just tried to take advantage of every opportunity."

"We had great upperclassmen last year, so just being able to give them a break when they needed or give the team whatever they needed in that moment was a great opportunity."

Playing behind Fertig and Barnes made it difficult for Symons to get on the court. The pair averaged more than 30 minutes per night and played in every big spot for the Cowgirls throughout the year.

Even so, having to wait her turn proved to be beneficial, and the lessons Fertig and Barnes imparted onto Symons have



Milo Gladstein/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

University of Wyoming forward Madi Symons is looking to make a leap in production going into her junior year.

proven invaluable.

"I learned a lot from them on and off the court," Symons said. "Them being able to produce and being great teammates, all of that obviously (helped me). I also looked up to them as people off the court. The leadership they had has really translated to this year (for me) as an upperclassman."

Symons will join a list of nine returners from last season that will look to fill massive holes in UW's rotation. Of the players on that list, Symons played the third-most on the team, with 353 minutes, 19 seconds – only behind junior Kati Ollilainen (563:12) and senior Malene Pedersen (1,101:04).

Based on playing time and experience alone, Symons is in line to take over one of the starting roles for the Cowgirls this winter. As with every year in college athletics, though, nothing is guaranteed.

To put herself in the best position possible, Symons spent a great deal of time since last season ended preparing for the upcoming season. That included spending four weeks in Laramie over the summer training with the UW staff, as well as her parents back home.

"I worked on mental state and trying to get mentally prepared for

a leadership role," Symons said.

"I really am just trying to embrace where I am, and take it one day at a time and really live in the moment."

Ezell has been impressed with the progress Symons has made since first arriving in Laramie. What has really stood out to her is Symons' willingness to do whatever is asked of her.

"Whatever you ask her to do, she's going to do it," Ezell said. "If I ask her to be the screener, she's going to screen. If I ask her to go get a board, she's going to get the board. So, whatever I ask her to do, she's going to do it to the best of her abilities."

Symons has also seen a difference in herself since coming in as a freshman. While it was a big learning curve at first, she has been able to steadily adapt to the college game year-by-year.

What would her message be to her younger self that was stepping into the college game for the first time two years ago?

"Stick with it," Symons said. "You can get defeated easily as an underclassman. Taking all the small wins and using that for confidence in knowing that you're doing good (is what helps you get through tough days)."



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