

'They're sleeping on Longwood'

With offseason in rear-view, Lancers revved up to prove they're ready to contend in the Big South

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Despite matching their highest Big South conference preseason ranking since joining the league in 2012, senior guard Shaboody Phillips, who burst onto the scene last season, is interested to know why the Longwood men's basketball team was ranked at sixth place in the 2019-20 preseason poll.

"I think we should be higher – but we don't worry about that. We just worry about getting better every day and let everything else happen for itself," Phillips said.

He laughed: "They're sleeping on Longwood."

Players and teams as a whole, for the most part, try not to pay attention to their rankings – the end goal is to obviously win games, but knowledge of where they stand is unavoidable.

However, Phillips, senior guard Sean Flood and the rest of the Lancers see this as a challenge to prove critics wrong, going so far as to say they feel "disrespected" by their placement.

"It's absolutely given us an extra chip on our shoulder," Flood said.

This preseason ranking comes half a year removed from, arguably, one of the more historic seasons in their short Division I history, with expectations seemingly higher than they've been in years for men's hoops just days before their home opener against Marymount on Nov. 5.

The Lancers return their entire starting backcourt from the end of last season – Phillips, who was named to the All-Big South Preseason Second Team, senior guard Jaylon Wilson and senior forward JaShaun Smith.

Phillips and Flood praised 6-foot-11-inch freshman forward Abraham Deng, who is seemingly set to step in and provide a favorable size matchup in the lane. Deng will make his Longwood debut this season after sitting all of the 2018-19 season as a redshirt freshman.

As of two weeks ago around mid-October, head coach Griff Aldrich – even with six returning players including three starters from last season – hadn't solidified his starting five for Tuesday's opener, and the

rotation was still taking shape.

The college basketball world was buzzing this past summer with the announcement to expand the three-point line to a little over 22 feet, making the move from 20 feet, nine inches. The decision was made in June for a few reasons; to create more available space inside the three-point arc for dribble and driving lanes, and to slow down the trend of the three-point shot becoming too prevalent while still keeping it integrated in college offenses, according to the NCAA men's basketball rules committee.

Aldrich returns multiple weapons who are stellar shooters from beyond the arc. Phillips led the team in three pointers made last season with 74 followed by Flood and Smith with 51 each. Having those assets, especially with the type of offense Aldrich runs outside the arc, proved last season to be an integral part in their success. With the new measurement change this season, Flood believes the team won't be affected negatively in any way – rather being quite the opposite.

"If anything, I think it'd be better for us because the spacing will be more difficult for teams to guard and we'll be more spread out," the Dublin, Ireland native said. "There will be more driving lanes, opportunities for drive-and-kicks."

With the three-point game prevalent in the Lancers offense, some newcomers will look to make an instant impact in this facet, including sophomore guard DeShaun Wade, a transfer from East Carolina University. As well as sophomore forward and NJCAA (National Junior College Athletic Association) product Christian Wilson.

Based on the performance of these players, among all other newcomers thus far, Phillips compared where they stand this year from where they were at this point a year ago – and the confidence in their offense is apparent.

"We're a little better this year because we're returning six or seven guys, so we already know how to run (the offense) and the newcomers are feeling it really good, so we're a little step ahead on

last year," Phillips said.

Aldrich echoed this thought in his Big South media day interview on Oct. 28; the unfamiliarity of being a brand-new Division I head coach has come and gone and is now in the full swing of developing new and old players.

"Last year, basically we had 15 new players and a new coach," Aldrich said. "We've got six returners back and have been through our paces once before, so (it's) a little bit easier."

The three-point arc being expanded surely opens up more space in the paint for driving opportunities and lanes to get to the basket – a part of their game they look to improve upon while maintaining a system identical to that of last year's.

"(We have) the same principles as last year ... We still want to get up and down, still want to shoot the ball, shoot a lot of threes, high percentage shots," Flood said. "We'll look to get the ball inside a little bit more than we did last year and get our bigs more touches around the block in that area."

The Lancers, who will debut their new-look uniforms and brand-new staff under Aldrich on Nov. 5, struggled in conference play following a 10-win non-conference schedule last season, including a massive win away from home over Richmond.

They keep relatively the same offensive and defensive systems, acclimating newcomers with the veterans. Ranked in the middle of the Big South preseason poll this year, they have a fresh start with the conference wide open – any team, Aldrich noted, no matter their season performance, can win on any day.

"Toughness", as Aldrich said on Big South media day, is an aspect of the Lancers game on the court which has to be established from the outset. Seeing as the reception of their conference expectations weren't taken exceptionally well by the players, Tuesday night is a moment for the Lancers to make an early statement, and, even against a Division III opponent, will give a taste of what to expect in 2019-20.