

1. Rogers State

In only its third year with a men's basketball program, Rogers State starts the season at the top of the NAIA ratings. It may be a surprise that a fledgling program is ranked so high, except that the Hillcats rose to the top spot last season and stayed there, finishing with a 30-2 record.

Coach Lloyd Williams wants to take care of some unfinished business, as his team was knocked out of the NAIA Tournament in the first round last season. Four starters, two top reserves and a great recruiting class spell trouble for the rest of the Sooner Conference, the strongest in NAIA basketball.

The Hillcats have two All-Americans in the lineup in 6-4 Eric Young (14.4 ppg, 6.0 rpg) and 6-6 Sylvester Spicer (13.4, 4.4). Maurice Rutherford (3.6 ppg) and Deveric Taylor (10.2) are the other returning starters.

Several transfers will make an instant impact, including 6-10 Theo Davis (Gonzaga) and 5-10 Lance Sullivan (Langston), who averaged 22 points per game last year.

2. Mountain State

While Rogers State is a relative newcomer to the elite of the NAIA, Mountain State is a veteran. Coach Bob Bolen's club has played in three national championship games, and won the 2004 title. The Cougars will be vying for the top spot again in 2009-10, led by a pair of All-Americans.

Eight lettermen return from last year's 28-5 Sweet 16 team. The go-to guys are 6-7 Nick Aldridge (16.0 ppg) and 6-8 Andrew Lee (15.0). Among the newcomers to the program are a pair of Division I transfers and 7-8 British import Paul Sturgess, the tallest player in college basketball.

3. Robert Morris

The Eagles have reached the NAIA Tournament Fab Four in five of the last seven years, and more of the same should be in store this season. Robert Morris welcomes back two All-Americans, five lettermen and another great recruiting class.

Coach Al Bruhl has a 330-78 career record with the Eagles but is still looking for that elusive first national championship. His returning dynamic duo consists of 6-5 Reggie Bunch (15.6 ppg, 8.6 rpg) and 6-7 Billy Rush (10.4, 5.1). That duo represents the firepower for the offense, which shot 48.6 percent from the floor and averaged 86.6 points per game during a 27-4 campaign in 2008-09. Several transfers will make an instant impact.

4. Oklahoma Baptist

The Bison lost four starters from last year's 28-5 team, but that won't stop Oklahoma Baptist, which was ranked second in the nation at the end of the season. The

club brings back two top players from last year: 6-6 Garrett Steinmetz (13.4 ppg) and 6-5 super sub Nate Brumfield (20.2 ppg, 7.0 rpg). Four other lettermen return, including 7-0 Mirko Vojinovic.

The Bison also have perhaps the finest recruiting class in the NAIA. Five transfers arrive at the school, led by 6-7 Kevin Swinton (Wake Forest) and 6-5 A.J. Hawkins (Wichita State).

5. Biola

The five starters who led Biola to a 22-9 record last year are back, along with four additional lettermen. The Eagles will need that experience to battle the likes of Golden State Athletic Conference foes Azusa Pacific, Fresno Pacific and Concordia in addition to other nationally ranked nonconference teams on the schedule.

The top returnees are 6-7 Josh Miller (11.8 ppg, 7.4 rpg), 6-9 Rocky Hampton (12.1, 8.4) and 6-4 Danny Campbell (10.5 ppg). Rounding out the starting lineup are 5-9 Marlon King (8.9 ppg, 3.3 apg) and 6-4 Nate Rakestraw (8.0 ppg, 4.5 rpg).

6. Life

Life is good at Life University, as its six-year absence from the NAIA Tournament ended last year. The Eagles built a 23-11 record and reached the postseason. Coach John Barrell welcomes back virtually the entire team this season, plus some strong newcomers.

The top player is 6-1 All-American Tay Barber, who averaged 18.7 points, 3.4 rebounds and seven assists per game in 2008-09. Three other double-figure scorers are back in a lineup that goes more than 10 deep.

7. Oklahoma Christian

Reigning NAIA Player of the Year Jason Taylor returns, along with three other starters, as the Eagles look to improve on their 23-10 record. Taylor, a 6-7 senior, did it all last year with 23.5 points and 8.4 rebounds per game.

Taylor has plenty of support from starters Jeff Crocker (12.1 ppg), David Jackson (9.8) and Andre Vaughn (6.5). Coach Dan Hays also brought in some new talent to support the Eagles' drive to compete in the tough Sooner Conference.

8. Azusa Pacific

The Cougars figure they can improve on last season's 24-10 record with the return of three starters and 10 lettermen.

All-American Dominique Johnson leads the way after averaging 17.2 points per game last season. Other veterans like 6-2 Marshall Johnson (9.2 ppg), 6-2 Mike Danielian (8.2), 5-10 Mike Caffese (6.9) and 6-4 Caleb Burgess (11.2) will fortify the team.

Coach Justin Leslie added to the team's talent level with four newcomers, including 6-8 Loyola Marymount transfer Mayson Maynard. The Cougars face fierce competition, as at least four teams in the Golden State Conference are expected to be ranked in the top 20 nationally.

9. Lindenwood

Three returning starters from a 19-13 team and some high-profile recruits are not the biggest story for the Lions. Instead, it was the offseason hiring of Brad Soderberg, who won 96 games during his Division I head-coaching career at Wisconsin and Saint Louis.

Soderberg will have some NCAA high-major-caliber players on his team, including All-American Toriano Adams, who averaged 13.2 points and 10.3 rebounds per game last year. The other returning starters are 6-3 Richard Rose (12.9 ppg) and 6-5 Jason Schneider (10.0).

Lindenwood also added 6-11 Brett Thompson, who transferred from Saint Louis, where he was a part-time starter and recruited by Soderberg. Among the other transfers is 6-6 Alfred Nelson, who averaged 7.9 points and 4.3 rebounds a game for NCAA Division II Drury.

10. The Cumberlandians

The Cumberlandians stepped into new territory last year, racking up a 27-7 record, winning the Mid-South Conference Tournament and reaching the Sweet 16 of the NAIA Tournament. Though only one starter returns, don't expect coach Don Butcher's squad to suffer. Butcher is surrounding 6-2 Chad Byron (11.9 ppg) with a ton of talent.

Five transfers supply instant firepower, led by 6-5 Andrew Prestley, who averaged 10.9 points and 5.3 rebounds a game for Grambling State, and Brandon Russ, who put up 12.8 points and 4.6 rebounds a contest at Indiana State last season.

POSSIBLE BREAKTHROUGHS

Auburn-Montgomery (27-7), California Baptist (22-9), Campbellsville (10-19), Columbia (27-8), Concordia (28-7), Cumberland (25-6), Freed-Hardeman (24-10), Fresno Pacific (26-8), Georgetown (27-5), John Brown (23-10), Lee (26-8), Loyola-New Orleans (19-11), LSU-Shreveport (22-11), Martin Methodist (22-10), McKendree (28-6), Mid-America Nazarene (29-8), Mid-Continent (15-15), Olivet Nazarene (16-15), Oklahoma City (15-16), Pikeville (20-12), Rocky Mountain (28-9), Southern Nazarene (20-12), Tougaloo (21-9), Texas Wesleyan (29-5), Union (29-6), Westminster (30-5), Westmont (16-14), Xavier-Louisiana (19-12).

TOP 10

- 1 Rogers State (Okla.)
- 2 Mountain State (W.Va.)
- 3 Robert Morris (Ill.)
- 4 Oklahoma Baptist
- 5 Biola (Calif.)
- 6 Life (Ga.)
- 7 Oklahoma Christian
- 8 Azusa Pacific (Calif.)
- 9 Lindenwood (Mo.)
- 10 The Cumberlandians (Ky.)

ALL-AMERICA TEAM

STARTING FIVE

- ▶ Nick Aldridge, Mountain State (W.Va.)
- ▶ Nate Brumfield, Oklahoma Baptist
- ▶ Reggie Bunch, Robert Morris (Ill.)
- ▶ Nester Colmenares, Campbellsville (Ky.)
- ▶ Jason Taylor, Oklahoma Christian

SECOND FIVE

- ▶ Tay Barber, Life (Ga.)
- ▶ Andrew Lee, Mountain State (W.Va.)
- ▶ James Lewis, Fresno Pacific (Calif.)
- ▶ Greg Truvillion, Union (Tenn.)
- ▶ Eric Young, Rogers State (Okla.)

HONORABLE MENTION

- Toriano Adams, Lindenwood (Mo.)
- Wes Anderson, Westminster (Utah)
- Ronnie Battle, Bacone (Okla.)
- Brenton Bell, Mid-America Nazarene (Kan.)
- Greg Brown, Life (Ga.)
- Todd Brown, Fresno Pacific (Calif.)
- Ryan Brock, Loyola-New Orleans (La.)
- Sylvester Collins, Tougaloo (Miss.)
- Rob Eppinger, Robert Morris (Ill.)
- Zack Frey, Freed-Hardeman (Tenn.)
- Rocky Hampton, Biola (Calif.)
- Kenny Hewitt, Lubbock Christian (Texas)
- Eric Hobbie, McKendree (Ill.)
- Justin Hicks, Pikeville (Ky.)
- DaVeil Jackson, Oklahoma City
- Dominique Johnson, Azusa Pacific (Calif.)
- Marshall Johnson, Azusa Pacific (Calif.)
- Eric McPherson, Lindsey Wilson (Ky.)
- Josh Miller, Biola (Calif.)
- Vic Moses, Georgetown (Ky.)
- Mike Pilgrim, LSU-Shreveport
- Dan Rasp, Westmont (Calif.)
- Nate Richardson, Rocky Mountain (Mont.)
- Billy Rush, Robert Morris (Ill.)
- Joshua Samarco, Pikeville (Ky.)
- Tom Schumacher, California Baptist
- Julian Scott, St. Xavier (Ill.)
- Will Shackelford, Martin Methodist (Tenn.)
- Kip Small, Auburn-Montgomery (Ala.)
- Sylvester Spicer, Rogers State (Okla.)
- Brandon Springer, Cumberland (Tenn.)
- Tyler Wallenfang, Olivet Nazarene (Ill.)
- Ben Werner, Indiana-South Bend
- Terrance Worthy, Concordia (Calif.)