Loyola returning top 6 players

But prognosticators aren't impressed as Ramblers are picked for 9th in Horizon League
By Shannon Ryan
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Sometimes at practice, Loyola coach Jim Whitesell has to remind himself he has a full bench.

"It's kind of fun: 'Oh, he has to get in practice too,' " Whitesell said Friday at Loyola's annual tipoff luncheon. "Last year, we kind of had to Band-Aid it a little bit the second half of the season."

The Ramblers' reasons for optimism can be found on the long roster and short injury report.

Loyola returns every starter, including leading scorer Terrance Hill, plus Horizon League sixth man of the year Walt Gibler. The return of junior swingman Jordan Hicks from a foot injury that kept him out of 18 games last season is a boost.

"The maturity level is much better," Whitesell said. "There's more of them available, which is always good."

The Ramblers started last season 11-2, but injuries that forced three players to play more than 30 minutes per game and the grind of the Horizon League season wore them down. They lost 14 of their last 17 games to finish 14-16 overall and 5-13 in the conference.

Butler, which played in the national title game against Duke last season, is again the overwhelming Horizon favorite. The Bulldogs bulldozed through the league, going undefeated with their biggest challenge coming in a 48-47 victory at Loyola.

The Ramblers, who finished eighth in the conference, face Butler twice and have a challenging nonconference schedule that includes Kansas State and DePaul.

An offensive spark would help the Ramblers, whose 64.8 points per game ranked second-lowest in the league. Increased minutes for Gibler, who scored 11.3 per game — only a tenth of a point less than Hill — could help.

Players see no reason they can't be near the top of the league, despite a predicted eighth-place finish in the preseason poll.

"I'm happy we're the underdogs," senior forward Andy Polka said. "The guys are motivated to prove people wrong. That's what we plan on doing."

Layup: Loyola will open the season with a four-team tournament named the Nick Kladis Classic in honor of the Loyola standout (1948-52) who died last November. The games run Nov. 12-14 with Loyola facing Eastern Kentucky, Indiana State and Texas-Pan American on successive days.