Loyola preview: Porter Moser begins latest turnaround project
By Toni Ginnetti
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Loyola coach Porter Moser waited to name captains until after a “boot camp” week in October that introduced players to an intense style of play.

“I wanted to go through the spring, summer and fall to evaluate,” Moser said. “I was going to choose the captains based on everything.’’

That he chose veteran forwards Walt Gibler and Ben Averkamp might seem obvious, but Moser insists it wasn’t because the senior and junior pre-med majors have the most experience.

“It’s because of how vocal they were and how hard they worked,” he said. “They demonstrated leadership.”

The captains say the same things about the new coach, who takes over a program with gleaming new facilities and a mandate to become a force in the Horizon League.

“Coach is intense, but there’s a reason for everything we do,” Averkamp said. “There are new demands and a new coaching staff. It’s almost like a freshman year all over again. But it’s been fun.”

“He definitely brings a lot of energy to what he does,” Gibler said.

The Naperville native has experience restarting programs, first at Arkansas-Little Rock (three seasons) and then at Illinois State (four). He spent the last four seasons as Rick Majerus’ top assistant at Saint Louis, where he was named one of the nation’s top 50 assistants by Basketball Times magazine.

“I’ve taken over two other programs, and both were in last place,’’ he said. “This one wasn’t [finishing eighth in the 10-team league]. You have to establish your culture and get a collective group to buy into it. It’s something you have to get started right away. You can’t be loose early and expect to tighten the ship later.

“This year that culture is so much a part of what we want to do — toughness and how to play the game. I think I can draw on being a head coach at two different places for seven years, and then I sat next to one of the best basketball minds in the game.”

Hiring Moser, 43, was new athletic director Grace Calhoun’s first major move, and while expectations for this season will be modest, the goals for the future won’t be.

The Ramblers have state-of-the-art facilities in the new Norville Center and will play in a revamped Gentile Center.
But the team also will feature many new faces, and that will bring the biggest challenge.

“Experience is always good, but our experience is in the post,” Moser said. “The biggest weakness is the lack of experience in the guards.”

The Ramblers had a major setback in September when returning senior guard Courtney Stanley suffered a season-ending knee injury. The door is open for sophomores Chim Kadima and Denzel Brito and freshman Joe Crisman to step up. Senior swingman Jordan Hicks, returning from a second injury-shortened season, will be asked to step in.

“We have a tough opening stretch,” Moser said of a schedule that begins at Illinois and sends the Ramblers on the road for seven of the first nine games. “We have to focus on ourselves. We have so much to do, put in a system and getting the guys into the system. But through adversity we hope to get stronger.”