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Incoming class looks to have 'all the pieces'

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

Monday, February 22, 2010

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While Stanford tries to avoid the school's first losing season in 17 years, help is on the way.

When Johnny Dawkins became head coach in May 2008, he decided to stockpile scholarships for the incoming class of 2010 rather than take what was left of the 2009 class. As a result of that decision - and a couple of injuries - the Cardinal have had very little help from their freshman class.

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Courtesy IMG Academies

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Despite winning three of their last four games, they are 13-14 overall and stand seventh in the Pac-10 at 7-8.

Next season, it's conceivable that three freshmen - possibly even four - could start.

Stanford's "Pick Six" class was already a highly touted group before 6-foot-11 Serbian-Canadian center Stefan Nastic committed to the Farm on Jan. 28. Next season, he will team with another recruit with whom he once played in Toronto, 6-10 forward Dwight Powell, who has spent the last three years at IMG Academies in Bradenton, Fla.

They will be joined by two players from the Seattle area, 5-11 point guard Aaron Bright and 6-10 forward John Gage, along with 6-7 guard Anthony Brown and 6-8 forward Josh Huestis.

"We have all the pieces: size, quickness, height, shooting ability," Brown said. "This class should do something special in the Pac-10."

Nastic, Gage and Brown all will be 17 when they enter college. "Our upside is pretty big," Brown said.

Potential for stardom

The best bets to make an immediate impact would seem to be Powell, Nastic and possibly Bright. Powell's prep coach thinks he'll be a contender for Pac-10 Newcomer of

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"He doesn't fit the traditional role of power forward, but he's long and athletic," IMG coach Vince Walden said. "He reminds us of Shane Battier. He's so smart, places a lot of value on defense and is shooting 50 percent on threes."

Playing tough competition in tournaments around the country, the IMG team is currently 14-10, and Powell averages 21.5 points, 11.2 rebounds and 2.8 blocks.

Going to school in Florida wasn't easy at first, Powell admitted. "Leaving home to go to school at 16 was something new for me," he said. "Not many guys in Canada had done that."

Walden said Powell fit in well. "He has a presence about him," the coach said. "He could run for public office."

European approach

Powell was one of two high school players invited last summer to train with the Canadian national team. Nastic has trained the last five summers with coaches from Serbia's national teams. He was 14 months old when his family moved to Canada.

"He's grown up into a very versatile big man," said Vlad Matevski, his coach on the Toronto 5-0 club team. "We took a European approach to prepare him for any position, from guard to wings to post moves. He'll help Stanford substantially, I think. They definitely can build a team around him. He's the most focused kid I've ever had."

Nastic's father, Slavisa, contacted the Stanford coaches in October; two days later, assistant coach Rodney Tention showed up at their door.

Bright, the first member of the group to commit to Stanford, averages 21 points and four assists for Bellevue (Wash.) High (20-2).

"He'll be a nice fit for Stanford in opening things up in the middle, because you've got to account for where he is," said his coach, Chris O'Connor. "He can flat-out stroke it."

Tired of the ferry

Gage lives on Vashon Island, a 13-mile-long strip in Puget Sound between Seattle and Tacoma. There are no stoplights on the island. The 18-3 Pirates, though, are trying to repeat last year's state championship, and Gage averages 20 points and 13.5 rebounds.

"He can't wait to stop commuting to games by ferry," his mother, Wendy, said.

He's an exceptional shooter, carries at 3.97 grade-point average and is the final stages of becoming an Eagle Scout. "If you had to build a player, it would be a lot like John," coach Andy Sears said.

Brown is making nearly half his three-point-shot attempts (45-for-94) while averaging 17.2 points and 3.0 assists for Ocean View High (25-3) in Huntington Beach (Orange County).

The sleeper of the bunch could be Huestis, whose C.M. Russell team from Great Falls, Mont., is 14-2 and ranked third in the state. A strong defender, he averages 17 points, 13 rebounds and five blocks.

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He flew under the radar nationally, but is a local celebrity in a town of 70,000 people. Some fans are going to his high school games wearing Stanford gear in his honor.

E-mail Tom FitzGerald at tfitzgerald@sfnchronicle.com.

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Oh my God. This is going to be fun. The Trent Era is starting to look very tiny in my rearview mirror. Go Cardinal.

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Watch out Pac10! With graduation and injuries, Coach Dawkins and his team could have easily given up and settled for last place. That's what the experts expected. The team is making the season respectable. Imagine how good this team will be with the incoming stellar recruits. Looks like both the women's and men's teams will soon rule the Pac. GO CARDINAL!

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Don't forget about their freshman recruit from this season as well - Andy Brown. He blew out



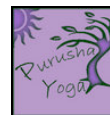
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his knee and is redshirting this year. Plus if Owens can come back next year! Could be real scary in a few years.

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