A new basketball season is upon us, and the Elon University Phoenix women’s team look to hit the ground running. The quest for a winning season and third NCAA tournament berth in four years has gotten off to a stunning start for North Carolina coaching legend Charlotte Smith. This 2019-2020 season started with a match-up against Western Carolina University and a thrilling overtime victory against Appalachian State University.

Elon’s victory helped Smith notch her 150th career win as a head coach. Two solid wins over former Southern Conference rivals, as well as several solid tests for the non-conference slate before beginning Colonial Athletic Association play, look to position the Phoenix for success.

Smith is in her ninth year of coaching the Phoenix, despite speculation in the offseason that she would leave Elon for her alma mater, the University of North Carolina Tar Heels, to succeed the recently retired coaching legend Sylvia Hatchell. Smith played for Hatchell from 1991-1995. Smith hit the game-winning three-pointer for the Tar Heels against Louisiana Tech University to net their only championship to date.

After spending 2002-2011 as an assistant coach for the Heels, Smith took over as the head coach for the Phoenix in 2011. Abbey Lipcsik, the women’s basketball assistant director of athletics communications, did not respond to Elon News Network’s requests to interview Smith or any players on the team for this story.

Smith has led the Elon program to a Women’s Basketball Invitational Tournament and two Women’s National Invitational Tournament appearances and back-to-back NCAA tournament appearances in 2017 and 2018. She said she looks to return to the NCAA tournament with a talented roster that is young and still growing. The roster is stacked with young talent for the Phoenix, as it doesn’t have any seniors on the squad.

Redshirt junior guard Jada Graves looks to break out this season for Elon, as she only played one game last season for the Phoenix due to a torn ACL. Sophomore guard Brie Perpignan will run a very fast-paced game at the point, as Elon will excel in the run game this season.

The freshman class looks to add depth and balance to the roster. The three-person class brings a guard and two forwards to a young Phoenix squad. Guard Vanessa Taylor is from Sweden, where she played basketball at Hagagymnasiet high school and debuted for the Swedish women’s professional league at age 15.

Forward Maya Johnson hails from Southeast Raleigh High School, where she helped the team make three state championship appearances. Forward Teylah Saunders, from Pikesville High School in Pikesville, Maryland, helped lead her team to a 1-A state championship in the 2018-19 season, and was selected for the all-state second team as a senior. She was named the defensive player of the year for Pikesville during her junior season and the team’s most valuable player in 2017.

The Phoenix picked up right where it left off with their defensive tenacity, as well as a balanced offensive attack, scoring in the paint along with a steady line of shots from the perimeter by talented forwards.

The Phoenix started the regular season strong with a strong victory over the Western Carolina Catamounts 68-24 in Schar Center. The team dominated in multiple facets, outscoring WCU 26 to 12 in the paint, 25 to 8 in points off turnovers and 33 to 5 in points off the bench. Jada Graves led the balanced scoring effort for the Phoenix with 12 points. The Phoenix dominated the boards with 45 rebounds.

Elon followed with a much more competitive game against Appalachian State. The result was a thrilling narrow victory by a one point margin in overtime with a score of 67 to 66.

Junior forward Jaylin Powell starred for the Phoenix with 19 points, going 7 for 21 from the field with two three-pointers. Powell also secured the deciding point with a free throw.

After a down year, Elon’s women’s basketball team plans to return to form.

Colby Cook
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Elon University junior and guard Ariad Colina makes a fast break against the Winston-Salem State University Rams in Schar Center on Tuesday, Nov. 5. The Phoenix was 77-48.

Middle: Elon University redshirt sophomore guard Ariana Nance takes out the Winston-Salem defender in Schar Center on Tuesday, Nov. 5.

Bottom right: Elon University junior and guard Satcilli Kenfird shoots a free throw in Schar Center on Tuesday, Nov. 5.

BY THE NUMBERS
9-21 was Elon University’s women’s basketball season record last season.

The Phoenix will be challenged this season with a very tough schedule. They draw three Atlantic Coast Conference programs in Wake Forest University, UNC and North Carolina State University, as well as tough opponents in the University of Nevada Las Vegas Lady Rebel Roundup in Las Vegas at the end of November. The Phoenix will also take on Coastal Carolina University out of the Sun Belt Conference in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

The CAA slate starts with a bang against defending champion Towson University, where the Phoenix lost a heartbreaker 59 to 58 last season in late January.

Elon looks for a bounce-back win against the Hofstra University Pride, who knocked them out of the CAA tournament last season, beating the Phoenix 77 to 75 on Jan. 19.

Elon University junior and guard Ariad Colina makes a fast break against the Winston-Salem State University Rams in Schar Center on Tuesday, Nov. 5. The Phoenix was 77-48.
Sophomores on women’s basketball team take on new leadership roles

Carter Horan
EUNews Network | @carterhoran

Despite only being sophomores, Brie Perpignan and Kayla Liles have the composure of veteran seniors on the basketball court. This year, the team is composed of nine underclassmen and four juniors and one redshirt junior, a similar group to last year’s young cohort.

Perpignan’s goal for this season is “to be more consistent.” Last year the Phoenix finished 9-21 with only four conference wins, the worst record for them in the past decade. And with two NCAA tournament bids in that time period, the expectations are always high for the Phoenix. But with new freshmen ready to make an impact, combined with their strong leadership, Elon is ready to take the next step.

A year ago, point guard Perpignan was third on the team in minutes at an impressive 25 MPG, playing in all 30 games. She averaged 8.9 PPG and 2.4 APG, making her the Phoenix’s third leading scorer and assist leader. On defense, Perpignan was second with 10 blocks and 31 steals in total, all while being the shortest starter.

Abbey Lipsitz, the women’s basketball assistant director of athletics, communications, neglected to respond to Elon News Network’s requests to interview Perpignan or any members of the team for this story.

The 5-foot-7 Virginia native has scored 29 total points in her first three games of the 2019-20 season while leading the team in minutes played. She’s a commanding force of the Phoenix offense and has brought the fire and passion needed her to. The sophomore duo have proven themselves, and with new freshmen ready to make an impact, combined with their strong leadership, Elon is ready to take the next step.

Sophomore guard Kayla Liles plays against Winston-Salem State University on Tuesday, Nov. 5.

Sophomore guard Kayla Liles plays against Winston-Salem State University on Tuesday, Nov. 5.

EUNews Network File Photo

BY THE NUMBERS

29
is the number of combined points Brie Perpignan has scored in her first three games this season.

11
is number of games sophomore Kayla Liles started in last year.

7
is the number of games Kayla Liles finished with double-digit scoring last year.

at a high level, and her length on defense allows her to get her hands in passing lanes and put pressure on the opponent’s offense. Standing at only 5-foot-10, she impresses with her ability to grab rebounds on both offense and defense. Against Marist, Liles led the team in rebounds with a total of nine, three of which were offensive.

When one player is struggling, the other is willing to step up; that’s what makes Perpignan and Liles an effective team. In Sunday’s loss against Marist, Perpignan had trouble finding the net on offense. In her 30 minutes on the floor, she shot 2/10 from the field with a season-low five free-throws, scoring a team-high 13 points. Although they lost the game, Liles proved she could step up in a situation where Perpignan needed her to. The sophomore duo have proven themselves, and with a larger role on this year’s team, they’re poised for success.
## MEN’S BASKETBALL AT HOME

### JANUARY

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Mike Schrage took over as the new head coach for Elon University’s men’s basketball team last April — marking the beginning of a series of changes to the team, as he started recruiting new members to the Phoenix.

“You get the job in April and you have potentially five scholarships, and [I’m] really excited about all the freshmen that decided to join us,” Schrage said. “They have such bright futures, and will be such a big part of what we’re doing now and going forward. I think everyone can see that already.”

With four games played in the 2019-2020 season, the Phoenix are 2-2. The starting lineup features three new additions to the team: Graduate transfer guard/forward Marcus Sheffield II, freshman guard Hunter McIntosh, and freshman guard/foward Hunter Woods.

The season is still in its early stages, but the young team will face their toughest opponent yet. Elon will take on the number five ranked University of North Carolina Chapel Hill on Wednesday, Nov. 20. The game will be in Chapel Hill, and is expected to start at 8:30 p.m.

HUNTER WOODS #25

WOODBGS IS ONE OF THE two freshmen that has appeared as a starter in all four games this season.

Getting experience and hearing that he was going to be a starter this early in his career was exciting for Woods.

“I was very excited,” Woods said. “I just want to continue to get better every day. So that’s the ultimate goal. Just getting better as a team and as a player.”

While Woods and fellow freshman Hunter McIntosh have started all four regular season games, Schrage said that he does not guarantee that new players will get that chance. But he also said he is not shocked about them earning playing time in their first year.

“I would never recruit a young man and say ‘you’re gonna play these many minutes,’ you know, ‘you’re going to start.’ There are no guarantees,” Schrage said. “But I know they’re going to have the chance to compete and play."

In the first part of the season, Woods had produced on the defensive side of the ball. In his first game against Mars Hill, Woods blocked in nine rebounds.

He also has three steals in the season. Woods said that he wants to continue to improve, but he also talked about gaining experience with his classmates.

“It’s going to be big time for us in the long run because coach is throwing us in the fire early,” Woods said. “So, at the end of the day, we’re going to be growing together and we’re going to have a great four years here.”

MCINTOSH COMES INTO THE year as one of two freshmen that have started each of the first four games.

In his collegiate debut, the Georgia native racked up 16 points against Mars Hill University, and has averaged nearly 10 points a game so far this year.

With a few games under his belt, McIntosh talked about his experience of finally playing at the college level.

“It’s definitely exciting. This is something you think about for a long time but then finally being here and being immersed in it,” McIntosh said. “Obviously four games is just a small taste of it, but I think I’ve gained some valuable experience over these first four games.”

McIntosh said it was exciting to get a chance to start so early in his career, and talked about his role as a freshman point guard.

“My role is, one, just be whatever the team needs me,” McIntosh said. “Right now, running the team, I’ve been kind of asked to shoot and score early, but also just being a great facilitator, being a great vocal leader.”

With players like McIntosh and Woods getting experience early on in their collegiate careers, Schrage said that they have shown maturity.

“They’re not afraid of the moment. They’re not afraid to compete. They’re not they’re not acting like freshmen,” Schrage said. “They’re willing and ready to make plays. And even in these environments we played most recently at Georgia Tech, at Michigan, they’re not overwhelmed by the moment by any means.”

HEFFIELD BRINGS VETERAN EXPERIENCE to the Phoenix. Before coming to Elon, he spent four years at Stanford University. As a Stanford Cardinal, Sheffield averaged just over six points per game in 86 games across three seasons. According to Stanford University Athletics’ website, Sheffield sat out his junior year due to a leg injury.

“It was a great experience at Stanford. Just my experience of plenty of good competition every day in practice,” Sheffield said. “The games are always peak competition in the PAC 12. So, I think, just good competition prepared me for Elon.”

Sheffield’s experience in the PAC 12 appears to be paying off. In his first four games with Elon, Sheffield is averaging over 17 points per game, and scored 22 points against the University of Michigan on Nov. 15.

Schrage also talked about the presence that Sheffield brings to the rest of the team.

“He just stabilizes us because he’s played at a really high level and competed at a high level. He gives the guys confidence that we have him on the court,” Schrage said.

Sheffield was not totally unfamiliar with the coaching staff. Sheffield and Schrage both knew each other from their time at Stanford. Sheffield was a freshman in 2016, Schrage was an assistant coach for the Cardinal. Sheffield said their previous relationship played a role in deciding on which school to transfer to.

“That was big for me when I decided to leave Stanford — to play for somebody [I] already had a relationship with and I definitely had a relationship with Schrage. So that kind of brought me to Elon,” Sheffield said.

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Schrage continued coaching at Stanford University, where he was an assistant coach there from 2008 to 2016. With this title, Schrage still found himself dealing heavily with recruitment.

Over time, Schrage narrowed down the values he looks for in recruiting. He booted in on these values with this years’ recruitment class with the opening of five scholarship spots. “We can’t just recruit anybody,” Schrage said. “They got to not just [be] good students, but great students, they need to have high standards; they need to do everything they represent.”

Schrage also said that above anything else, he wants to establish trust with the team so he can feel more at ease. “I want to trust the young men that we’ve recruited and continue to mentor and say, ‘Hey, they’re going to make the right decisions when they’re here,’” Schrage said. “They need to understand that they’re putting their signature on everything they do, every decision they make. Once they’re here, it reflects on them, reflects on us, reflects on our programs and their family back at home.”

In his previous jobs, Schrage said he never even thought about pursuing a head coaching job until the position at Elon was presented to him. Schrage said the process started smoothly because of Athletic Director Dave Blank’s familiarity with him. “It moved pretty fast,” [Ohio State] said in the NCAA Tournament when we initially had contact and once we got eliminated in the second round, it moved faster because it’s hard when you’re immersed with your own team,” Schrage said.

Schrage said his visit to campus made the process go faster, and he knew the job was for him. “When I came, I was blown away by the campus but was really blown away by the Schar Center too,” Schrage said. “I remember calling back to Ohio State and being like, ‘Hey, I’m getting this job. I’m sorry, but this is perfect.’”

When Schrage found out he had been offered the job, he said he tried to call his wife to share the news, but couldn’t contact her right away. He said he remembered feeling the pure euphoria of it all.

“The move from Ohio to North Carolina brought back some familiarity for Schrage and his family. “In his time at Duke, the family had lived in Durham, North Carolina, but he said his kids were probably too young to remember that time. It also wasn’t the first time the family moved to follow Schrage’s position. Of the total eight schools that Schrage has been creating his basketball program specifically. “It’s not easy on the family ever, especially at the age my children are because they develop great friendships and relationships wherever they’ve been,” Schrage said. “They’ve been great and they understand my passion. They know how much my wife and I love it so they were pretty excited.”

“After finally contacting his wife and telling his family about their eventual move, Schrage made the seven hour drive from Ohio to North Carolina to meet the team the Sunday before his first press conference. “I wanted them to know how excited I was to get to know them and to be at Elon,” Schrage said about his first encounter with the team. “I said, ‘Hey, we have something in common. You chose Elon, I’m choosing Elon now, but now Elon chose us.’”

Schrage said he wanted the team to feel comfortable with him right away, so he focused on the one-on-one personal connections with the players first. He said he wanted to set up the individual meetings early just to get to know them as people and their expectations.

“This year, Schrage said he is focusing on the foundation of the team. He said his dreams for the team will start one day at a time, with one player at a time, making one play at a time. Though the process may be long, and the team may not always come out of games with a win, Schrage said he wants Elon to trust his process. “It’s all about having a growth mindset, just getting better every day. I’m just proud to be here,” Schrage said. “Elon just gets keeping better and better and I love the vision that they have. Schrage said he recognizes Elon’s vision for growth, and he asks the community to, “Please know, I’m bringing that vision as best I can to the basketball program specifically.”