By Jason Hollander

By the end of each basketball season, most Ivy League men’s teams are left feeling like Cinderella as they watch either Princeton or Penn go off to the big dance (NCAA tournament), while they sit at home. This year, backed by seven seniors, the Columbia squad is eager to compete for a place among the Ivy elite. Whether the Lions can break through will depend on their ability to execute two key elements that eluded them last season: winning on the road and pulling out tight games.

The Lions follow a year in which they posted a respectable .500 Ivy League record, upended Princeton and Penn in back-to-back games (for the first time since 1986) and saw forward Craig Austin capture distinctions like Ivy Player of the Year and Associated Press All-America Honorable Mention. Still, the Lions won only 37% of contests decided by five points or less in 2000-01 and mustered only a 2-12 record in road games despite posting a 9-3 mark at home.

The room for improvement is obvious. Turning a few losses into victories could make all the difference in a league that is reputed for narrow finishes. But the execution will not be easy. Since 1995, Penn and Princeton have maintained a veritable lock on the Ivy League title, combining to capture 39 of the last 43 championships. That history, coupled with the fact that those teams had a strong recruiting off-season, makes Columbia’s task daunting, though not impossible.

Head Coach Armond Hill wants his players to remain focused on their goals. “We don’t try to compare ourselves with other teams in the League,” says Hill. “We try to focus on our own game.”

The former Princeton and NBA player believes last year’s accomplishments “mean nothing—” if the Lions don’t continue to make strides in the league. “We’re trying to build a program that will maintain a level of quality, commitment and dedication,” says Hill.

But for seven seniors who know their basketball careers may be only a few months from ending, there is a sense of urgency that cannot be denied. “This is it. We have to do it now,” says senior co-captain Treg Duerksen. “We have to work as hard as we can.”

The 6’3” guard sorely missed last year when he was forced to sit out the entire season with a tear in his anterior cruciate ligament and a stress fracture in his foot. The time off, however, gave him a new perspective.

“I learned a lot sitting on the sidelines,” says Durksen. “I learned more about rotation on defense and running the offense.”

Last year’s Ivy League Player of the Year Craig Austin knows that defenses will be geared to stop him this season. “It makes you sort of a bullseye,” Austin says of the award. Still, the 6’6” forward is hungry to duplicate his accomplishments. “I don’t want to lose it to someone else,” he says.

Having led the league in scoring in both conference and overall games, Austin also ranked among the top 10 in the Ivy in scoring, field-goal percentage, 3-point field-goal percentage, free throw percentage, assists and steals.

Despite battling tendinitis in his knees throughout the off-season, Austin, the team’s co-captain, says he is ready to lead the Lions. He believes the abundance of experience will be an important asset. “We know this is our last year. We want to play well,” he says. “We [seniors] all have to set an example for the freshmen.”

First-year players are plentiful on this year’s team, with talent hailing from around the country. Hill has made it a priority to quickly mold the new players into his system. “I have an idea of what it takes to be a student-athlete in the Ivy League,” he says. “I’m trying to pass that on to my students.”

For Hill, that means changing their attitude and approach towards competing, putting as much stock in the work ethic as the results. “We’re trying to develop a level of success. That includes a formula for hard work,” he says. “You can’t be a champion without it.”

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