

Three weeks out: Five early questions for Arizona State basketball

By Doug Haller, the Athletic/Oct. 16, 2019

Hard to believe, but in about three weeks Arizona State will open coach Bobby Hurley's fifth season against Colorado in Shanghai. No waiting around, the Sun Devils will be tested from the start. For now, we have questions. Let's get started.

1. How will Hurley distribute backcourt minutes?

This looks like a return to the Guard U days of two seasons ago, when Hurley relied so much on Tra Holder, Shannon Evans, Kodi Justice and the energetic freshman off the bench, Remy Martin. After running the point last season, Martin returns for his junior season. Senior Rob Edwards also is back (without the back issues), along with sophomore Elias Valtonen. Newcomers Alonzo Verge, Jaelen House and Caleb Christopher make for a crowded backcourt.

I asked Hurley at Pac-12 media day about a potential starting five, specifically mentioning Verge, who has played well since arriving. He didn't bite. "I'm still trying to formulate ideas on that," he said, "but he's playing like a starter, let's put it that way." If you assume Martin (a preseason all-conference pick) and Edwards start, the rest of the lineup likely will depend on whether Hurley wants to go with three guards. He likes the idea of House playing a role similar to the one Martin played as a freshman, as an energizer off the bench.

"I was concerned with his physique — could he make the jump?" Hurley said of the 6-foot-2, 160-pound House. "But he's so fast and he believes in himself. And I just think growing up in that household with Eddie there and the confidence he had as a player, he hasn't backed down from anybody. He just brings that edge to him."

The 6-foot-7 Valtonen is listed as a guard but he could slide to the frontcourt. He's not a scorer like the others, but he knows how to play and can contribute in other ways. "Elias has made a jump," Hurley said. "He had a good summer with his national team and he looks better."

In 2017-18, Hurley leaned heavily on his guards. Holder averaged 35.1 minutes, followed by Evans (34.9) and Justice (32.2). Martin averaged 23.8 off the bench. This season's distribution could be similar, but it also could make ASU vulnerable in the post.

2. Can they stop anybody inside?

Romello White looks good. The 6-8 junior forward is leaner and seems to have more bounce. At last week's open practice, he was a force in the post, establishing position and scoring at will. But it was reasonable to wonder: If the Sun Devils struggle to slow White in an intrasquad setting, how will they do against the Pac-12?

The Sun Devils are thin inside. White is the only returning true post player with experience. Sophomore Taeshon Cherry could help, along with 6-9 stretch forward Khalid Thomas, but ASU might have to lean on newcomers Jalen Graham and Andre Allen. A 6-9 freshman, Graham impressed during summer workouts but an ankle injury has limited him in preseason practice. A 6-9 junior-college transfer, Allen may have to adjust quickly.

"He's got to really embrace a junkyard dog-type mentality," Hurley said. "He's got the potential to be physical and score above the basket but he's got to embrace just being relentless to rebound. And then just being a defensive-minded guy on the frontline."

Zone is an option.

"We're going to explore it," Hurley said. "We have several weeks. I'm more of a man-to-man person, and that's all we've done up to this point, but we are going to look at some other things."

3. Will perimeter shooting again be an issue?

ASU had playmakers last season; what it lacked was shooters. The Sun Devils shot 33.6 from 3-point range, which ranked 215th nationally. It wasn't a death blow, it just made everything difficult. This season, even with the arc backed up to 22 feet 1 3/4 inches, Hurley expects the Sun Devils to be much better.

Stretch forwards Cherry (34.5 percent from 3 last season) and the 6-9 Thomas are keys. If they're consistently connecting from deep, the court should open for Martin and Verge to penetrate. "All the guards can shoot," Hurley said. "Verge, deep 3s. Remy, deep 3s. Rob Edwards, deep 3s. Jaelen likes to go off the dribble but he can make the 3 as well."

In 2017-18, the Guard U Devils shot 36.6 from 3, but nearly 38 percent of ASU's offense that season came from the arc. That ranked 15th nationally. ASU this season may not be in that range, but the Sun Devils may be close.

4. Where does Kimani Lawrence fit?

Along with Cherry, Lawrence may have the most room to grow. Last season the 6-8 wing moved to a sixth-man role after Edwards returned from his back injury. For the most part, he was good, averaging 8.6 points and 3.5 rebounds in 25 minutes. But he's capable of more.

Last season, with Martin and Luguentz Dort dominating the ball, Lawrence's scoring opportunities were limited. Over ASU's final 12 games, he reached double-figures in scoring only once. A positive: Lawrence could have an impact on the game in other areas. He grabbed big rebounds and played a key defensive role because of his length, especially when the Sun Devils shifted to a 2-3 zone.

This season may be similar.

"He looks great," Hurley said. "He's moving better. I think he'll be the beneficiary of just what the guards will be able to do. We've talked about him as just a mismatch guy and as a multiple-position player. I think he'll focus more on rebounding and try to offset the loss of Zylan (Cheatham, the Pac-12's leading rebounder)."

5. How will the Sun Devils defend?

ASU's biggest losses come on defense. Cheatham guarded four positions and the physical Dort harassed opposing point guards full court. Both were all-conference defenders, a reason the Sun Devils posted a 47.9 defensive 2-point field-goal percentage in conference contests, second-best in the Pac-12.

Neither will be easy to replace.

Martin needs to set the tone, starting with the inbound pass, something he has done in the past, but maybe not consistently. At ASU's open practice, the Sun Devils did full-court defensive drills, one on one, each player trying to disrupt the ballhandler.

"I don't think we're going to be as dynamic athletically," Hurley said. "So being a better positional defensive team, being a better positional rebounding team (is important). Because if we do get stops, from what I've seen, I think it could be the best team I've had offensively."