

Can HU's Lady Pirates take their game to the next level?

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By David Woods

According to recent **pre-season polls** Hampton University's Lady Pirates have already been picked to win the **Mid Eastern Athletic Conference** championship for the fifth time in the last five years.

One question the Lady Pirates face is will they go undefeated in their conference once again?

Last season Hampton led the nation in scoring defense (47.8 points per game) and was third in field-goal percentage defense (.320) and 3-point field goal percentage defense (.243).

Keiara Avant jumped from role player as an underclassman to Player of the Year as a senior.

Along with being the season's favorite Lady Pirates' Alyssa Bennett and Nicole Hamilton -- who played for Hampton and Phoebus high schools, respectively -- were named to the preseason all-conference squad. Hamilton (11.9 points per game, 179 assists) and Alyssa Bennett (10.1 points per game, 6.6 rebounds per game) are a good foundation.

According to the Daily Press, Hamilton though not a natural guard, played the position all last season and exceeded every one's expectations. Bennett may be the MEAC's most gifted player and ably checks point guards to power forwards.

This past season the Lady Pirates went 28-6. Hampton went unbeaten in MEAC play in 2012-13, a program first and just the fifth time in MEAC history a women's program went unbeaten in conference play. Hampton is also the second women's program in MEAC history to go unbeaten in conference play and win the conference tournament in the same season.

The 2012-13 season also saw the Lady Pirates go 3-3 against schools from so-called "BCS conferences" -- while the rest of the MEAC was 1-24.

Hampton beat such schools as Louisiana State University and Mississippi State, and the Lady Pirates set a program Division I record with a 19-game winning streak from Jan. 2 through March 16.

The Lady Pirates have dominated the MEAC Conference for the last four years, but what can take them to the next level? The last five seasons they dominate in conference play and play solid outside of their conference. With



this string of success they have attracted the attention of major conference college programs such as LSU, [Southeastern Conference] Kansas State, [Big 12 Conference] and Southern Mississippi [Conference USA]. Last season the Lady Pirates defeated LSU, giving them their second straight home win over an SEC school, as Hampton defeated Florida in 2010. With the string of success each year they face the same issue, the seeding they get in the NCAA Tournament, for the fourth consecutive season straight the MEAC Champions were given seeds ranking from 13th through 16th, meaning they had to play teams such as Duke last spring, Stanford in 2012, Kentucky in 2011, and Duke in 2010. The Lady Pirates are (0-4) against Duke in the NCAA Tournament.

According to Daily Press Sports writer Dave Fairbanks, "Hampton is doing just about everything possible to improve its chances of getting a higher seed in the NCAA. They play a handful of teams from marquee conferences every year. The problem is that the MEAC is rated so low that even if a team runs the table in the league and has a handful of wins against big conference teams – as HU did last season – it's still pretty much a lock to be a 15 or 16 seed."



After the committee gets past the top 10 or 12 seeds, it doesn't spend the same amount of time and or energy evaluating lower-seeded teams. The NCAA doesn't spend the same time and energy evaluating lower-seeded teams like HU, often they just move a lower seeded team up or down a spot for convenience' sake. Hampton would almost do better to leave the MEAC Conference and join the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference or the Mid-American Conference.

Another plausible solution for the Lady Pirates getting a higher seed would be playing bigger schools like Duke or North Carolina during the regular season, but are these big names school's willing play the Lady Pirates knowing that could take a loss to a team that is seen as inexperienced?

Last season after the first-round **NCAA tournament game**, Duke Coach Joanne McCallie said "Hampton is a great team. They are very athletic, very skilled and they play hard. I think this was a good game for us and a good test for us. Also, this game will be good to challenge us for further games. They had great ball pressure and we had to do some things that we hadn't done in the past couple of games. I think this will really help us grow and prepare us for our next game."

Schools aren't afraid to schedule Hampton, said **David Six**, the Lady Pirates head coach "We will play anybody, but we won't schedule just road games against marquee teams, like many MEAC teams do."

According to the coaching staff, HU likes to play home-and-home. Is this stance helping the Lady Pirates or putting them in even a worse predicament? Programs like LSU and Kansas State have both agreed to home-and-homes with the Lady Pirates.

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