

UCF Knights Face Early Season Test As Hosts of 2017 AdvoCare Invitational at ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex

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UCF head men's basketball coach Johnny Dawkins begins his second season at the helm of a Knights program that he directed to the National Invitation Tournament (NIT) semifinals during his inaugural season as head coach last season. The Knights posted a 24-12 (.667) overall record and led all 351 Division I men's basketball programs in field goal percentage defense (36.5). The Knights, who were 15-3 at home last season, are among eight teams participating in the 12th Annual AdvoCare Invitational tournament that will be played at ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex at Walt Disney World Resort (Nov. 23, 24 and 26).

The tournament, regarded by basketball experts as one of the best early season tune-ups in all of college basketball, features 2016 NCAA Sweet 16 team West Virginia, as well as the Knights (3-0). Other participants include Long Beach State, Marist, Missouri, Nebraska, Oregon State and St. John's.

Disney Sports spoke with **Coach Dawkins** last week about his expectations for the AdvoCare Tournament, his outlook for the 2017 season, and what he wants this year's team to be known for.

DS: You've got the team off to a 3-0 start this year. Give us a sense of where this team is and how good can you be?

JD: "This year's team is a different team from last year's team. We lost three seniors from last year's team and our current team only has one senior, so obviously, we're a young team, but I like our talent and I like our energy. I think we can be very competitive, and I think we have shown that during the first three games. One of the main differences between last year's team and our current team is last year's team knew what it took to win games. Our current team is in the process of learning how to win. We are learning what we have to do for 40 minutes to give ourselves a chance to win games and they've done a good job so far, but it's still a process with this group because in order to make it a habit, you have to continually do the things that help you win, and our guys are still learning to build those habits."

DS: You mentioned this team learning how to win. Saturday's game against William & Mary was one of those close, back-and-forth games, until you guys were able to pull away late. What was your main takeaway from that win that helped you guys improve to 3-0 with the AdvoCare Invitational coming up?

JD: "This was a good test for us. They're (William & Mary) a really good team from the standpoint of how they execute. They run one of those offensive systems that are difficult to guard. I thought our guys, being as this was the first time they've seen a team play that way, defended it well, and I think we won this game because we defended well."

DS: Each team has a signature or a trait they are known for. What do you want your team to be known for this year?

JD: "We were the number one field goal percentage defensive team in the country last year (limited opponents to 36.5 percent shooting from the field in 2016). Out of 351 Division I college basketball teams in the country last year, we were number one. That's what we hang our hat on. We believe our defense gives us a chance to be competitive with our opponents every night. That's what we bought into last year and that's one of the big reasons we were able to have a successful season."

DS: What do you and your team have to do to come out of next week's tournament feeling like you got better and got what you needed to get accomplished?

JD: "We need to play our brand of basketball - UCF basketball. That means we need to defend the way we are capable of defending and we need to improve and get better every time we step on the floor. The tournament will be a success for us if we do those things. We don't measure ourselves simply by wins and losses; we measure ourselves by our standard which is how we play and by the things we want to see happen on each and every possession both offensively and on the defensive end of the floor. That's what we look for. If we can do those things we need to do on the defensive end and share the ball the way we are capable of, that means we are improving. We will be three games into our season by the time the tournament starts, so we are a work in progress. We are still forming our team, so we want to make sure that we see steady progress in areas that bring us together, and if we do those things, it will be a successful tournament for us and the wins will come."

DS: Can you give us a sense of who your top guys are - particularly your starters and the first few guys off the bench?

JD: "Starting wise - at the center spot - you're looking at Tacko Fall (Center, 7-6, Dakar, Senegal). Tacko is one of the best defensive centers in the country (Named American Athletic Conference Defensive Player of the Year in 2016). He almost averaged a double-double last year as a sophomore and has gotten a lot better offensively in the low post. He's very efficient in that he shot over 70 percent from the field (71.5) which led the conference. Next to him, we have a lot of perimeter guys. One of our guys is A.J. Davis (Guard/Forward, 6-9, Atlanta, Georgia) who is a very versatile player, terrific defender on the perimeter who plays with a lot of length and versatility. Offensively, he plays multiple positions for us. He does everything from bringing the ball up the court to assisting other guys score the basketball for us. He's a jack of all trades for us - kind of our glue guy. Next to him is Dayon Griffin (Guard, 6-4, St. Petersburg, Florida). Dayon is a transfer player (Louisiana Tech) who sat out last year. He is an excellent three-point shooter with deep range who can also take you off the bounce and get to the basket. He's also a solid defender. At the point guard spot, we have Terrell Allen (Guard, 6-2, Upper Marlboro, Maryland), who is a pure point guard who looks to make others better. He finds guys in transition, gets into the paint and creates for himself and others, and can make the open shot. At the next spot is Ceasar DeJesus (Guard, 6-2, Jersey City, New Jersey), who is a scoring guard who is a really good finisher at the basket. He's a playmaker, and he is a freshman which says a lot about him since he is starting as a freshman. He has performed well for us so far. The next

guy is Chance McSpadden (Guard, 6-4, Winter Haven, Florida), who is an excellent defensive player who is also a good open floor shooter, runs the floor well in transition. He is more of a scoring guard, but he can make plays. Off the bench, we have Rokas Ulvydas (Forward, 6-11, Kaunas, Lithuania) and Chad Brown (Forward, 6-9, Deltona, Florida). Rokas is our big 6-11 versatile center who can step outside and make shots or can score it in the low post. Chad is the energy guy. He runs the floor well and is a great shot blocker."

DS: And finally, give us a sense of how competitive your conference will be this season?

JD: "We have a great conference. We think we play in one of the best conferences in the country. Wichita State recently joined the conference and they are a Top 5, Top 10 team and then you have Cincinnati, which is a Top 15 team. We also play in a conference that includes Memphis, Connecticut, SMU, and Temple, so it's a great league that has very accomplished coaches. Some of the coaching resumes of our guys include guys who are national championship winners, national coach of the year winners, and to be quite totally honest with you, I think we play in one of the best conferences in the country."