

SPORTS

UNLV BASKETBALL

Returnees, recruits revive Rebels

By Lee Brown
Sentinel-Voice

Look out Western Athletic Conference, UNLV's Rebel basketball team may be off and "Runnin" again.

Despite having just come off a very successful 1996-97 season — a year that saw UNLV in a dogfight for first place in their first year as members of the Western Athletic Conference, though a

pre-season conference underdog — UNLV's men's basketball program appears primed to take it to another level after the announcement one of its key players will be returning for his senior season, in addition to the recent signings of three national prep standouts.

All great news for Head Coach Bill Bayno and the program that put the "Runnin"

in college basketball two decades ago under then Head Coach Jerry Tarkanian.

Setting the pace for an exciting week for the Rebel program was the announcement that Keon Clark, no doubt a late first or early second-round pick in June's NBA Draft, would remain at UNLV for his senior season. By remaining, he could well end up a lottery pick in the

1998 draft.

Along with improving his game, Clark cites additional reasons for staying which include becoming the first male in his extended family to earn a college degree and winning a national championship. Coincidentally, UNLV's last conference title was won in 1992 (Big West Conference) and their last visit to the NCAA tournament was in 1991 when

they lost to Duke in the Final Four.

The wiry, 6-foot-11 center's decision enhances what on paper appears to be a much more talented Rebel team for the upcoming season.

"What I've always wanted was a championship ring," Clark said at a press conference where he announced his decision to stay. "I've played ball for a couple of years and never won any major championships. But I feel we can get that next year."

"I'm happy and delighted," said Bayno of Clark's return. "I hadn't prepared to go into next season without him." Bayno will begin his third year at the helm of the Rebels next season.

Expected to join Clark will be 6-10 Issiah Epps, who was academically ineligible last season; 6-10 Javares Anderson of Gulf Coast Community College in Florida; 6-8 forward Kevin Simmons, a redshirt transfer from UC Irvine; and current Rebels Tyrone Nesby, who led UNLV in scoring and minutes (16.3 points and 33.1 minutes per contest); Donovan Stewart, a 6-4 swingman who took a medical redshirt because of a herniated disc last season, and returning point guard Mark Dickel who led the team in assists (4.0 per game).

Clark, who averaged 14.8 points and 10 rebounds and 3.5 blocks per game last season, while coming off the bench, realizes, though, that it will be a challenge to keep everyone happy, as far as minutes on the court are concerned.

"If we can jell, we'll be something special," Clark said.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg for the 1997-98 Rebels. As if that group of returnees and transfers weren't enough to get the ball rolling, the program also landed three of the nation's top prep prospects, including Lamar Odom, considered by most one of the nation's premiere high school players. Along with Odom, the Rebels also landed point guard Edwin "Greedy" Daniels and power forward Kaspars Kambala, both High School All-America candidates.

Citing an interest in playing for a national contender and a close friendship with UNLV assistant coach Greg Vetrone, Odom, a gifted 6-9, 220 swingman from New York City, chose the Runnin' Rebels over Kentucky, Connecticut and the NBA a week-and-a-half ago prior to playing in the Magic's Roundball Classic in Auburn Hills, Mich.

The commitment of Odom, who will more than likely be the Rebels' starting shooting guard next season, gives UNLV one of the top recruiting classes in the nation for the second consecutive season and could possibly make UNLV a viable national contender.

One of the keys to Odom's decision was UNLV's returning team, which included Clark and Nesby, as well as incoming point guard "Greedy" Daniels, who joined Odom on a recruiting visit to the university last November.

"Greedy" is a great, great player and him coming here (UNLV) was a factor," Odom said in a recent Associated Press interview.

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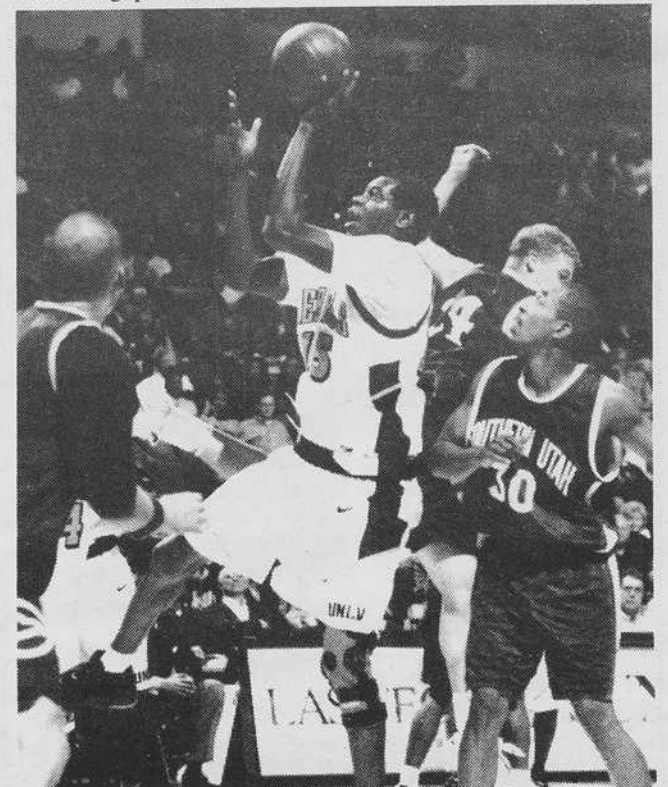


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UNLV center Keon Clark penetrates Southern Utah's interior defense during a game at the Thomas and Mack Center.

File photo special to Sentinel-Voice