

IWUhoops.com 2020-21 Season Preview

Part 1 – Player Profiles

December 21, 2020

[Follow Bob Quillman on Twitter](#)
[E-mail Bob Quillman: bobquill@me.com](mailto:bobquill@me.com)



L to R: Matt Leritz (1st Team all-CCIW), Pete Lambesis (2nd Team), Charlie Bair, Keondre Schumacher, and Doug Wallen are part of a deep and talented nucleus for the 2020-21 Titans.

Will they Play?

Illinois Wesleyan's last men's basketball game was February 29, 2020 – a loss to Elmhurst in the College Conference of Illinois & Wisconsin (CCIW) conference tournament title game. Two weeks later, the world changed.

As concerns over the possibility of a global pandemic grew, rounds 1 and 2 of the 2020 NCAA Division III MBB and WBB tournaments were completed the weekend of March 6. On Thursday March 12, however, a day before the Sweet 16 round, the tournaments were cancelled. A few hours later, the Division I tournaments – “March Madness” – were also cancelled.

Division III athletics have been temporarily crushed by the COVID-19 pandemic. After the men's and women's basketball tournaments were cancelled, so were the rest of the 2019-20 Winter and Spring sports championships.

Over the summer months, schools wrestled with the decision of bringing students back to campus for the 2020-21 school year or pursuing remote learning options. Simultaneously, administrators were also

left with the task of determining how to approach athletics – a huge factor, since roughly 30% of students at the average Division III school are on an intercollegiate athletics roster.

On August 5, 2020 the NCAA announced the cancellation of all Division III Fall sports championships for 2020-21. Some Division III schools found a way to participate in a few Fall sports contests. Most were completely shut down – like the CCIW.

Early in the first semester, the CCIW Council of Presidents (COP) made the decision to delay the start of winter sports. These programs were allowed to practice within very specific rules and in adherence with strict COVID-19 protocols. Illinois Wesleyan's men's and women's basketball teams, for example, practiced from October 1st until just before Thanksgiving break. Student-athletes were sent home the week of November 23 and told, basically, to stay in shape, plan to return to campus January 3, and expect to resume practice January 4 in preparation for some kind of season commencing in late-January.

Some CCIW schools experienced campus-wide outbreaks during the Fall practice season that shut athletic activities down. North Central and Augustana had significant challenges – I assume other schools were impacted as well.

And here we are in late-December, trying to figure out if we'll see winter sports, including basketball, in the CCIW. Some Division III schools are playing; many NAIA and Division II schools are as well; and Division I is pretty much in full swing (within COVID-19 guidelines and protocols).

Student-athletes at CCIW schools got great news on December 17, when the league's COP [communicated intentions to continue planning for winter sports competition](#). The announcement was a critical step forward in the path towards playing. It's possible we could see CCIW basketball games as early as January 23.

The December 17 announcement does not mean, however, that basketball and other winter sports are a sure thing. The wording makes it clear it will be a fluid situation. "...the COP has determined that if federal, state, local, and campus conditions are at a point that student-athletes can return to competition safely and proper testing can be secured, then winter competition can commence." It concludes, "...the COP will reconvene in January to discuss if changes to this plan need to be made."

One CCIW coach I spoke with told me, "I hope I'm wrong, but it feels like the announcement says, 'We're not cancelling winter sports quite yet.'" Another was optimistic: "I believe we will play...I really do."

That's where things stand as I write this on December 20th. Those of us who'd love to see CCIW winter sports should absolutely be hopeful. But I believe we must also understand factors related to the pandemic could alter plans.

My IWU MBB preview is different this year due to all of the moving parts in play related to the pandemic. I've decided to do it in two parts. I've completed the Player Profiles and projected varsity rotation. In January I will do my usual full-scale conversation with Ron Rose about expectations, keys to the season, etc.

Q&A with Illinois Wesleyan Head Coach Ron Rose

As mentioned above, I've decided it makes sense to hold off on this portion of the preview until sometime in January – closer to the projected start date of January 23. Due to COVID-19 impacts, everything related to the 2020-21 season seems to be changing on a day-to-day basis. I fear anything Coach Rose and I talk about now will be quickly out of date. We should know a lot more in mid-January.

If I can work out the logistics, I'd like to do this portion of the preview as a video with Coach Rose.

For great coverage of pandemic impacts on NCAA Division III conferences and schools, see the D3hoops.com [“Winter is coming, but who will play?”](#) page.

There is also a ton of great and timely [Hoopsville](#) content that all Division III Fans should check out. For example:

- [“Coronavirus Impact”](#)
- [“COVID Cancellations”](#)
- [“Hoopsville: Playing in a Pandemic”](#)

Stay tuned.

Grant Wolfe Walks Away for Health Reasons

In jumping into the “Player Profiles” section, I started my questions for Ron Rose with senior PG Grant Wolfe (5-11/185, Effingham HS).

“Well, sadly, one hour ago (12/19) I spoke to Grant and he has decided not to play,” said Rose. “He just feels for his long-term health it is the right thing to do.”

Wolfe played in only 7 games last season, missing IWU's final 21 contests. After suffering a concussion in practice after the 11/23 Lake Forest game, he missed the game at Anderson (11/27), and then the home games vs Wheaton (12/4) and Carthage (12/7). He returned, and was tremendous, in games at Augustana (12/15) and vs WashU (12/19).

But a concussion during practice 12/28, in Texas, while preparing for two games in Austin ended his season. Of particular concern, Wolfe also suffered multiple concussions in HS, playing football.

Wolfe was outstanding in the 7 games he played in for the Titans last year (starting all) – 18.0 ppg, 3.0 rpg, 3.6 apg, .517 FG, .455 3-point, .867 FT. He played, and looked like, a 1st Team all-CCIW PG.

In the win at Augustana he led the Titans with 14 points, 7 rebounds, and 3 assists, and made numerous big plays down the stretch in regulation and overtime. Against eventual UAA champ WashU, in what turned out to be his final collegiate game, he scored a career high 28 points.

Wolfe, with support from his family, decided to give it a go his senior season, participating in the October/November practice season.

“Grant was remarkably good in the practices, but he told me he felt like he was playing to not get hurt,” said Rose. “He felt if he sustained another concussion it would not be good.”

"I fully respect and support Grant's decision," said Rose. "But I am heartbroken I don't get to coach him this year. He is such an impressive young man, and a fierce competitor. I will really miss having Grant on the roster and on the floor."

Grant Wolfe was a great Titan – he was a gamer and a winner. I loved watching Grant play and wish him the best.

2019-20 Season/2020-21 Returning

- Overall Record: 19-9
- CCIW Record: 11-5 (T3)
- CCIW Tournament: Defeated Augustana 74-70, Lost to Elmhurst 78-72
- Returning Starters: 5 (excluding Grant Wolfe, who missed the final 21 games)
- Returning Top 8: 7 (excluding Grant Wolfe, who missed the final 21 games)
- Varsity rotation losses to graduation:
 - Alex O'Neill, 6-9 C (10 min per game; 2.5 ppg, 2.1 rpg)
 - Bernie Coderre, 6-4 G (7 min per game; 1.0 ppg, 1.0 rpg)

2020-21 Roster & Player Profiles

(Players are listed by primary position, then alphabetically by class. This is not a depth chart. Comments are from Ron Rose.)

PG:

- [#30 Lucas Heflen, 6-2/185 So.](#) – *"Lucas is a different player than he was a year ago...worked incredibly hard in the off-season...he is tough, hard-nosed...we threw him into the deep end last year, making him play the point on the JV team and in practice, which he had never done before...he struggled early but you could see the light bulb turning on at the end of the year...has really come a long way in his ability to handle the ball and run the team...he is a big, tough, physical guard."*
- [#4 Luke Yoder, 6-0/170 So.](#) – *"Progressing really well from off-season injuries (broke both wrists in a pickup game the 1st week of September)...it was great he was able to get in some practices in the 1st semester...no one is going to work harder than Luke...he has been in the gym and will be ready...had a tremendous freshman year and was recognized as the Freshman of the Year in our league...plays the game beyond his years...should be one of the best perimeter defenders in the CCIW...a true point guard in terms of his ability to run a team and see the floor."*

- Connor Heaton, 6-5 Fr. – *[Heaton took the 1st semester off and re-enrolled at IWU for the 2nd semester. He'll be back on the roster soon.] "I'm excited to coach Connor...brings an athletic, physical presence to the perimeter...has the ability to play all 3 perimeter spots...our hope is that he can play multiple positions in his career, like a Pete Lambesis...is going to be a very good player at Illinois Wesleyan...Connor will be behind other players at his position because he was not with us in October and November...we look forward to seeing his progress in January."*

SG:

- #3 Cory Noe, 6-2/175 Jr. – *"Cory is a hooper...loves to play...spends time improving his game and it has shown as he has gotten better each and every year...has added strength...he is a smart player...what you always know is that Cory is always going to be locked in...plays with a high level of competitiveness and intensity...counting on Cory for big things this year."*
- #11 Keondre Schumacher, 5-11/175 RS Jr. – *"The biggest thing with Keondre is how comfortable he is at Illinois Wesleyan and with our guys now...I thought last year, his first year after transferring in, he got in his own way some...there is just a whole other level of comfort and ease he is playing with now, both from understanding of how we play and the friendships he has made on the team...when he is comfortable, he is more aggressive...Keondre has made a huge step since last year...there is not a quicker player in the country at our level than Keondre...he is a knock-down shooter...now that he understands where he is going to get his shots in our offense it's making a big difference in his play."*
- #10 Ryan Verhulst, 6-3/185 So. – *"Slowed in the Fall due to a back injury which limited his practice time...a tremendous 3-point shooter...shoots with a quick release and great range...he can really, really shoot...I'm mean seriously shoot it...with all the shooters we have, if we played a game of HORSE from beyond the arc he probably wins it...getting on the floor will be all about progress on the defensive end and more offensive versatility."*
- #23 Pryce Punkay, 6-3 Fr. – *"A pure shooter...able to spot up and shoot it or come off screens and shoot it...has a scorer's mentality...has the ability to put it on the floor...a big, strong, physical guard...we are excited to watch Pryce's progression and are excited he's here...Pryce was a big recruit for us."*
- #13 Grant Taueg, 6-2 Fr. – *"Unfortunately Grant suffered a shoulder injury during October practice and had to have surgery...he will miss the entire season...a long, athletic guard...a tenacious defender that makes whoever he is guarding uncomfortable...he has lightning-fast hands and feet...can shoot it too...looking forward to having Grant healthy next season...has a big upside."*

G/F:

- #12 Colin Cheaney, 6-4/190 Sr. – *"Colin has gotten better every single year...he has improved physically...has improved his basketball understanding...has improved his aggressiveness...Colin is a tall, athletic guard that can shoot it...the more aggressive he is, the better he is...a strong rebounder due to his jumping ability."*

- [#2 Peter Lambesis, 6-4/195 Jr.](#) – *“Pete really came into his own last year...tall, athletic perimeter player...can do a lot of things on the floor...he is a tremendous defender...a good rebounder...can handle and pass the basketball...he is terrific getting to the basket...has really improved his perimeter shot in the off-season...Pete got well-deserved recognition last year making the all-conference team...has improved a lot in the off-season and ready to take that next step.”*
- [#5 Gavin Markgraff, 6-4/205 Jr.](#) – *“Missed the majority of last season due to shoulder surgery...has come back healthy...is one of the smartest players you’re ever going to coach...one of the best communicators I’ve ever coached...really sees and understands the game...can really shoot the basketball...primarily a wing, but we did slide him over to play some 4 at different times last year.”*
- [#14 Ryan Sroka, 6-5 Fr.](#) – *“A really talented freshman...a multi-dimensional perimeter guy who can do a lot of things...can handle the basketball...terrific shooter that can score in a lot of different ways...his bread and butter is his pull-up jumpshot but he can also post up, and catch and shoot the 3...hard-nosed and a fierce competitor...he has great size for a perimeter player and I think he has grown since we saw him in high school...we’re excited to watch Ryan develop in our program...we think Ryan is going to be an outstanding player for us.”*

PF:

- [#25 Doug Wallen, 6-5/210 Sr.](#) – *“Had a breakout year last year...what Doug has in spades is his positive attitude...I’ve never met a more positive guy...last year he learned how hard you have to play and with what energy you have to play with...he showed a willingness to do whatever we needed him to do for us to be successful...I was just so pleased with how hard he played last year...Doug can go to both the offensive and defensive glass...can run the floor and make hustle plays...has the ability to score it as well.”*
- [#45 Cody Mitchell, 6-7/205 So.](#) – *“Completely changed his body in the off-season...Cody got great experience on the varsity last year and he had some really big moments...with his length and his ability to move, he can be a tremendous defender for us...a natural rebounder because of his length and athleticism...he is a guy who can play the 3 or the 4...can step out and shoot it...we really want to see his evolution in the low post, where he has some real ability...he can create mismatches in the low post because of his size and athletic ability.”*
- [#31 Tommy Nelson, 6-6/205 So.](#) – *“Tommy is an unbelievable rebounder, especially offensively...I am not kidding, he is a freakishly great rebounder...when he rebounds, he gets to places I don’t know how he gets to...has a motor and is a hustler...was slowed some in the practice season due to a concussion but he’s healthy now...has improved his shot...Tommy has himself in the conversation now.”*
- [#32 Evan Schneider, 6-6 Fr.](#) – *“Not your typical freshman physically...he clearly spent time in the weight room before getting to Illinois Wesleyan...hard-nosed, very focused, driven player that is eager to learn...I have been pleasantly surprised to learn how well he shoots the ball, even behind the arc...can really step out and shoot it and has a pure shot...Evan is going to be a very good player here.”*

F/C:

- [#50 Charlie Bair, 6-7/220 Sr.](#) – *“What I said about Charlie as a freshman is about what I’ll say now in that he is a hard-working, blue collar, high motor player...but since he came in he has worked himself into being a really physical player...he is very strong...Charlie is also very smart and knows what’s going on...is a great communicator...a terrific leader...he wears opponents out because he is always hustling, and always pounding the glass...defensively I thought he had an amazing season last year...his defense tends to cover up a lot of our mistakes...a guy we are counting on for a big season both in terms of production and leadership.”*
- [#0 Matthew Lertz, 6-7/235 Jr.](#) – *“Has added pieces to his game every year...once he got healthy last year had a phenomenal finish to his sophomore season...was virtually unstoppable on the low block...has expanded his game even more now in that he’s shooting it from beyond the arc extremely well...has added the ability to put it on the floor and get to the basket...he is just going to be a nightmare matchup because of his ability to score inside and out...he is also a tremendous rebounder...is a seeker of contact and just a physical player...gives you physical toughness in the paint.”*
- [#34 Cole Khoury, 6-9/235 So.](#) – *“Cole is a big, strong physical player that has improved dramatically in the last year...his understanding of the game of basketball has really improved...because of his ability to move and his strength is a very good low post defender and rebounder...his offensive game is maturing...we’re thrilled with Cole’s progress.”*
- [#35 Grant Hardy, 6-8 Fr.](#) – *“A naturally gifted athlete...is tall, long, and runs like a deer...has terrific ball handling and passing skills...can defend multiple positions on the floor...we hope he is going to be able to alter the game with his defensive presence...I remember how Zach Freeman (’07) could just get up on the rim so effortlessly and do chin ups, and Grant does the exact same thing...we had a dunk contest at our last practice and Grant won it...he can just fly...has to get more aggressive and look to score... his best basketball is ahead of him and he has a bright future.”*
- [#40 Nate Seputis, 6-9 Fr.](#) – *“Nate really worked hard during our practice season and got better...he is 6-9 and long...can shoot the ball from the perimeter...Nate has to get more aggressive to realize his potential...his future depends on his aggressiveness.”*

IWUhoops.com Projected Varsity Rotation (as of 12/21/20)

Below is how I see the rotation at this early stage.

Starters:

Pos.	Player	Last Season
PG	Luke Yoder, 6-0 So.	Started 14; CCIW FR of the Year; 10.4 ppg, 2.6 rpg, 2.3 apg
SG	Keondre Schumacher, 5-11 Jr.	Started 27; 12.0 ppg, 1.7 rpg, 1.9 apg; 61 3s; 40% 3
G/F	Pete Lambesis, 6-4 Jr.	Started 28; 2 nd Team All-CCIW; 12.3 ppg, 2.4 apg, 3.4 rpg
F	Doug Wallen, 6-5 Sr.	Started 28; 11.2 ppg, 5.6 rpg, .504 FG
F/C	Matt Leritz, 6-7 Jr.	Started 8; 1 st Team All-CCIW; 10.9 ppg, 5.5 rpg, .576 FG

Bench 1:

Pos.	Player	Last season
PG	Lucas Heflen, 6-2 So.	Primarily JV
SG	Cory Noe, 6-2 Jr.	Played in all 28; 8.8 ppg, 2.3 rpg; 30 3s; CCIW tourney: 17 vs AC, 16 vs EC
G/F	Ryan Sroka, 6-5 Fr.	Huntley HS
F	Cody Mitchell, 6-7 So.	Played in 26; 2.0 ppg, 2.3 rpg
F/C	Charlie Bair, 6-7 Sr.	Started 23; 9.0 ppg, 8.3 rpg; leading rebounder (200); 26 pts at Wheaton

Bench 2:

Pos.	Player	Last season
PG		
SG		
G/F	Colin Cheaney, 6-4 Sr.	Played in 17 games; 2.1 ppg
F	Gavin Markgraff, 6-4 Jr.	Played in 3 games before injury; missed most of season
F/C		

I see 12 players in the best position for a varsity rotation spot at this point, with many more pushing. As indicated in the Player Profiles, there is a ton of talent on this IWU roster. Starting January 4, competition for every spot will be fierce and I assume things will look a little different by the time the Titans play a game in late-January.

Could one of the young posts earn their way in? How quickly does Connor Heaton get up to speed in January? Is there a surprise player who makes a case? We'll see.

I view Charlie Bair and Cory Noe on the same level as the 5 projected starters. They could easily end up starting and, even if they don't, I expect them to be on the floor for starter minutes. The Titans are really loaded with talent and experience in that top 7.

Something to keep an eye on is the PG rotation. Does Coach Rose go with the Yoder/Heflen combo for 40 minutes...or does Pete Lambesis play some PG? After Luke Yoder broke his hand during the February 8 Augustana game – and with Grant Wolfe already out for the season - Lambesis was outstanding at the 1 in the final 7 games. The Titans went 5-2 with Lambesis starting at PG, including wins over Elmhurst and Augustana. What Coach Rose does with the PG minutes will significantly affect the entire rotation.

Projected JV Rotation

Unfortunately, there will not be a JV season due to COVID-19 impacts.

Broadcast Info

In 2020-21, the Titans will be broadcast on WESN 88.1FM Titan Radio Network, with the video and audio streamed through IWUsports.com.

Eric Stock and Joel Swanson will be on the call for the men. Derek Bohlmann will have the call for the women.

Final Thoughts

I'll add final/final thoughts when I complete Part 2 of the preview in January.

For now let me just say – hang in there, everyone. There is light at the end of the tunnel of this awful ordeal we've been living through. As we make our way towards that light, please continue to wear a mask, follow social distancing guidelines, etc. – I'm 100% sure it's the only chance we have to see CCIW basketball this season.

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to all of you! Please stay safe...and go Titans!

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