

Basketball Times

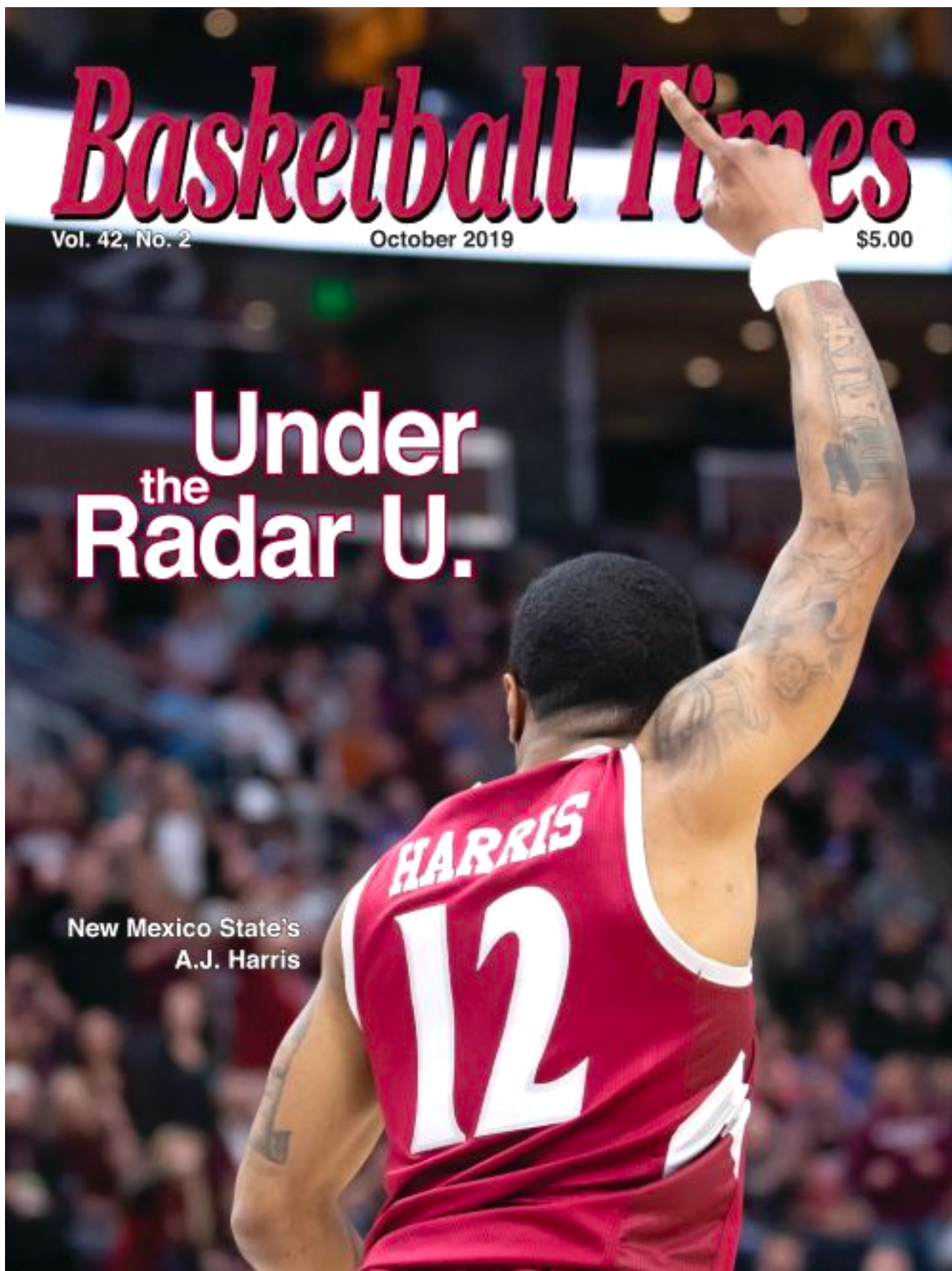
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Under the Radar U.

New Mexico State's
A.J. Harris



Under-the-Radar Team

*New Mexico State, 30-5, nearly beat the team that nearly beat the national champs.
The Aggies return with most of their lineup intact, plus another key transfer.
Now, the goal is clear: Produce the school's first NCAA Tournament win in 25 years.*

N.M. State flying fast, low

By Matt Craig

At New Mexico State, there's a standard for good basketball: eight straight seasons of 20 or more wins, seven appearances in the last eight NCAA Tournaments, four WAC regular season championships in the past five years.

Chris Jans knows this. Entering his third season at the helm in Las Cruces, N.M., he wants to do something the Aggies haven't done in over 25 years. And he's not shy about sharing his goal with the team.

"We understand what we want to do so, we might as well talk about it," he tells them. "We want to advance; we want to win games in the NCAA Tournament."

Motivation, he says, should not be a problem. Not after coming one corner three away from upsetting Auburn in last season's NCAA Tournament. That Auburn team advanced to the Final Four, leaving New Mexico State to think how a 30-win season could have been so much more.

Now Jans steps into territory that's so comfortable, it's unfamiliar. After a decade of bouncing around the junior-college ranks and two stops in Division I, he has never experienced a third season as head coach at the same school. He called it the "most enjoyable, stress-free summer and fall" he's ever had as a coach. It's not hard to see why. For the first time in his career, he hasn't had to completely overhaul the roster.

Nine players return who played at least 10 minutes per game last season, seven of whom are seniors, making the Aggies one of the oldest and most experi-

enced teams in college basketball. Expectations at the basketball-crazy school have never been higher. But if you think this season is a result of some of kind master plan building to an all-in season, you don't know Chris Jans.

As a junior-college head coach, Jans didn't have the luxury of choosing whether or not he wanted to "win now." Players coming and going every year or two was a fact of life. He mastered the art of quick

ers last season and they rewrote the record books with a 30-5 record, including one nail-biting loss to blue-blood Kansas.

"All I've ever known is new players, teaching at Ground Zero in terms of implementing everything you want," he says.

Jans is quickly developing another signature within the program, a form of basketball communism. Last season, 14 players averaged double-digit

minutes for what kenpom.com determined was the nation's deepest roster. Seven different players led the team in scoring, yet only one averaged double figures (even then, it was 11.3 ppg). On a given night, any player might be a hero or a bench warmer. Jans used practice performance to determine playing time, leading to cutthroat competition in practices that he believes improved the team significantly over the course of the season. Ultimately, he found little separation up and down the roster.

The obvious challenges — Jans' first thought after games was about which players he'd need to talk to and encourage about not playing enough — were offset by unexpected benefits.

The Aggies were almost impossible to gameplan against, capable of morphing their lineup to fit a given matchup. Foul trouble was never an issue. Neither was fatigue or the inevitable knick-knack injuries that occur during a season.

The team kept winning, at one point rattling off 19 in a row, which certainly didn't hurt the team's bond-



Coach Chris Jans addresses the Aggies before their NCAA Tournament game against Auburn.

team-building in six years at four juco schools, winning 20 or more games every season. In his one season at Bowling Green, he won 21 games. By the time he arrived at New Mexico State, "win now" had become his modus operandi. He added graduate and juco transfers and won a program-record 28 games in his first season. All but five left. He brought in 10 newcom-

ing process. Still, coaches noticed a collective trust develop they had not anticipated. When a player got down or frustrated, everyone else could relate. Gradually players saw playing time less as a means of proving their own worth to the coaches and more as a responsibility to not let their teammates down.

“Everybody on the team has your back so when you go in the game you have to make sure you play your best and play hard,” says guard Trevelin Queen. “No matter who’s on the court, we believe that they’re just as good as the next person.”

Jans agrees: “It wasn’t like we didn’t have behind-the-scenes issues that we had to deal with on a day-to-day basis because of playing time, but it worked out. I wouldn’t be afraid to do it again.”

He expects the rotation to run 10 or 11 deep again this season, barring injury, which has limited a few players in fall practice.

This fragile construction would likely not hold firm were it not for the number of junior-college players lining New Mexico State’s roster. In many programs, juco players are viewed as a last resort, brought in to fill a roster hole. At New Mexico State, they are the cornerstones of the program. This season’s team has seven players who spent time at a junior college, including five who started games last season and one, Terrell Brown, who earned first-team all-WAC honors.

Jans prefers these players for a number of reasons. Some are obvious. He and his staff’s backgrounds are in the juco ranks, where relationships can be tapped for talent. His sales pitch there is strong, including a body of evidence with similar players, allowing him to get involved with more talented recruits than he could at the high school level. Juco players also have the experience of 60 college basketball games, two years of college coaching, and help Jans’ teams “stay old,” a key to mid-major success.

But the philosophy runs deeper. Juco players have been humbled by their circumstance, oftentimes a result of academic or disciplinary issues. They’ve had to mature, grinding out a career with little glory in return. The pursuit makes them hungry.

“It’s something that clicked to them, like I *have* to make it, I *have* to do it,” says Brown, who played at City College of San Francisco after being dismissed from San Jose State’s team in his freshman season.

Assistant coach David Anwar trusted the evaluation of Brown’s juco coach and met with his mother multiple times to do due diligence after struggling to reach Brown over the phone.

“When he warms up to you, he was the best; he’s a great kid,” Anwar says. Brown’s struggle gave him a new perspective, he says, that success is really a result of continuing to push against the desire to quit. He became an all-conference performer for the Aggies last season.

There is perhaps no better example than Queen, who stayed off the recruiting radar by bouncing around high schools and becoming an academic non-qualifier. He found his way to New Mexico Military Institute, where Anwar and Jans pursued him heavily, only landing him after he abruptly left Western Kentucky for undisclosed reasons last September. New

Mexico State filed for immediate eligibility. In mid-December, Jans called Queen into his office, feigning like he was about to deliver bad news, then informed him his waiver had been granted.

“I cried a little bit I can’t lie,” Queen says.

“He was uncontrollable,” Jans remembers, admitting he gets goose bumps just thinking about the moment. “We’ve talked about a lot since he’s arrived, that you’ve got to prove that you can make it, that you can finish and you’ve got to get a degree and be somewhere to keep your feet on the ground and stay familiar, and he’s doing it. He’s doing it.”

Queen hit a game-winning buzzer-beater last season against UT Rio Grande Valley, clinched a win over rival Grand Canyon with a steal and an offensive rebound and hit four 3-pointers in New Mexico State’s second half comeback from 13 down against Auburn in the NCAA Tournament.

Some might measure Jans’ success by his capacity and willingness to take on risk in the form of talented players with off-court concerns, but that line of thinking underestimates his effectiveness with such players.



Terrell Brown and Trevelin Queen earned all-WAC tournament honors.

Zach Lofton, a first team all-WAC selection in Jans’ first season, came to New Mexico State having attending four other colleges. He left with a degree and a spot in the NBA G League. Brown is on track to graduate, and Queen was named to the NABC Honors Court recently for maintaining a GPA higher than 3.2.

“There’s a lot of people on this team and in this program that never had it easy,” Queen says. “Coming in here, we all have different background stories and different adversities in life, so we all take that as motivation to be better.”

Whether Jans’ empathy and influence on such players comes as a result of his own past is unclear. He was fired from his post at Bowling Green after inappropriate advances toward two women in a bar while intoxicated, a mistake he has apologized for and led to personal growth.

“I’m a better person today because of it,” he said at his introductory news conference.

Regardless of the motivation, it’s clear the structure is working. New Mexico State will enter the 2018-2019 season as one of the best mid-major teams in all of college basketball, ready for their national TV close up in mid-November at Arizona and a month later when they travel to Mississippi State. They will be heavy favorites to win another WAC championship.

Much of the team’s core will carry over from last season, including Brown, Queen, all-conference second teamer A.J. Harris and big man Ivan Aurrecoechea. But while there aren’t many new faces, Jans has emphasized in conversations with friends and fans the almost universal rule that a player’s biggest jump comes from his first to his second season in the program.

One player whose offseason improvements teammates and coaches rave about is 6-foot-4 guard Jabari Rice, a utility player last season who has added improved outside shooting and decision-making skills to his signature hustle. Jans bestowed him with the highest of compliments, saying, “he rebounds like Jermerrio Jones,” in reference to the 2018 WAC player of the year who led the Aggies and ranked second in the entire nation in rebounding during Jans’ first season.

The Aggies will also add at least one impact newcomer. Shawn Williams, a 6-1 guard, was granted immediate eligibility in his transfer from East Carolina, where he was named the rookie of the year in the American Athletic Conference after averaging 12.8 points and shooting nearly 36 percent from 3-point distance.

The embarrassment of riches in the guard rotation only means that New Mexico State will once again hold some of the most intense practices in the country. Jans loves it that way. He doesn’t want last season’s success to make players feel comfortable. There aren’t many teams who can say their returning leading scorer and all-conference guard doesn’t have a guaranteed spot in the rotation. In Las Cruces, it’s an understood fact.

“(Practice) is competitive and intense because the new players are trying to fight for roles,” Brown says. “I feel like I still got to fight for my role at the same time.”

Jans differentiates himself from many coaches in his focus on results. “Trust the process” is not a phrase he

utters very often. There’s a far more common one uttered by he and his players.

“We got that chip on our shoulder because everybody wants to beat New Mexico State now,” Queen says.

“I feel like we got a little bigger chip on our shoulder,” Brown says.

“I had a big heart and a chip on my shoulder,” point guard Shun Bachannon says.

“They’ve got a chip on their shoulder and we like that,” Jans adds.

Watch New Mexico State this season and you’ll see what they mean. They’ll fly all over the court, dive for loose balls and fight like hell for every rebound. They’ll play each game like they have something to prove. Until they achieve a precious victory in the Big Dance, they do.