

IU WOMEN'S
BASKETBALL

THIS COULD BE THE YEAR



Last season, under Head Coach Teri Moren, the Hoosiers won a record 23 games. Now its two star players are seniors—and it's the team's last chance to win a Big Ten title with them on board. By Peter Dorfman



The four returning players to this year's squad: (l-r) Amanda Cahill Photo by Evan De Stefano/IU Athletics; Bre Wickware Photo by Evan De Stefano/IU Athletics; Tyra Buss Photo by Evan De Stefano/IU Athletics; and Kym Royster Photo by Rachel Meert/IU Athletics

Tyra Buss drives to the basket against Purdue on the way to a home 74-60 victory. Photo by Rachel Meert/IU Athletics



They play in the shadow of Big Ten men's basketball—the biggest show and the hottest ticket in Bloomington. But Indiana University women's basketball has been quietly building a following, and this season it intends to make a statement by fielding a winning, athletically gifted team and setting an attendance record.

The team is built around two outstanding seniors playing at the peak of their game: Tyra Buss, honorable mention All-American and first team All-Big Ten point guard, and Amanda Cahill, second team All-Conference power forward. Close friends off the court, Buss and Cahill have been starters since their freshman year and know this is their last chance to win a championship together.

They will have big-time help from two strongly self-motivated returning players. Junior Kym Royster will start at center and is determined, she says, “to become one of the best rebounders in the Big Ten.” Tal-

ented small forward Bre Wickware, a self-described “perfectionist,” will be moving up to become a starter in her sophomore year.

Adding to the optimism is the effective recruiting of third-year Head Coach Teri Moren. Jaelynn Penn, a guard from Louisville, Kentucky, came to Indiana as one of the highest-rated prospects in the country. Penn has gotten most of the pre-season attention, but guard Keyanna Warthen, from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, also is a nationally touted recruit.

Guard Bendu Yeane (Portland, Oregon), center Linsey Marchese (Dacula, Georgia), and forward Alexis Johnson (Houston, Texas) round out the freshman class.

“We’re building this program to win a Big Ten Championship, to get to the NCAA Tournament,” Moren says. “It’s just a question of how quickly our young players can grow up and digest all the things we’re throwing at them. We have a

lot of work to do, but we’re more athletic than we’ve ever been.”

Despite graduating three senior starters, the team heads into the preseason primed for a serious run at the Big Ten title—or, at the very least, for a significant improvement over last season's third-place conference finish and quarterfinal run in the Women's National Invitational Tournament (WNIT).

In August, the women traveled to Italy for team building and a series of exhibition games. The team schedules international travel every four years, but this year's trip was especially timely, allowing Moren and her staff to step up the intensity of summer training for the five freshmen. The women easily won all three of their games against the Italians, and overall Moren was pleased with the effort, the energy, and the unselfish play.

A beefed-up pre-conference schedule should help Moren's Hoosiers make their case for a post-season NCAA Tournament



berth. “We had a good schedule last year—we just didn’t beat enough top-150 teams to get invited to the tournament,” she explains. “We had our best season record in wins ever [23]; we finished third [10-6] in the Big Ten. But it still wasn’t enough. We’re trying to play incrementally tougher opponents as we go, to lead us into Big Ten play. It’s very intentional.”

A rabid, growing fan base

The women have a growing and increasingly fired-up fan base. “It seemed every night we got a few more fans during the WNIT,” Moren says, leading up to the quarterfinal loss to Villanova, where there were about 6,000 in the stands. “Some of them probably had never been to a women’s game. And I hope they thought, ‘Hey, this is pretty cool. They play hard, they’re fundamental, they can shoot, there’s great body language. And they’re fun to watch.’”

The women’s game is played on the floor, with more ball handling, passing, and set plays, differentiating it from the men’s game, which is often played above the rim.

Actor and Bloomington resident Jesse Eisenberg appreciated that kind of ball movement when he attended a game last season. Eisenberg met Moren at a benefit for Middle Way House, a local shelter for survivors of domestic violence that the actor supports. “Teri was generous with her support, so we (he and his partner, Anna Strout) went to a game as a courtesy to her,” Eisenberg says. “I didn’t expect the game to evoke the kind of excitement NBA basketball does for me, but it did. It had all the fundamentals of good basketball.”

Between film projects, Eisenberg is a magazine journalist. He was so impressed by the Hoosiers’ gameplay, he was moved to write an article about the experience for *InStyle* magazine. The online version

(clockwise from left)

Amanda Cahill battles by a Minnesota defender. IU won 78-62. Photo by Rachel Meert/IU Athletics

Actor Jesse Eisenberg talks strategy with Tyra Buss during a videotaping for *InStyle* magazine. Photo by Rachel Meert/IU Athletics

In Italy, freshman Jaelynn Penn goes up for a layup. IU swept the three-game series. Photo by Craig Bisacre/IU Athletics

Head Coach Teri Moren calls out a play. Photo by Evan De Stefano/IU Athletics

(magbloom.com/tyra-jesse) features a video of Eisenberg playing one-on-one with Buss.

“My background is in theater,” Eisenberg says. “I try to see obscure plays in small theaters in New York City. And sometimes I’ll see something really great and I’ll ask myself, ‘Why is it in this little hole in the wall instead of on Broadway?’ That’s how I felt at the IU women’s game. It’s as exhilarating as men’s basketball—why is the arena a quarter full?”



Title IX changed everything

Men's basketball and football are the money sports that enable IU to carry the cost of all the other programs. But women's sports have grown rapidly since Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 compelled colleges to provide equal opportunities for men and women to participate in varsity sports. And women's basketball has come a long way at IU since its pre-NCAA days in the early 1970s.

"We've made comparable investments in women's and men's basketball," IU Athletic Director Fred Glass asserts. "The women's team travels by charter now; they're taking foreign trips. In Cook Hall, the training facilities are a mirror image of each other. We think that facility is without peer, not only in the Big Ten, but nationally."

The investment, Glass notes, has come despite IU's status as a financial underdog in the Big Ten. "Men's basketball generates about \$12 million a year for IU," he explains. "Football is about \$6 million a year. Big Ten schools with bigger stadiums and TV markets make more money on one football Saturday than we'll make on a seven-game home schedule. It's expensive to put events on in Simon Skjodt Assembly Hall, with all the event staff. Women's basketball is inevitably going to cost the university money, but it's still a very high-profile program."

In men's college basketball, fans come with the expectation that some of the players

will be future stars in the NBA; will be internationally celebrated; play in huge, packed arenas; and will be paid astronomical salaries.

There is a future for a select few women in the 12-team WNBA, a professional league now in its 21st season, heavily subsidized by the NBA owners, and struggling for relevance. The average player salary is about \$72,000 (\$38,000 for rookies). American women also play professional basketball, often for higher salaries, overseas. IU's Alexis Gassion, who graduated in May, has signed to play in Finland this year.

Whatever becomes of the professional league, fan interest in the women's college game is strong. And by attendance standards, the Hoosiers are doing okay. With average attendance at 2,894 per game last season, IU ranked 38th among all colleges—ahead of top-25 nationally ranked University of Washington, UCLA, University of Oregon, North Carolina State, University of Miami, West Virginia University, and Syracuse University, but still far behind national champion University of South Carolina's average attendance of 14,364.

The dynamic duo: Buss and Cahill

Some of the popularity of IU women's basketball arises from the bond between fans and the team's veteran players.

Unquestionably, the face of the program is Tyra Buss. Born in Vincennes, Indiana, but raised in Mount Carmel, Illinois, she

was much heralded when she arrived in Bloomington at the start of the 2014–15 campaign. She'd averaged 47 points a game while graduating as valedictorian of her high school class. An *Indianapolis Star* headline at the time asked, "Is IU women's hoops recruit Tyra Buss too good to be true?"

By most metrics, she's lived up to the hype. She reached the 1,000-point milestone faster than any women's basketball player in IU history. But for all the accolades and the all-conference performance stats, Buss is shy about attention and never misses an opportunity to credit her coaches and teammates.

Buss is the likeliest member of the current roster to play on after graduation. In August, she was among the 40 players invited to try out for a chance to represent the United States on the USA Basketball Under-23 women's team. "I can't see myself not having basketball in my life," she says. "Whether that's in the WNBA or in Europe or both, I'll have to see. I'm not worrying about it now."

As point guard, Buss runs the team on the court; she is Coach Moren's alter ego when the clock is running. "This isn't the individual game the men play," Buss emphasizes. "We have to set screens for each other. We move a lot more than the guys have to. A guy will just take his player one-on-one and go to the rim. The women can't necessarily do that. We don't dunk, but we



(opposite page, left) Wearing the team's Breast Cancer Awareness uniform, center Kym Royster puts up a shot against Michigan. Photo by Evan De Stefano/IU Athletics

(opposite page, right) Moments after the final buzzer, IU celebrates defeating Iowa 80-77. Photo by Rachel Meert/IU Athletics

(left) Tyra Buss propels herself by two Rutgers players at the Louis Brown Athletic Center in Piscataway, N.J. Rutgers won the game 71-60. Photo by Cal Sports Media via AP Images

(below) IU Athletic Director Fred Glass. Photo by Rodney Margison



run a team offense a lot more. We set each other up for success.”

Coach Moren cites Amanda Cahill as an equally important player on the squad. “Amanda didn’t have the hype around her that Tyra had when she came up from high school, but I believe she is the best stretch four in the Big Ten.” (By “stretch four,” Moren means a power forward who can be effective both under the basket and from the outside.)

“She has the best skills,” Moren adds. “Obviously, Tyra has the ball in her hands a lot, but without Cahill, we wouldn’t be where we are.”

A lot depends on freshmen

Moren cautions her freshmen that Big Ten athletes play fast and practice hard. “Our freshmen have great attitudes,” she says, “but they haven’t been getting up at 6:30 a.m. and heading for the weight room. They do that during their summer camp—and

they’re taking two classes. No matter what they accomplished in high school, they’re just not used to this. On top of everything else, they’re far from home, and they have that to get used to as well.”

Big Ten recruits tend to have similar backstories: There are only so many young women talented enough to be NCAA Division I recruits. Each of them was an outstanding high school player who probably carried her team both on offense and defense. It can be hard to get used to the realization that in the Big Ten, all of their teammates, and their opponents, did the same.

For most, though, it’s a relief. “When you’re not expected to do it all, you get time to focus on your own goals,” sophomore Bre Wickware says. “Having a lot more time to focus on myself was good and bad, because I’m a perfectionist and I can be hard on myself. But my teammates and coaches helped me navigate through that.”

The bottom line

Coach Moren is reluctant to make any specific predictions on the coming season except to say she anticipates the program setting attendance records.

“We’re in the entertainment business,” she says. The spectacle of IU women’s basketball—the band, the flags, the Jumbotron show—is equal to that of the men’s game.

“But first, it’s about playing the game the right way,” she says. “Then our fans have an opportunity to come down onto the floor in Assembly Hall—a place a lot of them have only ever seen on television—to meet and greet and take pictures with our players. Our players love being role models. That’s important to me, to give back to people who come out and support us.”

Fred Glass’ expectation? “We want to be contenders for the Big Ten championship. I think Teri Moren has the mettle to get us there, and the early returns are showing. We’re headed the right way.” ✨