

Lonergan Prepares Cats For America East Tournament

Contributed by Preston Junger
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Interview With Vermont Basketball Head Coach Mike Lonergan

Mike Lonergan is in his fifth season as head coach of the Vermont men's basketball team. With 100 Vermont wins and 351 career wins, he is preparing his team to compete for the America East Tournament this weekend in Hartford.

Lonergan is hoping his talented team, led by seniors Maurice (MoJo) Joseph, Nick (Nicky V) Vier and Marqus (MB23) Blakely, can add a couple more wins to their already impressive 20-9 season.

The Cats have reached the America East championship game three out of the last four seasons, last season losing to Albany. Binghamton eventually went on to win the AE Tournament and advance to the NCAA Tournament. Now riddled with academic & disciplinary problems, Binghamton has dropped out of post-season play, but another rising SUNY program--Stony Brook--presents the greatest obstacle for Vermont's Title dreams.

Vermont Sports had a chance to connect with Coach Lonergan to get his thoughts on the tournament, what the team is doing to prepare for it, and his appreciation for the amazing Vermont fans.

VTSN: How prepared is the team for the tournament this weekend? What have you been working on?

Mike Lonergan: We are not prepared at all! What kind of question is that? [Laughs]

I think we will be well prepared by Saturday night.

We have spent all season trying to improve our team. We have continued to work on our shooting which has been one of our weaknesses this season. We are working on free throws as well since missing 18 free throws was a major reason we lost to Albany in last year's tournament.

We are emphasizing that defense and rebounding win championships and that we need to focus on those areas Saturday night.

VTSN: What are the keys to UVM being successful against UMBC and making a push to win the championship?

Mike Lonergan: We need to play great defense and rebound well. That is no secret. When we do those two things we have been very successful this season.

Marqus needs to play at a high level. He is our best player and we need him to set the tone immediately against UMBC. He needs to handle double teams with his great passing and not turn the ball over. He needs to make teams pay for fouling him by making his free throws.

We also need guys like Maurice and Nick to play well. The seniors need to step up their games in the tournament. I am confident they will.

VTSN: How did Binghamton pulling out of the post-season effect the teams preparation or mindset?

Mike Lonergan: It was a distraction because we didn't know who we were playing until Monday night. It doesn't have any other affect in my opinion. People love to worry about match-ups but the people telling us that UMBC is a better match-up for us don't realize that UNH lost 4 of their last 5 games. UMBC won 2 of their last 3 and 3 of their last 5. They are the hotter team going into the tourney. I am more concerned with how we play than who we play.

VTSN: Regular season champ Stony Brook has been playing at the top of their game and sharpshooter Tommy Brenton was runner up to Blakely for Fans Choice Player of the Year, but what other team are you guys looking at as a major threat?

Mike Lonergan: I think every team in our conference is capable of winning two games this weekend. I really mean that. On paper teams like BU and Maine should be the favorites along with Stony Brook and us.

VTSN: What will you tell the guys in the locker room before the UMBC game? How about a line from Hoosiers or Any Given Sunday?

Mike Lonergan: I will tell them to relax and enjoy the atmosphere. I will tell them to look at all the great Catamount fans that made the trip to Hartford to support them. I will tell them all I ask is that they give great effort, play hard and smart and that the winning will take care of itself!

VTSN: Last but not least, congratulations on 100 wins at UVM and 351 career wins. I speak on behalf of many fans in saying thank you for working to keep the program at a high level for the five years you've been here. That said, anything you'd like to tell Catamount diehards, maybe specifically those fans headed to Hartford for the weekend?

Mike Lonergan: Thanks. I am proud of what we have done to keep UVM as a Mid Major power in men's basketball.

When we got here five special seniors were on their way out (including the two best players in school history-Taylor & TJ). It looked like a major rebuilding was needed but we were able to be very competitive right away. The team we had my first season was very inexperienced but they were great people. That team made the championship game because of their tremendous character and work ethic.

It isn't easy fighting for a championship every year. UVM has now done that for 9 straight seasons. Only Coach Brennan and I know how hard that really is. We have the best fans in the conference and this is truly a special place to play and coach because of our fans. We hope we can get two wins and get back to the championship game. I know we will try our best.

Thanks so much to all our loyal fans and thanks especially to those who are making the trip to Hartford.

VTSN: Thank you coach. Catamount Nation will be rooting for you guys this weekend! We will try to pack the house with as many green and gold supporters as possible [oh yeah, that means all you Vermont fans MAKE SOME NOISE down in Hartford!!!]

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