

Miami Herald

Thursday, November 3, 2022

[Today's eEdition](#)

Miami Dade College among local women's basketball programs with potential this season BY WALTER VILLA MIAMI HERALD WRITER NOVEMBER 02, 2022 9:00 AM



Courtesy of Miami Dade College

In NCAA Division II women's basketball, Nova Southeastern University has been predicted to finish third in the Sunshine State Conference. Barry is fifth in the preseason ranking. Over in the NAIA's Sun Conference, Florida Memorial's women's basketball team is predicted to finish second. St. Thomas is fourth in the preseason ranking. But perhaps no local women's basketball team is more optimistic about the upcoming season than the Miami Dade College Sharks. Coach Susan Summons, who has returned to MDC after a one-year "retirement", has added some big pieces, including 6-foot-5, 250-pound center Lianyi Becquer Leblanch, who defected from Cuba this past summer.

Becquer, 25, had played for Cuba's National Team for nine years when she defected. That aside, here's a quick look at the five aforementioned teams:

NSU, which finished 16-12 last season and lost in the first round of the SSC tournament, have an experienced roster with seven graduate students and one senior with just one true freshman. The top players for veteran coach LeAnn Freeland-Curry are Iowa State transfer Madison Frederick; Hailey Conley, who played just five games last season due to an injury; and Tennessee-Martin transfer Kyannah Grant, whose twin sister Kyarra is also on the squad. NSU also added transfers Zeyno Seren (New Mexico); Emma Krause (William & Mary); Suzan Kinran (UC Riverside); and MacKenzie Steele (Florida Southern).

Barry finished 16-10 last season, losing in the SSC tournament semifinals. The Bucs have a large roster with 19 players. There are 10 newcomers -- five transfers and five freshmen. Coach Kristina Baugh's top returners are Chiara Fusan, who averaged 9.6 points; Ashia Pool (7.1 points); and Ashleigh Pink (5.8). Top transfers are Lidsey Mahoukou, a 6-3 center who was a junior-college All-American; Signe Glantz, a 6-1 forward who played for Brigham Young and for the Swedish National Team; and 5-7 guard Reagan Jackson, an all-conference standout for Division II Clark-Atlanta.

Florida Memorial finished 16-10 last season, getting eliminated in the Sun Conference tournament semifinals. They are coached by Gregory Stanback.

St. Thomas finished 11-16 last season, getting eliminated by Florida Memorial in the Sun Conference tournament quarterfinals. They are coached by Candace Walker.

Over at MDC, the women's basketball players often get together to cook, and they all try dishes from each other's countries.

It's quite a feast. That's because the Sharks have one player each from Macedonia, Serbia, Finland, Ecuador, England, Nigeria, Cuba and Senegal. Of the four Americans on the team, they are a varied group, too, hailing from Alaska, Arizona, Chicago, and Miami. There's strength in numbers, according to Macedonia's Iva Cholakoska. "If I found myself with 12 American Miami native girls, I don't think I would have someone who understands me," she said.

"But because we have these get-togethers, and we share our cultures, it makes it easier. We help each other because we're all facing the same challenges, the same homesickness." Cholakoska has formed an especially tight bond with teammate Ana Vakanjac, who is from Serbia. They are both fluent in English, and they can also understand each other's native languages. Vakanjac said she is still looking for a Miami store that has some of her favorite foods from back home, including *ajvar*, a roasted red pepper spread. In the meantime, she's finding comfort in the diversity of her teammates. "We're all missing our families," she said. "It means a lot that we can connect through basketball." As for the arrival of Leblanch, teammate Cholakoska is thrilled: "As soon as she walked in the gym, I knew she was going to help us," Cholakoska said. "I'm scared for the girls who have to try to stop her."