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USVI Men's Basketball Team to Kickoff FIBA Americup Qualifiers on EPSN + Wednesday Night in Game Against Canada

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Laron Smith, who leads the Virgin Islands with 6 blocks during the FIBA Americup Qualifiers, swats the ball away vs. Cuba at the UVI Sports and Fitness Center during an earlier game in the qualifying process. By. FIBA BASKETBALL

On Wednesday the Virgin Islands Men's Basketball team will begin a stretch of three games in four days to try and qualify for the next FIBA Americup tournament that they once finished as high as 4th, in 2017. This time around the team heads into the final qualifying window needing positive results in order to make the tournament.

The Virgin Islands Consortium spoke with Men's National Team Coach Donald Bough as he prepared to lead his players into the final window of the 2022 FIBA Americup Qualifiers.

The Virgin Islands will take on Canada on Wednesday night at 8 and Saturday at 11:30 a.m. The team will play the Dominican Republic on Friday at 2 p.m. All three games will be streamed on ESPN + with all game times in A.S.T.

The USVI's best chance of qualifying is if Cuba loses all three of their games, which would allow the Virgin Islands to qualify with just one win in the three games.

Another route to the AmeriCup for the Virgin Islands is if the USVI could upset Canada in one of their match-ups. The tie breaker would then come down to a point differential of the matchups between the two teams. This means the USVI would need to beat Canada by more than Canada beats them by if they split the two games. If the USVI upsets Canada twice, the team would qualify.

Coach Bough broke down the team's upcoming opponents and said that the biggest issue with Canada is the team's size. "They may not have a seven footer but they have a lot of guys 6'10 hovering around there, so size-wise we have to contend with that," he said

In the match-ups against the Canadians Mr. Bough hopes the Virgin Islands will be able to push the pace and get points in transition. Mr. Bough said, "If we play at our pace, we have a chance."

In the Dominican Republic game, Mr. Bough expects a different type of play as the Dominican Republic has a myriad of guards that will cause a lot of pressure on the Virgin Islands ball handlers. In the paint, he said they weren't as big but they have two good players, with Mr. Bough mentioning Elroy Vargas, a 6'11 center that played at the University of Kentucky and scored 23 points and hauled in 12 rebounds in the last matchup against the Virgin Islands, as causing some problems for the USVI.

The coach said that in the last game against the Dominican Republic, "We had some transition, we saw that they were going to pressure us so we decided to pressure them too. All in all between those two teams, we have to up-tempo the game and be selective."

The head coach wasn't worried about the short turnaround time in between games. "In the older format you probably would have four games in five days and a lot of the players played in the older format," he said. "Mentally they are prepared for it."

Mr. Bough said he believes the offense will be more effective than the last window because they worked on simplifying it due to the short practice time. "The best thing that we did was trying to make things simpler, and like they say, keep it simple, stupid and we try to do that," he told the Consortium. Mr. Bough hopes that allows the team "to play loose, and play spontaneously" to limit the overthinking that sometimes happens when the focus is running a play or a set perfectly.

On the defensive side, Mr. Bough said he was looking at the tape from the last game and wanted to adjust how his team reacts to screens at different areas of the court.

He also spoke of Covid-19-related challenges but said the games were fair because all participating teams are going through similar situations.

Even though Mr. Bough feels like his team is more cohesive than the last window in November, the USVI was unable to get the full team together for the week-long training camp on St. Croix.

Three players were unable to participate last week, among them point guard Walter Hodge who has been one of the top players for the national team in recent memory.

While Mr. Hodge qualified for the Puerto Rico games, Mr. Bough still has questions relative to if he can clear protocol in time to practice with the team before their match-up against Canada.

Ivan Aska was impressive during camp training as he demonstrated his ability to be the coach on the floor. Mr. Bough said Aska has been with the national team “for nearly a decade” and has been helping coach the younger and less experienced players.

Coach Bough spoke glowingly about some of the younger players that he feels are ready to make an impact this window. The first player he spoke about was Trivante Bloodman, a guard that played at Mississippi State. Bloodman came into this year's training camp 26 pounds lighter than he did during the November window, a testament to his dedication and work ethic between windows. Mr. Bough said, “You could tell from that he’s thinking about how he can make a more positive impact on this team.”

Romani Hansen, a 6’9 power forward who played at the University of Albany, is another player that the coach expects to make an impact at the international level. Mr. Bough spoke about his ability to shoot for size which will help the Virgin Islands stretch the floor in the upcoming games. “If we could get anything positive from him that would be a great asset. Not only for this window but in the future windows to come because we need that stretch player,” Mr. Bough said.

The coach noted that the Virgin Islands is one of the smallest participants that made it to the bubble format, and said the lack of resources limits the team's ability to secure top players. “A lot of the time we can’t get our best players because of the resources,” he said. “The mere fact that we compete, regardless of wins and losses, if I have a team that competes and that are right there in the end with an option to win, that’s a blessing for us.”

Mr. Bough spoke on how the public will focus just on the results but don't realize that sometimes “the stars don’t align” and the Virgin Islands can’t bring their full-strength team to tournaments and games.

He wrapped up the phone interview by stating, “Tune-in everybody and let’s support the smallest team in bubble format.”