

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The Runnin' Roos want a good start in their new basketball conference home – the Big South.

Like a customer trying on a new suit, VMI basketball will be searching for the right fit in a new home for the 2003-04 season.

The Keydets move from the Southern Conference to the Big South Conference this season, and the squad of six returning letterwinners and three starters will be trying to make the transition as smooth as possible.

But head coach Bart Bellairs wants his team to focus from within in this year of change, instead of trying to crash course the new terrain of the Big South.

"We're really excited about the new challenges. We don't know much about the teams in the Big South, but our philosophy is we really want to know more about us," said Bellairs. With so many new faces, we really don't know much about us yet. So our big thing is to concentrate on us, our tempo, and how we play. It's going to be about what VMI does. We'll let them worry about us more than we're going to worry about them."

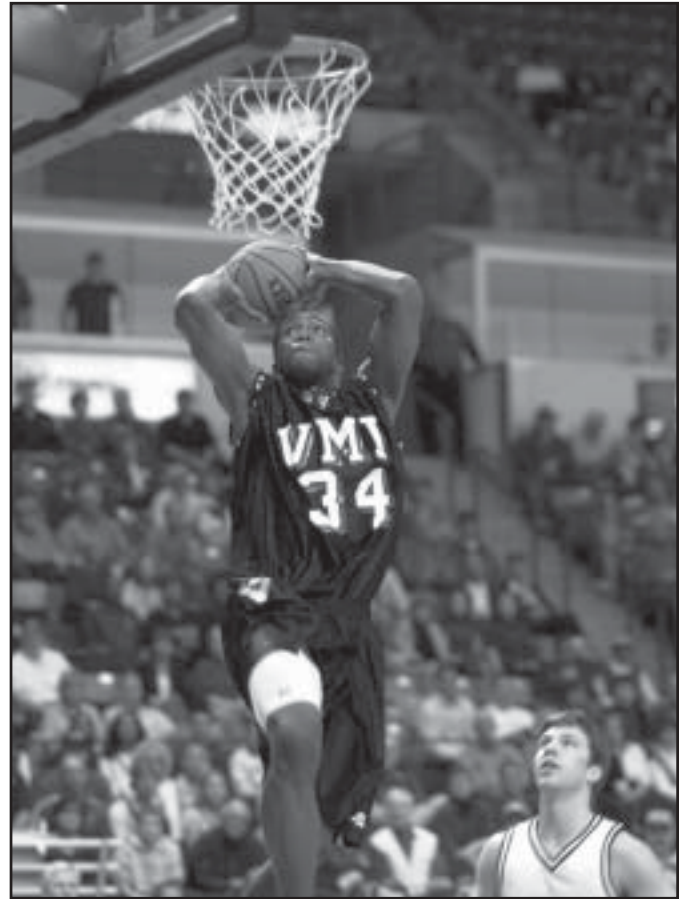
VMI labored through a 10-20 record last season – a year that was marked by off-court distractions when sophomore guard Jason Conley, the NCAA's leading scorer in 2000-01, bolted for Missouri before conference play began in January. The Keydets spent the remainder of the year trying to find the right chemistry, and hit stride in the Southern Conference tournament with shocking upsets over higher-seeded Furman and Davidson before falling in the semis to Chattanooga.

Bellairs hopes his team will draw from the energy of last year's strong kick in the stretch.

"I thought it was great way to end up in the Southern Conference obviously, the best way would have been to win the tournament, but our kids really almost overachieved at the end and I think they're really hungry to keep going."

The top two players of last year's squad, senior 6-6 forward **Radee Skipworth** and senior 5-10 point guard **Richard Little**, both return to form the core of the starting lineup.

Skipworth was the top scorer (18.6) and rebounder (5.8) for the Keydets last year and finished the season in a flurry when he averaged 23 points and seven rebounds over his last 11 games of the season. He scored 36 points in VMI's stunning 66-60 win over Davidson in the Southern Conference tournament and tallied in double figures in all but



Senior forward Radee Skipworth averaged 23 points and seven rebounds in the last 11 games of last season.

three games last year. Skipworth, who ranks 15th on the school's all-time scoring list with 1,221 points, will be counted on for "go to" scoring production this year as well as strength on the boards.

Little ranked sixth nationally in assists with a 7.2 average and wrapped up the season with a SoCon tournament record 13 assists against Chattanooga. He shattered the school season record for assists with 216 and dished out seven or more assists in 20 games. A true floor leader, Little will be counted on not only to stabilize the floor attack, but spark the defensive intensity. Backup help should come from 5-10 **Matt Coward**, who averaged 15.9 points while dishing out 7.7 assists for Hermitage High School in Richmond, Va.

Bellairs knows the teams fortunes are in his seniors' hands.

"They are very talented and I think how very fortunate we

are to have our two guys," said Bellairs. "We're going to put a lot of young men around them and we're excited about their leadership."

Junior forward **Preston Beverly** (6-6, 240, Monroe Township, N.J.) a part-time starter last year, could be ready to occupy the starting power forward slot full time in 2003-04. A tough and tenacious defender who frequently drew the toughest assignment last year, Beverly made 13 starts last season and shot 51% from the field while averaging 4.3 points and 4.0 rebounds in 18 minutes a game. If Beverly can shoulder more scoring on the frontline this season, it could add another weapon to the Keydets' offensive arsenal. 6-6 **Sam Mielnik** (Brooklyn, N.Y.) should help off the bench at power forward, while freshman forward **Chi Chi Ezekwe** (6-6, Vicksburg, Miss.) will provide depth at the swing position.

Another player with starting experience, 6-9 center **Tim Allmond** (Fredericksburg, Va.), will likely move to the starting lineup position fulltime at the post. Allmond made 12 starts in 30 games last season, and brings the Keydets an experienced and physical presence inside with his shot blocking ability. Allmond was second on the team in blocks with 30 last year and averaged nearly five boards a game. Allmond averaged just 4.4 points on the season but did show the ability to score when he posted a double-double 13 points and 10 rebounds against SoCon league champion East Tennessee State. Sophomore 6-9 **Tadas Mankevicius**, the program's first foreign player (Lithuania) will be counted on for inside production and should see his playing time double with the graduation of 6-9 senior Zach Batte.

Bellairs thinks the inside play of Allmond and Mankevicius will be ready for the Big South wars.

"Tim Allmond got better as the year progressed last season, and Tadas worked as hard as anyone I've seen during the off-season," Bellairs noted. "We really feel like we are fortunate to have those two with us as we head into the new conference."

The shooting guard position is wide open with the graduation of Ben Rand, and the starting job will likely be a battle between sophomore **Levar Joseph** (6-2, St. James, La.) and freshman **Fred Robinson** (6-2, Washington, D.C.). Joseph improved and gained confidence as the season progressed and developed into a reliable outside threat when he hit 39.5% of his three-pointers. Robinson averaged 14.0 points and seven rebounds on as a senior at Montrose Christian that went 20-1 and was ranked ninth nationally in the USA Today poll. 6-3 guard **Jack Castleberry** (Virginia Beach, Va.) could potentially develop into a contributor in the backcourt as he gains more experience.

With only 12 players on this year's roster, significant contributions must come from the entire team to build quality depth needed to see the Keydets through another tough schedule. The Keydets open Nov. 20 against Washington State in the

2003-04 VMI Basketball Quick Facts

2002-03 Record : 10-20

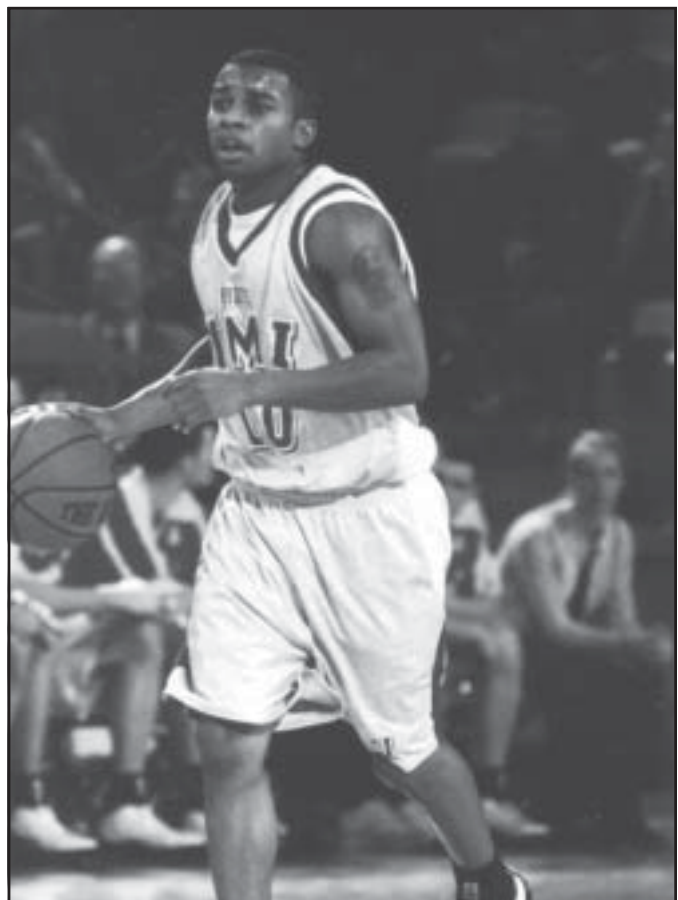
2002-03 SoCon Record: 3-13 (Fifth in SoCon North)

Starters Returning (3): Preston Beverly, F, Jr., 4.3 PPG, 4.0 RPG; Richard Little, PG, Sr., 7.5 PPG, 7.2 APG; Radee Skipworth, F, Sr., 18.6 PPG, 5.8 RPG

Starters Lost (2): Zach Batte, F-C, Sr., 3.8 PPG, 3.7 RPG; Ben Rand, G, Sr.; 8.4 PPG, 2.4 RPG

Other Returnees (4): Tim Allmond, C, Jr., 4.4 PPG, 4.6 RPG, Levar Joseph, G, So., 4.0 PPG, 1.0 RPG; Tadas Mankevicius, C, So., 2.4 PPG, 2.2 RPG, Sam Mielnik, F, Jr., 1.0 PPG, 1.0 RPG

Newcomers (5): Matt Coward, 5-10, PG, Fr.; Jack Castleberry, 6-3, G, Fr.; Chi Chi Ezekwe, 6-6, F, Fr.; Matt Murrer, 6-7, F, Fr.; Fred Robinson 6-2, G, Fr.



Senior guard Richard Little ranked sixth in the nation in assists last year.

"Top of the World" Classic in Fairbanks, Alaska. Other non-conference games have Virginia visiting Cameron Hall, and road contests at Louisville, Virginia Tech, and Old Dominion. The Runnin' Roos know the warm "welcome wagons" from their new conference brethren will roll away once the ball goes up, making this year's slate one of the most challenging in years.