Last year wasn’t the kind of season that first-year Coach Eric Bozeman had envisioned for Southern Arkansas. The team finished with a disappointing 6-21 overall record and was 3-13 in Gulf South Conference West Division play. Although the results weren’t what were expected, the Muleriders have plenty of reason to be optimistic heading into this season. SAU returns three starters from 2005-06 and four other returnees who combined for 57 percent of the scoring and 52 percent of the rebounds from last year. Add to that a couple of red-shirt players and several newcomers and things look a lot brighter for Bozeman and seventh-year assistant Aaron Niven.

Returning starters include senior center Leon Stone, and junior guards Cory Green and Brandon Bealer.

Stone, 6-8, 235-pounds, out of Murfreesboro, looks to build on an impressive junior season. He averaged 9.2 points and 4.7 rebounds a game last year and has worked on an array of post moves to complement his size. Green and Bealer return a ton of experience to the guard spot which will be crucial for the youth-laden squad. Both hard-nosed on defense, the two can produce offensively as well. Green, a 5-10, 175-pounder from Shreveport (Huntington), La., is the leading returning scorer on the team, having averaged 10.2 points per game last season. Bealer (6-0, 170), out of Little Rock via Bossier Parish (La.) Community College, sees the floor well, led the team in assists at 2.3 per game, had 41 steals, and put up 7.0 points a contest.

Other returnees include forward Brandon Williams, guard Reggie Tims, and centers Chris Montgomery and Ndubuisi Egwuatu.

Williams, a 6-6, 190-pound junior from Tyler (John Tyler), Texas, saw extensive action late last year, averaging 5.2 points per game. A smooth player who handles the ball well, Williams also shoots well from the perimeter. Tims (5-5, 150), a sophomore out of Little Rock (Mills), is another returning guard who brings experience. He averaged 12 minutes per contest and is an extremely tough defender. Montgomery, a 6-6, 215-pound junior, who hails from Killeen (Ellison), Texas, also gained valuable experience late last season. The coaching staff expects him to increase his scoring productivity this year. Egwuatu (6-8, 250), a sophomore out of Abuja, Nigeria, should see more minutes on the block this season. A dominating defensive presence inside, the coaches feel he should show a great deal of improvement this season.

Southern Arkansas brings in five newcomers and one returnee from the 2004-05 team for the 2006-07 season. Leon St. Rose, a 6-4, 210-pound red-shirt sophomore forward from Houston (Milby), Texas, returns after sitting out last year. A tough, physical player on defense, St. Rose also has the ability to rebound and score inside.

The five new faces on the team are guard Caleb Winters, forwards Kenny Wilcox, Cameron Butler, and Jeremy Whittaker, and center Rolando Little.

Winters, a 6-0, 165-pound freshman out of Baton Rouge (Christian Life), La., possesses solid ball-handling skills, and most importantly, is a winner. He led his high school teams to over 100 wins in his prep career, including a state championship his senior season. A 6-3, 190-pound junior from Dallas, Texas, Wilcox transfers in from North Lake (Texas) College. An aggressive, athletic player, Wilcox also displays great touch from outside. Butler is a 6-6, 185-pound freshman out of Malvern, who has the potential to make an immediate impact for the Muleriders this year. An athletic swing-man, Butler led his team with 20 points in the Arkansas High School All-Star game. Whittaker, a 6-3, 195-pound sophomore from Memphis (Christian Brothers), Tenn., brings an intense work ethic to the floor every day. The 6-9, 205-pound Little should have an immediate impact on this season’s team. A red-shirt freshman out of Memphis (Cordova), Tenn., Little improved dramatically in his red-shirt year, and boasts a soft touch inside to go along with a solid defensive presence.

SAU opens the season November 18-19 at the Delta State University State Farm Insurance Classic in Cleveland, Miss., facing Miles (Ala.) College and Clark Atlanta (Ga.) University. The team holds their home-opener November 25 against Dallas Baptist (Texas) University. Southern Arkansas will again travel this year to face Division I Tulsa, playing them on December 10. The Muleriders will also compete in the Armstrong Atlantic State University SpringHill Suites Midtown New Year Classic in Savannah, Ga., December 29-30. SAU will face host Armstrong Atlantic State and Georgia College & State University. Southern Arkansas will open GSC play on January 6 at home against Christian Brothers University.