

Northeast Conference

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Sacred Heart Selected as NEC Women's Basketball Preseason Favorite *Pioneers Shoot for Third Title in Five Years; Preseason All-NEC Team Announced*

Somerset, NJ -- Having won 21 consecutive games against Northeast Conference (NEC) opponents, Sacred Heart stands as the preseason favorite to capture the 2009-10 NEC women's basketball crown. The defending champion Pioneers received a total of nine first-place votes in a poll of the league's 12 head coaches. The NEC announced both the poll results and its five-member Preseason All-Conference Team during a media teleconference, which served as a prelude to the league's 24th season of women's hoops.

Saint Francis (PA), which fell to Sacred Heart in the 2009 NEC Championship Game, garnered two first-place votes to finish second in the poll, one spot ahead of Central Connecticut State (third).

Robert Morris, last year's preseason favorite, claimed the lone remaining first-place nod and took fourth. Quinnpiac finished in fifth place followed by two Garden State rivals - Fairleigh Dickinson (sixth) and Monmouth (seventh). Mount St. Mary's claimed the eighth spot in front of Long Island (ninth) and NEC newcomer Bryant (tenth). Wagner (eleventh) and St. Francis (NY) (twelfth) round out the results of the annual preseason survey, which does not permit coaches to rank their own teams.

The Northeast Conference preseason poll last correctly predicted the league's champion in 2005 when Saint Francis (PA) won a fourth consecutive crown. The Red Flash were one of two teams to defy last year's preseason rankings. Despite being tabbed last in the 2008-09 poll, Central Connecticut State was the NEC regular season runner-up before bowing out in the NEC Tournament semifinal round. Meanwhile, Saint Francis (PA), tabbed eighth, finished five spots higher than the preseason survey projected to capture the No. 3 seed in the league's eight-team postseason tournament.

Sacred Heart has owned the moniker of NEC preseason favorite on one prior occasion. The Pioneers won their first-ever conference crown in 2006 and were the coaches' pick to repeat during the subsequent season only to fall two points short of Robert Morris in the 2007 NEC Tournament final.

Looking to live up to its preseason billing this time around, Sacred Heart returns three starters from a team that gave Big Ten Conference powerhouse Ohio State a scare in the 2009 NCAA First Round. If the Pioneers are to make a third NCAA appearance in five years, they'll have to do so without last year's NEC Tournament MVP Kaitlin Sowinski. Despite losing the two-time all-NEC first team center to graduation, Sacred Heart is home to the league's top returning scoring duo. Junior guard **Alisa Apo (Freehold, NJ/St. John Vianney)** and sophomore forward **Callan Taylor (Overland Park, KS/Blue Valley North)**, both members of the 2009-10 Preseason All-NEC Team, combined to averaged 28.9 points per game as underclassmen last season. Junior **Maggie Cosgrove (Andover, MA/Andover)** started 31 of 33 games alongside Apo in the backcourt while contributing 8.3 points and 3.1 assists per contest.

Another key returnee will be on Sacred Heart's sideline for his 20th season at the helm. Head coach **Ed Swanson** oversaw the Pioneers' development from a Division II program into a D-I regional power. In 10 seasons of Northeast Conference play, Sacred Heart has finished no lower than third in the league standings. During the same season in which he won his third career NEC Coach of the Year award, Swanson became the all-time NEC wins leader (138) by surpassing the late, great Bill Sheahan (124).

2009-10 Northeast Conference Women's Basketball Preseason Coaches Poll

1. Sacred Heart (9)
2. Saint Francis (PA) (2)
3. Central Connecticut State
4. Robert Morris (1)
5. Quinnpiac
6. Fairleigh Dickinson
7. Monmouth
8. Mount St. Mary's
9. Long Island
10. Bryant
11. Wagner
12. St. Francis (NY)

First place votes in parentheses ().

(2009-10 NEC Women's Basketball Preseason Release; 1-of-3)

Bryant University (2012-13) • Central Connecticut State University • Fairleigh Dickinson University
Long Island University • Monmouth University • Mount St. Mary's University
Quinnpiac University • Robert Morris University • Sacred Heart University
St. Francis (NY) College • Saint Francis (PA) University • Wagner College

None of the five all-NEC preseason honorees are seniors and four hail from programs that reached the 2009 NEC semifinal round. Joining Sacred Heart's Apo and Taylor, Saint Francis (PA) junior **Samantha Leach (Mount Sterling, OH/Miami Trace)** and CCSU junior **Kerrienne Dugan (Waterford, CT/Waterford)** enjoy preseason honors after helping their teams end postseason droughts a year ago. Long Island sophomore **Ashley Palmer (Oxford, PA/Oxford Area)** posted the best scoring and rebounding averages of the group, but is still waiting for her first NEC Tournament appearance.

Moving over to the point guard position for her sophomore season, Apo spearheaded Sacred Heart's perfect run toward the NEC crown. The 5-foot-9 floor general became only the second woman in Northeast Conference history, joining the legendary Jess Zinobile of Saint Francis (PA), to win the NEC Player of the Year award after claiming NEC Rookie of the Year honors the prior season. Apo started all 33 games last season, the only Pioneer to do so, on her way to averaging a team-high 16.9 points per game (5th in NEC). The former Jersey Shore high school standout owns a multi-faceted repertoire that leaves defenses back on their heels. The reliable ball-handler has the ability to shoot from the outside, find an open teammate, or take the ball to the hoop. Not afraid to draw contact from a defender, Apo went to the charity stripe 184 times last season and sunk a league-high 153 free throws. Her free throw percentage (.832) and three-point field goal percentage (.385) both ranked fifth in the NEC as did her 4.09 assists per game average.

Taylor, an NEC All-Rookie and All-Tournament Team selection as a freshman, was another catalyst for the Pioneers' championship run. The 6-foot-1 forward played with the poise of a polished veteran during the 2009 NEC Tournament, averaging 12.0 points, 13.0 rebounds, and 5.3 assists per game in three victories. Taylor was arguably the league's best all-around shooter. She became the second consecutive rookie Pioneer to lead the NEC in three-point field goal percentage (.441) and ranked second in overall shooting (.498). Her size and athleticism yielded the NEC's eight-best rebounding average (7.3 rpg) while her scoring average (12.0) landed her 19th amongst league leaders.

Dugan turned her 2008 NEC All-Rookie Team selection into all-conference second team honors last year when Central Connecticut State surged up the NEC standings to finish second. A key ingredient to the top turnaround in NCAA Division I women's basketball, Dugan led her team to a 12.5-game improvement from her freshman season. She was on the floor longer than any other Blue Devil during CCSU's record season that yielded the program's first-ever postseason WNIT bid. A guard who will also play forward, Dugan averaged 11.6 points over a team-high 34.8 minutes per game. An across-the-board contributor, the 5-foot-10 Blue Devil was the team's second-leading scorer on a balanced attack while ranking third in rebounding (5.9 rpg), second in steals (50), second in assists (92), and second in field goals made (128). As the Blue Devils' wins increased, moving from four to a program-record 18, so did Dugan's accuracy from the field. The lone CCSU player to start all 32 contests tied for sixth (.457) amongst NEC field goal percentage leaders after shooting only 38.9 percent as a freshman.

Leach, a second team all-NEC selection last year, became the first Saint Francis (PA) player to capture all-NEC honors since 2005. Helping nine-time NEC champion Saint Francis (PA) end its three-year postseason drought and return to the NEC title game for the first time since 2005 NEC Player of the Year Beth Swink was still in uniform, Leach led the resurgent Red Flash in scoring (12.7 ppg) and field goals made (156). Leach was one of four Flash to average in double figures thanks to an almost five-point improvement on her rookie scoring mark (7.8 ppg). The Ohio native was the only player to start all 32 games for the Flash who improved their NEC win total (11) by eight games.

Palmer's freshman campaign was as statistically strong as any in the league's 23-year history of women's basketball. The top freshman scorer (17.1 ppg) in all of NCAA Division I women's basketball through the conclusion of the 2008-09 regular season, Palmer ranked fourth overall amongst NEC leaders in scoring average and second in rebounding (9.3 rpg). The 5-foot-10 post player, who is also reliable around the perimeter, won seven Choice Hotels NEC Rookie of the Week awards to tie former SHU standout Amanda Pape for third-most in league annals. Palmer matched another one of Pape's freshman feats by becoming the first NEC rookie in five years to rank amongst the league's top-10 in both scoring and rebounding. The overpowering Palmer led all NEC rookies in piling up 13 double-doubles (second overall in the NEC). Only the second player in Long Island history to sink more than 200 field goals in a single season, Palmer made a league-high 208 shots during the regular season on her way to 497 total points.

The 2009-10 Northeast Conference Championship is set for March 6, 7, & 14. Saint Francis (PA) will host for all quarterfinal (March 6) and semifinal (March 7) games at the Maurice Stokes Center in Loretto, Pennsylvania. The NEC Championship Game, slated for March 14 at 3:00 pm, will be played in the home facility of the highest remaining seed.

2009-10 Northeast Conference Women's Basketball Preseason All-Conference Team

Name	School	Yr.	Pos.	Ht.	Hometown/High School
Alisa Apo	Sacred Heart	Jr.	G	5-9	Freehold, NJ/St. John Vianney
Kerrienne Dugan	Central Conn. St.	Jr.	G/F	5-10	Waterford, CT/Waterford
Samantha Leach	Saint Francis (PA)	Jr.	G	5-10	Mount Sterling, OH/Miami Trace
Ashley Palmer	Long Island	So.	F	5-10	Oxford, PA/Oxford Area
Callan Taylor	Sacred Heart	So.	F	6-1	Overland Park, KS/Blue Valley North

Northeast Conference Women's Basketball Preseason Poll History

Year	Preseason Favorite (actual finish)	NEC Tournament Champion (preseason position)
2008-09	Robert Morris (6th)	Sacred Heart (3rd)
2007-08	Long Island (4th)	Robert Morris (2nd)
2006-07	Sacred Heart (T-1st)	Robert Morris (3rd)
2005-06	Robert Morris (T-2nd)	Sacred Heart (2nd)
2004-05	St. Francis (PA) (1st)	St. Francis (PA) (1st)
2003-04	St. Francis (PA) (1st)	St. Francis (PA) (1st)
2002-03	St. Francis (PA) (1st)	St. Francis (PA) (1st)
2001-02	Long Island (T-2nd)	St. Francis (PA) (8th)
2000-01	Mount St. Mary's (1st)	Long Island (6th)
1999-00	Mount St. Mary's (2nd)	St. Francis (PA) (2nd)
1998-99	St. Francis (PA) (2nd)	St. Francis (PA) (1st)
1997-98	St. Francis (PA) (1st)	St. Francis (PA) (1st)
1996-97	Mount St. Mary's (T-4th)	St. Francis (PA) (T-5th)
1995-96	St. Francis (PA) (2nd)	St. Francis (PA) (1st)
1994-95	Mount St. Mary's (1st)	Mount St. Mary's (1st)
1993-94	Mount St. Mary's (1st)	Mount St. Mary's (1st)