



A-State basketball season is rolling! The road to March begins now!



Return of the Pack: Men's basketball builds upon Pannone's first year

ERIC FLUKE

SPORTS EDITOR

Following a record-breaking 20-win introductory season, head coach Ryan Pannone and the Arkansas State men's basketball team are ready to take the Sun Belt Conference (SBC) by storm in the 2026-27 season.

After taking the helm of the program following Bryan Hodgson's departure in 2025, Pannone put together a roster

with no returners and found major success in his first year. Breaking the school's scoring average and road win records, the Red Wolves ranked second in conference play with a six-way tie.

Their success did not translate to the postseason as their season ended in their first SBC tournament game against Georgia State. However, their massive regular season success outweighed the postseason sting

of defeat, giving the Red Wolves a foundation to build upon in Pannone's second year.

Looking back on the previous year, Pannone said it wasn't a matter of lessons learned, but rather adjustments to the team.

"It was more so take a look at the roster (with) what we did well, why we were able to win 20 games," Pannone said. "Then (it was) what could we have done in terms of roster construction and preparation to win 21, 22, (or) 23

games."

In constructing this roster, Pannone said he pinpointed the team's weak spots, such as the amount of turnovers and lack of quality shot contesting, to determine the most suitable recruits.

"We got multiple ball handlers with a really good assisted turnover ratio," Pannone said. "We had the lowest block rate in the league last year, so we went out and got a little bit more front

court athleticism."

Incoming guards Tameron Ferguson, Diggy Coleman and Layne Taylor will provide the Red Wolves with playmaking throughout the rotation this season after impressing Pannone with their skill sets.

Outside of his talent, Taylor could become a Red Wolves crowd favorite as a home-state hero, hailing from Farmington and originally starting his college career at the University of Central Arkansas before moving to Murray State. A-State stood out in his transfer portal search because of the program's head honcho, but he also found the town and its community appealing.

"Once I was here in Jonesboro, really getting a feel for the campus and the people involved was super attractive," Taylor said. "I didn't fully understand how bought in people are and how much they love basketball and sports until I got here."

Since coming to A-State, Taylor said the system here doesn't differ much from his previous school and has given him room to continue growing under the great coaching staff.

"I'm really just trying to be a sponge and learn from them, and then bring some of the stuff I know (from Murray State)," Taylor said.

With additions such as Taylor, the team will look to push a fast-paced offense this season while putting a handle on some of the mistakes that come with playing at a rapid speed.

"(With) the way that we play, it's not by chance that we set the school record in scoring in year one," Pannone said. "The goal

is to break that in year two by obviously having less turnovers to give us more possessions."

While bringing victory to each match in the 2026-27 season, Pannone said he also hopes this accelerated offense brings fans to their feet with its electric performance.

"We're going to play a style of play that our fans love and enjoy," Pannone said. "When they walk into this gym, they are excited to see an up-tempo, throwing down lobs, big time dunks, blocks, and that pace and that force that we play with."

Besides bolstering the team's ball-handling, Pannone added several interior defenders to boost rim protection.

Pannone noted forwards Aliou Maiga, Amadou Doumbia and Delang Muon as the main set of added shot blockers who will upgrade their paint presence alongside returning forward Grayson Bennett. By bringing on these athletic shot blockers, Pannone said he hopes to bring more physicality to A-State's brand of play.

"If you look at the two top defenses in college basketball over the last five years, it's the University of Houston and Iowa State," Pannone said. "They defend ultra physical, so we've put a huge emphasis on that."

Beyond their benefits to the offense and defense, Pannone put character above all for his recruitment process. He said character plays a factor in the team's performance in the system he envisions.

"The way that we play is all about self-sacrifice and playing for each other and being willing to make the extra pass and

being willing to sacrifice a good shot for a great shot," Pannone said. Usually, selfish players are selfish people, so we really try to evaluate and identify unselfish characteristics as human beings."

As one of the leaders of the fresh faces in the locker room in his second year at A-State, guard Royal Blue Smith sees the character in team members that Pannone looked for in recruiting: people who are willing to work and sacrifice to win.

"It's fun to play with these guys because it's not like I'm in the gym with guys that don't want to be here," Smith said. "They're all on the same page as me and all want to be there and want to win and get better every day."

Outside his new recruits, Pannone has high hopes that Smith and the other three returners will be even greater this season, leading the incoming players to adapt to the system and culture he has built.

"The expectations are that they make a big jump from where they were at last year," Pannone said. "They make a jump physically, mentally, and then how we're playing the game within the execution of the system."

Specifically, Smith hopes to make a bigger jump this year and contribute to the team after learning key lessons last year.

"Consistency is key ... that's one thing that coach Pannone has taught me," Smith said. "Even if I'm not having a great

scoring game, I could do a lot of other things to contribute and help my team win."

A-State enters the year as the preseason No. 1 team in the SBC with Ferguson and Taylor both being named to the All-SBC second team. With all their improvements and adjustments from last season, the Red Wolves seem poised to hold that position and maintain the media's high expectations.

A-State opens its 2026-27 campaign at home against the Toledo Rockets on Nov. 2 at 7 p.m., as Pannone calls on fans for a request in their first match.

"Our goal on opening night is to beat (the attendance record) from the city of Jonesboro to get you guys to come out," Pannone said. "This is the city's team. We've got to pack it out."

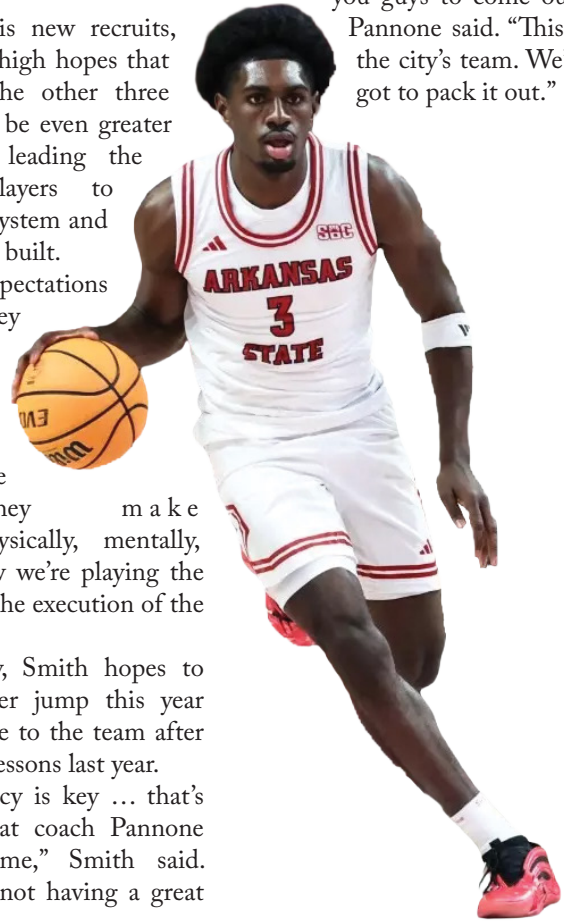


PHOTO COURTESY OF A-STATE ATHLETICS

Head coach Ryan Pannone talks over strategies with his team in a timeout during a 2025-26 match. During his first year as head coach, Pannone broke multiple program records en route to a 20-win season.



BENJAMIN MCDOWELL

STAFF WRITER

Arkansas State football faced the Georgia State Panthers on Saturday in their eighth game of the season, taking a 38-32 homecoming victory and a two-game win streak into the bye week.

The Panthers' offense ranked 27th in the Football Bowl Subdivision in third-down conversions, converting 47.5% of its attempts. This set up a critical matchup against A-State's defense, which at times this season had struggled to consistently get off the field on third downs. On the other side of the ball, Georgia State allowed just 24 points per game, the fifth-fewest in the Sun Belt Conference, testing an A-State offense that had only recently begun to click.

A-State came out strong with its defense, forcing negative yardage on Georgia State's opening plays. The Red Wolves limited the Panthers' running game, forced a 6-yard loss on a

pass play, and sacked quarterback Cameron Brown to force a three-and-out.

After A-State's special teams gave the offense a 40-yard line start, the Red Wolves built on their momentum with a three-play, 40-yard touchdown drive capped off by quarterback Trey Owens throwing a 12-yard pass to the end zone for wide receiver Jaylen Bonelli.

Jones spoke about his team's fast start, noting how much it impacted the game overall.

"You can never let your opponent gain momentum at home, so we talked all week about coming out fast, and we did the same on defense, and I think that helped with everything," Jones said.

Jones said A-State's work on building a tempo early mirrored their play in the win against Southern Miss on Oct. 17.

"Momentum is a big deal," Jones said. "You look at last week in Hattiesburg. I thought we maintained the momentum of the game from the start to finish, and I thought we did in this

game too."

The Red Wolves' defense kept the Panthers' offense uncomfortable, forcing Brown into difficult throws and multiple three-and-outs. Both teams tried to establish their running games, but neither offense found much success late in the first quarter.

In the second quarter, the Red Wolves began moving the ball as Owens worked to become more comfortable in the pocket. However, penalties, including false starts, and limited gains on running plays stalled the drive, leading to the first of two misses from kicker Clune Van Andel.

Georgia State responded as its running game found success early in the second quarter as running back Dennis Murray Jr. hit a stride and contributed to 56 of the 74 yards on the Panthers' first touchdown drive, tying the game at 7-7.

The Red Wolves responded as Owens kept connecting with Bonelli, completing 16- and 24-yard passes. Wide receiver Chauncy Cobb added a 21-yard run, and Owens completed

several shorter passes to move A-State into the red zone.

On fourth-and-goal, Owens scored on a 2-yard quarterback run to give the Red Wolves a 14-7 lead with 3:08 remaining in the first half.

Taking over following an injury to Brown on the Panthers' previous drive, quarterback Ayden Pereira found a rhythm early, hitting a mixture of short passes and quarterback runs until he connected on a 33-yard touchdown pass to wide receiver Qwantavius Wiggins.

With 26 seconds remaining before halftime, Georgia State evened the game up at the half 14-14.

A-State struggled to regain its rhythm as the second half began. Owens missed several passing opportunities, and the Red Wolves increasingly relied on the run backed by Clay's perimeter attacks.

Jones praised Clay's production and leadership following the game.

"Kenyon Clay had a good night tonight (with) a couple

of big runs," Jones said. "It's immense, and, you know, obviously his production from the running back position, but really what he means to our team in the locker room and in that running back room."

Even with Clay's production, A-State settled for a field goal again after penalties derailed the first drive coming out of the half, ending with another Van Andel miss.

On Georgia State's next possession, Pereira threw an interception to A-State cornerback Brandon Greil, giving the Red Wolves the ball back.

Owens capitalized on the turnover on the next play, throwing a 54-yard touchdown pass to Nana Burris. The score gave A-State a 21-14 lead with 10:45 remaining in the third quarter.

Georgia State responded with a strong running game, using its backs to wear down the Red Wolves' defense. Murray opened the drive with 9- and 4-yard runs before Wiggins broke free for a 77-yard touchdown run to tie the



Photo by Allie Carson | Editor-in-Chief

Wide receiver Nana Burris hurdles a Georgia State defender. Burris had a career night against the Panthers with 114 receiving yards on six catches and a touchdown.

game at 21.

Owens responded with a 35-yard pass and a 10-yard completion before A-State leaned on its running game to move into

the red zone. Owens finished the drive with an 8-yard quarterback run and a 1-yard quarterback sneak, giving the Red Wolves a 28-21 lead with 6:39 remaining

in the third quarter.

Read the full article at [astatetheherald.com!](https://astatetheherald.com/)

Sports

Connecting the Pack: Blending old and new to create success

LUKE DUNLAP

SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

Following a 27 win season ending with a phenomenal WNIT Final Four run, the Arkansas State women's basketball team looks to start anew and reach greater heights in the upcoming year.

This year's roster is full of fresh faces: nine to be exact. Many familiar members from last season's WNIT team and the season prior's NCAA tournament team have graduated, leaving gaps in the roster for these new players to fill.

While approaching the new season of unknowns, head coach Destinee Rogers plans to keep her same mentality while staying aware of the new changes that may come.

"I think the biggest thing for me is just going into this year with an open mind, knowing that we have a brand new team, and continuing to instill the discipline (and) accountability that has worked for us the last two years," Rogers said.

Her recruitment philosophy in the transfer portal for this year and prior years relies more on individual additions into a system rather than a team changer, opting to fit players into her coaching style.

"It's just plug and play. It's the same thing, just different faces," Rogers said. "We did a really good job this year of making sure we brought the right personalities in. I wanted a tougher group, and I think we definitely knocked the ball out of the port with this group."

Rogers described her process of selecting in a detailed step-by-step program. Before prospects reach Jonesboro, she contacts former coaches, whether that be high school coaches, Amateur Athletic Union coaches or other college coaches.

"I want all the information before they even step foot on campus because we can't swing and miss," Rogers said. "We want to make sure we're bringing the right type of players and people to Arkansas State."

She also tests her group of potential newcomers to make sure they are fully fit for the program outside of their basketball skill set.

"I'm really big on personalities. It just helps me understand how to serve and lead these young women," Rogers said. "And then once we know all that information, I then decide whether I want to bring them on campus or not."

One of the nine new players is a sophomore transfer from Texas State: Angela Carroll. In her freshman season as a Bobcat, she started in 25 out of all 30 games she played. She averaged a double-double: 14 points, 10 rebounds, and 2 assists.

Carroll said Rogers' recruiting



Photo by Abigail Leggett | Staff Photographer

Guard Crislyn Rose guards an opposing ball-handler during a scrimmage match. Rose has been selected as preseason Sun Belt Conference Player of the Year prior to their first game.

strategies worked on her within their introductory conversations.

"As soon as that first phone call happened, I was already clinging towards the coaches. Everything sounded great," Carroll said. "(I felt really loved, and I think when coaches show you that they really want you and how they can use you and also make you grow as a player, but as a woman too, that's important."

When it comes to game-time action, the acquisition of Angela Carroll remedies a major issue in last year's squad: rebounding. A-State struggled on the boards last season due to their small-ball style of play; they were lightning quick on the perimeter but were quick to be out-muscled in the paint. Carroll along with the eight other girls recruited with her seek to fix this problem from the previous season.

With all the new additions and changes to the roster, the leadership still remains. Guard Crislyn Rose, a fourth year at A-State, returns to helm the head of the ship.

Averaging 11 points, five assists and three rebounds per game, Rose was named Preseason Sun Belt Player of the Year. She aims to improve specific aspects of her game to become an even bigger threat on the court. She pinpointed multiple areas of improvement she worked towards this offseason.

"(I'm) being more consistent at the three-point line and spacing the floor out a little bit more in different areas besides just

attacking the basket," Rose said.

Alongside her own skills, she wants to leave a major impact on the younger girls in the locker room.

"(I want them) to know that as long as you're around the right people in the right setting, you can be the person that you want to be," Rose said.

With all of the fresh faces mixing with the veterans, chemistry is a bit of a concern. However, assistant coach Liz Nessling aimed to bring this new team

from the jump, organizing a plethora of events for the team.

"We did a LEGO night, movie night, which was kinda cool. We did a 'speed dating' type of thing, and basically they had to ask each other questions for 30 seconds," Nessling said.

All of these events and activities they did in the offseason increased the chemistry sevenfold, but a new addition to the mix has been content creation and social media.

Nessling is an active influencer on social media and is using this platform to grow the team's popularity in the city of Jonesboro and the surrounding areas. She posts humor-driven shorts with players, coaching staff, and more to reach a broad audience and show them all what the behind the scenes are really like.

Hoping to showcase the mix of old and new put together by Rogers, Nessling, Rose and the rest of the roster, the Red Wolves take a trip up to the Midwest to take on the Ball State Cardinals on Nov. 2 at 7 p.m. However, in their home opener on Nov. 17 against Jackson State, Rogers made it plain and simple about what she expects from the crowd: pack the stands to support the Red Wolves.

