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UDC Firebirds Continue Amazing Resurgence During Anniversary Season

Washington, D.C. – The 2005-2006 season was one for the record books for the men’s basketball team at the University of the District of Columbia – for all the wrong reasons. Bouncing back from a self-imposed one year suspension, the Firebirds were able to field a team that featured only three scholarship players and four other players who had never played high school basketball. The results were predictably painful – the Firebirds finished with a 1-22 record, earning their lone win in the 3rd to last game before the end of the season.

“Other than the losing, last year’s team was the most fun I ever had in college coaching,” said men’s basketball coach Julius L. Smith, Jr, who took on the task of rebuilding a basketball program literally from square one. “These kids had character, work hard everyday, and never quit.”

Smith says he approached the current season with a similar philosophy. “When recruiting this year’s team, I told (assistant coach Chris) DeFelice that I wanted the same quality of people as last year but with increased talent. I feel we have achieved both.”

Even Coach Smith would have had difficulty in predicting the magnitude of improvement, however. Defying all odds, the resurgent Firebirds have streaked to a 7-1 record so far this season, with their most recent win, a 56-50 triumph over 21st-ranked Bloomsburg University Huskies, 56-50, in Bloomsburg, Pa. last Saturday. The Firebirds never trailed while handing the Huskies (6-1) their first defeat of the season.

“This record is very surprising to me. This team has bonded much faster than we could have ever hoped with eleven new players,” said Coach Smith. “They like each other. They push each other on the floor, in the weight room, in study hall and in the classroom.” Coach Smith points with pride to one of the teams many goals for his student athletes - to achieve a team grade point average of 2.5 or better for the season.

The Firebirds’ return to the court comes during a special anniversary year for the hometown public university of the nation’s capital. In 1982, the UDC Men's Basketball Team won the NCAA Division II Basketball Championship. The team completed the 1981-82 regular season with a 25-2 record before going on to win the National Championship. The team was sparked by Firebird standouts Michael Britt and Earl Jones, who became the first All-America male athletes in the history of the University.

“That national championship team was one of the greatest teams I have ever seen at any level,” said Coach Smith. “It was coached by one of the greatest coaches at any level, Coach Will Jones. We talk about the national championship banner hanging since 1982, 25 years ago but none of our players are 25 years old and don’t know much about that team.” The University plans to host a special commemoration of the championship season later in the season.

While Coach Smith and his staff generally don't talk about leading scorers or statistics in general, what he is anxious to point to is five players on his squad who averaging in double figures in scoring, sharing the ball and sharing the game. This team's strength, according to Smith, is their tenacious defense. The Firebirds have been consistently stingy all year, holding opponents to 38% shooting from the field while forcing 20 turnovers per game.

One player Coach Smith does directly single out is Frank Petersen, one of the co-captains, and one of two members of last year's 1-22 team.

"Frank is our point guard, our leader, and one of the gutsiest, toughest players I have ever coached or been around," exclaimed Smith. "When talking about student-athletes, you are talking about Frank Petersen, who not only plays with passion and leadership, but carries over a 3.0 grade point average in the classroom. I love this kid!"

The resurgence of the men's team is not without a parallel by the Lady Firebirds. Under Coach Lester L. Butler, Jr., the women's team has not equaled the success of the men's program, but continues with their development. The Lady Firebirds' record is currently 3-5, most recently suffering a 64-50 loss at the hands of Wilson, N.C. Despite the losing record, University of the District of Columbia Director of Intercollegiate Athletics Dr. Harold M. Merritt, has equal pride for both men's and women's programs.

"It's been a long hard trip back for both our teams," stated Dr. Merritt, who joined the University almost a year ago in January of 2006. "A year lay-off makes recruiting a real challenge. You have to give credit where it's due, however. Both Coach Smith and Coach Butler have done a tremendous job in rebuilding their teams. Now we are seeing the fruits of their labor."

University president Dr. William L. Pollard had announced in November of 2004 the cancellation of the University's men and women's basketball programs for the 2004-2005 seasons, citing concerns over the recruitment, academic eligibility and financial aid provided to several players on the men's and women's basketball team. This move was part of the

University's ongoing internal investigation into the operations of the institution's Intercollegiate Athletics program. Following a comprehensive internal review, Dr. Pollard reinstated the programs for the 2005-2006 academic year. Dr. Merritt was hired as Director of Intercollegiate Athletics shortly thereafter.

Other athletics programs at the University have returned to the competitive field this year with favorable results. Cross-Country runner Wilfred Chemallan finished in 3rd place at the NCAA Division II 2006 Cross-Country Southeast Regional, in November, going on to compete in the National Championship Meet on November 18, 2006. The Lady Firebirds volleyball team finished their season with a 14-7 record. The Independents Collegiate Athletic Association named Lady Firebird volleyball player Daniella Bezerra, a freshman from Sao, Paulo, Brazil, to the 2006 All-ICAA Volleyball Second Team. The Firebirds men soccer team finished their season with a 3-11-1 record, with freshman David Agbaza from Cheverly, Md. being selected to the 2006 All-ICAA Soccer Second Team. The team's outlook for next year is bright, as the team will compete on a completely refurbished playing field.

It's now easier to track the activities of the Firebirds and Lady Firebirds. The Department of Intercollegiate Athletics website is a one-stop resource for news of recent competitions, schedules of upcoming games and other information on facilities available at the University of the District of Columbia. The site can be accessed at www.udcfirebirds.com.

The University of the District of Columbia is the fully-accredited sole public source for accessible, inclusive, affordable, and comprehensive public higher education in the District of Columbia and provides additional life-long learning opportunities. The University delivers quality instruction and uses student-centered approaches to empower and benefit both individuals and its local communities. The University, an urban land grant institution, is a very diverse community, a gateway to the world, and a significant investment engine for the

District of Columbia. The University is located at 4200 Connecticut Ave, NW Washington, and is conveniently located at the Van Ness/UDC stop on the Red Line of Metro. For more information on other University activities, contact Mike Andrews, Senior Director for Communications and University Spokesperson at (202) 274-5685 or visit the University's web site at www.udc.edu.

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