

# VCU

**2010:** 27-9 (11-7 CAA), Swept Saint Louis 68-56 and 71-65, CBI championship series

**In-conference offense:** 1.14 points per possession (1st)

**In-conference defense:** 0.98 points allowed per possession (4th)

You have to give Shaka Smart and his staff credit. They took a team that was 69th nationally in adjusted offensive efficiency in 2009, lost Eric Maynor, and built an offense that finished 26th nationally in 2010. The Rams will have to pull off something of a repeat performance in 2011 after losing Larry Sanders to the draft. Promising freshman center **Juvonte Reddic** will likely slide right into Sanders' spot with JC transfer **Toby Veal** as an insurance policy. The rest of the top six all return and gifted freshman wing **Reco McCarter** also projects to earn minutes. And there aren't really any hold-over problems from a year ago to fix: VCU pulled off something unique, placing in the top half of the CAA last year in each of the four factors on both sides of the ball. There are no pressing needs to address except for filling the hole Sanders leaves. Otherwise the natural improvement of their mass of young talent should put them right at the top of the conference. The five returning members of last year's top six (junior **Bradford Burgess** and seniors **Joey Rodriguez**, **Ed Nixon**, **Brandon Rozzell**, and **Jamie Skeen**) all had offensive ratings above 109 and all used at least 17 percent of the

teams possessions. It's not hard to imagine a team as strong as 2010's version, even without Sanders, when considering the play of the reserves last year and the ability of the conference's most impressive recruiting class. What may cause the most improvement? Non-steal turnovers. VCU ranked just fourth in the conference in turnovers forced despite their league-leading steal rate. Maybe the pressing style the Rams favor means that the baskets they do allow are quick and easy. So much effort is put forth trying to force the turnover that, oftentimes, defensive possessions are short (i.e. not long enough for the other team to make stupid mistakes), either due to a steal or a layup for the opponent. But let's take a step back. Most mid-majors would love to be worrying about non-steal turnovers and whether acclaimed freshmen pan out. I'm giving the edge to Old Dominion but I don't feel especially comfortable about it, and in the end my choice was mostly about the home dominance ODU has shown recently. If it turns out that losing Lee hurts Old Dominion more than losing Sanders hurts VCU, my pick could end up looking awfully silly.