Much more than a championship trophy came from Hartford’s America East women’s basketball title. The impact the league tournament had on school spirit, campus pride, and the Hartford community will be felt well into the future.

It’s a moment longtime University of Hartford supporters have envisioned since Howie first flopped his feathers—since the famed “third-half concert series” hit its opening note.

The University of Hartford, which ushered in Division I athletics in 1984, earned its first NCAA basketball tournament bid in March when the women’s basketball team recorded a trio of last-minute victories to win the America East title.

The excitement began last summer when the University was awarded the opportunity to serve as the host school for the eight-team competition. Few, however, would have imagined the fervor on campus that was created by the 2002 Friendship Cottage Cheese America East Women’s Basketball Championship, March 7 to 9.

If the story of these three days was the fifth-seeded Hawks’ winning it all, not far behind was how the support of the University and Greater Hartford communities made the tournament a smashing success. The average attendance for each of the four sessions during the tournament’s run was 2,259, the second-highest in the five years the championship has been held at a single site and the highest since 1998.

Benefiting from the tourney, too, was the Greater Hartford region. As teams and their fans arrived from across New England and New York State, area hotels and restaurants saw a significant rise in business, as did many leisure and cultural attractions in the area.

“No other series of events has brought this level of community and regional focus on the institution since its inception in 1957 as the tournament and victory have,” is the opinion of John J. Carson, the University’s senior advisor for corporate and community relations.

Letters and phone calls arriving at the University recently show that the impact of the tournament was powerful in the neighborhoods surrounding the University.

John Duchon, physical education teacher at Hartford’s Rawson Elementary School, brought his students to each of the games the Hawks played during the tournament. “The women [on the Hartford team] treated these children as sisters,” Duchon says. “They were kind and considerate toward them. They gave them autographs. They talked with them. They gave them each a piece of pizza. What more can I say? What positive role models these women were for the children, who were on cloud nine as I drove them home.”

The picture was priceless each day of the tournament as University President Walter Harrison sat in the center of the student section, loudly cheering on the Hawks with the hundreds of students that he invited to join him. “I can get away with a lot of things sitting there among the students that I couldn’t sitting elsewhere,” he quipped. Those not familiar were amazed when told that the man dancing to the time-out tunes and jumping farthest when a call went against the Hawks was the school’s leader.
Road to the League Title

Under third-year Head Coach Jennifer Rizzotti, the Hawks headed into the NCAA Tournament having won nine of 11 games, including their first-ever win at Maine. But it was at the 2002 Friendship Cottage Cheese America East Women’s Basketball Championship that the Hawks climbed to the next level.

Quarterfinals
Thursday, March 7
Hawks 59, Maine 55
After winning at Maine less than a week earlier, the Hawks again were victorious. Hartford led, 26-20, at the half and built an 11-point lead in the second half, but Maine rallied to tie the game at 50 in the closing minutes. Ernestine Austin’s jump shot with 1:38 left put the Hawks up for good, 52-51. Janeka Lopp had 15 points to pace the Hawks.

Semifinals
Friday, March 8
Hawks 60, Vermont 59
In a true classic, the Hawks overcame a four-point deficit with 3:23 remaining and ended Vermont’s 13-game winning streak. Kenitra Johnson scored with 18 seconds remaining for the game’s final points as the Hawk defense prevented Vermont from getting off a good shot in its final possession. The game marked the first time that the Hawks have knocked off a top seed in tournament play and assured Hartford a third straight .500-or-better season for the first time in the program’s Division I history.

Championship
Saturday, March 9
Hawks 50, Stony Brook 47
A first half that included four ties and five lead changes set the stage for a thrilling finish. Hartford trailed, 43-38, with four minutes remaining but used a 9-4 run, capped by a Lopp three-pointer, to tie the score with 55 seconds left. Kelly Ann Charles snuck free inside and hit a layup with 18 seconds left for the winning points. Dorcas Miller scored a game-high 16 points and was named to the All-Tournament team along with Lopp and Johnson (Most Outstanding Player).

The Men: A Heart-Stopping Finish

It took a miraculous finish to end the men’s basketball team’s season on March 3 in the America East tournament semifinals in Boston. Hartford’s Mantas Storpirstis had hit a running jumper with under one second left, apparently, to force overtime. In the unlikeliest of plays, however, Boston University, from its own baseline, threw the ball far upcourt to the top of the key, where Stijin Dhondt hit his only basket of the game to give the Terriers the 63-60 victory. The officials viewed multiple replays of the finish before ruling that the ball had left Dhondt’s hand with one-tenth of a second remaining.

The Hawks enjoyed one of the nation’s biggest turnarounds, winning 10 more games than they had in the previous season. Hartford finished third in America East with a 10-6 league mark. Second-year Head Coach Larry Harrison brought in a class of freshmen and transfers this past season that was ranked among the top 30 nationally by Hoop Scoop Online.
University student Olga Diaz ’04, an economics and finance major, has not seen such a showing of school pride in her two years on campus. “Everywhere you went those three days,” she says, “the main question was, ‘How was the game?’ This has united the college’s population. I have not chanted and cheered so much since attending my high school’s football games. I am so proud of my school, especially when talking to friends. It’s even more exciting to see the University of Hartford’s name in the newspaper and on television, especially ESPN.”

As the seconds ticked down late in the championship game, the Chase Family Arena was a site to behold. A collective roar challenging any ever heard since the Sports Center opened its doors more than a decade ago led many to tears. The largest crowd ever to watch a women’s basketball game at the University of Hartford—2,811—had seen a moment it and the institution will never forget.

Music to Cheer By
by Barbara Steinberger

The scene at the Chase Family Arena embodied the spirit of March Madness. Exuberant fans waved red and white pompons. Howie the Hawk pumped up the crowd as cheerleaders formed human pyramids at Center Court. The Pep Band swayed back and forth to the upbeat melody of the University fight song.

Wait a minute….A pep band? A fight song? At the University of Hartford?

That’s right. In January, the University unveiled its first-ever fight song and its official alma mater. At the same time, the new Pep Band began making its debut at men’s and women’s basketball games.

The two new songs and the Pep Band have contributed significantly to school spirit, something that the University has been working to improve. Nowhere was that spirit more evident than at the America East Women’s Basketball Tournament in the Chase Family Arena.

“The fan support was just amazing, and we were a part of that,” said John Lelan Ywarsky, a Hartt School senior who plays clarinet in the Pep Band. “The experience of being there and cheering on your team and getting the crowd worked up—you just feel like you’re contributing something to your school.” Ywarsky even added a little extra school spirit to the Pep Band by dying his hair bright red for the Hawks’ championship game against Stony Brook on March 9.

The fight song and the alma mater were written by faculty members of The Hartt School. Stephen Gryc, professor of composition and theory, wrote the music and lyrics to the fight song, “Fly High.” Gryc also wrote the music for the alma mater, “The Red and the White,” and the lyrics were written by Henry Fonte, associate professor of theatre. Both songs were introduced at the University’s mid-year faculty/staff meeting, held in Millard Auditorium in January.

The fight song will be played mainly at sporting events, while the alma mater will be performed at more formal occasions.

Gryc said he was pleased to be able to play a role in boosting school spirit and establishing some new traditions for the University. “Music at a game helps to create a sense of occasion and an atmosphere of excitement for the fans. The music and the fans give the players the emotional energy they need to compete and to win.”

The Pep Band was created by Glen Adsit, associate professor and director of bands at The Hartt School, and it is directed by Hartt graduate student Brian Zamek. The band has between 25 and 30 members; most are Hartt School undergraduates, but there also are some band members who attend other colleges within the University.

The band began playing at basketball games in January and was extremely well received by fans, Zamek said. After the women’s basketball team won the America East Tournament, the Pep Band accompanied the team to Norman, Okla., for the University’s first-ever appearance in the NCAA Division I basketball tournament.

Women’s basketball Head Coach Jennifer Rizzotti said that the boisterous fan support at the Chase Family Arena played a key role in helping the Hawks win three close games in a row to capture the America East championship. Members of the Pep Band are gratified that they helped to create that electric atmosphere.

“Our goal is to try to get the fans involved as much as possible. We collaborate with the cheerleaders and sometimes we even start the cheers,” said Zamek, who will earn a master’s degree in music education in May. “A lot of people have come up to us and told us how much they appreciate what we’re doing.”