One for the Record Books

WOMEN’S BASKETBALL WINS FIRST NCAA TOURNAMENT GAME

BY JONATHAN EASTERBROOK ’87, ‘90

On the night of March 21 in Trenton, N.J., the University of Hartford women’s basketball team was among the nation’s final 32 teams playing in the NCAA Division 1 Women’s Basketball Tournament for the first time in University history.

With the America East Conference’s Rookie (Erica Beverly), Player (Erika Messam), and Coach of the Year (Jennifer Rizzotti), the Hawks enjoyed a storybook 27-win season, setting school records at every turn. After capturing their third league tournament crown in five years, they then scored the biggest win in school history, defeating Temple University, 64-58, in the opening round of the NCAA Tournament. It was the first Hartford win ever over a Top 20 opponent and its first-ever victory in an NCAA Tournament game.

One win away from the Sweet 16, Hartford’s bid for a second straight upset fell short against the University of Georgia (73-54). “We had great respect for them [Hartford] coming into this game,” legendary Georgia Coach Andy Landers commented, “and we leave the game with even greater respect for the way they play and the season they had.”

As the basketball world took notice, so too did the University of Hartford family. Proud alumni and friends shared their thoughts through a University-hosted blog on the Internet, writing in from as far away as Yokohama, Japan; Oxford, England; and Paris, France.

Many former players checked in too, including Paige Sechler ’96. “I am thrilled that Hartford women’s basketball is getting the recognition that so many of us over the years worked so hard for and one day hoped to make a reality,” she said.

Coach Rizzotti, who recently signed a contract extension through 2010, is already thinking about next year. “Our goal now is to find kids who want to be on the first team at Hartford that goes to the Sweet 16.”

Two Hawks Fly High in SI

Thanks to Sports Illustrated (SI), the rest of the country now knows what fellow Hawks players, fans, and conference rivals knew all season: Kenny Adeleke ’06 and Erica Beverly ’09 are two of the region’s dominant hoop stars.

Adeleke was one of five players nationwide featured in the Jan. 23 edition of SI’s Inside College Basketball section. Under the title “Stealth Stars,” Adeleke was noted for breaking NBA star Vin Baker’s Hawks record for most consecutive games with a double-double (reaching double digits in any two categories—points scored, rebounds, or assists—in a game).

Beverly appeared in the magazine’s Feb. 7 edition as one of its “Faces in the Crowd.” At the time, she was recognized for helping to lead the Hawks to a 17-2 record, for earning seven Rookie of the Week honors, and for collecting five double-doubles. In all, Beverly set an America East Conference record, pulling in Rookie of the Week honors 10 times this season. Senior Adeleke established a new conference record as an eight-time Player of the Week.
For the first time in more than 20 years, the cry of “Play ball!” is wafting through the spring air on the University of Hartford campus.

“We’ve been a vagabond team for awhile now,” says Associate Athletics Director Jim Keener. “The last time we played a game on campus was in 1985.” The Hawks’ former field was sacrificed to create needed parking on campus, and funds have not been available to build a new field until now, according to Keener.

It’s not easy being a baseball team without a home field. But all that changed on a beautiful spring day in March when the Hawks played their first home game on the new field against the University of Massachusetts. Students, faculty, and staff came out to cheer for the Hawks, whose 6-2 victory over UMass was the first on-campus win for the baseball team since April 23, 1982.

With an outfield and infield covered in A-Turf, an artificial playing surface, Hawks Head Baseball Coach Jeff Calcaterra says the team should be able to get more games in and practice earlier in the season. He adds that his players are very excited about the new facility.

Second baseman Frank Cipolla ’06, who joined President Walter Harrison, Director of Athletics Pat Meiser-McKnett, Head Coach Calcaterra, and former players to throw out ceremonial first pitches before the game, says, “The field makes your jaw drop.”

Calcaterra has already seen the impact of the new baseball facility on recruiting. Players from California, Missouri, and Texas are on the Hawks roster this year, as well as from East Coast states like Delaware and Maryland. He believes the school will be even more successful in the future at drawing quality players from outside New England.

“When student-athletes are deciding whether they want to attend a school, [they look at] the education piece, and they consider the coach, the facility, and the schedule,” Calcaterra says. “Having this facility will help this program become one of the top baseball programs in the Northeast.”

The construction of the baseball field and the relocation of the softball field are part of Phase I of the University’s Home Field Advantage (HFA) project. The HFA project provides state-of-the-art sporting facilities for the school’s intercollegiate athletics programs. Besides the baseball and softball fields, Phase I also included the renovation last fall of Al-Marzook Field, the University’s soccer and lacrosse facility. The construction of a track and an all-purpose surrounding field in Phase II will complete the $11 million project.

The Hawks are hoping that the new facility will help them build attendance at their home games.

“A lot of people in West Hartford don’t know the University of Hartford has a baseball program,” says the second-year coach. “In a few years you will see a steady stream of support for this baseball program.”