Jennifer Rizzotti
Head Women’s Basketball Coach

Jen Rizzotti is now in her seventh year as head coach of the Hawks women’s basketball team. A former All-American on the UConn women’s team that captured its first national championship in 1995, she played five seasons of professional basketball in the WNBA and ABL. Since coming to Hartford in 1999, Rizzotti has led the team to three NCAA Tournament appearances, including this year’s first NCAA tournament win (64-58), against Temple University. The Hawks were defeated in their second-round game against the University of Georgia (73-54).

JEN, TO A LOT OF PEOPLE IN THIS STATE, ESPECIALLY LITTLE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN, YOU’RE A VERY SPECIAL PERSON. WHAT IS IT ABOUT YOU THAT MAKES YOU A GOOD ROLE MODEL?
When I meet people and they realize how short I am [editor’s note: she’s 5’5”] and the success I’ve had in basketball, they’re amazed. It does seem to inspire people to work hard and put their heart into everything.

WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR WHEN YOU’RE RECRUITING STUDENT-ATHLETES FOR THE UNIVERSITY?
We look for kids who do well in school, who are good teammates, who have strong family values, and who know how to work hard. At the same time, they need to be good at basketball. We’ve stuck with that recruiting strategy, and it’s worked brilliantly for us. We’ve had four semesters in a row now with a team GPA of over 3.0.

HAVEN’T YOU SAID THAT DIRECTOR OF ATHLETICS PAT MEISER-MCKNETT SAW THE COACH IN YOU BEFORE YOU DID?
If you had asked me a month before I got the job [about being a women’s basketball coach], I would have thought you were crazy! When she called me in to talk about the job, I was pretty surprised. Once I thought about it and saw the opportunity in front of me, I realized it was something I would love doing. I feel very fortunate that Pat had faith in me. I’ll always be grateful to her for that.

WHAT DID SHE SEE IN YOU?
Being a former coach herself, Pat knows you can’t just hire somebody who knows the game of basketball. You have to hire someone who can do the job of head coach. And whether it’s recruiting, or speaking out in the community, or handling media attention, there’s so much more to being a head coach than just basketball. I think she saw that, as young as I was, I could handle that gracefully.

YOU HAVE FOUR SENIORS GRADUATING THIS YEAR. DO YOU SEE NEXT YEAR AS A REBUILDING YEAR OR A CONTINUATION OF THIS YEAR’S INCREDIBLE SUCCESS?
Our seniors got us started and helped me recruit better and better players every year. Because of that, I don’t see us needing to rebuild. We still have a lot of great players, and I think our seniors have left us with a new, higher standard of excellence and determination that was never here before.

YOU’VE HAD A RECORD-BREAKING SEASON THIS YEAR. WHAT WAS YOUR FAVORITE MOMENT?
This team was really determined to go into the first round of the NCAA Tournament and win, and they never wavered from that for one second. Standing on the sidelines, with 10 seconds left to go in the game and the realization that we were going to do it—that is my fondest memory of the whole year.