Sports Journal
An up-close look at SU athletics

Bouncing Back

“We were behind the whole game. We were down six points at halftime and down five with three minutes to go. At the end, we were down one and their best shooter was on the foul line. All she had to do was make one of two shots.

“She missed them both and we called a time out at 14 seconds. I just told the team then that at six seconds I want a shot. Jadeane [Daye] started to put up a shot at six seconds. By the time it reached the board there were only three seconds left.

“It went in and we won the game.”

In that way Barbara Jacobs, head coach of SU’s women’s basketball, describes her team’s 57-56 win over Villanova on March 3 for the Big East Championship. To Jacobs, that first-ever league crown meant more than just a chance to advance to the NCAA tournament.

That game was like a two-hour version of the Syracuse women’s entire season. Like the game, the season saw the women giving their all from a struggling start, gaining confidence from small breaks, and then doing what it takes to win.

“Hard work pays off” was the lesson of the season, Jacobs says, in which SU went from a 7-10 start to an 18-13 final win-loss record.

For the Orangewomen, the 1984-85 season began with uncertainty. Of the three returning starters, one—senior Jadeane Daye—had missed the previous season with a serious injury. “The beginning of our season was a real tough schedule,” Jacobs recalls. “I knew we were going to get banged around a lot at the beginning.”

The turning point came in mid-January, when Jacobs moved senior Toni Igrec from forward to center and freshman Felisha Legette to forward—where she belonged all along, Jacobs admits. Freshman Sue Ludwig began at guard. Everyone played better and the chemistry was right, Jacobs says: “These girls knew each other.”

From then on SU won 11 out of 13 games and finished the regular season tied with Pittsburgh for fourth in the Big East. They entered the league tournament on a roll, edged Pitt 56-55 in the first round, and blew out top-seeded St. Johns 67-49 in the second round.

That set up the championship game against Villanova. SU scored the first basket of the game, but lost that lead and did not regain it until 39 minutes later. In the meantime, Syracuse looked to be losing a noble fight, trailing by six at the half and by seven with only 3:29 on the clock. It was then that the Orangewomen turned on the jets, bringing themselves to within a single point.

When Villanova forward Shelly Pendefather missed two free throws at 0:14, Syracuse called time. Two passes later, Daye took the ball between two defenders, leaned toward the lane, and swished an off-balance, 10-foot jump shot from the left side that meant victory. “I just shot it, went across the lane, and I looked up and it went in,” Daye said later. “Then I heard the screams.”

Ironically, the final game reflected the women’s season in one other respect as well: It was played in virtual anonymity. Despite the fact that the tournament was held in SU’s own Manley Field House, the women attracted exactly 501 paying fans to witness their championship victory, and their effort netted them just two columns in the next day’s local newspaper.

Across campus at the Carrier Dome, the men’s team had concluded its season just five days earlier as the hottest ticket in town—or in the country, for that matter. A single-game attendance record of 32,520 was set when the Orangemen played Villanova on Feb. 1 (SU whipped the eventual NCAA champions, 92-79); and the season’s average attendance of 25,870 set a national standard as well, beating out Kentucky’s Rupp Arena.

There is no question that the Orangemen deserved their popularity. They opened the season with four returning starters—including charismatic Dwayne “Pearl” Washington and Raphael Addison—and a corps of four outstanding freshmen. Although most preseason experts saw them standing one year away from their full potential, the men enjoyed early season success, scoring impressive victories against the likes of Louisiana...
State and Notre Dame, and pulling off an emotional one-point upset of top-ranked Georgetown in the Dome.

Unfortunately, the regular season contained its share of disappointments, as well: two frustrating losses to Connecticut, a last-shot defeat at the hands of St. John's, and a 9-7 record in the Big East. In post-season play, the men suffered convincing second-round losses in both the league and NCAA tournaments. “We had a very good season,” Coach Jim Boeheim told the press after the NCAA tournament loss to Georgia Tech. “We belonged in the group ranked from 10 to 20. We weren’t a top-five team that could blow people out.” Nevertheless, Boeheim’s remarks carried an almost wistful tone. “Last year’s team overachieved,” he said. “This year’s team did at least what it should have done.”

Although the men’s 22-9 record actually outclassed the women’s 18-13, Jacobs’ post-season comments were considerably more upbeat than Boeheim’s. Despite their 25-point loss to eventual national champions Old Dominion in the NCAA tournament, both Jacobs and her players spoke as though they were on the edge of something big.

"That never happened before. This has definitely accelerated our program.”

Jacobs, in her seventh year as an SU coach, has had winning teams before. In 1979-80, for instance, the women were 26-8 and went to the AIAW (Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women) nationals. Partly because women’s sports programs operated separately from men’s, even less exposure came with that season. This year, the exposure has started to come, although getting spectators into the stands and stories into the media hasn’t been easy. “The press will say to you, ‘You don’t have a crowd so why should we put anything in the paper about you? Nobody cares,’” Jacobs says. “Our answer is that nobody cares because they don’t know that we’re playing.”

Attracting more fans may be the key to the program’s continued growth and success. And Jacobs points out that the audience for SU’s women’s basketball is already bigger than that of most other schools in the Big East. “There have always been people who were very supportive of us,” she says. “Now that we’re winning, we’re just gaining more people. Hopefully, when we open our next season there will be a lot more people interested in seeing what we’re going to be like.”

In the long run, both more fans and better press may depend on an appreciation of how the women’s game has changed. “Most people still think of women’s basketball as being back in the Dark Ages, when they played in long skirts,” Jacobs says. “They had six players on a side, weren’t allowed to cross midcourt, and were limited to three dribbles.”

The women’s game still doesn’t strive for the dazzle of the slam dunk, but neither is it a sleeper. Men’s and women’s basketball are simply not the same game, Jacobs stresses. “The men’s game is above the rim. Our game is on the floor. A lot of people do compare us but it’s just not the same. We don’t want to be compared and we don’t want to compete with them. There’s no way for us to compete.”

“We are trying to create our own following, our own part of the world,” she adds. “We are trying to be what we can—the best that we can be.”

—Cheryl Dorschner/David May