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Montclair State women rout College of NJ, 76-47, to complete undefeated regular season

Joan Ficke knew better, but, against her better judgment, she did it anyway — and has endured a constant ribbing ever since.

Last week, Ficke, the team captain of Montclair State's last regular season undefeated women's basketball team in 1970-71, dug up an old team picture from that season and showed it to her pal and the school's legendary hoopster, Hall of Famer Carol "The Blaze" Blazejowski.

Blazejowski, the inaugural winner of the Wade Trophy as the nation's best collegiate women's player in 1978, when she led the country in scoring with a 38.6-point average, was coached by Ficke during her freshman season. She enjoys nothing better than poking good-natured fun at her.

The black-and-white photo shows the team dressed in dated, no-frills culottes-style jumpsuit uniforms. Ficke gleefully points out the uniforms had numbers on the back.

"Carol jumped all over it," said Ficke, who is now dean of the Graduate School at Montclair. "She couldn't contain herself. I'm a historical artifact. But that's the way it was back then. We were called the girl's team, not women's team.

"The culottes were actually a step up. The year before, we wore wool tunics that we shared with the field hockey team. Talk about being warm."

Wednesday night, Montclair State's pioneering past ushered in the new gatekeepers of the school's proud women's basketball tradition as Ficke and Blazejowski watched the Red Hawks complete a record-setting undefeated season with a 76-47 victory over the College of New Jersey before a boisterous crowd at Montclair's Panzer Athletic Center.

"I think it's terrific," said Blazejowski, the associate vice president of university advancement at Montclair. "Any time a team can go undefeated, it's impressive. You always have those off days and anybody can sneak up on you."

The Red Hawks (25-0, 16-0 in the New Jersey Athletic Conference), ranked No. 5 by D3Hoops.com and No. 9 in the USA Today Sports Division 3 poll, tied a school record with the 25 victories, set by Blazejowski's 1977-78 team that reached the AIAW Final Four at UCLA's Pauley Pavilion. This team's 25-game winning streak is a school-record.

Montclair State is the No. 1 seed in the conference tournament and has earned a first-round bye. The winner of the tournament advances to the Division 3 NCAA Tournament, which begins March 1.

"It's kind of surprising," said coach Karin Harvey, in her sixth season. "We only returned four players from last season and only have one senior. But they worked hard and understood and bought into our system. They're a very team-oriented group.

"Our style is we defend first. We defend. We rebound. And we run. It's pretty fun — and we're pretty good at it."

The numbers bear that out. The Red Hawks, who play an up-tempo style, have steamrolled the opposition. Entering Wednesday night's game, they ranked second in Division 3 in scoring margin (28.8 ppg), second in steals (18.4 spg) and seventh in scoring defense (44.8 ppg).

Four players average in double figures — Melissa Tobie (15.0), Taylor Jeffers (11.2), Janitza Aquino (10.2) and freshman Shalette Brown (10.1). Nicosia Henry, a transfer from Seton Hall, is averaging 9.5 points.

Harvey has assembled the talent without the benefit of Division 1-type scholarships. Top-ranked DePauw University is the only other undefeated team in Division 3.

"Not everyone wants to play in Division 3," said Harvey, a tireless recruiter. "We probably have three players on our roster who could play on the Division 1 level but chose to play at Division 3 because they like the balance of being a student athlete."

The season has been quite a ride down memory lane for Ficke and Blazejowski, a pair of New Jersey natives from Paterson and Elizabeth, respectively.

"I think back to Title IX (in 1972) and now you have these women doing this," Ficke said. "I feel like I'm watching my past but with much younger women. I remember what it meant to me. It was fabulous.

"And I'm sure Carol would say the same thing."

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