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Living up to tradition started by Montclair State trailblazers

From her courtside vantage point, staring into a human landscape of celebrating bodies, head coach Karin Harvey could feel the intoxicating mix of joy and relief spreading through her Montclair State gym.

All the focus, all the anxiety, all the pressure and all the fun of a long season had just collided in one glorious moment: a 76-47 victory over The College of New Jersey that clinched an undefeated regular season, punctuated the long-secured top seed in the New Jersey Athletic Conference women's basketball tournament, and all but assured at least an at-large bid to the upcoming Division III national tournament.

"Just amazing" is how Harvey described last Wednesday night's scene. "For the first time, my team was able to celebrate, to smile, and for me, that was the best part, to see them finally allowing themselves to feel everything instead of holding it in. As much as you say it's OK if you lose, the closer you get, the more you want it."

The 25-0 mark is the best in the school's history, matching a Montclair State record for victories in a season. For two women sitting side by side in the stands, the on-court celebration below had a familiar feel, awakening memories of a season 35 years ago, about a group of groundbreaking women who would help usher in the crowded women's sports tableau we now enjoy.

"We were in some ways a curiosity. People came to see us at a time when women's basketball was breaking out," said Carol Blazejowski, the Hall of Fame player out of Montclair State who two years ago traded in basketball for an administrative position at her alma mater. "I had such a prideful feeling watching this team, that yet another Montclair team was making a historic run into the record books."

Blazejowski's amazing four-year run at Montclair put the program on the map, a career still remembered decades later for so many records, among them the single-game scoring mark at Madison Square Garden (52), a just-matched school record 25 victories in 1978, a nod as the initial Wade Trophy winner as the nation's top female player and a run to the AIAW Final Four, the forerunner to today's ubiquitous March Madness appeal.

"Blaze," who hails from Cranford and now lives in Nutley, continued a rising basketball path as a professional player, a member of the U.S. national team and longtime general manager of the WNBA's New York Liberty.

That run ended in 2011, but though she is not officially in the game — her Montclair position as associate vice president of university advancement involves marketing and outreach for the entire university — the game will always be in her.

So she got her ticket to last Wednesday's game, got a seat beside close friend, current graduate school dean and fellow Montclair warrior Joan Ficke, who led the 1971 team to an undefeated regular season, and grabbed a handful of faculty colleagues to form what she called "a posse" in the stands. She and Ficke, who coached Blaze's freshman team, found themselves back in the grip of the past while at the same time enthralled with the future of their beloved sport. From there to here, tethered together like pieces on the same game board being played generations apart.

"It's the continuum of women's athletics, from what it was to what it's become," Ficke said. "This story is about them, who they are and what they are doing, but you feel grateful you had some early role in doing something that years down the road, there's this."

In truth, there were more fans in the seats and more again standing in the aisles when Blaze was blazing her path, but that should not be perceived as declining interest in the women's game. Rather, it reflects how much the world of opportunity has changed for girls and women interested in playing sports, how much the passage of Title IX (1972 federal legislation mandating equal opportunity for both genders at federally funded institutions) truly opened the floodgates to college, high school, grade school and recreation teams.

"I have daughters who have been playing basketball since fifth grade; I didn't play organized ball until college. There were no teams for girls," Ficke said. "We didn't know what Title IX would mean, but we were all attached to it. In some ways, it's probably better that players now can take it for granted."

Because now, this is a story about those Title IX descendants, about a new generation's chance to pick up the ball and advance it a few more steps. The next chapter in Montclair's journey comes Wednesday against Rutgers-Newark, in the second round of the conference tournament (Montclair earned a bye in the weekend's opening round) and with a win, a berth in Saturday's championship game. After that, it's the NCAA tournament, where the Red Hawks should receive a high seed based on their rankings: No. 1 regionally and No. 5 nationally.

They will be forced to play all tournament games on the road, however, because of the NCAA's recent decision to disallow sanctioned events to be held in New Jersey due to recent moves by the state toward allowing legalized sports betting.

"We're excited, this is what they worked for," Harvey said. "Now we can get started."

They are blazing a new trail all their own, but without doubt, the fire was lit by a different blaze years ago. Together again last Wednesday night, new history was made.

"I'm grateful to come back to my alma mater, where history began, and be part of a new generation. For me, it's come full circle," Blazejowski said.

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