

## **At 25-0, Montclair State women's basketball a surprise juggernaut**

For a few rare and ultimately fleeting seconds, the Montclair State University women's basketball team is actually losing, but the school's most famous hoops alumna is anything but worried.

MSU senior Taylor Jeffers leaps to shoot a layup during the second half Feb. 13.

"The game is young," Carol Blazejowski says from her movie theater-style box seat, situated in the top row of the modest bleachers at MSU's Panzer Athletic Center. It's a sentence said casually, confidently, the way you might describe the arrival of a train running a minute or two behind schedule.

Montclair State, unbeaten and one of the best NCAA Division III teams in America, trails conference rival The College of New Jersey, 10-8, after six minutes of basketball. The deficit doesn't last long.

Without missing a beat, sharpshooter Jen Kuczynski hits the first of her four 3-pointers seconds after Blazejowski's pronouncement, sparking a 15-0 run that turns the Red Hawks' regular-season finale into a full-blown coronation: a 76-47 victory in front of a raucous crowd of students, alumni, school administrators, and more than a few curious fans out to see a team whose 25-0 record seems to have materialized out of nowhere.

Three decades ago, the gymnasium at MSU was where Blazejowski, a Basketball Hall of Famer and the first Wade Trophy winner for the most outstanding women's college basketball player, wowed fans with her gifted scoring ability. Her Montclair State teams became one of the early powers in the game, taking third place in the 1978 national college tournament, then operated by the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW).

Now an associate vice president for university advancement at MSU, Blazejowski made sure to be in attendance to watch the 2013 team earn win No. 25 - equaling the total of her '78 Final Four team. She sat next to Joan Ficke, who led the 1971 MSU team to a 12-1 record and coached Blazejowski for a season, recalling the past and enjoying the Red Hawks' performance.

"It means so much to have them at our games," said Karin Harvey, the team's sixth-year coach.

"Carol is such a big piece of women's basketball history, and we try to share that with our players. We try to educate them about the opportunity they get automatically, thanks to Title IX, that didn't exist before people like Carol and Dr. Ficke."

[Read more about Carol Blazejowski, the legacy of Title IX and Montclair State's place in women's basketball history in Tara Sullivan's column on [NorthJersey.com](http://NorthJersey.com).]

Montclair State, which played its New Jersey Athletic Conference tournament semifinal last night after The Times went to press (the championship game, if MSU won, would be Saturday afternoon at the Panzer Athletic Center), is ranked No. 5 in the nation in Division III, according to one poll. MSU's average margin of victory is more than 28 points per game, and every game has ended in at least a 13-point victory. The team is expected to be highly seeded in the school's first NCAA Tournament appearance since 1995.

"We returned four players from last season's team," said Harvey, whose previous best record here was a 19-8 mark a year ago. "They were important returners, but we were basically dealing with 10 new players. When we started practicing in October, I was definitely excited about our effort and ability level, but we had no idea how long it would take for everything to click." Harvey's full-court trapping defense can be suffocating, and it has been exceptionally effective. Despite playing at a fast pace (the Red Hawks force nearly 30 turnovers per game), only four opponents have topped 50 points.

A wonderfully balanced lineup, Montclair State has five players averaging 9.6 or more points per game, and four players averaging 6.0 or more rebounds per game.

"It makes us pretty special," Harvey said. "You can't key on any one player. Every single player, all 14 on our roster, has bought in to what we're trying to do, and so everyone contributes."

Sophomore captain Melissa Tobie is the team's highest scorer (14.9 PPG), and can do just about anything on the court. A star player at Roselle Catholic High School who had offers from Division I schools, Harvey sold her on the opportunity to play for and win championships while being a "true student-athlete."

Another key player, Nicosia Henry, a starter at Division I Seton Hall last season, transferred to MSU for its Fashion Studies program, which is one of the best in the state. The team's lone senior, 5-11 forward Taylor Jeffers, was a role player for three seasons before blossoming into a leadership role. Point guard Janitza Aquino and freshman Shalette Brown run one of the rare alley-oop combinations in Division III.

For this group, winning has become routine in a matter of months. And while last Wednesday was no exception on the scoreboard, in reality, these players recognize that there's nothing routine about what is happening on the hardwood at Montclair State.

"This is the most rewarding season I've had, and it has nothing to do with being 25-0," Harvey said. "To have a group of student-athletes who are dedicated, who work hard, who care for each other, who are good students? That's what Division III is supposed to be about. I couldn't be prouder that I get to share a season like this with this group of kids."

[View Original Article](#)