A frustratingly familiar end to the season for women's basketball

By JAMES NOLAN
Staff Writer

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. — Over the summer, the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference will rebrand and operate under a different name. They might as well rip the band-aid off and call it the Connecticut Conference, because it feels as though no matter the sport, the championship matchup perennially features the Fairfield Stags and the Quinnipiac Bobcats.

Women's basketball's matchup March 9 marks the sixth time in the past three academic years that a MAAC Championship comes down to the rivals. The Bobcats faltered yet again and watched the Stags celebrate on the floor of Jim Whelan Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City, N.J. for the third consecutive year.

If not for a first minute goal in the 2023 MAAC women's soccer championship game, Quinnipiac wouldn't be in the win column. This loss now puts them at 1-5 over that span.

"That rivalry, it keeps the fans going, it keeps us going," Meghan Andersen, Fairfield's junior road runner, said. She's won the championship every season she's been with the Stags, putting up nine points, two steals and two blocks to help secure this seasons' game against the Bobcats.

While Quinnipiac came up short again, it's hard to classify this season as anything but "successful," in the words of Quinnipiac head coach Tricia Fabbri.

"One of the best in the program's history," Fabbri said. "But, we still wanted to cut those nets down and I wanted to bring these young ladies out for a little dance with March Madness."

As it always is with collegiate sports, the nature of the beast is that a few of those young ladies will not return to play basketball in Hamden next season.

There's senior guard Sydney Ryan, who joined the Bobcats for her final season after three years at Furman University. Her sister, first year guard Ella Ryan, became one of the most pivotal players for the Bobcats down the stretch. Sydney Ryan took the final shot that could have tied it for Quinnipiac. With 23 seconds left, her three-point attempt clunked off the rim and into the hands of Fairfield.


TYLER MIGANULT/CHRONICLE

"If we had to do it all over again, we'd do the exact same thing, with the exact same person, with Sydney shooting it," Fabbri said, placing no blame on the elder sister.

Then there's the two four-year pillars of this roster. The ones that helped laid the groundwork of what Quinnipiac basketball has become. Senior forward Ella O'Donnell and graduate student guard Jackie Grisdale.

Fabbri made it more than evident that she will miss the duo. She called O'Donnell "one of the hardest working players I've ever coached," bubbling with praise for how much the Ireland native improved since this time last year.

"She exemplifies the courage and the hard work and the program of what our foundation is laid upon by taking that leap of faith," Fabbri said.

As for Grisdale, Fabbri wasted no time giving her her flowers. "I have been amazed and in awe of what she does. As a human, let alone a basketball player," she said in her opening statement.

Grisdale rose to the top of a variety of Quinnipiac career records during her time in Hamden, most notably three-pointers, finishing with 231. Tomorrow brings unfamiliar territory for the Bobcats: the post-Grisdale era.

In a lot of ways, the former walk-on perfectly embodies what Quinnipiac basketball has become. Hard-working and selfless.

"I am so thankful for every moment that I've spent here," Grisdale said. "I didn't know where I was going to end up after high school, but I couldn't have asked for a better path than this."

She played every minute of both of Quinnipiac's final two games. She never gave up on the team, firing a desperation three-pointer with eight seconds left that would've only impacted the margin of victory.

Grisdale and Fabbri both sported misty eyes and shaky voices after the game. Perhaps no moment better encapsulates their raw emotion than when Fabbri was asked how her seniors have made her a better person.

Deafening silence. Fabbri took 10 seconds to collect herself and her thoughts.

"It's the reason you still coach, right?" she finally said. "They make me feel alive, they give me great purpose and… they make me want to be better because of what they're sacrificing and doing every day for this program and university."

It's another disheartening, yet frustratingly familiar, end to the season for Fabbri's Bobcats. As Grisdale and O'Donnell depart, one thing is surely staying put. The foundation of what Quinnipiac basketball has become, that they, alongside Fabbri, hammered into place.

"I couldn't be prouder of (the team) and I know that they are going to continue to do amazing things," Grisdale finished, before walking off the stage, wearing the Bobcat uniform for the final time.

Far from a fairytale ECAC ending

Men's hockey falls before the gates of Lake Placid for the first time since 2019

By ALEXANDRA MARTINAKOVA
Editor-in-Chief

"I assumed we were playing tomorrow."

Those were the final words from head coach Rand Pecknold following Quinnipiac's ECAC Quarterfinals sweep loss to Clarkson — two games that the entire team and fans would probably like to forget as soon as possible.

Historically, the ECAC Tournament has not been kind to the Bobcats. Despite the fact that they now etched their name into the Cleary Cup 10 times — six times consecutively as the only team to do it in one conference — the Bobcats were only crowned ECAC Champions once in 2016.

Twenty-one seasons in the ECAC, 10 regular season titles and yet only one ECAC Championship. It's almost impossible odds, yet that is exactly the fate of the Bobcats.

Especially since Quinnipiac has been basically dominating the conference, at least since the 2012-13 season.

Since their first season in the conference (2005-06), the Bobcats have made and traveled for the ECAC Semifinals 11 times (counting the 2021 season, where the games were hosted in Hamden due to COVID-19 restrictions). They made the championship game six times.

And even with the proverbial curse of Lake Placid, when the ECAC Tournament moved back to the Herb Brooks Arena in 2014, the Bobcats only missed out on their chance to play on the miracle ice in 2018, 2019, 2020 — even with the championship weekend cancelled due to pandemic restrictions, Quinnipiac fell to Princeton in the quarterfinals — and this past weekend.

But looking on paper, it really shouldn't have.

Clarkson was the No. 8 seed, the lowest surviving team from the opening round. Quinnipiac beat the Golden Knights at home in the regular season in a decisive 4-1 victory in late November and tied on the road in January, losing after a shootout.

Not to say that it would've been an easy matchup for the Bobcats either way. The Golden Knights came into the contest determined to punch their ticket to Lake Placid, and their fight and passion showed.

Quinnipiac was 26-7-3 on the season heading into the series this past weekend. Its players have been on a roll, with four forwards notching double digits in goals and eight players having over 20 points.

That team was nowhere to be found on Friday or Saturday.

"We stunk," Pecknold said following the first game of the series. There really is no other way to put it.

There is no question that Quinnipiac got absolutely dominated across all boards. Letting in two shorthanded goals on the same power play is not something that one sees often.

It would be easy to place the blame on junior goaltender Dylan Silverstein. The Los Angeles, California native started both games in his first weekend this season with back-to-back games and let in three goals on three shots in the latter end of the third period in game two.

But it is also important to note that despite the 3-0 loss, game one of the quarterfinal series was his best performance of the entire season, with a season high 32 saves and a .970 save percentage.

"Silvi was great, kept us in the game," Pecknold said following said game. "Probably the best game he's had all year."

It would also be easy to blame junior winger Mason Marcellus, who accidentally left the puck behind on the blue line on the power play, which led to the first breakaway and shorthanded opportunity that completely shifted the momentum of the game.While, it would be easy to place the blame on one player or mishap, the truth is, this one is on the entire team.


QUINN O'NEILL/CHRONICLE

"We just had a lot of guys who were in panic mode from the get-go, just pouty on the bench," Pecknold said Friday night. "I think some guys didn't wanna play hockey tonight, they thought it was gonna be easy and it wasn't. It just perplexes me that we have this really good team, high character kids and that in a home playoff game, we can be that bad."

Before this weekend, Quinnipiac only truly lost one home game the entire season (or in over a year), falling to Cornell Feb. 20 — excluding the unofficial shootout loss to Alaska Fairbanks that counts as a tie.

"Our buy-in has been sporadic, we had a really good run until the Cornell game and then we went off the rails a bit, the buy-in has not been good," Pecknold said.

Maybe it was the two-week pause after securing a bye-round in the ECAC Tournament, maybe it was that dreaded 6-1 Cornell loss.

Whatever it was, the Bobcats need to work it out before the first round of the NCAA Tournament if they hope to make it back to the Frozen Four for the first time since their national championship title in 2023.

Despite falling to No. 10 in the NPI after the sweep, their appearance in the tournament is confirmed. What awaits now is which regional they will appear in and whether or not they showcase the heart and identity that Pecknold keeps preaching and fight for their chance to show they deserve their place amongst the best teams in the nation.

The Selection Sunday show is scheduled for March 22 at 3 p.m.