Owls win NE10



PHOTOS | JULIAN MARKESE

Forward Arianna Gerkin, a sophomore, after the game.



The team celebrates receiving an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament.



Guard Hope Fox, a senior, receives the Elite 24 award.



Guard Taeya Steinauer, a sophomore, throws a pass.



Guard Hope Fox, a senior, dribbles up the court.

By Julian Markese
Sports Editor

The women's basketball team won the NE10 Championship for the first time since 2007. They defeated Bentley University 59–50 in Waltham, Massachusetts on Sunday, March 8.

Bentley has won 24 out of 43 possible NE10 titles. Before Sunday's matchup, they were four-time defending champions. It was the first time in 14 years that the Owls beat Bentley away from home.

"We knew we could do it. We've done it once this year. The only thing was, we were on the road. That was just a little more adversity, but we've faced so much this year already," guard Ally Sentance, a senior, said. "It was nothing new to us."

The Owls found themselves in foul trouble early. Forward Tish Blackwood, a freshman, who won NE10 Rookie of the Year, picked up two fouls in the first quarter and was forced to the bench for the rest of the first half.

Forward Arianna Gerkin, a sophomore, stepped up in her absence. Gerkin had two blocks in the second quarter, in which Bentley only scored six points. She grabbed four important rebounds and finished with four points.

Bentley, despite out-rebounding the Owls in the first half, especially on the offensive glass, was unable to capitalize on their chances. They shot only 31% from the field in the first. The Owls nursed a four-point lead heading into the second half.

In the third quarter, the Owls faced offensive woes of their own. Bentley's defense was stifling. They locked down the Owls, leading to several shot clock violations, each of which added volume to the hostile crowd.

"The crowd makes it more fun. There were some baseball boys chanting, trying to get in our heads. But we just don't let them. We're stronger than that. We're bigger than that. It doesn't matter who's yelling at us," Sentance said. "We just stay with each other, cancel the outside noise and focus on us."

Sentance used her known shooter status to her advantage. Instead of taking three-pointers, of which she is hitting 42% this season, she faked, drove to the rim with quick feet and fast hands on her way to 12 points. She also grabbed six defensive rebounds, tied for the team lead.

The team leaned on their three experienced guards more than they have all season. Sentance, and guards Jillian Martin, a graduate, and Hope Fox, a senior, all put on scintillating performances.

"I can't say enough about our seniors. They have been here before. They have experienced failure. That really drove them and this team to get where we are," Head Coach Kate Lynch said.

Fox was the star. She was efficient from the field, shooting 5–9 for 12 points. She was tenacious on the glass, grabbing six rebounds. She dove for loose balls. She rallied her teammates each and every time there was a lull. She was a constant threat and an ankle snatcher.

"We use Hope Fox as a verb. We say, 'She just got Hope Foxed,'" Lynch said. "She steps up in big moments. That's just who she is."

Fox was the NE10 Championship Most Outstanding Player. She won the Elite 24 award, given to the player with the highest GPA at the NE10 Championship, for the second time in her career.

"Honestly, I don't even know how those awards work. I'm just glad to walk away with a win," Fox said. "At the end of the day, we just wanted to win. That's all that matters to me."

The Owls pulled away in the fourth. Despite struggling to find a rhythm after sitting most of the game, Blackwood leapt into action and made an impact when it mattered most. She tied the game at 43 with a strong layup through contact, which kickstarted the Owls' fourth quarter run.

Ten straight points gave the Owls a 51–43 lead with less than five minutes remaining. The traveling fans made their presence known, drowning out the previously unflappable Bentley crowd. The deficit was too much. The home team pulled within four, but the Owls showed their resilience.

Martin was the engine. She played the whole game. She facilitated the offense calmly, providing a team-high four assists to go along with her team-high 15 points. She was laser focused. She was dependable down the stretch, hitting seven of her eight free throws in crunch time while Bentley fouled to try to stay in the game.

Pure joy was on display when the final horn blared. The players jumped into each other's arms. Some fans ran onto the court. The team was given their trophy, their hats and their T-shirts. Each player and coach climbed a ladder to cut a piece of the net.

"It doesn't even feel real right now," Fox said.

The team will not have long to celebrate. Following the win, they will get an automatic bid to the NCAA tournament, where they will face Saint Michael's College at home on Friday, March 13. The Owls are the top-ranked team in the region.

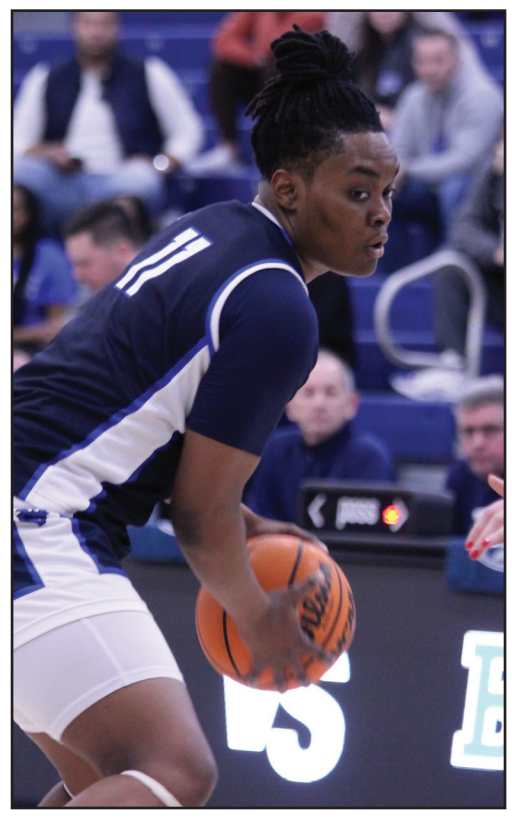
"We'll celebrate a little on the bus, then right back at it," Sentance said. "Coach Lynch runs a tight ship, and we love it that way. I would expect nothing less than to practice tomorrow."

Winning the NE10 Championship is a triumph in and of itself, but the team has set its sights higher since the beginning of the season. With Lynch at the helm, the team is primed and ready for a deep playoff run. She gave all the limelight to her players.

"This moment is for them. I am so proud of them. I am grateful to be their coach. They are all amazing young people," Lynch said.

In turn, the team shone the light back on her.

"We did that for Coach Lynch," forward Rheyna Steinauer, a senior, said.



Forward Tish Blackwood, a freshman, backs down a defender.



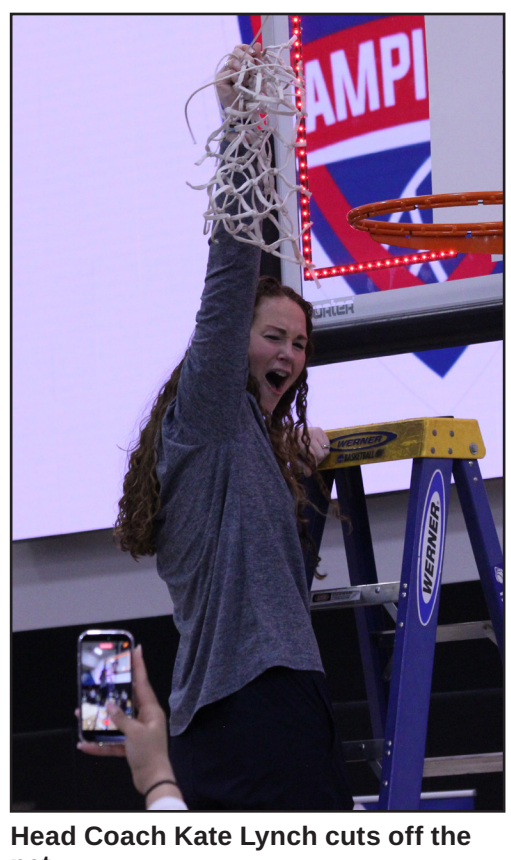
Guard Jillian Martin, a graduate, calls a play while she dribbles.



Forward Rheyna Steinauer, a senior, lifts the trophy.



Guard Taeya Steinauer, a sophomore, with a piece of the net after the game.



Head Coach Kate Lynch cuts off the net.