Women’s Basketball takes Arizona by surprise

BY ERIC TOSI  CRUSADER SPORTS STAFF

For Head Coach Bill Gibbons and the rest of the Holy Cross Women’s Basketball team, one of the goals for the 2001-2002 campaign was to not simply make the NCAA tournament, but for the fifth straight year, but rather to achieve the coveted 12 seed in the “Big Dance” that would ensure that the tournament game in March be played at a neutral site. As you may or may not know, the top ranked teams in women’s college basketball who play the 14, 15, or 16 seeded teams earn home court advantage for the first round of the NCAA tournament. Playing at home greatly hinders the chance of an upset, as most, if not all, college basketball teams boast tremendous records when playing on their own familiar and friendly hardwoods.

To earn a 12 or higher seed, a team must play a strong non-conference schedule, go 13-2 or better and win many of these non-league games, in addition to winning their respective conference tournament. That means a strong performance in the beginning of March, to bolster their Rankings Percentage Index (RPI). The former part of the criterion to reach a 12 seed has already been met by the HC women’s hoop team in just their first seven games. Playing a grueling “WNYA-like non-conference schedule” that included teams such as UMass, Providence, Siena, Boston College, Northeastern, Arizona, and 20th ranked Wisconsin, the women have played the best and beaten the best, and are off to a sizzling 5-2 start.

In the season opener versus the University of Massachuestts Minutemen, the Lady Crusaders used a 19-0 run midway through the first stanza en route to a convincing 68-42 victory at the Hart Center on November 16. Three Crusaders tallied double figures for Coach Gibbons, led by freshman sensation Maggie Fontana, who in her first collegiate game, finished with 13 points to go along with her 8 rebounds coming off in off the bench. This past weekend, the Crusaders ventured out to the Desert to particpate in the Arizona Basketball Classic at the McKale Center in Tucson, along with national powerhouses Arizona (two votes out of the top 25 in the Associated Press Poll), Wisconsin (#20 in the AP poll), and Pittsburgh. In the first round of the tournament, they squared off against host Arizona and stunned the Wildcats, on their own home court, 83-74, in what Gibbons dubbed “a huge win for the program.” Their diamond-and-one defense baffled the Cats, as the Crusaders consistently led by seven or more points throughout the first half and went into the locker room at the break up nine. In the second, HC witheld their lead by不断扩大 some huge free throws to secure the nine point victory. Fontana blew up for a career high 23 points to lead the ‘Saders while O’Keefe and senior Tri-Captain Elisa Zawadzki added 16 and 11. Campbell had her second solid game in a row, as her play in the post was labeled “dominant” by Gibbons against the bigger Arizona frontcourt as she scored 13 points and grabbed seven rebounds. The win moved the Cross to a 5-1 record on the year.

In the Championship Game, the ‘Saders faced 20th ranked Wisconsin. They put forth a spirited effort and gave the Badgers all they could handle but fell after the disappointing loss to Boston College. HC bounced back brilliantly as they crushed the Huskies 71-51. O’Keefe, Fontana, and Paukert all hit double figures for the Cross as they dropped 16,16, and 11 respectively. However, they were not the only three to tally more than ten, as sophomore forward Mary Rose Campbell connected on 5-8 from the floor and Keefe added 14 points and hauled in 8 rebounds.

On a cold and rainy Saturday over Thanksgiving Break, the women’s team faced the defending MAAC champion Siena, in a game that Coach Gibbons expected to be the toughest of the early season. They were up to the challenge, however, as the Crusaders soundly defeated the Saints 88-73. Four playeers reached double digits (O’Keefe a career high 23, Abraham 18, Fontana 17, Jeanette Paukert 16) and two recorded double-doubles, as Paukert dished out 10 assists to accompany her 16 points, and Fontana dropped down 10 boards to go along with her 17 in Holy Cross’ 3rd straight win of the season.

Just two days later on Nov. 26, Gibbons’ Girls traveled to Chestnut Hill to face the highly touted Boston College Eagles. BC’s combination of deadly shooting and stifling defense was too much for the Crusaders as the Eagles shot a shocking 57% from the floor and notched 20 steals, on their way to a 36 point victory over Holy Cross, 93-57. Boston College went on an 18-0 run with about seventeen minutes to go in the game, eventually pulling to within 4 at 6 and never looked back. The loss dropped Holy Cross to 3-1.

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