

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Chasing Upsets of March, Ivy League Joins the Conference Tourney Crowd

By SETH BERKMAN MARCH 2, 2017

Ivy League purists can blame Gabas Maldunas for helping upend 60 years of tradition.

Maldunas was a versatile 6-foot-9 post player for Dartmouth, although he never had the opportunity to showcase his talent on a national stage. In his four seasons playing for the Big Green basketball team, from 2011 to 2015, Dartmouth never finished above .500 in conference play.

But in his final Ivy League game, Maldunas experienced a sliver of March Madness euphoria and forever became a villain in New Haven, making a winning layup against Yale that helped extend a Bulldogs N.C.A.A. tournament drought that at that point had lasted more than a half-century. The basket, the final highlight in a forgettable Dartmouth season, has had a lasting ripple effect.

The loss dropped Yale into a tie with Harvard for the Ivy League title. Because the league had no postseason tournament, a one-game playoff to award the league's N.C.A.A. tournament berth was held. A week later, Yale lost that game as

well, 53-51, in front of a raucous crowd at the Palestra in Philadelphia. Yale was devastated, but many others in the league found the drama thrilling.

“It was electric,” the Ivy League’s executive director, Robin Harris, said. “There were several A.D.s who attended that game who did not have a team participating, and they did so just to see what the atmosphere was like.”

The idea of creating a postseason tournament in the Ivy League had long been under discussion, a classic sports debate about the value of regular-season excellence versus one-weekend luck. The 2015 Harvard-Yale playoff only whetted appetites even more.

So last March, amid an influx of new personnel and shifting opinions among players and coaches, the Ivy League broke with its tradition and became the final Division I conference to institute a postseason tournament. Under the inaugural format, the top four regular-season finishers will compete for the league’s automatic bid to the N.C.A.A. men’s and women’s tournaments on March 11 and 12 at the Palestra.

“The March Madness feel is something that’s been missing in the Ivy League,” said the Columbia women’s coach, Megan Griffith, who played for the Lions and coached on Princeton’s staff for six seasons. “Everybody gets that exposure now.”

With one weekend of games remaining and seeding on the men’s and women’s sides undecided, the league has the heightened drama it coveted.

Last Saturday, Columbia’s Luke Petrasek blocked a potential tying 3-point attempt by Penn’s Jackson Donahue at the buzzer to keep the Lions alive for a conference tournament berth.



Afterward, Petrasek's teammates stormed the court, and the senior Jeff Coby kicked the basketball into the student section. It was probably the most intense celebration in history for a team that had just moved to 5-7 in conference play, but the win was a vital lifeline: It tied Columbia — which last appeared in the N.C.A.A.s in 1968 — with Penn for fourth place in the league standings, and in doing so kept alive the possibility of a fairy-tale March run.

Not every team is as thrilled with the changes. Princeton's men's team, for example, is 12-0 in conference play this season, and has won 15 consecutive games over all. In past years, with a two-game lead over second-place Harvard (10-2 Ivy) entering this weekend, the Tigers would need only one victory or a Crimson loss to clinch a place in the N.C.A.A. tournament. Now, they must finish strong to protect their seed, but still could end up facing Penn, their archrival, in one of the Ivy semifinals on Penn's home court.

The Princeton women's coach, Courtney Banghart, said the league should consider rewarding the top seed, perhaps by having it host the tournament.

"I hope that happens," Mitch Henderson, the Princeton men's coach, said. "Not just because we stand in that position right now, but we should be protecting our No. 1 seed."

Banghart also suggested switching the format to three teams, with the winner of a game between the second- and third-place finishers playing the top seed, which would receive a bye for winning the regular-season crown.

Harris, the league's executive director, emphasized that one of the main reasons for deciding on the current bracket was to package the men's and women's events. She added that the conference would re-evaluate the system in May and make adjustments as needed.

"The Palestra was an easy answer, especially for the inaugural year," Harris said. "It's the cathedral of college basketball."

She added, "We're going to make the court and venue as neutral as possible," a reference to the signage and dominant colors in the building.

Harris was hired by the Ivy League in 2009. She said she immediately began surveying athletes about adding a tournament. "I never came across one who said they didn't want one," Harris said. "To me, that's really compelling."

Yet like antique collectors who see beauty in rotary phones or Atari consoles, a segment of Ivy League alumni and fans is already pining for the old days. Minimalism has long been an Ivy League calling card; most teams still don't print players' names on the back of their jerseys, and home teams still wear their road uniforms on the Saturdays after Friday night games to spare their visitors a laundry crisis.

Penn center Sydney Stipanovich, a senior, said she had grown to like the novelty of a regular-season marathon, which came to be known as "the 14-game tournament," to crown a champion. And the former Penn athletic director Steve Bilsky, one of the staunchest critics of an Ivy tournament, still isn't sold on changing that format.

Bilsky called the 14-game schedule — home and away against every league team — "the fairest way to crown a champion," and he liked that it guaranteed the league would send its best team to the N.C.A.A. tournament.

"I understand why people want to do it, and I think this year's will be exciting," Bilsky said. "It's the first time and there's the newness of it, but to sustain it and be the right thing for the long haul, I still question it."

Harris noted the new tournament would increase television exposure for the Ivy League, because all of the games will be broadcast or streamed on ESPN's networks. Most important, though, she pointed out that the change meant there would be few meaningless games entering the final weekend. But the focus is likely to be away from the league leaders and on the "bubble" teams: Brown and Yale trail fourth-place Cornell by a game in the women's standings, and then there is the Penn-Columbia race on the men's side.

A complex set of tiebreakers means even last-place Dartmouth (3-9), which last went to the N.C.A.A. men's tournament in 1959, is still alive for a spot in conference tournament entering the final games. That is why Maldunas, who now plays professionally in Spain, will be following his alma mater intently.

"Of course, it makes me a little bit jealous, too," he said, "because when I was there, we were already out of contention going into the last weekends."

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