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Ivy League Basketball Finally Merits Your Respect

Yale's win over Baylor was no fluke: The conference has evolved and is now producing teams that can compete at the highest level.



Fans of the Duke Blue Devils try to distract Blake Reynolds of the Yale Bulldogs at Cameron Indoor Stadium on November 25. Duke defeated Yale 80-61. *PHOTO: LANCE KING/GETTY IMAGES*

By **BEN COHEN**

March 18, 2016 6:51 p.m. ET

Richard Brodhead had spent his entire adult life at Yale—as a student, professor and eventually the dean—when he left New Haven in 2004 for a better job on another campus: He became the president at Duke.

“Not everyone took it well,” Brodhead said at his inauguration. One of his Yale students, he said, was even more dismayed when she heard where he was going. “It was like Dean Brodhead was married to Yale,” he recalled her saying, “and now we learn that he’s leaving us for someone younger and more athletic.”

Duke is still younger than Yale. It still cares more about sports, too. And yet these two schools, somehow, will be on the same court Saturday playing for a Sweet Sixteen spot in the most intriguing game of the NCAA tournament's next round. That's almost inconceivable to anyone who has memorized the history of Yale's basketball team—which wouldn't take long. This is Yale's first NCAA tournament appearance since 1962, and Thursday was their first tournament win ever.

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But it shouldn't be a surprise any more when an Ivy League team wins in the NCAA tournament. This is the time to admit something that not even Ivy Leaguers would brag about: They can actually compete at the highest level of college basketball.

No. 12 seed Yale didn't just beat Baylor. They bullied them. They were so clearly the better team that they actually outrebounded the Bears, one of the best rebounding teams in the country, and put Baylor's players in the awkward position of explaining how that could ever happen. It would've made more sense if there were actual bears on the court.

"That's Yale basketball," forward Justin Sears said. "We're a blue-collar team."

Only in the NCAA tournament could the Ivy League be the underdog that the rest of the country roots for. But it's beginning to happen more often than anyone expected. The Ivy's run started in 2010 with Cornell sliding into Cinderella's glass slipper and waltzing all the way to the second weekend and



Taurean Prince #21 of the Baylor Bears and Brandon Sherrod #35 of the Yale Bulldogs react to a call in the second half of their first-round game. PHOTO: JIM ROGASH/GETTY IMAGES

continued when a certain school near Boston advanced past the first round in 2013 and 2014.

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The Ivy even won when it lost. Princeton took a Kentucky team that went to the Final Four to a final possession in 2011, and those Harvard squads stressed Michigan State and North Carolina like term papers due the next day, proving they could play with any team in college basketball.

Yale’s latest win may have been the most impressive of them all. The old Ivy teams that were NCAA tournament threats played slow, dragged out possessions and caught their opponents cat-napping with backdoor cuts. They simply couldn’t compete otherwise. Now they can.

“It was the way they won that I find truly impressive,” said Ivy League executive director Robin Harris. “I think it’s a huge statement win for the Ivy League.”

Yale’s upset wasn’t a fluke, either. It’s what happens when a quality team with experienced players from a solid conference get its shot on a neutral court.

The Ivy is as tough top to bottom as it’s been in decades. In the old days of the Ancient Eight, the Ivy’s automatic bid essentially alternated between Princeton

and Pennsylvania, but five schools have won it in the last decade and the Ivy now ranks in college basketball's upper half in terms of overall conference strength, according to kenpom.com. Its best teams—the ones that are around this time of year—are even better. Six of the last seven Ivy champions have been top-75 teams and four have been top-50 teams.

The league has come so far that there is chatter about two teams getting into the tournament at some point. A two-bid Ivy, in fact, was still a possibility until the last weekend of the regular season. Some people around the league believe Princeton should've been considered anyway—and that basketball in the Ivy is ahead of its reputation. The Tigers ended the season ranked 39th in the RPI, a metric the selection committee uses, which was higher than 10 teams that were given at-large bids.



Yale forward Justin Sears dunks against Baylor. PHOTO: CHARLES KRUPA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“But no one ever mentioned them,” Yale coach James Jones said, “and probably because they’re an Ivy League.”

The league is catching up with the rest of college basketball along with its teams. Last week, it approved a plan for a four-team playoff starting next season, ending an era when the Ivy was the only conference not to stage a postseason tournament. Harris says the Ivy game itself is looking more like everyone else's, too. “There are still backdoor cuts, and our games are not always super high-scoring, but they’re very physical,” Harris said. “It’s a different type of basketball.”

That’s because the Ivy is recruiting a different type of player. Ivy schools don’t offer athletic scholarships, but generous financial-aid policies now allow them to chase a wider swath of high-schoolers with the grades to get in. Harvard’s incoming recruiting class is ranked as high as 11th in the country—better than

Kansas's and right behind North Carolina's.

The upsets keep coming in the NCAA tournament, though, because of another shift occurring across college basketball, which happens to show how Brodhead's old Yale student was right in a way she never could have imagined.

Duke's basketball team really is younger than Yale's now that the sport's contenders experience the annual churn of players leaving early and entering the NBA draft. Yale, meanwhile, is more athletic than ever, but it has a long way to go: Yale still has lost fewer players in school history to the NBA than to an *a cappella* group called the Whiffenpoofs.

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