

HOOP DREAMS COME TRUE

By Bob Weiner, B.A.'82

Photos by Bob Ewell

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— UAlbany Athletic Director
Lee McElroy

On March 17, 2006, it was hard to tell it was St. Patrick's Day. Most of the 19,900 basketball fans at Philadelphia's Wachovia Center, and millions more watching on television, were thinking purple and gold, rather than green. Creating a deafening roar with foot stomping and chants of “UA, UA, UA, UA,” a vast majority of the spectators inside the arena were rooting for the University at Albany Great Danes to upset the heavily favored University of Connecticut Huskies.

With only 10 minutes left in the opening round of their first NCAA Division I tournament, the Great Danes owned a 12-point lead over the Huskies, who at the time were ranked No. 2 in the nation. America East Conference player of the year Jamar Wilson, a smooth-shooting junior who led the Great Danes in virtually every statistical category during the season, glided through the UConn defense with ease, and 7-foot-1 center Kirsten Zoellner matched up surprisingly well with the Huskies' talented and quick big men. Although a No. 16 seed had never beaten a top seed in 84 previous meetings, the upstart Great Danes were giving it their best shot.

Unfortunately, the powerful Huskies rallied and surged past the exhausted Great Danes, 72-59, but the game put the UAlbany program on the basketball map. The 21-11 Danes finally experienced their own version of “March Madness.”

It was hard to believe that the Great Danes, who finished only 5-23 two seasons before, could reach such heights so quickly. UAlbany was so undermanned back then that the Great Danes had to finish with just four players on the court in one game after several fouled out. Jon Iati, a freshman at the time, had the dubious distinction of leading the nation in minutes played, averaging an almost unbelievable 40 minutes per contest.

Those days are a distant memory now. “I'm glad to see so many people excited about our program,” said Coach Will Brown. “UAlbany basketball has entered a new era.”

Athletic Director Lee McElroy said the Great Danes' NCAA tournament appearance had a major impact on the program and the University. “I received hundreds of e-mails from alumni who expressed their pride that the team played at such a high level,” said McElroy. “Everyone believes we have taken a major step in exposing the key attributes of our University to a national audience. Clearly, Coach Brown and the kids have set a good tone for our athletic program and the University.”

UAlbany President Kermit L. Hall agreed. “The success of Will Brown and his team has sparked a new enthusiasm for the University in all of its dimensions,” Hall said. “In this case, it has given us a porch on our already fine house, where we can display our excellent academic and research programs, from the Department of English to Rockefeller College to nano science.”

The Great Danes might be just as good next season, with four outstanding recruits joining seven returning lettermen, including three starters. ■



Conference player of the year Jamar Wilson, left, goes up against UConn's Rudy Gay.

2005-06: A Season of Accomplishments

The Great Danes put together their most celebrated season at the Division I level:



Hoisting the America East trophy

- First State University of New York school to earn a Division I NCAA berth
- Most single-season victories (21) in program's Division I history
- Eleventh 20-win campaign in school history and most victories since 1993-94
- Most America East Conference wins (13) since joining the league in 2001-02
- First-ever America East regular-season title and tournament championship
- Most home wins (10) as a Division I program
- Most road victories (8) since moving to Division I
- First victory over Boston University since joining the league
- Eight-win improvement from previous season and 16 more wins than 2003-04
- First America East Conference postseason tournament victory
- First postseason game win since 1995, ending a nine-game losing skid

For a short movie of highlights from UAlbany's America East championship game March 11, go to:
http://www.albany.edu/audiocast/media/amereast2006_highlights.wmv



Why Not Us? The 16th-ranked Great Danes at Philadelphia's Wachovia Center before their contest with No. 1 seed UConn