

Tribe revels in their revenge tour

Resurgent W&M ready for first NCAA Tournament game



William & Mary players celebrate after beating Campbell in the CAA Tournament championship on Sunday. High Point is the Tribe's foe tonight for W&M's first-ever NCAA Tournament basketball game. CAA

BY MARTY O'BRIEN STAFF WRITER

WILLIAMSBURG — Bella Nascimento described William & Mary's stunning four-day run to a first-ever Coastal Athletic Association Tournament title and NCAA appearance in an idiom befitting only a New Englander.

"It was 'wicked spectacular,'" said Nascimento, a Grafton, Massachusetts, native whose career-high 33 points led the No. 9 seed Tribe to a 66-63 upset of No. 3 Campbell in the championship game Sunday in Washington, D.C. "This was our ultimate revenge tour.

“We wanted all of those teams lined up the way they were to get them back.”

The Tribe had a lot of getting back to do after finishing a disappointing 11-18 during the regular season. So much that the notion of William & Mary becoming the first basketball team in school history of either gender to reach an NCAA Tournament was so improbable, it seemed like a joke.

In the final six days of the regular season, the Tribe lost to No. 8 Hofstra by 20 points, No. 1 North Carolina A&T by 25 and No. 3 Campbell by 18 to finish with five losses to that trio by an average of 21 points. Crueler still was the earlier 59-58 loss at Drexel on three free throws with a half-second remaining in overtime.

The Tribe beat them all in Washington: Hofstra 76-65 in the opener, North Carolina A&T 74-66 in overtime in the quarterfinals, Drexel 76-54 in the semifinals and Campbell 66-63 in the championship game.

Those victories put the Tribe (15-18) into an NCAA Tournament First Four game at 9 tonight against Big South champion High Point (21-11) in Austin, Texas, on ESPN2. The winner earns the No. 16 seed and faces No. 1 Texas on Saturday in Austin.

Whatever happens, the Tribe players and staff will return to a campus forever appreciative they put W&M finally in a Big Dance. They were greeted as heroes at Kaplan on Monday.

“I was so overwhelmed with emotion that so many people met us with high-fives and cheers,” Tribe coach Erin Dickerson Davis said.

How did the Tribe produce a moment — albeit stretched over four days — that ranks almost with the men’s 1977 upset of No. 2 nationally ranked Phil Ford and North Carolina in school basketball annals?

“They found togetherness and camaraderie,” Dickerson Davis said. “We weren’t playing together for a long time, but when it was time, they came together and did it together.

“It was sweet and poetic.”

The sweetest and most poetic moment came to start the championship game, when the Tribe fell behind 14-0 to a Campbell team that had battered W&M by 21 and 18 points in the regular season.

“I asked them during a timeout, ‘Do you think you belong in this game? Do you think you got here by luck or because you worked for it?’” Dickerson Davis said.

“Then I told them they’d be crazy to give up on (their championship dreams) now. After that, it was just the girls talking about what wasn’t working and how to fix it.

“I had never seen that out of this team, and look what it accomplished.”

On the way to the championship rally, there were numerous memorable moments that included everyone, but were led by team star Nascimento and breakthrough standout Monet Dance. Despite the dismal ending to the regular season, Nascimento says the players emerged from multiple players' meetings prior to the tournament "oozing confidence" and with BELIEF as the team motto.

She scored 18 points in the win over Hofstra, while Dance (12 points), Kayla Rolph (11), Anahi-Lee Cauley (8), Natalie Fox (8) and Rebekah Frisby-Smith (8) contributed to a balanced attack. The Tribe parlayed 11 first-half forced turnovers to a three-point halftime lead and steadily stretched it.

Dance (27 points) and Cassidy Geddes (26 points) were the stars in the upset of top-seeded North Carolina A&T, which owned wins of 23 and 25 points over the Tribe. They split the points in the overtime, when the Tribe outscored A&T 10-2, holding the Aggies to 1-of-8 shooting.

Dance entered the tournament averaging just 3.9 points while shooting 30.3% overall and 31.6% from the 3-point arc. Amazingly, she made 7 of 9 3s against A&T, and 10 of 13 shots overall, as she hit 13 of 16 3s and 18 of 25 field goals in the first three victories.

"I just saw the first two 3s go in and my teammates told me to keep shooting, which gave me confidence," said Dance, a Roswell, Georgia, native whose 18 points against Drexel gave her 57 in the first three games. "I'm blessed to have great coaching and I'm not surprised they went to me, because they worked with me all season."

Dickerson Davis said Nascimento couldn't wait to play Drexel, confident she could take on the Dragons' matchup zone. Her 20 points led the Tribe to a surprisingly large win, after which she told her coaches she would achieve a double-double in the championship game.

Nascimento not only did that with her 33 points and 11 rebounds as the Tribe rallied from the early 14-point deficit, and a 13-point deficit late in the third quarter, she made the key basket. Her 14-foot jumper with 11.7 seconds remaining gave the Tribe a three-point lead, forcing the Camels to attempt a game-tying 3-pointer they missed.

"I was like, 'Let me get to my sweet spot, because I always make the little elbow jumper,'" Nascimento said. "It was a great moment because people had doubted us.

"People didn't think we'd be here and they underestimated us, but we showed everybody, and ourselves, who we are. We're a team that stays together and doesn't fold or crumble, but rises through adversity."

Wicked spectacular indeed.