Lancers Look to Snap NCCAA Tourney Curse

BY STEVE COPELAND
Sports Editor

Head coach Jim Kessler has done just about everything during his 33-year tenure with Grace's men's basketball program. Nine MCC titles, an NAIA national championship and back-to-back Elite Eight appearances. But there is one missing accomplishment on his impressive résumé: an NCCAA national championship.

When it comes to the NCCAA tournament, specifically its championship games, the Lancers have been hexed by a 40-year curse. You know – Bam-bino, Billy Goat, the front cover of Sports Illustrated type jinxes. Kessler has made it to the NCCAA championship game four times and has fallen short on each occasion, usually because of a series of uncanny circumstances.

1970 – AZUSA PACIFIC 108, GRACE 83

The curse began during Kessler’s senior year at Grace Prepares to Host NCCAA

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Grace Prepares to Host NCCAA

The 2010 Women’s Div. I NCCAA National Championship is only one week away. It will be held from March 11-13, and the Lady Lancers will play their opening game at 7:30 on Thursday. The tournament bracket will be finalized this Sunday, and Grace will most likely have the night off as the host school.

The first 100 students on Thursday will receive a free hot dog and drink. All students get in free.

All three Grace games will also be video-streamed live on the Internet along with the championship game on Saturday.

The link to the video streaming can be found on Grace’s athletic Web site.

Sports Information

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Nate Wotting (above) went a combined 4-7 in Grace’s doubleheader on Saturday.

2010 UNDECIDED

Now, after back-to-back Elite Eight appearances in the NAIA tournament, Grace will return to the NCCAA national tournament on March 18 in Oakland City, Ind.

“For me, the tournament is probably more special because I’ve come up through the ranks of the NCCAA,” Kessler said. “It’s one honor that Grace College basketball has never been able to achieve. If we can get a ring there, I’ll wear it with pride.”

In two weeks, Grace will have a chance to break the curse.

“My freshman year, we talked about how Coach had been to the championship several times and had always come so close,” said Swanson. “Then, we barely lost to Bethel in the championship game. It would be special for him to get another ring and for us to help him get another ring.

2003 – TENNESSEE TEMPLE 74, GRACE 60

For once, there was nothing screwy in this game. Kessler said that Grace simply got outplayed. Tennessee Temple focused on shutting down All-American Matt Abernethy in the post, the son of Indiana University star and NBA player Tom Abernethy, and the Lancers bricked everything from the perimeter.

Game over. 0 for 3.

2007 – BETHEL 90, GRACE 81 (OT)

Marcus Moore, Grace’s second all-time leading scorer, certainly didn’t love the game for the Lancers. But he definitely didn’t win it.

Senior David Swanson’s freshman year, Kessler found his squad trailing by two points in the final seconds of regulation... again. Moore took a three-pointer to win the game, but Bethel fouled him on the attempt, leaving 1.3 seconds left on the clock. Moore, with a chance to win the game, missed the first free throw, and made the next two to send the game into overtime.

Bethel outplayed the Lancers in overtime and stole the national championship.

Game over. 0 for 4. “It’s just part of the game,” Kessler said. “It’s not a choke factor, that’s just the way it happened. It wasn’t to be, I guess.”
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SPORTS

Lady Lancers Refocus for NCCAs

BY ZANE GARD
Staff Writer

For the women’s basketball team, the season has been filled with highs and lows. Heading into the 2010 NCCAA Women’s Basketball National Tournament, they are looking for one more high note.

For a team whose goal was a fourth-place finish in the MCC, their first game of the season was a wake-up call when they lost by 12 to Holy Cross. They got another wake-up call three games later when their leader, senior guard Kiera Gray, went down with a season-ending ACL tear. To compensate for the loss, individual players stepped up, and head coach Scott Blum created a new motion offense.

A few games later, they were back on track. The Lady Lancers poured in 101 points in the 2009 Classic opening game and gave then-ranked No. 11 Cedarville a scare in Grace’s 69-80 loss. But once again, the lows accompanied the highs, and Grace entered the New Year having lost seven out of eight games.

The team took Christmas break to refocus and come together. They spent three days together in Michigan at co-captain Morgan DiAntonio’s house doing activities ranging from movies and a Detroit Pistons’ basketball game in a suite to helping paint at a local church and praying together. Blum said that it was good for players to bond outside of practice and other more focused times.

After refocusing on Christmas break, the team started 2010 on a three-game winning streak, their longest since November 2007. Grace also snapped their 38-game losing streak to Taylor University, who they beat again late in the season. When conference season rolled around, wins were hard to come by—considering all six teams above them had full power, like when they defeated then-ranked No. 10 Taylor. Other times, the bulb can be barely lit, like during two separate six-game losing streaks this year.

The team has averaged 21.1 turnovers on the year. And in their first 30 games, the Lady Lancers scored more points in the second half than the first. There seems to be a missing balance between playing with a sense of urgency to win and playing relaxed. This balance will be gained through experience.

One way Grace gained experience was in last year’s NCCAA tournament. The Lady Lancers nearly beat the top seed in last year’s opening round, but lost by three points in overtime. This time around, they hope to once again play their best basketball at the end of the season.

Assistant coach Skip Wottrich of Renton, Wash., the capacity of Rent One Park, where Grace’s basketball team played on Feb. 27. "We have to take it one game at a time and not get intimidated before we even start playing," Lengel said. All eyes will be on the Lady Lancers at the Orthopedic Capital Center for the NCCAA tournament on March 11-13.

Winning the first game is a must to avoid a mental letdown. "Most teams don’t get to play for a championship on their own court, so it makes you want to win it more," explained sophomore Hayley Cashier.

After losing to the top seed by three points in last year’s tournament, the team is poised to win now. “We want to prove to people we can win,” DiAntonio said. “A new tournament is like a new season.”

Lady Lancers head coach Scott Blum (left) and Morgan DiAntonio (right) discuss a play in one of Grace’s games earlier this season.

Player of the Week

Michael Clark

Junior Michael Clark kicked off Grace’s baseball season positively on Saturday. Clark tallied nine strikeouts in five innings against Principia College, leading Grace to a 9-3 victory. In his three years with the Lancers, Clark has tallied 73 total strikeouts. Last year, Clark had a 5.56 ERA and four home runs in only 64 at-bats.

Finish the Sentence

If I were Apolo Ohno, I would... Canada’s hockey team is... watching the games with my teammates. Grace’s winter sports highlight was... being on SportCenter.

If you could have one superpower, what would it be? Apparently the best, but it’s still up for debate. Matt Mariano: forget the helmet and let my beautiful hair blow in the wind.

Hannah Lengel: full of cocky wimps that get lucky.

Hannah Lengel: all the injuries in every sport made the trainer’s room extra exciting.

Abby Birkey: get a haircut.

Joel Zakahi: unimpressive.

Andrew Duncan: bad bet cheat.

Michael Voss: because he would always say what was on his mind.

Marcus Crider: because he can teach you how to jerk (type of dance).