

Cinderellas' stories: Memory of upsets still strong

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The first thing Fang Mitchell needed to do was find his team a hotel room.

It's funny to him now, 18 years later. He laughs when he talks about having to worry about booking No. 15 seed Coppin State a place to sleep the night after the Eagles defeated No. 2 seed South Carolina in the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

There were no rooms ready because nobody anticipated they would be in Pittsburgh so long.

"It was the biggest moment of (the players') lives," Mitchell said. "They worked hard to get to that point. Basically, they felt they could go and win. They wanted to win it all. That would've been unbelievable to a lot of people who thought there was no way they are going to win."

At the time, Coppin State -- which needed two overtime victories in its conference tournament just to make the field -- was just the third No. 15 seed to defeat a No. 2 seed. It's happened four more times since, including Lehigh's upset of Duke in 2012 and Florida Gulf Coast's remarkable run in 2013.

The Cinderella stories happen every year in the NCAA Tournament, whether it's a one-and-done upset like Coppin State or the Archie Miller-led Dayton team that made the Elite Eight last season. A No. 16 seed has never beaten a No. 1 seed, but March Madness has seen just about everything else.

And it all starts when nobody else is paying attention.

For Coppin State, the road to an upset bid began during a tough non-conference schedule that featured teams like Oklahoma and Illinois. Mitchell called those experiences “paramount” to the Eagles’ later success.

“Most of the time, when you play against bigger schools, that’s intimidation in itself, and young men don’t believe they can play with them,” Mitchell said. “We had a schedule we mandated every year that we had to go play against those big schools. They were confident that they could be successful. They prepared and wanted nothing but a victory.”

Northwestern State coach Mike McConathy can relate. The Demons -- a No. 14 seed who upset No. 3 seed Iowa in 2006 -- traveled to to play teams such as Louisville and Marquette. The Demons challenged themselves, even pulling off an upset at Utah State and losing to Oklahoma State by just three points.

Northwestern State was an experienced team, one that started with 11 freshman and grew into two-time league champions that lost in the conference championship game the year before. So, by the time the NCAA Tournament began in 2006, the Demons weren’t intimidated. They had seen it all.

“We got beat up and finally got a little confidence,” McConathy said. “We played in a lot of places against a lot of very good teams. We believed in our system and what we were trying to do at that time.”

It worked. Trailing by as many as 17 points in the second half, Northwestern State stormed back to pull off the upset. And the comeback all started with one seemingly insignificant moment that McConathy sometimes forgets.

It stemmed from Northwestern State’s trip to the Rainbow Classic earlier that season, when the Demons lost on a missed call in overtime to Iowa State. They had an energetic bus driver on that trip, and they called themselves Bus No. 2. Every time they bus driver yelled that out, the team would break into a chant.

Flash forward to the Iowa game. With his team falling dangerously behind, McConathy called a timeout and with his players looking at him, perplexed, simply said, “Bus No. 2.”

His team performed the chant, and he said it was like the Eagles “inflated the rest of the way.” Northwestern State rallied to win that game, with Jermaine Wallace hitting a fadeaway 3-pointer at the buzzer to give the Demons the 64-63 upset.

For Mitchell, the turning point came when the Pittsburgh crowd really started to get behind the Eagles in the second half. Everyone loves an underdog, and the fans proved that with the boost it gave Coppin State to finish off South Carolina.

“I was always under the impression that we had to stay close,” he said. “I used the media timeout rule. We tried to stay close and be in the lead after each four-minute stretch. We did a pretty good job. At halftime, it was a close game.”

Lehigh coach Brett Reed remembers taking a timeout midway through the second half after Duke just made a run. He expected to offer his team some motivation, but he didn’t have to. The players had already taken care of it.

“I could hear our guys encouraging each other, just affirming each other so much,” he said. “Even when I walked in, there wasn’t much that I could add that was more valuable than what they were saying to each other.”

Experience and a challenging offseason also played a part in Lehigh’s upset in 2012. The Mountain Hawks’ non-conference schedule included St. John’s, Michigan State and Iowa State. They lost all of those games, but the defeats helped them when it counted.

“That left a hunger in our guys,” Reed said. “They knew that we had gotten close. They also knew that they could play with just about anybody in the country. I remember our players talking about falling short and how close we could be. I think the idea brought a bit of confidence.”

For those teams, though, the experience ended after just one game. The nerves didn’t seem to catch up with them until the second round, after all the attention and media hype started.

It’s hard to refocus after an emotional high, and, as Reed said, there is usually a corresponding low.

In the second round, Lehigh opened up a lead in the first half against No. 10 seed Xavier and went into the break 37-33. But the emotion caught up with them in the second half, and so did the effort from the previous game. The Mountain Hawks got a little tired, a little unfocused and their second-straight upset bid disappeared.

For the Demons, it was a little different. West Virginia led by as many as 25 points in the second half. Northwestern State put together a late rally, but it fell short and the Demons lost 67-54.

“The hype for a school our size to win a game is enormous,” McConathy said. “I felt like we were prepared for it, but I don’t know if the players were really prepared for that. Even though we were saying, ‘Go win games’, we didn’t seem to grasp the importance of staying totally focused on what is going on. Sometimes in a victory, you live in the moment.”

“It was hard calming the young men down,” said Mitchell, whose team lost to Texas 82-81 in the second round. “They were so excited. ... It was an opportunity for them to showcase their talent. I was hard with people calling them constantly to get them to settle in, but basically we only had another day to prepare for the team.”

Dayton, a No. 11 seed last season, is one of the low-seeded teams that was able to extend its run in the Tournament. Miller credits the pressure the Flyers were under down the stretch of the regular season. Every game was crucial just to earn an NCAA Tournament bid.

The Flyers drew Ohio State, which presented them with a unique opportunity to face an opponent they knew well. After the win, Miller’s team didn’t react any differently than how they did in February. The players just kept looking forward.

“I think that was a credit to how we were doing things at that time,” Miller said. “We had a way about us. We had a lot of confidence about us and I thought we played to win.”

After the Round-of-32 win over No. 3 seed Syracuse, the players remained even-tempered, reserved. Their confidence only grew as they moved on to face No. 10 seed Stanford. That game ended up being the peak of the run as Dayton lost to No. 1 seed Florida in the next round.

“At that point in time, beating Stanford, it wasn’t going to get any bigger than that for us,” Miller said. “Even playing against Florida, I never really felt they we were overwhelmed.”

At major conference schools, NCAA berths and wins became the norm. Those things are expected. But at mid- to low-major programs, either is a reason for celebration. There’s no telling when it might happen again.

“It was a monumental win for our program on a national stage against a great opponent,” Reed said. “There’s a strong sense of pride for our alums and everyone with our university. It’s been a significant moment for the school.”

It’s hard to win in the NCAA Tournament, especially for smaller schools. It’s even more rare to pick up more than one victory, like Wichita State and Butler and most recently, Dayton, did. Will those programs be able to do it again? McConathy hopes so. It’s encouraging to him to see some outsiders crash the party.

“The reality is, it’s hard to do that,” he said. It’s hard even to get there because the reality is everything needs to line up perfectly. We don’t stop to think about what we accomplished because we have a great push to try and replicate what happened. You look up and don’t even stop to savor what just happened.”