MID-MAJOR MOJO

By Brian Koonz

The evangelist in sneakers leans a little closer, her eyes and her voice sharing a moment 22 years in the making. There is no script for this testimonial, only a narrative of faith, trust and the kind of success that comes with winning on the biggest stage. Head women’s basketball coach Tricia Fabbri is the muse of a program and a university. During last season’s historic run to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA women’s basketball tournament, Fabbri and the Bobcats emerged as a national storyline, no longer the mid-major upstart with the curious name.

“Our success has continued to brand the university on a national scale,” said Fabbri, who arrived on campus in 1995 as Quinnipiac’s first full-time female head coach. “We’re committed to being a real power at the mid-major level. We’re committed to taking the next steps and continuing to grow our program. That commitment will never stop.”

On this day, Fabbri’s ensemble of pearl earrings and school-issued sweats works perfectly. It’s business casual meets the business of sports. The Sweet 16 party is over, replaced by recruiting meetings, booking home games for the 2017-18 season and integrating new uniforms by Adidas.

“We’re not even 20 years in Division I and look what this university has done,” Fabbri said. “We’re babies in this world of athletics. And yet, [men’s ice] hockey has played in two Frozen Fours, women’s rugby has won two straight national championships and women’s basketball has made it to a Sweet 16.”

Fabbri’s team upset No. 25 Marquette and No. 16 Miami last March before losing to eventual national champion South Carolina in the Sweet 16. For the first time in its history, Quinnipiac (29-7, 17-3) ended the year ranked among the top 25 teams in America, reaching No. 23 in the final USA Today Women’s Basketball Coaches’ Poll.

“Looking back, John Lahey was committed to the move from Division II to Division I and what that required in terms of resources, upgrades and everything else,” Fabbri said from her office at the Quinnipiac Sports Center. “Once this arena was built, it put us on a whole other level. It gave us new expectations, but it also gave us new opportunities.”

The next chapter of Quinnipiac women’s basketball isn’t about an encore, it’s about enduring beyond two weeks in March. It’s about trading the newcomer metaphor of a two-tiered step stool for the unapologetic mission of playing deeper into the NCAA tournament.

Whether that climb happens this season, next season, or sometime down the road, it’s driven by the kind of commitment that gives birth to a story that will be told for years to come.
The women’s basketball team gives Coach Tricia Fabbri a celebratory shower after beating No. 16 Miami last March to advance to the Sweet 16.

The road is a question that follows Fabbri like a shadow. Either way, with most of last year’s Sweet 16 team back this season, the future is promising in Hamden.

“You’re never satisfied,” said Fabbri, who signed a contract extension through the 2020-21 season in June. “It all goes to three things: your staff, your schedule and your recruiting. Why we get out of bed every day now is because we want to win that game in the Sweet 16. We saw firsthand what that level is. We firmly believe we’ve taken no shortcuts to get where we are. The backstory is six [consecutive] years with 20 wins. We’ve challenged ourselves every step of the way. We certainly feel we’re a top-20 program. But now, what’s it going to take to become a top-15, top-10 program in the next two years?”

For Jen Fay ’18, a redshirt junior from Long Island, New York, it’s going to take more of the same: absolute effort, universal commitment and fearless noise. The Bobcats validated everything for the Bobcats. It was a pinch-me moment, the kind of success you cherish the rest of your life. “The sky is the limit for us,” Fay said, her grin burning as brightly as those Sweet 16 bulbs in the Miami scoreboard. “We’re going to be excited when we see that banner go up. That’s going to motivate us to get back there and get that taste back.”

“I was just like, ‘Bring it. Yell some more, please. Go ahead, do it.’ The odds were definitely against us and we didn’t care. We love the fact that we surprised people.”

Aryn McClure ’19, a junior from Springfield Gardens, New York, realizes no one will be surprised anymore. “We know where we want to go. We know how hard we have to work to reach our goals,” said McClure, who scored a career-high 28 points last March to lead Quinnipiac over Rider, 81-73, for the MAAC championship. “We enjoyed ourselves at the Sweet 16, but at the end of the day, it was a business trip for us. If you’re not careful and you’re not focused, you’re not going to have those opportunities.”

No player understands how difficult it has been to build Quinnipiac into a Sweet 16 program more than Carly Fabbrì ’18, the coach’s daughter. “When I think about those teams when I was little, they weren’t always competitive, but as the years progressed, they started making championship games,” said Fabbrì, a senior guard. “Now, people all over the country know who we are. I think that’s a testament to how hard my mom has worked all these years. The Sweet 16 didn’t happen overnight.”