

2016-17 Trojan cinderella magic

Re-visiting Taylor's surprise tournament run

By NATHANIEL BOER



Keaton Hendricks, a junior in 2016-17, was a key part of the late season run to the Sweet 16

March 8, 2017 the Taylor men's basketball team advanced to the sweet 16 in the NAIA Division II National Championship. Their first trip in 11 years.

The 2016-17 season was Head Coach Josh Andrew's fourth year at the helm. Andrews, just the third men's basketball coach since 1947-48 for Taylor, started off the season a perfect 10-0; one of the best starts in program history.

The season was characterized by its ups and downs, filled with passion and hard work. They finished the season with 20 wins and were tied for third in the Crossroads League. All said and done, it was a good season to build upon with a promising freshman class; but it looked like they did not have a chance to make the tournament.

"Our whole team gathered in one of our seniors rooms and watched, what we thought was, another team deciding if our season was ending or not," said current senior Ryan Robinson, "The team we needed to win, lost and within the next few days it was time for the releasing of the brackets."

However, their run did not end so easily.

They received the very last at-large bid and was the last team selected to participate in the national tournament. The video of the team finding out that they were the last team still exists. The room immediately breaks out in pure unadulterated joy as all of their hard work was rewarded.

It had all of the makings of a Cinderella story.

As the last team in, they were up against one of the best teams in the nation. No. 8 Warner University boasted senior Warren Hall, who led NAIA Division II with 31.1 points per game and was a NAIA Division II player of the year candidate. Taylor was not supposed to win.

In 2016-17 the Trojans were 14th in NAIA Division II for 3-pt field goals made, and 18th in 3-pt percentage defense.

"From a basketball point of view they had a chip on their shoulder," Andrews said about his team. "They were one of the better 3-pt shooting teams and could score in bunches."

And against Warner; score in bunches they did.

It took a little under 14 minutes for the Trojans to score their first 30 points and take a 31-12 at the 6:10 mark.

While Taylor played nearly flawless on offense, shooting nearly 50% from the field, it was their stalwart defense that allowed for them to dominate.

Junior Tim Fleming was assigned to guard Hall. Fleming held Hall to 14 points; 17 points less than his average. Fleming also forced Hall to shoot 4-of-20 and commit 7 turnovers.

“Tim was just an incredible defender, especially when you gave him an assignment,” Andrews said. “He could make life very difficult for them.”

Taylor advanced to the round of 16 with a 73-67 victory, and moved on to play Trine International University.

Taylor had once again gotten off to a hot start, up 37-19 in the first 16 minutes and finishing the half up 37-22.

It was a story of two halves. Trinity came into the second half with a hot hand, as their sixth man Luke Mead hit three treys in an 83-second span, shoring up the gap. However it was senior Grant Corsi who connected on a baseline jumper to break the tie with 2.2 seconds left to win the game. The final score was 74-72 in favor of Trinity.

While they lost the game, the Trojans were able to prove that they were one of the best teams in the country and defied the expectations set for them.

Two big factors were a pair of freshmen with rather familiar names: Robinson and current senior Mason Degenkolb. The two combined for 48 minutes and 24.7 points a game in the 2016-17 season.

“Winning our first game and going to the sweet 16 was awesome, but the dinners, bus rides, shopping, and many other things we got to do together as a team is what I will never forget,” Robinson said.

Three years later, Degenkolb and Robinson are graduating and will be leaving as the fifth and ninth all-time scorers, respectively. Throughout their four years they accumulated countless awards, both athletic and academic.

Andrews described how their edge was contagious and how as a team throughout the season they were able to rally around their scoring.

“That season was really special, there were so many factors, but the joy that they had experienced was really cool to see,” Andrews said.

Looking forward, the Trojans will be led by two seniors in Vincent Miranda and James McCloud; along with two juniors C.J. Penha and Jason Hubbard.

Taylor will be returning nine lettermen and three of their starters, and are set to gain a 6-4 recruit from Cincinnati, Kaden Fuhrmann.

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