

COLLEGE

This Rhode Island team has reached the Final Four, but it's not who you think it is

Mike Scandura Special to The Providence Journal

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PROVIDENCE — Of all the in-state college basketball teams, one that's flown under the proverbial radar is the Rhode Island College women's team.

For the first time in the 46-year history of the program, the Anchorwomen have qualified for the NCAA Division III Final Four. Yet the Anchorwomen are familiar with NCAA Tournaments since this is the sixth time in program history that they've made this trip.

"I'd be lying if I said 'yes' because I didn't envision this," coach Jenna Cosgrove said. "I don't think anything that happened was an accident.

"The goal this year was to win a first-round NCAA game and last year we fell short."

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The Anchorwomen already have vanquished Rowan, Scranton, Chicago and Babson en route to a semifinal game against Christopher Newport at 5 p.m. Saturday at Trinity College in Hartford.

Just as impressive is that RIC won a program-record 28 games and lost only three. Cosgrove, who is in her sixth season as the head coach, has had some outstanding teams. But the 2022-23 team stands out above the others.

"This team is really special in terms of how deep we are and that we practice really hard every day," Cosgrove said. "We have an unselfish group.

"One thing that has been a key this year is we don't have one super star. We have five people on the court who share the ball. On any given night, anyone can step up for us. That makes us hard to scout."

Good point considering only two Anchorwomen are scoring in double figures: Newport's Isabelle Booth (12.2 points per game) and Angelina Nardolillo (11.5 ppg).

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"It feels great," said Madison Medbury, a sophomore guard from Scituate who was a three-time All-State selection and a four-time All-Division honoree while playing for Scituate High. "We're having the most fun at this point of the season and it's great still to be playing."

Since the Anchorwomen are "only" two wins away from a national championship, Medbury has put any thoughts of what might happen well in the rearview mirror.

"Honestly, we take it one game at a time," she said. "I don't find it difficult to focus on it because [the game against Christopher Newport] is all I've been thinking about this past week."

While the Anchorwomen average a modest 65.7 points per game, arguably the hallmark of this team is its defense. Through 31 games, RIC is allowing an average of only 51 points per game. Christopher Newport, which plays in the New Jersey Athletic Conference, compiled a 30-0 record and averaged 85.1 points per game.

"Defense is always what we preach," Cosgrove said. "This team has completely bought into defense better than any team I've ever coached.

"After we came back from Scranton [a 62-55 victory in a second-round game], we were 15th in the nation in scoring defense and sixth in the country in rebounding margin [plus 12.5]."

Medbury is one of the keys to the Anchorwomen's defense, since she was voted to the Little East Conference's All-Defensive Team.

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That's noteworthy considering she scored more than 1,000 points in her career while playing for the Spartans.

"Since I've been a kid, all the coaches I've played for have preached defense first," Medbury said. "So, it's been ingrained into what I am as a player."

The story within the story of the team's school-record 28 victories is that it was 13-2 on the road. At the Final Four, the Anchorwomen won't be playing within the friendly confines of the Murray Center.

"I just don't think this team has let anything faze it," Cosgrove said. "This team has bonded together and road trips have allowed our team to do this.

"We're playing our best basketball and these ladies are having fun together."

What could be more fun than dominating the Little East Conference?

The Anchorwomen have won three consecutive regular-season and tournament championships. That prompts the question: What is more difficult — annexing that initial championship or retaining it?

"I think they are both difficult," Cosgrove said. "That's a credit to our athletic department by allowing us to play during COVID [the 2020-2021 season]. Most schools shut down during COVID.

"We played 11 games and it helps prepare us mentally and physically."

Besides Booth — who was voted First-Team All-Region 2 by D3hoops.com; First-Team All-Little East; and Second-Team All-New England by the New England Women's Basketball Association — and Medbury, two other Rhode Island natives have made significant contributions to the team — Johnston's Antonia Corsinetti (82% free-throw

shooting) and Gloucester's McKenzie Field.

"When I took this job, I wanted to get the best players from Rhode Island," said Cosgrove, who was voted the Region 2 Coach of the Year. "They play a real crucial part. It definitely is a big factor in having the Rhode Island kids on our team."

Medbury didn't hesitate when discussing reasons why Cosgrove has molded the Anchorwomen into a Final Four team.

"I think her toughness and balance has helped us because she doesn't take it lightly on us in practice," Medbury said. "She knows how to deal with us during the times when there have been lows."

To date, "lows" have been at a minimum.

