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PANTHERS SET SIGHTS ON TOURNAMENT

Alex Lehmebeck
Sports Editor

More than 16 months have passed since Pitt volleyball's last postseason match, a devastating five-set loss to Cincinnati that spurred gut-wrenching images of the seniors' reaction following the shocking end of their careers.

But the Panthers have returned to the NCAA tournament, looking to overcome the early-round woes they've had in years past, starting with their late-night, first round matchup against Long Island University. The matchup will take place on ESPN3 Wednesday at 10:30 p.m. in Omaha, Nebraska.

Amidst a season altered by the COVID-19 pandemic, it's difficult to gauge the Panthers' resumé entering the tournament. The team only played 20 regular season matches across the fall and spring, 10 less than the previous year.

More importantly, Pitt could only schedule two non-conference opponents in its NCAA tournament appearance under head coach Dan Fisher in 2016. The Panthers looked out of sorts in the fall, going 4-4 in a conference-only slate. But the team drastically turned things around in the spring, going 12-0 to launch itself back into the NCAA tournament conversation.

But after failing to receive a national seed during the selection show, Fisher said the team started getting nervous, until it finally heard its name called late in the process.

"The initial reaction, just because they announced us almost 45 minutes into the show, was like a relief of 'okay, we did make it,'" Fisher said. "After that passed, I think we're an 18 or 19 seed which is right around where we are in the coaches' poll, so I think we're pretty close to where we thought it would go."

The Panthers received LIU as their opening draw, a team coached by Ken Ko, a friend of Fisher. The Sharks didn't start their season until the spring, going 8-5 to earn the No. 2 spot in the Northeast Conference standings, setting up a rematch against Sacred Heart University in the NEC championship to determine the conference's automatic NCAA tournament qualifier.

The Sharks lost two thrillers to SHU in the regular season, but the third match never occurred. The NEC cancelled the championship after a positive COVID-19 test in the Sacred Heart program, sending the Sharks to the Big Dance for

the 12th time in program history.

A strong defense has pushed LIU this far. The team ranks 19th in the country in digs per set, and junior libero Anastasia Scott ranks 12th individually. Pitt's frontline will need precision with their attacks to end points quickly. Because of his relationship with Ko, Fisher said he already had a familiarity with some of the Sharks' roster before this week.

"They historically have had a fair amount of foreigners," Fisher said. "Getting foreign players to want to go to New York City seems to be something that they are able to do. From what I've seen so far, they have some very good pin hitters that are going to cause us some problems."

If the Panthers defeat the Sharks, the No. 14 seed Utah Utes will stand in between them and history the following day at 10:30 p.m. Since its first season in 1974, no Pitt team has ever made it past the second round of the NCAA tournament. While sporting a 7-8 record in first-round matchups, the program has lost in all seven of its second-round appearances, including the past four seasons.

The Panthers beat the Utes 3-1 in a road bout last year, but Fisher knows they will certainly have their hands full this time around, led by Pac-12 Coach of the Year Beth Laurs. Utah senior outside hitter Dani Drews, the nation's leader in kills per set, enters the tournament with some daunting attack numbers.

"They're one of the best teams in the country," Fisher said. "They're very good."

Drews' capabilities present a potential nightmare matchup for the Panthers. Pitt's last season ended at the hands of Cincinnati's Jordan Thompson, who had set the NCAA record for kills in a season shortly before the two teams met. Pitt will have to successfully navigate past yet another transcendent offensive talent to reach the third round for the first time ever.

Because of COVID-19 protocols, the NCAA will hold the entire tournament in Omaha, Nebraska. This means for the first time since 2017, Pitt will not host its first round matchup. Senior outside hitter Kayla Lund — who recently became the first player in conference history to win the ACC Player of the Year award twice — said

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CEDRIC HUMPHREY AN ERA OF EMPATHY

Written by Megan Williams
Photos by Clare Sheedy

Cedric Humphrey is so much more than the Pitt senior who stumped President Joe Biden.

Though Humphrey's question to President Biden about Black voters at an October town hall catapulted him into national news — CNN, The New York Times and The New Yorker, to name a few — he's made headlines at Pitt for years now.

As executive vice president of Student Government Board, Humphrey oversees a lot of moving parts and moving people.

"My job is to create different initiatives that would better the student body experience and pursue those over the course of the year," Humphrey said.

A tall order for a year marked by political instability and a pandemic — but Humphrey hasn't let anything slow his plans.

"This year, carrying on something that I brought from last year's Board, we've been really focused on civic engagement," he said.

Humphrey's whole life has been marked by his dedication to civic engagement. In high school in his hometown of Harrisburg, he was the treasurer of five clubs. Before joining SGB in 2019, he worked for Pitt Serves at the community engagement centers in Homewood and the Hill District. Placed in the latter's Center That Cares, Humphrey taught basic coding to grade schoolers.

"The community assistant program really showed me that the next year I wanted to continue my involvement in some way," he said.

It took a copy of The Pitt News, grabbed from a Centre Avenue news box, to show Humphrey his next step. After reading an article about SGB's search for more students interested in getting involved, Humphrey called his girlfriend and then filled out a packet to run for office.

"The rest is really history from there," he said.

As a member of SGB, Humphrey's dedicated time to many projects, from writing The Year of Engagement's initial proposal to serving on both

something I definitely try to do in all situations."

The push toward prioritizing kindness stems from Humphrey's mother, who he said is the single greatest person he knows.

"If you go to Harrisburg and you walk down the street and you ask 10 people 'You know Yolanda Goodwin-Humphrey?' I'm pretty sure one of those 10 people will tell you a story about how she's been great in their lives," Humphrey said.

Goodwin-Humphrey feels much the same way about her son.

"Cedric has taught me not to judge and to look for the good in everyone and accept people for who they are," Goodwin-Humphrey said.

She remembers Humphrey's capacity for kindness from a young age. He once took a stand against some bullies picking on a friend in only fourth grade.

Goodwin-Humphrey has no trouble picturing her son as a politician, even at an early age. Sometimes, Humphrey created that picture him-

self, like when he dressed up as President Barack Obama in grade school.

Humphrey catapulted from dressing up as the president in childhood to interning for Lieutenant Governor John Fetterman in summer 2019. During his internship, Humphrey handled constituent services like replying to mail, gave tours of the office and trained to process the Board of Pardon's clemency applications. He also helped finalize a special report on marijuana submitted to Gov. Tom Wolf after a 67-county listening tour.

Fetterman recently announced his candidacy for United States Senate. Humphrey said he's an avid supporter of the former mayor of Braddock.

"I'm a big John Fetterman fan," Humphrey said. "Working in his office for an entire summer was a really great experience. He is definitely

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