2010-11 Review

While the destination may have been expected, the journey was anything but for the Muhlenberg women’s basketball team.

A strong start gave way to a rollercoaster ride through January. But the Mules recovered to peak at the right time, finishing the season 23-6 and ranked No. 15 in the final WBCA poll.

They won their record sixth Centennial Conference title and advanced to the “Sweet 16” of the NCAA Tournament for the second time in three seasons.

Returning four players with starting experience, including 2010 first-team All-CC guard Alexandra Chili and CC player of the year Kelly McKeon, the Mules had high hopes from the start of preseason practice.

But when McKeon suffered an injury during preseason practice that would cause her to miss the start of the season, Muhlenberg was forced to adjust.

Despite playing without the 2010 Mid-Atlantic Region player of the year, the Mules pushed the tempo, winning their first eight games of the season and climbing to No. 13 in the D3hoops.com poll.

But when McKeon rejoined the squad when the calendar flipped to 2011, something odd happened. Instead of thriving with the senior point guard back on the floor, Muhlenberg struggled to adjust to a new style of play.

The Mules went 5-5 during the month of January, including a pair of losses to CC regular-season champion Johns Hopkins, and slipped out of the rankings.

Muhlenberg headed into its February opener against Swarthmore looking for a fresh start. And the Mules came out of the dark, both literally and figuratively, against the Garnet as a much more composed team.

The Mules shook off a 90-minute power outage and an 11-point deficit in the first half, took control in the second half and cruised to a 76-63 win.

With January’s swoon cleared from their minds, the Mules began morphing into the team they had expected to be from the start. Double-digit wins over Franklin & Marshall, Dickinson and McDaniel followed before the Mules closed out the season with home wins over Haverford and Ursinus to clinch the No. 2 seed for the conference tournament.

In the semifinal, Muhlenberg used one of its most impressive halves of the season to jump on top of Gettysburg. The Mules shot 64 percent from the field and led by 15 at the break before claiming a 75-60 win to advance to the title game.

After blowing late leads in their first two matchups with Johns Hopkins, the Mules proved the third time was the charm against the Blue Jays. Trailing by one at the break, Muhlenberg used a 12-0 run in the second half to take control. From there, the Mules cruised to a 71-62 win for their third CC title in four seasons.
The conference’s automatic qualifier for the NCAA Tournament, Muhlenberg faced No. 25 Williams in the first round. The Mules led for the first 30 minutes until the Ephs woke up on offense and pulled back into the game. With a tight battle coming down to the wire, the two teams were either tied or changed leads four times in the final five minutes.

Williams hit a jumper with to grab a two-point lead with 14 seconds remaining. Muhlenberg missed a jumper on its ensuing possession, but the ball touched an Ephs player before going out of bounds.

Inbounding from the corner along the Muhlenberg baseline, McKeon looked for Chili, who was flashing around the three-point arc. Chili caught the pass, and with a defender in her face, rose and unleashed a fadeaway shot. The ball sailed over the edge of the backboard and caught just enough of the front of the rim to fall through for a game-winning three-pointer with 1.0 second showing on the clock.

But hard as it was to believe, the Mules actually found a way to top that drama during their second-round game against host Rochester. The Yellowjackets, who had advanced to the 2010 “Final Four” and won 11 of their previous 12 NCAA Tournament games at home, shot 50 percent from the field with four three-pointers in the first half to take a 17-point lead into the break.

That’s when McKeon and Chili took over.

McKeon scored eight of Muhlenberg’s first 10 points to cut the deficit to single digits less than four minutes into the second half. The Mules finally went in front for the first time when McKeon hit a three-pointer from the left wing to make it 58-57 with 5:28 to play. Chili drained four straight free throws down the stretch to cap the miracle comeback and seal the 74-69 win.

Muhlenberg’s magic ran out in the “Sweet 16” at hands of eventual national champion Amherst.

McKeon and Cook ended their careers as the first class in school history to record at least 20 wins in each of their four seasons. They were also a part of Muhlenberg’s only two “Sweet 16” teams, and their 91 wins are the second-most in Mule history.

Chili, who scored the 1,000th point of her career against Mount St. Vincent, received honorable mention on the State Farm Coaches’ All-America Team after setting a school single-season scoring mark with 546. A first-team all-conference and all-region selection, she also set the conference mark for career three-pointers with 253.

McKeon and Alita Zabrecky earned CC honorable mention, and McKeon was also named to the all-region third team. Chili, McKeon, Zabrecky and senior Alexandra Berlin became the first quartet in conference history to register at least 50 assists apiece, while junior Katy Rossino dished out 49 assists.

Junior Kathleen Naddock and freshman Leeann Lanza had strong seasons in the post, while sophomore Kate Clawson and Julie Kelly and freshmen Erin Laney and Katy Mitton provided solid depth off the bench.