MIT women's basketball: A struggle for respectability

By Glenn Brownstein

One small part of the MIT's varsity athletics program, the largest in the country, is a team that, after a number of years as a club, is embarking on its maiden varsity voyage, somewhat maligned and largely ignored. That team is the women's basketball squad, which, despite its relatively low standing at MIT, is quickly developing into a major activity at the Institute.

The basketball team is becoming an integral part of MIT's emerging women's athletic program, according to Mary Lou Sayles, Director of Women's Athletics, "The athletic department here is meeting the needs of women well, with the second largest number of women's sports in the country (seven).

Ms. Sayles would like to have more interest in athletics on the MIT athletic staff, but on the whole the feeling presently at the Institute are quite capable.

Sayles is effectively the "general manager" of the basketball team, in charge of scheduling, overseeing the coaching staff, attending practices and games, and acting as an advisor to general interest and interested fans.

Most of her time in the past few weeks has been spent organizing the MIT Intercollegiate Basketball Tournament, which will take place this coming Friday and Saturday nights at Rockwell Cage. The teams participating in the tournament include the University of Chicago, Brown, Radcliffe, and the host team, MIT. "The tournament should generate a lot of publicity for the women's program, which I feel offers great opportunities to women here," says Sayles.

Opening the tournament Friday night will be a 6:30 game between Chicago and Brown following at 8:30. Saturday afternoon action will be composed of a 6:30 consolation game and the tournament championship showdown at 8:30.

On paper at least, Friday's second-round game between Chicago and Radcliffe is the greatest matchup, featuring Chicago's 8-6 team and has three scholar-ship showdown at 8:30.

Chicago and Brown following at 8:30. The Friday and Saturday nights at the Cage Wednesday night. To try and discover what women's basketball is all about, I followed the team around the squad's preparatory practices Tuesday and the game Wednesday night. The most immediately noticeable thing about practice besides the disparity in skill, is that the girls play much more by note than by instinct. In other words, most team members do not have an instinctive feeling for the passing-shooting-shooting flow of a game, but instead perform these skills as if they have to consciously remember them.

"Our players fall into two categories — those who played varsity or JV in high school, and those who want something to do after the winter. Most areas have a high school good program, so we've had a chance to get some experienced players," explains Coach Randy Florent.

Coach Florent was in his second season as women's basketball coach. He is ably assisted by Paul Woods '75 and Greg Hunter '76, who split their time between the coaching and working with the team.

In practice, Greg and Paul help the women improve their individual skills, with Paul doing more of the demonstration and Greg using verbal rather than pictorial instruction. Coach Florent sets up the drills that he feels will best help the team. The drills come from upcoming opponents and makes team adjustments during each day's two-hour session.

In describing the team itself, Coach Florent feels, "Kathy Roggenkamp '77 is the key to our team offensive. Sometimes the squad is in the trap of relying on her too much, Kathy and Bev, and they get 18 or 16 points regardless of the other team's defense. The problem is that we have to supplement her offense with that of other players to keep the team alive.

Watching the team practice, it is very clear what Florent means. The team is almost important offensively except for Roggenkamp's junior. Center Chris Tracy '76 almost never misses a lay-up when she gets inside, and other players hit an occasional shot, but only Roggenkamp is consistent. I meet Kathy, we have two good centers in Linda Yenter '76 and Chris. Linda's a little stronger on offense, while Chris is a good defensive player and a percent of her baskets. With defensive guards, Bev Herbert '75 and Mary Sullivan '76, are important to the team to move the ball well to give us a chance to slow the game down."

"Even though we're weak on offense, I feel we're a better basketball team than we were in the past. I play ten people this past. I play ten people regularly, and we lose very little in substituting."

Florent on the team demonstrates familiarity with the game as Florent's efforts to give each team member as much experience as possible have proven to have a team that has some difficulty playing together.

Coach Herbert offered one explanation: "We feel we're improving as a team and getting better on the course of the season, but there still are some things we need to work on. Offensively, we're generally weak, and we need more of a balanced attack. We're not shooting out. Most of our team has to be handed down, and we definitely need more direction on the court."

The squad will have to slow the game down. For one thing, we're not a fast team, and also you can't play as fast as the best team on the court to win a game. The key is to learn to slow down and in explaining his coaching philosophy.

To prepare for Mount Ida, Florent sets up a drill designed to move the ball against a 1-3-1 zone, much like the 2-3 formation Mount Ida will use. He cautions the players against rushing the offense, for he feels that pace will be the key to the team's success.

"Mount Ida's a very good ball club, although they play a lot of man-to-man. They'll have to slow the game down, dictate the tempo, and there's a lot they haven't had to do before."

On the day of the game, most of the team's players looked the same routine until about an hour before game time, when the players were allowed to shower and then go to the room to get dressed. Strongly enough, not included in the on the court pre-game activities is a normal talk by Coach Florent.

"Randy doesn't talk to us before games," explains Roggenkamp. "He tried it early in the season, but the team was a lot more relaxed, and they went into the game by fifty points. Since then, we've been reluctant to say anything prior to the game. Instead Bev and Maura each give us a pep talk, then permission to go on the court to warm up."

To prepare for Mount Ida, the team is conditioned by men's basketball, watching the women's team run, and taking advantage of anything to do with it — the lay-up drills are particularly. There are no amazing leapers to crash the boards — but a lot of it has to do with players understanding and the women are not the same as the men. The action does not flow, but instead the players must make the right decisions. The frustration is the obvious, which, although fair, normally ends in frustration.

"We can't stay together and keep cool," said Herbert. "If we catch a cold, the team's going to fall apart. If we're behind, we won't be able to catch up and be patient."

Offensively, the Engineers' efforts are "the foundation of the game. Roggenkamp's dribbling ability and the good start, most players are not able to put the ball up, and allow the defense to move it."

"The game is a struggle to them. They're too much of a team's lack of quickness and numerous turnovers allowed the Engineers to score the last ten points of the half. At halftime, Coach Florent made adjustments. "Mount Ida has only been taking outside shots when wide open. Under pressure, their shots don't go in. Therefore, keep the zone tight and drive them the inside but pressure them outside as well. Maura, on offense, go inside, drive them, especially last night to look it. Create some more offense,"

The second half began with MIT doing its best to follow the coach's instructions. Roggenkamp jumpers and a Sullivan drive cut Mount Ida's margin to 28-20, and the Crickets took a timeout. Again, a strategic time-out proved to be the difference as the Engineers Resorts to running tactics against a Mount Ida trap zone, and the Crickets blew the game open, winning 51-37.

As expected, Roggenkamp led MIT scorers with 14 points, more than the rest of the team combined as the Engineers' lack of height proved to be the telling factor.

Coach Florent offered both general and specific reasons for his team's fifth loss in six games. "Normally when a team gets a ten or twelve point lead over us, we trouble coming back because you usually have to run up to make that kind of deficit. We only have a chance if the other team's going as slow as we can play our game. Otherwise we almost have to stay close to keep."

Generally, we played good defense tonight, but we not scoring and no offense. We didn't get an open shot all night because of our poor passing and guard play. We'll just have to work on these things tomorrow in practice."

No one ever said that the road to acceptability was an easy one. From a small start several years ago, the MIT women's basketball team still has a long way to go to reach the stature of the majority of sports at MIT. Although this year may be a poor one statistically, according to Mary Lou Sayles, the years to come should prove fruitful for the basketball team and women's sports in general at MIT.