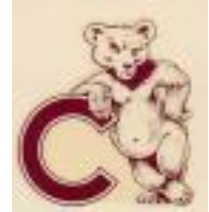




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by
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Picking Up the Pieces

Picking up the pieces of my sweet shattered dream
I wonder how the old folks are tonight?

Gordon Lightfoot, *Carefree Highway* (1974)

On Monday, March 9, 2020, the weekly national college sports polls had the Big Red No. 1 in men's hockey, No 1 in women's hockey and No. 2 in men's lacrosse. The Cornell men sported a 23-2-4 record, had won the ECAC regular season title, were the top seed in the ECAC tournament and would certainly be a top seed in one of the four NCAA regionals. The Cornell women had a 28-2-3 record, had won the ECAC regular season title and were the top seed in the eight-team NCAA tournament. And men's lax was 5-0 and moved up to No. 2 with a thrilling 18-17 victory over then-ranked No. 2 Penn State the previous day. Three legitimate shots at that NCAA team championship that had eluded the Big Red since 1977. Talk about a sweet dream. I already had my airplane tickets to the NCAA men's Frozen Four in Detroit and the men's lacrosse championship on Memorial Day weekend in Philadelphia.

When the Ivy League cancelled all winter and spring sports two days later, and the NCAA followed suit the next day by cancelling all winter and spring championships, and lacking any idea what would lie ahead, I was disappointed—indeed, *very* disappointed. Almost 18 months later, the loss of those chances to win an NCAA championship certainly pales in significance compared to everything else that has happened (and continues to happen). But since this is a “sports report,” that’s what I’ll write about. And that sweet dream was shattered. Wondering how “the old folks are”? Well, as one of those “old folks,” I fear that Cornell may have lost the best chance it would ever have of checking that NCAA title off my bucket list.

Maybe the damage to Cornell's athletic prospects was inevitable once the games were cancelled in March 2020. But the lame, delayed response of the Ivy League presidents did not help. I don't criticize the decision to cancel essentially all intercollegiate sports in the 2020-2021 academic year; certainly, the schools that carried on had mixed results as some competitions turned into fiascos with COVID cancellations. On the other hand, my wife's alma mater, Northwestern, made it through the entire regular football season and Big Ten championship game without a single COVID case. Perhaps those smart, driven student-athletes in the Ivy League could have achieved the same results. One would hope so. But the delay—until February 2021—in coming up with a proposal to allow some Ivy league athletes to complete their athletic eligibility was a problem, as was the fact that the proffered solution—allowing only 20-21 seniors to compete for a year as

graduate students—was clearly inadequate. It wasn't just the seniors that lost a year, it was everyone. That the league's action was a case of too little, too late, was the sentiment of virtually all Ivy athletes.

Call it a whine if you will, but I believe that of all the Ivy League schools, Cornell has been the most disadvantaged going forward by what occurred. The Big Red's athletic chops, such as they are, come from their ability to compete nationally in certain programs, especially hockey, lacrosse and wrestling. If you get your bragging rights from winning Ivy titles, you're likely to continue to do so since all Ivies had the same thing happen to them. But the damage to the hockey and lacrosse programs, which shut down with no safety net plan in place while its national competitors continued to play, may take years to repair. I hope I'm wrong.

Enough grousing. The school year has started, women's soccer has already played a few matches and the Big Dog—football—is less than three weeks away. What can Cornell fans look forward to, sports-wise, this fall? One thing all fall sports teams have in common is that because their seasons are confined to a single semester, it is a relatively straightforward matter for a player to withdraw from school and delay graduation until the fall. This was a route a number of fall athletes in the Cornell class of '21, especially football players, took while awaiting the league's belated decision whether to allow them to play as graduate students. (More men than women seemed to have taken this approach, which may be a comment on how the different sexes prioritize playing games versus joining the real world.)

Soccer started first so I'll start with them. Women's soccer has a new coach, **Rob Ferguson**, the sixth head coach the Big Red have had since 2000. In truth, it's been a tough millennium for the Red, who have had a losing record in Ivy play every year since Y2K, have finished last 13 times, and last won an Ivy League match five years ago. But hope springs eternal. Cornell started the season last weekend with a 2-0 win over Canisius and a 2-2 draw with Albany. But bear in mind that in 2019 the Big Red won its first four matches, then finished the season 4-10-1, including an 0-7 mark in Ivy play. So we'll see. The Red has 13 players—eight first years, and five sophomores—who will be playing college soccer for the first time, but they also have two experienced goalkeepers and 14 other juniors and seniors, including two fifth-year seniors, all of whom had significant playing time in 2019. And three of Cornell's first four goals came from the newbies, **Peyton Nichols '25** (two goals) and **Ava Laden '24** (a goal and two assists).

The outlook is brighter on the men's side. Coming off 2019's third-place Ivy finish, the Big Red were picked in the Ivy League media poll to finish second, trailing only defending champion Yale. Cornell returns 17 upperclassmen, including three fifth-year seniors and five players who earned All-Ivy honors in either 2018 or 2019. They will be joined by 18 newcomers, nine freshmen and nine sophomores. This could be a very good team. How good, we'll find out early as the Red open on the road this week against two ranked teams, 7th-ranked Wake Forest and 24th-ranked High Point.

Another team that could challenge for an Ivy title is volleyball. When **Trudy Vande Berg** took over the program in 2015, it was a mess, plagued by losses and defections. By

2016, Cornell was a .500 team and then from 2017 to 2019 the Big Red finished third in the Ivy League each year. The 2019 team was especially strong, posting a 17-6 overall record and a 10-4 record against Ivy opponents. (FWIW, after Cornell had played and beaten Penn twice, the Quakers' season was shut down prematurely because of "vulgar, offensive, and disrespectful" posters in the women's volleyball locker room. The Ivy League then decided not to count games against Penn in the official league standings, so the Red's conference record was, officially, 8-4.) The Big Red have been picked in the Ivy media poll to finish third yet again. It will be a young team, with ten first years and sophomores and just seven experienced players returning (and no fifth-year seniors). Cornell will be led by **Jillienne Bennett '22** (1st-team All-Ivy in 2019) and **Madison Baptiste '22** (2nd-team All-Ivy).

Field hockey has historically been a good-but-not-great team at Cornell. The Big Red have never won an outright Ivy championship, their best finish being a four-way tie for first in 1991. Under **Donna Hornibrook's** 14-year leadership, the Red finished in the top half of the league 11 times, including six 2nd-place finishes. After Coach Hornibrook stepped aside for medical reasons, Cornell had a difficult 2018 season under an interim coach, winning just five matches and finishing tied for last in the Ivy League. But the Big Red bounced back in 2019 under new coach **Andy Smith**, winning 10 times and finishing third in the league. The Ivy media poll pegs them for a 4th-place finish this year but who knows. All three 2019 All-Ivy honorees have graduated and the current roster includes 16 rookies and just eight returning letter winners. One returnee is 2019 leading scorer **Claire Jones '22**.

We've got a few more weeks before football starts so I'll limit my comments now to generalities. In case you've forgotten, the Big Red finished strong in 2019, winning their last two games to end up 4-6 overall, 3-4 in the Ivy League and in a tie for 4th-place. It may not sound like much but it matched the best records of the **David Archer '05** era and included a win over then No. 12 Dartmouth, the first road win by the Red over a ranked team since 1950. The good news is that much of that team is back. Of the 29 juniors on the team, twenty will play this year as fifth-year seniors, including quarterback **Richie Kenney '21** who improved dramatically during the second half of the 2019 season. The bad news is that most other Ivy League teams will also be loaded with fifth-year seniors. Apparently, the folks who vote in the Ivy media poll thought that the bad outweighed the good because they picked Cornell to finish last. But as cornellbigred.com noted, the Big Red have bested the media poll's predictions in five of the last six seasons.

That's all for this month. It will be good to have Cornell sports back. **GO BIG RED!**