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## REDEMPTION ON THE HILLTOP

**Run to title round of College Basketball Invitational lets Bradley have some fun in season of adversity**

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**BY DAVE REYNOLDS**  
OF THE JOURNAL STAR

**PEORIA** - Not often does a college basketball team receive a chance for redemption at the end of a disappointing season.

But that was the case this year for the Bradley Braves, who parlayed a 17-15 adversity-riddled campaign into a six-game run to the championship game of the inaugural College Basketball Invitational.

"Look at the teams we got to play, the great atmospheres, the extra games, getting Andrew (Warren) back, getting the young guys postseason experience and, selfishly, the chance to coach these seniors a few more games," BU coach Jim Les said. "It's easy to say when it was all said and done, 'What a great tournament.' But on the front end, it was a venture into the unknown and took a lot of forethought from our administration to support it."

Although Bradley didn't make any money or receive much national attention from the CBI, the tournament allowed the Braves the opportunity to field a team at full strength for the first time since the nonconference part of the season in November and early December.

And that was invaluable for leaving a good taste after an often sour



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string of events. After starting the season 6-2, an all-time record Carver Arena crowd of 11,597 roared its approval as the Braves nearly upset then ninth-ranked Michigan State before falling in the final minutes, 66-61.

"It's as great an environment as we've played in," said Michigan State coach Tom Izzo after the game. "It was a huge win for us, and I mean that."

For Bradley, which led by as many as nine points in the second half, it was a huge missed opportunity, one of several throughout the season.

There was the close loss to another ranked team, Vanderbilt. There was the six-game losing skid after Daniel Ruffin suffered a sports hernia, including a one-point, last-second defeat to the Drake Bulldogs, who would be ranked later in the season. There was the classic double-overtime, 111-110 loss at Creighton without Andrew Warren, followed by another close loss to the Bluejays in the Missouri Valley Conference quarterfinals.

Aside from the injuries, the program endured big hits when Theron Wilson and Tyrone Cole-Scott were cited for underage drinking and Ruffin was arrested on a charge of domestic battery. All three received team suspensions.

"A lot of people have asked if this season was tougher than any other," Les said. "I don't rank them. You deal with things as they're presented to you and get through them the best way possible."

"When I look back at this season, I'm most proud of the attitude of this team. We were acclimating two new coaches and seven new players. Then throw in all the variables we were presented with. We certainly had a lot of built-in excuses. But to a man, our team was finding excuses on how we should win. That was the overriding positive characteristic of this team. It paid off when we got to full strength because guys had a swagger about them from playing undermanned."

The player who most exemplified that swagger on the court, Jeremy Crouch, ironically conveys a most humble personality.

When Ruffin went down and the team needed Crouch most, he delivered, increasing his numbers in every category and becoming the go-to guy in clutch situations.

"I've had so many great players around me that I haven't had to do all the other things as much," Crouch said. "When Daniel got hurt, Coach Les challenged me to pick up my game and continued to challenge me the rest of the season."

Crouch's 28 points on Jan. 12 at Northern Iowa put an end to the six-game skid and gave the Braves new life.

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"A lot of people were questioning this team and what we were doing as a staff," Les said. "We were making strides, but you can't keep selling kids on, 'We're getting close.' Winning at Northern Iowa was so important for our psyche and was a turning point because the guys developed a mentality they could win without Daniel."

Two games later, Ruffin was back. And the Braves, despite more setbacks ahead, finished the year winning 13 of their last 20, culminating in the CBI with home wins over Cincinnati and Ohio and a huge road victory at Virginia. Bradley lost the best-of-three championship series to Tulsa, 2-1, as each team held court in their home arena.

The tournament extended the season to April 4, the latest Bradley basketball has competed in its 102-year history. The 38 total games played tied the most by a BU team.

Crouch, named first-team all-MVC as well as team MVP, shattered two school records held by Aaron Zobrist - most 3-pointers made in a season (118) and most in a career (262).

Ruffin's 644 career assists rank fourth all-time in MVC history, and his 207 steals are fourth on the all-time BU list.

"I'm grateful to have the opportunity to have coached Daniel and Jeremy," Les said. "They're local guys who raised the bar for expectations and excellence of this program."

Ruffin, who missed nine games and was subpar physically in a few others, was glad for the chance to play a fourth season after having to sit out his first BU season because of academic issues.

"I still think I did better this year than I would have my first year," he said. "So I don't consider it a bad year.

"I honestly think, for my career, I overachieved. I did better than what I expected. Coming into Bradley, I never thought I'd be considered one of the better point guards to play at Bradley when I left."

The third senior, Matt Salley, will also be sorely missed. He led the team in rebounding and provided much in the intangibles department.

"Matt took on the warrior mentality and did whatever it took," Les said. "We'll miss his work ethic and his toughness."

Especially in a year filled with strife, those are traits that served this team well.

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