On Campus

The Basketball Coach Who Tamed the Columbia Lions

Under Megan Griffith ’07CC, the women’s basketball program has leapt to the top of the Ivies. How far can this team go?

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Megan Griffith celebrates a Lions victory over Princeton. (Joshua Wang / Columbia Athletics)

Before Megan Griffith ’07CC became coach of the Columbia women’s basketball team, the Lions were limping. The team had tasted just one winning season since

joining the Ivy League conference in 1986 and would go through eight head coaches over the next twenty years. Their historically bad season in 1994–95, when they went 0–26, was bracketed by years of almost equal futility. As an assistant coach for the Princeton Tigers, the apex predators of the Ivy League conference, Griffith had watched Columbia's woes from across the court. And it hurt. She was a former Lion herself, an intense competitor, and she still bled Columbia blue.

And so in 2016, when Columbia's athletic director, Peter Pilling, offered her the job of head coach at the school she loved, Griffith pounced. "I knew that nobody would do a better job than me," she says. "Not because of my experience, or who I was as a coach, but because nobody was going to care about the program like I would."

Today, Griffith, thirty-nine, is the winningest coach in the program's forty-year history. In 2022–23 she led the Lions to their first-ever Ivy League title, and she repeated that feat in 2023–24. "I've always been passionate about this place," she says, sitting in her office in Dodge Fitness Center, surrounded by team photos, plaques, framed jerseys from her Columbia playing days, and a video screen where she studies film of opposing teams.

"It was clear that Megan knew what it was going to take to be successful," Pilling says. "She was young, but she understood the Ivy League process and had a very detailed plan about how to build a championship program."

The problem, as Griffith saw it, was that the Lions lacked distinctiveness. They had no particular strengths or style. "They were good players just playing basketball," says Griffith, "and so I felt we needed to establish an identity. I wanted to be different." Being different in the Ivy League, she decided, meant playing an up-tempo game, and Griffith set out to find the players to fit that model. She cast a wide recruiting net, scouting high-school players in the South (Florida, Georgia) and internationally (the UK, Australia, Spain). "You have to go out and present Columbia to prospects," Griffith says. "Obviously, this is an amazing place to go to school, one of the best universities in the world. Admissions standards are extremely high, and there is needs-based financial aid."

The trick, then, was to convince talented, sought-after players to be part of a rebuilding project. She met with student athletes and their parents and recruited Abbey Hsu '24CC and Kaitlyn Davis '23CC, two players who would become the core of a Columbia juggernaut.

“Coach G. really sold it to me, like, ‘Hey, you could come here and make an impact right away,’” says Hsu. “I saw all the effort that she and her staff put in and how much belief they had in this dream that they were painting. My parents loved that Columbia was an Ivy League school, and my dad, who was Chinese, loved that Coach G. is half Chinese [Griffith’s mother is from Hong Kong]. So it was just a perfect scenario.”

Davis, too, was sold on the plan and recalls not just the practices and games but also Griffith’s semiweekly team meetings. “We talked about our team and about things that were going on in the country,” she says. “We reflected, we journaled. Coach G. pushes you to work hard on and off the court. But she also shows you how much she cares about you as a person in a way that just makes you want to run through walls for her.” Hsu agrees: “Coach G. is a natural-born leader, and she coaches us extremely hard. On the flip side, she cares and loves us so much harder.”

With players and a plan in place, the Lions began to gel. In 2019–20 they went 17–10 (8–6 in Ivy League play), and in the three years since the COVID-canceled season of 2020–21 they have been the terror of the conference, going 25–7 (12–2), 28–6 (12–2), and 23–7 (13–1). This past season they finished in the top thirty nationally in scoring, assists, and field-goal percentage. “We’re one of the best offenses in the country right now,” Griffith says.

That’s a big statement to make about any Ivy program, let alone Columbia’s. Certainly it is not something Griffith could have predicted when she first arrived at Morningside Heights in 2003, recruited out of Villa Maria Academy High School in suburban Philadelphia. Griffith, who played guard, became the star and captain of the team at a tumultuous time (she had four coaches in four years) and was a two-time All-Ivy selection. In 2016, the year she became the Lions’ head coach, she was inducted into the Columbia Athletics Hall of Fame.

But for all her prowess on the court, Griffith will probably be best remembered as the coach who engineered one of college basketball’s greatest turnarounds. This past March, Columbia earned its first bid in the NCAA women’s tournament, an achievement Griffith calls “absolutely momentous.” (The Ivy League has a competitive disadvantage in relation to other conferences: by its own rules, it does not award athletic scholarships and does not permit year-round practice.) And though they lost 72–68 in the First Four round to Vanderbilt, the Lions proved they

belonged on college basketball’s biggest stage.

Yet for all the team’s success, Griffith says that her proudest moment as a coach came earlier this year, when Hsu and Davis were drafted into the Women’s National Basketball Association (Davis was selected by the New York Liberty, Hsu by the Connecticut Sun). And it thrills her that the stands in 2,700-seat Levien Gymnasium in Dodge, which were virtually empty during her own playing days, are now packed with sellout crowds.

“Fans are showing up not just because it’s entertaining but because they are *with* us, cheering for our players,” Griffith says. And the Lions feed off that energy: there’s a swagger in their gait these days. As Griffith gears up for the 2024–25 season (the home opener against Stony Brook University is on November 4), aiming for an Ivy conference three-peat, her confidence is palpable.

“If you want to win championships, you’ve got to talk, walk, and act like a champion,” Griffith says. “I don’t think there’s a limit to what we can do.”

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