

# Can the MAAC bounce back after dismal '01-02 showing?

**Jack Styczynski**

Parity. Competitiveness. Unpredictability. Spin it however you want, but 2001-02 was not a banner season for the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference. For most of the year, the MAAC was plagued by mediocre to bad basketball. Manhattan got off to a hot start and Siena finished strong, but no team put together a complete season.

The computer rankings reflected this, dropping the MAAC as low as it has ever been. The MAAC placed 25th of 31 Division I conferences in the final Sagarin ratings, and although the NCAA's official Ratings Percentage Index (RPI) is never made public, a popular simulation ranked the MAAC comparably. So when seventh-seeded Siena swept through the league tournament in Albany, N.Y., it was basically a foregone conclusion that the Saints would be doomed to the NCAA Tournament play-in game.

Fortunately, some face was saved when Siena beat Alcorn State and then performed admirably in a loss to eventual national champion Maryland. Even so, the play-in is a game every mid-major conference would rather avoid when favorable seeding is so crucial to a team's chances of pulling a first round NCAA Tournament upset. Not long ago, the MAAC was considered one of the nation's better mid-major leagues and would have been safe from such a dubious distinction. Times have changed.

From 1990 to 1995, the MAAC had its most impressive seasons. Former conference member La Salle was once awarded a four-seed in the NCAA Tournament. Another year, Manhattan received an at-large berth, and knocked off Oklahoma in the first round. Multiple bids to the National Invitation Tournament were common, with Siena and Canisius each advancing to the NIT semifinals at Madison Square Garden. But since 1996, the MAAC has had much less to crow about, last season being the low point.

Ironically, the league's decline has coincided with the implementation of an "up-schedule" policy intended to improve END ITAL its stature. The policy requires MAAC teams to play five non-conference games against higher-rated teams, which in theory will raise computer rankings due to an increased strength of schedule. However, losses can negate the benefit. "It's a great premise, but it only helps if you win," says Iona head coach Jeff Ruland of the policy. Last year, Manhattan's drubbing of St. John's was the only notable non-league victory the MAAC achieved.

Like Ruland, Marist coach Dave Magarity questions the policy, especially when weaker teams like Loyola and St. Peter's are trying to turn around their programs. "I think you've almost got to look at your program, where you're at, and what's best for you," says Magarity. "I think the 'up-schedule' policy has sound logic behind it, but sometimes you shake your head."

Others, such as MAAC commissioner Rich Ensor and Siena athletic director John D'Argenio, defend the policy. "We're not requiring you to play five Top 20 teams," says Ensor. D'Argenio adds, "I do think it's important that you're playing teams that are perceived to be good and also are good by the numbers, because then if you beat them, your numbers are going to rise." Last year, Siena lost at Providence and Xavier. This season, the Saints will have a chance to avenge those defeats at home, as well as Xavier's 87-48 trouncing of St. Peter's in the opening round of the recently completed Pre-Season NIT.

Regardless of whether last year was an aberration or the continuation of a downward trend, there will be a

major change in the MAAC. Following similar moves by the West Coast Conference and Horizon League over the summer, the MAAC has adopted a new tournament format that favors higher seeds. The regular season champion will get a bye to the semifinals. The second, third, and fourth seeds will get byes to the quarterfinals. Seeds 5-10 will square off in the first round, needing to win four games to capture the tournament title.

Primarily, the change gives more meaning to the regular season in a league that typically sends only one team to the NCAA tournament. No more downplaying games in January and February, falling back on March as the only month that matters. "I think there's a lot of merit to it," says Magarity. "You really do need to reward the teams that did well in the regular season."

On the other hand, how much of a reward is it? Ruland is already wondering if the top seed will benefit from bypassing two rounds while the other teams play. "That's a double-edged sword, because you're saying to yourself you're going to be fresh, but also now are you sitting around too long? I don't know. I can't answer that question yet," says the Iona coach. Magarity also wonders. "I think that one seed, it would be excruciating having to wait around," he imagines.

But even if the top seed doesn't advance, that team may still get a reward out of the new format. "I think it helps them, if they don't win the whole thing, they don't suffer a bad loss which might keep them out of a NIT bid situation," theorizes D'Argenio. Last March, top-seeded Rider fell to Canisius in the MAAC quarterfinals, and the Broncs did not get an invitation to the NIT.

Some observers see another potential plus in the format change. It might help prevent lower seeded teams from winning the league tournament and representing the MAAC with a poor seed in the NCAA Tournament. In 1997, Fairfield finished last in the regular season, but won the MAAC tourney and got a 16-seed in the "Big Dance." Then there was Siena's trip to the NCAA play-in game this past March, also as a 16-seed. Despite respectable performances by the Stags and the Saints, no 16-seed has ever won a first round NCAA Tournament game since the bracket expanded to 64 teams in 1985.

However, MAAC officials deny that either Siena's title or the WCC and Horizon moves prompted the new tournament format, which Ensor claims was the result of a two-year strategic plan reviewing several issues. When a decision was made to eliminate the league's post-season banquet, it cleared the way for the format change, which also includes an extra TV game and totally separate tournament sessions for the men and women.

Unlike the Horizon League, the MAAC has no plans to further reward higher seeds with home games in the tournament. "We're going to be a neutral site tournament," says MAAC assistant commissioner Larry Keating, who was instrumental in coordinating the new format. "We're in Trenton this year. We're back in Albany next year. We're in Buffalo the following year and we're up for bid for the year after. We'll be in one of the major arenas." Of course, none of those arenas is completely neutral, which Siena proved when it won the 2002 league tournament as the host school.

Aside from the tournament format change, there's still hope that last year's expansion of the NIT from 32 to 40 teams will help the MAAC

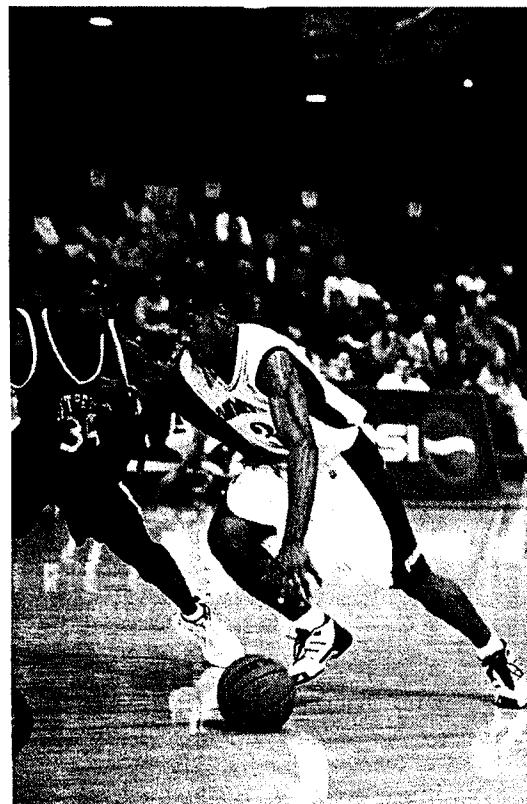
regain its previous stature as well. The expansion likely helped get Manhattan a bid, and Ensor believes it could result in a return to the days of multiple bids. "Part of the problem has been the NIT has really looked at more of the power conferences in recent years," explains the commissioner. "We've had those discussions with the NIT on numerous occasions, and that led them to opening up the bracket last year." Unfortunately, Manhattan was the only MAAC team that won enough non-conference games to take advantage of it.

The NIT expansion actually scuttled plans for an alternative mid-major post-season tournament called the Spring Break Classic, at least for now. "We had gotten pretty far in the process of getting that towards implementation when the NIT decided to expand its bracket," reports Ensor. "It's kind of gone on hold, although it remains an option down the road. A lot of people don't realize Division I has grown significantly over the years, so you have a lot more teams that have pretty good records at the end of the year that still aren't getting opportunities to play in post-season competition. I think we'll just have to see over time if it continues to be an issue on the mid-major level, and if so, do we need something in addition to the NIT?"

In the interim, the surest way for the MAAC to bounce back isn't difficult to comprehend. Jeff Ruland sums it up best.

"You have to win some out-of-conference games. It's very, very simple."

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*Manhattan's Luis Flores could help return the MAAC to its proper place.*