



**2004-05
Vermont Men's Basketball
News Articles**



**America East Champions
2003 • 2004 • 2005**

THANKS FOR A GREAT RIDE

The Burlington Free Press
By Patrick Garrity
Free Press Staff Writer
March 26, 2005

Every time we thought it never, ever could get any better, it did.

When we figured they couldn't top 21 victories and a first-place finish, David Hehn sank a jump shot in a crowded Boston gym.

When we were positive Hehn's last-second, NCAA-clinching jumper was as good as it got, Taylor Coppenrath painted a masterpiece with one arm.

And when we were convinced Coppenrath's legendary, 43-point performance was the pinnacle of bliss, T.J. Sorrentine stuck a 26-footer into Syracuse's heart.

The University of Vermont men's basketball team spent four years proving us wrong, refusing to let our easy contentment shackle their lofty aspirations. Thank goodness.

How did Catamounts coach Tom Brennan so aptly put it? "You know you live in a very special place when your realities outweigh your dreams. That's where I am right now."

We're right there with you, coach.

What grist was there for great expectations, after all? One hundred years of UVM basketball had come and gone, and the highlight was a 19-3 season - in 1947. Win 20 games? Finish in first? Go to the NCAA tournament? Knock off a national champ? Our Cats? You really think so?

A band of brothers really did.

They came from Minnetonka and West Barnet; Pawtucket; Prague - each armed with the notion that a free education and the chance to play college basketball are opportunities to prize. The fact the record book was unflattering and the rafters were empty was of no consequence to them.

The winning didn't begin all at once, not even for these gold-plated Cats.

It is easy to forget, after 89 victories and three successive NCAA bids the last four years, that UVM lost 11 games in a row during Sorrentine's freshman season. The coaches gave serious thought to scrapping Coppenrath's year-in-waiting and plugging him into the lineup. The Catamounts finished 12-17; Brennan considered quitting.

Then the stars began to shift.

Perennial powerhouses left the league. Trevor Gaines developed into a frontcourt man-eater. Coppenrath blossomed by the day. Steady Grant Anderson became a fixture. Freshmen Hehn and Germain Mopa Njila were quality additions. And Sorrentine, the little guard from Rhode Island, oozed a contagious confidence that would become the Catamounts' prevailing attitude for the next three years: We're good. Get used to it.

A semifinal stumble in 2002 delayed the victory lap, but they - and we - had seen the possibilities. The Cats viewed Sorrentine's two broken wrists and BU's depth and talent the following season as hurdles, not walls. Coppenrath truly was a gift. Big Matt Sheftic returned from sabbatical, and Hehn ably manned the point. When his improvised jumper fell through to win the 2003 title game at Boston University, they - and we - were finally champs, 102 years in the making.

"I just kept believing that this day would come," Brennan said that Saturday afternoon in Boston.

"This day" kept recurring, each time a little better than the day before, as these Cats became constants at the top of the standings.

One championship became two; two became three. The wins and accolades mounted; the national attention, too. Sports Illustrated and ESPN came calling. Columnists gushed.

The crowning moment came last weekend in Worcester, Mass. With the country tuned in, the Catamounts scored their biggest win yet, an overtime toppling of mighty Syracuse in the first round of the NCAA tournament. Big East? Big deal, our boys said. We'll see your All-American and raise you a Mopa Njila.

The success and attention have been intoxicating, but what made these four years exceptional was the way the Cats went about business. No chest-thumping. No finger-waving.

They had too much homework for such nonsense. These Cats worked for their dinner, and Vermont fell in love with their effort as much as their results. The more fans crammed into Patrick Gym to watch, the more praise the players and coaches gave the fans for their support.

Imagine. They thanked us.

Now, it's over, ended with a loss to Michigan State in the NCAA tournament. Sorrentine, Coppenrath, Hehn, Mopa Njila and reserve gunner Alex Jensen will graduate in May, each toting a GPA as impressive as their winning percentage. They are student-athletes, with the emphasis on the former.

Brennan has retired to a sundeck in Colchester and a microphone to be named later. His chosen successor is on the way; his assistant coaches, including 17-year wingman Jesse Agel, are unlikely to return.

Sad? Yeah, a little.

We will miss Brennan's humor and Coppenrath's humility and Sorrentine's swagger - not to mention all those baskets. But part of the magic of these Cats and their triumphs, like shooting stars and perfect games, is that they were extraordinary. This was something special.

And to think we were satisfied with that first 21-win season.

TOP CATS

The University of Vermont men's basketball roster over the past four championship seasons:

- 11 T.J. Sorrentine (2000-05)
- 12 Jack Phelan (2000-04)
- 14 Kyle Cieplicki (2003-05)
- 15 Andre Anderson (1999-03)
- 20 Martin Klimes (2002-05)
- 21 Mike Goia (2001-04)
- 21 Chad Powlovich (2004-05)
- 22 Taylor Coppenrath (2000-05)
- 24 David Hehn (2001-05)
- 25 Timothy McCrory (2004-05)
- 32 Germain Mopa Njila (2001-05)
- 35 Alex Jensen (2002-05)
- 40 Corey Sullivan (1999-04)
- 42 Grant Anderson (1999-03)
- 42 Matt Hanson (2003-04)
- 43 Scotty Jones (1999-04)
- 44 Ryan Schneider (2004-05)
- 45 Trevor Gaines (1998-2002)
- 50 Corry McLaughlin (2000-02)
- 50 Josh Duell (2004-05)
- 52 Matt Sheftic (1999-04)
- 54 Chris Holm (2004-05)



Gathering is evidence Brennan went out on top

The Boston Globe
By Bob Ryan, Globe Columnist
April 2, 2005

ST. LOUIS -- Rick Pitino, Tom Izzo, and Roy Williams are certifiably great coaches with a total of two national championships and 14 combined trips to the Final Four. Bruce

Weber arrived here with a 36-1 team that has been ranked No. 1 since Dec. 6. They are the men in the tournament spotlight.

If they're lucky, someday they'll all wind up like Tom Brennan.

Brennan's teams won one (1) NCAA Tournament game. He retired from the University of Vermont with a losing career record. But the Victory Tour for a coaching life well led continues amok, the latest chapter being a daylight fete organized by Harvard coach Frank Sullivan, who yesterday invited people to a St. Louis establishment called J.D. McGurk's to "commemorate his retirement from coaching with his friends." And so while the aforementioned marquee mentors put their teams through the requisite faux dog-and-pony-show practices and did their coachly duties for the assembled national media at the Edward Jones Dome, Brennan and a few hundred of his closest friends were hoisting 'em about 2 miles away at McGurk's.

In case you're wondering, this does not happen at every Final Four. Of course, Tom Brennans aren't happening anymore, ever, which was kind of Sullivan's whole point.

"To me," said Boston University coach Dennis Wolff, "this is the way everyone's career is supposed to end and, unfortunately, so few do. All of us here are his friends. I competed with him, but I am happy for his success. He is a special person."

"He is everyone's crazy uncle," said Hofstra coach Tom Pecora. "He is the one who puts it all in perspective for the rest of us. They talk about old school. Well, Tom Brennan is old school. He tells you who he's recruiting. He approaches it the way people did 20 years ago, before it all became so corporate. We should all be like him. Plus, he's never boring."

The truth is the rest of them couldn't be like Brennan. No one else at that level was wired like him. Said 17-year assistant Jesse Agel, "Tom, unlike the rest of us, wasn't very concerned about the X's and O's. He was more concerned about the kids, on and off the court, and how they were moving through life, and what was going to happen to them after they left Vermont."

It was no secret that Coach Brennan had his own M.O., what with his daily morning radio show and all, and that Agel was indeed Vermont's chief tactician. Tom Brennan made sure everyone knew that.

T.B., as he likes to call himself, had a style, an act even, and it worked for him. Like, who else invites the opposing coach out to dinner the night before the game?

"It used to drive Jay Wright crazy," said Pecora, who assisted the current Villanova head coach at Hofstra before becoming his successor. "He'd say, 'He takes you out to dinner, he never watches a [naughty word] tape, and we can't beat him in that gym.'"

Pecora said that Brennan's, shall we say, relaxed style of coaching is something more people should emulate. "We all overprepare," Pecora maintained. "He used to say to Jay, 'You've got better players than us. Just do the Frank McGuire thing. Sit down, fix your [naughty word] cuff links, and you'll win.'"

La Salle coach John Giannini, who was a Brennan foe at Maine for many years, stated Brennan was special in other ways. "He would take you out to dinner," Giannini said. "He would call you to congratulate you if you got a job and he would call you to pick you up if things were not going well for you. That's a reflection of the type of person he is, and also a reflection of the fact that he respects the coaching profession. There was always a humility about him. He always shared the credit. He never acted as if he were the reason the team won. I think that's why his players played hard for him."

Going to play Vermont in the Tom Brennan era was a unique experience. "I remember my first trip to Burlington," said Notre Dame coach Mike Brey, who had been an America East foe at Delaware. "You go up there. You get the dinner. He calls you at 6 a.m. for his radio show. And then the game starts and you can't get a call! I'm a mid-Atlantic guy. As soon as I get to the court, I hear these thick New England accents. I say, 'One guy's from Vermont. One guy's from New Hampshire. One guy's from Massachusetts. What chance do I have?'"

Speaking of first times with the One and Only, Sullivan recalled his first scouting trip with Brennan as a fresh-

ly minted Villanova assistant under Rollie Massimino. "It's 1974," Sullivan began. "We pick up a hundred or two hundred dollars in cash and I think we're supposed to be heading for Newark to see a kid. But along the way we stop at a clothing store and, if I'm not mistaken, he buys a leisure suit with some of the cash. Next we stop at Solano's restaurant for a meal. He spends all the cash before we even get there."

It was the start of a beautiful friendship. "The great thing," Sullivan said, "is that when he started to win, he acted the same as he did before. It was just that the stage became bigger. More people became aware of his approach. But now it's like when Al McGuire got out of the game. Who's going to be the next one to come along?"

Massimino had him first. The Villanova mentor put him on the payroll for \$13,000, in part because he liked the kid and in part because of a letter of recommendation from the president of the University of Georgia, where Brennan had been a pretty good 6-foot-4-inch forward who once dropped 37 on LSU. "He was a flamboyant, emotional, hard-nosed type of kid," Rollie declared.

From Villanova, Brennan moved to Yale, and then, in 1986, to Vermont. He started off 14-68 the first three years and he wound up with four straight 20-win seasons (the only ones in Vermont history), three straight league titles with the attached NCAA berths, and one very big, valedictory victory over Syracuse. He had announced his retirement in November, never dreaming the season would be quite this good. "It's been a thousand times more than I ever would have hoped for," he said.

The man to pity is Mike Lonergan. The Maryland assistant is the new Vermont coach. "This guy really ought to be rethinking this thing," said Brey. "He's not only got to follow a winning coach; he's also got to be following David Letterman."

It was late afternoon and the guest of honor took a look at what was basically a mob scene at J.D. McGurk's, and at that moment wins and losses were utterly insignificant. If Messrs. Pitino, Izzo, Williams, and Weber had any sense, they would have been desperate to trade places with a guy whose career wound up with a record several W's shy of .500.

"I guess it all comes around," Brennan sighed.

"It wasn't the wins and losses," said Agel. "It was about the ride. It was about the journey. That's what made it special."

At J.D. McGurk's, no one was leaving. They all wanted to remain in Coach Brennan's orbit.

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Time of his life

By John Harvey
The Virginia Gazette
March 23 2005

WILLIAMSBURG — Every college basketball player dreams of playing in the NCAA basketball tournament.

Martin Klimes did more than just dress out in college basketball's showcase, he became a part of one of the biggest upsets in this year's March Madness.

For one weekend, the University of Vermont's basket-

ball team became America's team and Klimes was a factor. The former Walsingham Academy standout scored seven points and grabbed five rebounds as the 13th seed Catamounts upset 4th seed Syracuse 60-57 in overtime in the first round.

Klimes scored three points in the extra session, including 1-of-2 from the free-throw line with 13 seconds left to give Vermont its first ever tournament victory.

Two nights later, the 2002 Gazette Player of the Year scored 12 points and pulled down eight rebounds during Sunday's 72-61 loss to Michigan State in the second round.

"I think it's really difficult to sum up this weekend in words," Klimes said in an interview on Tuesday. "Everyone will have 15 minutes of fame throughout their lives. This past weekend, I lived out my 15 minutes of fame and I stole a few minutes from a couple of other people."

Klimes got a brief taste of the NCAA Tournament last year during Vermont's 70-53 loss to eventual national champion Connecticut. He missed the only shot he took before fouling out, an adventure that took just 8 minutes.

Klimes' stay this year was more memorable. "I think the mindset and expectation was what made this year's tournament different," he said. "We were a 15th seed last year, and although you play to win, after the game it didn't feel like a loss. We were proud of the way we played and of our accomplishments."

"This year we came to Worcester with the mindset to win two games," he continued. "We were confident in ourselves and we believed we could make it happen. We worked hard all year to put ourselves in position to compete with the best, and we did."

Klimes said that he received plenty of support from around the world, including well-wishes from his family in his native Czech Republic and in his adopted home of Williamsburg.

"I got emails and phone messages from many people I know in Williamsburg and it really makes me feel special," he said. "Everyone wants to be remembered and I am very fortunate that I left such an impression in Williamsburg that people take the time to congratulate me and feel proud of my accomplishments."

Several of Klimes' former teammates said they were glued to the television last weekend. Patrick Dwyer and Chris Brown said they enjoyed living their basketball dream through their friend.

"It was extremely cool to see him playing on television playing against the best players in the country — and to see him succeed," said Dwyer, a Division III college basketball player at Catholic University in Washington.



"I just think it's really cool to be able to say to my friends [in Washington] that Martin and I are friends and that I played with him in high school because now he's on a national stage."

Brown, who plays soccer at Boston College, had his whole dorm room rooting for Vermont. "Seeing Martin on CBS beating a former national champion was phenomenal," Brown said. "It was honestly one of the most exciting basketball

games I have ever seen, and to see Martin in there battling with the best players in the nation made it that much better."

At James Madison, John Naparolo agreed. "Even people that didn't play with him got caught up in the moment. It is great to have that sort of association. He's representing a little piece of everyone he has known along the way."

"I think it's really difficult to sum up this weekend in words," he said. "For any player who plays college hoops, the NCAA tournament is the ultimate goal. To be able to beat Syracuse and compete with Michigan State is the highlight of my career."

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Band of brothers

Brattleboro Reformer
Editorial page
March 22, 2005

It was the unlikeliest bunch of Green Mountain Boys you'll ever see -- five guys from Pawtucket, Prague, Sarnia, Ontario, Yaounde, Cameroon, and a little, no-stoplight town in the Northeast Kingdom called West Barnet.

Hailing from all points of the compass, these players were the starting five of the University of Vermont Catamounts -- the guys that shocked the nation Friday night with a thrilling 60-57 overtime win against Syracuse in Worcester, Mass.

That first round win in the NCAA Division I men's basketball tournament broke a 102-year drought for UVM in post-season play. And while the Catamounts lost to a deeper, more athletic Michigan State team on Sunday, it does not in the least diminish what happened Friday.

No one gave UVM a chance against Syracuse, the Big East champs. The Catamounts were supposed to play with grit and determination, and lose in the end to the Orangemen.

Instead, we saw Germain Mopa Njila, the Cameroonian who averaged 5.5 points a game during the regular season, score a career-high 20 against Syracuse.

Instead, we saw the pride of Pawtucket, T.J. Sorrentine hit nothing but net in a can-you-believe-this 30-foot jumper to win the game in overtime.

Instead, we saw the player from Prague, Martin Klimes, play a grind-it-out game inside to score seven points and not even let an elbow flush to the face slow him down.

Instead, we saw the player from West Barnet, a guy who is poised to be the first Vermonter to ever play in the NBA, Taylor Coppenrath, score 16 points and hold his own against what on paper appeared to be superior competition.

Instead, we saw Vermont basketball history be made and jaws drop from Brattleboro to Richford in disbelief that this band of brothers had what it took to knock off Syracuse.

This will be the memory we take away from this season, the final one for one of the true good guys in college basketball, UVM coach Tom Brennan, who retired after Sunday's loss to Michigan State. Brennan remembers too well how bad it was at the beginning of his 19 years in Burlington -- a 22-88 record, only nine scholarships, no recruiting budget and a team that was one of the perennial doormats of the old North Atlantic Conference.

He leaves as the winningest coach in UVM history. He leaves with three straight America East championships, three trips to the NCAA tournament and an upset victory for the ages. Coppenrath, Sorrentine, Mopa Njila and the guy from Ontario, David Hehn, are all graduating in May. They leave behind a legacy of success that was built with hard work, determination and faith in their abilities and their teammates -- as good an example as any of how Vermonters, both native and adopted, can get things done that no one else thinks are possible.

Vermont reminds us first time is best time

Manchester (Conn.) Journal Inquirer
By: Randy Smith
March 22, 2005

Vermont is the way we were. Vermont is where we came from. Vermont is the way everybody was and where

everybody came from. Vermont is all that's good about college basketball and the NCAA Tournament.

The Yankee Conference may be dead, but the under-dog spirit will play on forever.

Is there anything quite like the first time? The first dance, the first date, or the first kiss? The first time you step into a batter's box, the first time a ref leaves you alone with the ball on the foul line, or the first time you hear your name announced over a public address system? Well, is there?

The first time your favorite college basketball team is in with a chance against an allegedly superior team in the NCAA Tournament is a time you'll never forget. Vermont's fans relished every minute of it. They descended on the DCU Center in Worcester en masse, dressed in green, white, and yellow, the colors of their state university. They wore only two kinds of hats - green UVM hats and green John Deere hats. Nobody could tell the difference.

They came in blind, basically, unsure of what they might see. Vermont had been to the NCAA Tournament before - twice, in fact. Two years ago, the Catamounts were blown out by Arizona. Last year, they were blown out by UConn. This year, most pundits predicted they would be blown out by Syracuse. To count up the number of brackets that had Syracuse making the Final Four would require thousands of fingers. To count up the number that had Vermont reaching the Final Four would require none.

Vermont's fans were undeterred. The innocence in their eyes and the purity in their hearts would protect them, no matter how the game played out. They were there to root for their boys, and root they did.

The noise level during the Vermont-Syracuse game was staggering. Nobody had to tell Vermont's fans to make noise. They did it on their own. They took over the DCU Center and turned it into a home-court advantage for their team. They chanted, "UVM, UVM, UVM," at the beginning of the game, during the game, and most loudly, at the end of the game. T. J. Sorrentine, Taylor Coppenrath, Germain Mopa Njila, and the rest of Vermont's players had pushed heavily favored Syracuse to the limit, and now, the fans wanted more.

More is what they got in the form of overtime, during which Sorrentine, Coppenrath and Mopa Njila made a fairy tale come true. Nobody from the Green Mountain State will ever forget the final score: Vermont 60, Syracuse 57. It should be carved in a mountain and probably will be soon.

"All you can ask for in life is an opportunity," Sorrentine was saying the day before the game. "This is our opportunity to be on stage. We're really excited about playing a game like this. We don't have a next year. If we lose, none of us will ever suit up in a Vermont uniform again."

The frankness of Sorrentine's words and the competitive fire in his eyes were impossible to ignore. This meant so much to him and he was determined to do his part. More than one person left the interview room thinking, "Go get 'em, kid."

"If I had T.J.'s intensity, I would have coached in the Big 10," retiring coach Tom Brennan said.

Brennan savored every second of the last act, which ended on Sunday when Vermont lost to Michigan State.

"The part about my job I like the most - the No. 1 thing - is they come in as boys and leave as men," he said. "T.J.'s the greatest leader I've ever coached. It's not even close. You just get in line and follow him."

Asked what kind of a pro player Coppenrath might be, Brennan never broke stride.

"The best since Jordan," he said, "but, of course, I'm a little prejudiced."

Brennan did for Vermont what Stephen King has done for Maine: He put it on the map.

"We don't have stars in Vermont and we don't have thieves," he said. "You can't steal because the state's too small. Our governor doesn't live in a mansion and doesn't drive a limo. We're just plain folk. To be honest, I never thought we could get better than Northeastern, but here we are."

That was Brennan's secret dream - to get better than Northeastern. Can you imagine?

Of course, you can. You were there in 1988 when Jim Calhoun led UConn to an unexpected NIT championship, and you were there two years later in the Meadowlands when UConn had Duke beat in overtime with one second to go and

a trip to the Final Four hinging on the outcome. Christian Laettner didn't have to make his 16-foot runner with Lyman DePriest jumping out to try to block the shot, but the damn thing went in.

That was UConn's first brush with reaching the Final Four and there's nothing quite like the first time. Can you recall the score of UConn's win over Georgia Tech in last year's national championship game off the top of your head? It was 82-73. Everybody who was at the Meadowlands on March 24, 1990, remembers the final score to this day: Duke 79, UConn 78.

Fifteen years later in Worcester, accentuated by Vermont's Cinderella story, it was hard not to notice how much things have changed. UConn isn't Vermont. UConn isn't even UConn anymore, although the name of the uniform argues otherwise. UConn is U.S. Steel, the old company immortalized by a line from the 1950s: "Rooting for the Yankees is like rooting for U.S. Steel." UConn has become Duke.

So, while thousands of Vermont fans rang down the rafters, a much smaller contingent from UConn amused themselves by chanting, "Ryan Thompson, Ryan Thompson." Nobody even would have thought of doing such a thing at the Meadowlands in 1990.

There can be no turning back. That was once upon a time and once upon a time never comes again.

To see and experience the ride of a lifetime in the form of Vermont, its coach, its players, and its fans was to be reminded of the way we were and where we came from. There can be only one first time, and usually, it's the best time of all.



**Cats' road ends
Michigan St.'s depth wears out Vermont**

The Burlington Free Press
By Jeff Pinkham, Free Press Staff Writer
March 21, 2005

WORCESTER, Mass. -- From the opening tip to the final ticks of the clock, the Michigan State University men's basketball team made Sunday's NCAA tournament second-round game against the University of Vermont a 94-foot affair.

The fifth-seeded Spartans pressed on defense, accelerated the tempo on offense and pulled out a 72-61 win at the DCU Center, ending the 13th-seeded Catamounts' run one win short of the Sweet 16.

Vermont made only 22 of 70 field goal attempts (31.4 percent), seven of 22 from 3-point range (31.8 percent) and had just five assists. Michigan State piled up 16 fast-break points to just two for Vermont, which finishes this record-breaking season 25-7.

"They picked up full court all game," said UVM senior guard T.J. Sorrentine, who hit six of 15 3-point attempts and scored 26 points, including the 2,000th of his career. "That's a hard thing to do and it definitely wore on us, but we can't make excuses. We played as hard as we could and left it all out of the floor. That's all we could do."

The Spartans (24-6) showed off their depth and balance Sunday; eight players provided points and nine went at

least 10 minutes.

Michigan State even turned Vermont baskets to its advantage, grabbing the ball after it fell through the hoop and racing upcourt in forcing the Cats to hustle back on every possession.

"Everybody in the country struggles when Michigan State takes the ball out of bounds and starts chucking it down the court," said UVM associate head coach Jesse Agel, who likely coached his last Vermont game after 17 seasons on the sidelines.

"They can run the floor," said UVM senior Germain Mopa Njila, who was shut out Sunday but contributed eight rebounds after scoring 20 points in the Cats' win over Syracuse on Friday. "After made baskets, after made free throws they pitch it ahead. Sometimes you would get back, but the next time they just keep coming."

"We tried our best to stop them but they were just the better team."

The Spartans felt coming into the game that their numbers would be an advantage, and realized early in the game that their pressure could tire the Cats.

"We thought our depth could hurt them and wear them down," said 6-foot-11, 270-pound Michigan State junior center Paul Davis, who scored 11 points and grabbed 14 rebounds, "and that was obviously the case out there."

The Cats hung tough despite the pressure and a steady stream of fresh bodies racing off the Michigan State bench. Vermont led 6-2 after two Sorrentine 3-pointers in the first two minutes before the Spartans regrouped and went up 18-11 with 10:19 left in the half.

MSU still led 22-17 with 6:04 left before Sorrentine hit two 3-pointers and a short jumper to put UVM back ahead 26-24. Sorrentine hit a driving layup with 2:56 to make score 28-27 Vermont, but MSU closed the half with an 8-0 run and Vermont never led again.

"We tried to hang in there," said Martin Klimes, who provided Vermont with 12 points and eight rebounds, "but they were the better team."

The lead reached double figures (45-34) on Kelvin Torbert's dunk with 16:29 left, and topped out at 14 (50-36) with 14:42 remaining. UVM put together a 9-2 run over the next four minutes, highlighted by four points from Taylor Coppenrath and another 3-pointer from Sorrentine, to make it 52-45 with 10:06 left.



Then the Cats, making their third straight NCAA tournament appearance, couldn't find a final run.

"At the end of the game we were trying to get back into it," said Coppenrath, who scored 16 points on 5-for-23 shooting and had 14 rebounds, "but we didn't have enough to get over them."

Maurice Ager, a 6-5 junior, led the Spartans with 19 points. Torbert added 14 points off the bench for MSU, which advances to play Duke in the Sweet 16.

"Today our defense was at times as good as it's been in my career," Michigan State coach Tom Izzo said, "and at the speed we play to have only nine turnovers, that may have been the key to the game even more than our defense."

Seniors' legacy is unrivaled

The Burlington Free Press

By Patrick Garrity, Free Press Staff Writer

March 21, 2005

Wanted: Four saints.

Good grades a must. Big hearts and sweet dispositions a plus. The taller, the better.

Apply at the University of Vermont men's basketball office. Leave a message; no one will be there to answer.

A few minutes shy of 5 o'clock Sunday afternoon, an era passed. The finest basketball team in Vermont history called it a wrap with a 72-61 loss to Michigan State in the NCAA tournament's second round.

So ends, in no particular order, a record-setting season, the 19-year coaching career of Tom Brennan and, most likely, the unabashed adoration of the national media. ESPN, it's been nice.

Sadly, so ends our relationship with four young men we were lucky to get to know and will never forget. T.J. Sorrentine, Taylor Coppenrath, David Hehn and Germain Mopa Njila have made our fine, little state a better place. How many of us can say that?

Goodness knows, it's just basketball, and they're just college kids. It's not like they've spent the last four years escorting convoys through Baghdad or scouring the Earth for a cure for cancer. But the way they have played the game, conducted themselves on and off the court and banded together as brothers will leave an imprint long after they're gone.

Sorrentine and Coppenrath arrived together five years ago. You know the whole story by now. Little scrapper from Rhode Island. Big kid from Barnet. Bunk beds, a dorm room and little in common except a love for hoops. Either one of them alone would have been a gift to the state's basketball fans.

Together, they took us places we never imagined, scoring 4,465 points along the way. Every America East player of the year trophy the conference has bestowed the last four years resides in a three-bedroom apartment a few steps away from the UVM campus.

A year behind them, hailing from the renowned basketball hotbeds of Yaounde, Cameroon, and Sarnia, Ontario, came Mopa Njila and Hehn. This pair was a whisper next to the noise of Sorrentine's and Coppenrath's offensive exploits -- it took Sorrentine one college game to hit the 20-point mark; it took Mopa Njila 122 -- but nobody wore the green-and-gold more times in competition and nobody wore it with more pride or class.

If that were it, it would be massive, but toss in the America East academic honor rolls (nine and counting) the four have earned, and remember the grace and dignity with which they have handled both the soaring heights and stinging lows, and their legacy sparkles even more.

Said Brennan in Sunday's post-game press conference, "I don't want to get too melodramatic, but it is hard for me to imagine anything in Vermont that has meant more to more people," than what this team has accomplished over the last four years.

Is this the best thing that's ever happened to Vermont? Well, statehood was pretty good. I'm guessing people were pretty excited about the arrival of electricity. The idea of chair lifts has been pretty good to us, all in all.

But the impact of these four Catamounts has to rank somewhere close to the top. If they were to decide whether or not to hang Nos. 11, 22, 24 and 32 in the Patrick Gym rafters tomorrow, you'd have a tough time finding a dissenting vote.

Leave it to Hehn, the sweet-hearted Canadian, to put the impact of this senior class in perspective.

"It's a pretty amazing thing to know I can come back in 50 years and people will remember me and what we accomplished," he said. "We made a mark."

Thanks, boys. You will be missed.

Catamounts' magical journey created memories for a lifetime

The Boston Globe
By Jackie MacMullan, Globe Columnist
March 21, 2005

WORCESTER -- The bubble officially burst with about 6 1/2 minutes to play, when beleaguered Vermont big man Taylor Coppenrath, harassed by three Michigan State defenders, coughed up the ball in the post, then watched helplessly as the Spartans zipped down the floor in transition and ran off with the Catamounts' happy ending.

On a different day, perhaps, Vermont may have been able to find a way to mount one more challenge, to devise one more ingenious scheme to come roaring back from a 14-point deficit to keep their folksy, feel-good season alive.

Not this time. Vermont didn't have the depth, the legs, or the stamina to withstand a workman-like performance by the Spartans, who simply refused to be caught up in the emotion of New England's favorite team.

Coppenrath, who had logged 45 minutes two days earlier, slogged through 38 minutes last night with 6-foot-11-inch, 255-pound Paul Davis on his hip, a plethora of pesky guards slapping at the ball, and an occasional weak-side forward thrown in for good measure. His superb career ended badly, with uncharacteristic misses around the basket that added up to a 5-for-23 shooting performance. Yet the young Vermont native coach Tom Brennan affectionately dubbed Paul Bunyan will not be measured by this one game alone. His contribution to his home state has been immeasurable.

The same holds true for fellow senior T.J. Sorrentine, the fearless point guard who took care of providing team swagger all on his own. His career has been over for fewer than 24 hours, and already I'm missing those ludicrous fallaway 3-pointers. Who doesn't have a soft spot for Germain Mopa Njila, the pride of Cameroon and Friday's 20-point hero in a stunning upset of Syracuse who tumbled back to earth yesterday afternoon with 0 points and 8 rebounds?

Yet the most sobering development of all yesterday was the realization we won't have Brennan to quote around anymore. Yesterday's 72-61 loss at the DCU Center was the final of his long and entertaining career. Brennan is now officially retired, and the most exhilarating and successful era in Vermont basketball history is over.

"You know your program has come a long way when you're crushed you lost to Michigan State," said Brennan, who was alternately misty-eyed and hilarious in his farewell address.

You had to feel for Michigan State, a talented basketball team with dreams of its own. They were an afterthought throughout this weekend of competition, all but oblivious amid the adulation for the Green Mountain Boys.

"Everyone talks about Vermont's seniors," said Davis. "Well, we've got seniors, too, and we were playing for them."

The Michigan State players acknowledged they were a little perplexed why so much fuss was being made over a man who went 9-45 in his first two seasons in Burlington. Here's why: Brennan was the same man when he won a grand total of three games in 1987-88, as he was this season, when he won 25 games and upended Syracuse. The trick for the quick-witted, nattily attired grandfather is he never takes himself too seriously. He approached his profession with humor, grace, and humility. God help poor Mike Lonergan, the Maryland assistant who will succeed him.

It could well be akin to following John Wooden at UCLA.

Asked how on earth Lonergan will pull it off, Brennan offered, "The first thing he should do is not worry one bit about me. I hope he'll use me as an ally. One era is over, and another is beginning."

"Here's what I love about the people of Vermont. There's no sense of entitlement. None. Just appreciation. They're going to give him time. They'll give him space."

"And let's be clear about one thing: They won't be clamoring to get Brennan back."

He is wrong about that, naturally. It was Brennan who convinced players such as Coppenrath and Sorrentine to com-

mit to his program. It was Brennan who generated millions of dollars in publicity for his university. It was also Brennan, by the way, who convinced his team when it fell behind, 50-36, that this game did not have to be over if the players didn't want it to be.

He used nine players yesterday, mindful of the fact Coppenrath and Martin Klimes played the full 45 minutes against the Orange, and Sorrentine and Mopa Njila 43 minutes. He had no choice but to let Sorrentine go the distance yesterday, because there was absolutely no way on this earth he would have been able to wrestle the ball away from his floor leader.

It would be an understatement to suggest fatigue played a role in this game. The pace was too frenetic, and the bodies Michigan State kept running in and out too fresh. Vermont wilted under the weight of the Spartans' full-court pressure and the momentous emotions that finally caught up to them.

"We saw it with about 8 or 12 minutes to go," reported Spartans senior Kelvin Torbert. "We saw a couple of their guys bending over, and said, 'Time to make a run and put this game away.' We saw them sucking air."

In the end, the Spartans never did quite deliver the knockout punch. The Vermont kids have come too far, and



invested too much to let anyone blow them out. They fought to the finish with grit and guts. No wonder everyone loves them.

"If I wasn't playing them," Michigan State coach Tom Izzo confessed, "I might have been pulling harder for them than anybody."

No one is sure what's next for this cast of Vermont characters. Coppenrath undoubtedly will be drafted by some NBA team looking for a banger with a nice inside touch. Sorrentine will bring his bombs to the Portsmouth Invitational, hoping to be noticed. Mopa Njila will graduate with a degree in engineering, and quite possibly become a spokesman for Crest toothpaste, which surely could use someone with a smile as dazzling as his.

Brennan will continue to host his radio show in Burlington, and very likely will be offered a wheelbarrow of money to offer quips and insights for ESPN.

"You live in a special place when your realities outweigh your dreams," the coach mused yesterday.

The dream is over, but the memories will remain. The Catamount players truly were crushed over their fate, but some day, when Paul Bunyan and his teammates look back, they will remember a magical weekend in Worcester when they shocked the basketball world, and put Vermont permanently in the NCAA Tournament books.

Jackie MacMullan is a Globe columnist.

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CINDERELLA GORY

The New York Post
By LENN ROBBINS
March 21, 2005

WORCESTER, Mass. — The greatest four-year run in Vermont basketball history ended yesterday with sweat and tears dripping onto the court in the DCU Center and fans in green and yellow giving the losing team a standing ovation.

Like a skier flying down virgin powder, no one in New England — and not many March Madness fans across the country — wanted to see this basketball ski lift closed for the season. Tom Brennan was America's funniest coach. Taylor Coppenrath was the most humble of star forwards. T.J. Sorrentine was part Doug Flutie and part Scott Skiles.

"I told these guys in the locker room, 'It's hard for me to imagine anyone ever doing anything in Vermont that's meant more to the people than these guys,' " said Brennan. "These guys are going to be heroes forever."

Heroes fall hard and it took a hard team to end Vermont's March joyride. The bigger, deeper, tougher team from Michigan State, whose coach is from Iron Mountain, Mich., wore down college basketball's most endearing story, 72-61.

When the final horn sounded, Sorrentine stood at midcourt, bent at the waist, hands on his knees, his chest heaving. He had taken 23 shots against the mighty Spartans and made nine.

Coppenrath also felt the fatigue. He attempted 23 shots against the Big Ten Spartans and made just five. The Catamounts, who got at least 30 minutes from all five starters, had given it all but literally come up short.

"They just make every shot so tough on you," acknowledged Sorrentine. "Even the shots we made were tough."

Toughness was Michigan State's trademark at the turn of the century. The Spartans (24-6), who will face Duke in Austin, were the most physical team in America.

Coach Tom Izzo would have them practice in football helmets and shoulder pads. He recruited players from the tough city of Flint, Mich., and in 2000 they won the national championship. But then the Spartans began to lose their edge.

A soft team wasn't going to beat these Catamounts in New England, where everyone now claims to have spent at least one semester at Vermont. This was basically a home game for Vermont.

"Even if they're not wearing the [Vermont] shirt, we have fans wherever we go," said Coppenrath.

Despite coming out of the America East, not known for its physical play, Vermont (25-7) was tough enough to force Syracuse into 24 turnovers in a 60-57 overtime upset on Friday. And the Catamounts (41 to 38 rebounds) held their own on the boards against the Spartans.

But Michigan State kept running bigger, fresher bodies at Vermont. Izzo played nine Spartans at least 10 minutes. Often the 5-11 Sorrentine was forced to shoot over the 6-4 Kelvin Torbert.

The 6-9 Coppenrath had to contend with 6-11 Paul Davis or 6-10 Drew Naymick. The Catamounts were held to 31 percent shooting.

"Every time we'd try to come back they'd just pop us in the face," said Coppenrath.

Which is exactly what Michigan State is going to have to do if it wants to advance in this tournament that has claimed Kansas, Wake Forest and Connecticut in the first weekend. Izzo acknowledged the Spartans had lost that unloving feeling.

"An old saying used to be, 'Players play, tough players win,' " said Izzo. "I've been asked, 'What if it's not in the player's personality?' Then put his personality where the sun don't shine."

The sun shined on Vermont this year. Then a hard team knocked out a heartfelt story.

"I won't capture it for a few years down the road," said Sorrentine. "We're just living in it."

Along with an entire state.

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Sing no sad songs for Sorrentine

The Providence Journal
by Bill Reynolds
Monday, March 21, 2005

WORCESTER -- So it ended.

The wonderful college career of T.J. Sorrentine, the 5-foot-11 Pawtucket kid who has written his own little chapter in the history of Rhode Island basketball, the former St. Raphael All-Stater who took his basketball dreams to Vermont five years ago and saw them all come true.

It ended with the seconds clicking off the clock here at the DCU Center and on the wrong end of a 72-61 score. Ended with him having scored 26 points, the reason Vermont stayed in the game as long as it did. Ended with him having a great game in a losing effort, a game in which Michigan State's size and athleticism eventually trumped Vermont's heart.

Before that happened, though, he had a first half that showed everyone what all the fuss was about, a stretch when it became his ball and his game, a stretch when he was off in some private place where all your dreams come true.

A fallaway 3-pointer from out top. Then another. Then a mid-range jumper off a nifty move along the baseline, followed by a deep three off the dribble that was a thing of beauty, then a drive through what seemed the entire Michigan State team.

Was Sorrentine going to beat Michigan State all by himself?

For a while it seemed like maybe he was, as he had a first half that seemed to pick up from his deep shot Friday night that beat Syracuse, as if the NCAA Tournament had become his personal field of dreams.

Until reality entered the game. The cold reality that America East teams beat Big Ten teams about as often as elephants jump over the moon.

So it ended.

But to dwell on yesterday is to miss the point. Yesterday was just the curtain coming down on the greatest of plays, the afternoon the lights got turned off and the theater went dark. Nothing else. Every great story has to have an ending. Yesterday was Sorrentine's.

But sing no sad songs for the Catamounts, who became the darlings of this tournament, the team that came out of nowhere to beat Syracuse Friday night, the kind of game that gives this tournament a great name, a reaffirmation that Cinderella never grows old and dreams never die. For three years now Vermont has been everything that's good about college basketball, a team that rallied a state, went to three straight NCAA Tournaments and then upset Syracuse as an exclamation point.

And sing no sad songs for Sorrentine.

How many 5-11 kids see their basketball dreams come true? How many kids who grew up in the Rhode Island Interscholastic League see their college careers end on national television in the NCAA Tournament?



Sorrentine knew he never could have planned that five years go.

"I just wanted to go and work hard and see what happened," he once said.

Work hard and see what happened. That was the only game plan. Not NCAA appearances. Not playing on ESPN. Not being written up in national magazines. Not being part of his amazing basketball journey at Vermont, one that even a Hollywood scriptwriter would probably have dismissed as too hokey.

Or as Vermont coach Tom Brennan said afterwards, "Nobody has ever done anything more in Vermont that has meant more to more people than these kids. That's their legacy. That's what they will be remembered for. These guys will be heroes forever."

But all that was a little too much in the future for Sorrentine yesterday.

"Maybe a few years down the road I'll look back and see what we accomplished," he said.

He was standing outside the Vermont locker room in the DCU Center, disappointed certainly, but already aware that life goes on. A couple of months ago he'd said that he never could have envisioned his career when he first went to Vermont five years ago. Yesterday he reiterated that.

How could he not?

He's had a great career, one no one ever expected him to have.

This weekend was just the exclamation point.

"The other night after we beat Syracuse I looked up and saw my father in the stands," he said. "It's one of those moments I'll remember the rest of my life."

For careers end.

But memories are forever.

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Tourney successful at DCU Center

Worcester Telegram and Gazette

Mar 21, 2005

By John Conceison

WORCESTER—Representatives from host Holy Cross and the NCAA were all smiles after tournament play concluded at the DCU Center yesterday.

"I think it was a superb weekend; everything went about as well as can be expected," said HC athletic director Dick Regan, who served as tournament director. "The six basketball games were tremendous. The crowds were great. It was five years in the making, and now it's over. It's hard to believe."

NCAA basketball staff member Bill Hancock, who was also in Worcester in 1992 for the first- and second-round action, echoed those sentiments. "Lots of credit goes to Holy Cross and the arena staff, particularly Frank (Mastrandrea, media coordinator) and Rose (Shea, tournament manager). They worked so hard for many months and years, and today, they saw the culmination of their work."

Hancock thinks Worcester has a chance to host another NCAA basketball weekend in the future but notes the concern of available hotel space for the participating teams. Only Connecticut stayed in the city; Michigan State, North Carolina State, Old Dominion, Vermont and Central Florida were in Marlboro, Syracuse in Westboro, and Charlotte in Framingham.

"The one thing about this area, and we knew this coming in, was the hotels are such a great distance," Hancock said. "One of the athletic directors said his team spent a total of eight hours on the bus while it was here, on trips from the hotel to the arena. There aren't any other sites where that has happened. It's a shame there aren't more hotels around the arena."

Help may be here soon. Under way is the development of a Hilton Gardens Hotel at the former Central Division fire station lot, a \$22 million project that could fill the need for a convention hotel near the DCU Center.

"But (the hotel situation) shouldn't take away for the performance of the building people and the Holy Cross people did this weekend," Hancock said.

Vermont merchandise hard to find

No doubt the hot commodity over the weekend was the University of Vermont. The only school's apparel to sell out in the DCU Center lobby Friday night was Vermont's, and a Catamounts media guide couldn't be found by members of the press.

Vermont basketball publicist Bruce Bosley sent 160 media guides to Worcester for the pregame news conferences Thursday, and they were gone before tipoff Friday night. The NCAA requests that the school sends 250 copies of media guides and game notes, but Vermont didn't have that many remaining from the fall press run of 1,500. "We've been selling them at basketball games; we can't keep enough around," Bosley said.

Gordon Woodworth, the school's director of athletic communications who had been with the Catamounts hockey team in Albany at the ECACHL playoffs, came to Worcester with about a dozen copies, reserved for members of the Michigan State media.

"Like coach (Tom) Brennan has been saying, we travel like Nebraska football," Bosley said.

Rare miss for Gibbons

For the first time when Holy Cross women's basketball has gone to the NCAA Tournament, Bill Gibbons Sr. didn't make the trip to see his son's team play. He was at the scorer's table at the DCU Center as official timer and was having the Crusaders' game against Ohio State taped at home.

"I have given orders at the table that no one's to give me the score," Gibbons said at halftime of the N.C. State-UConn game, as Holy Cross was falling to the Buckeyes in College Park, Md. "I'm going home later to watch it just like it's live and hope that he wins."

Gibbons, who also worked Worcester's NCAA games in 1992, felt he had to hold his commitment. "About five or six weeks ago, the people at Holy Cross saw that the women's team would probably be on the road this weekend and asked if could still do the games, and I said I would."

Wolfpack fans show signs

A couple of the more creative signs were made by Melanie Sendek, the wife of N.C. State coach Herb Sendek, and their young daughters, Kristin, Catherine and Kelly. They read: "We love you, Herbie, the Love Bug" and "It's easy math: N.C. State > UConn."

"That's what it's all about," the coach said. "Those gals have been unbelievable in my life, and to be able to share that moment with them, even if we weren't next to each other, was something special."

No Worcester jinx

UConn and Syracuse both lost at the DCU Center this weekend, and Syracuse also fell here in the 1992 NCAA Tournament, but UConn coach Jim Calhoun refuses to believe Big East teams are jinxed in Worcester.

"We stayed in Worcester; we went out to eat in Worcester," Calhoun said. "The people of Worcester have been absolutely terrific, except for the police having too much fun with their motorcycles driving too quickly, too fast. Beyond that, everything has been great, the people have been great, it's been a great site for us, except for the fact that we lost. We'll return to the Centrum (DCU Center) some day — I sound like Patton, I think — and we'll win here and go on. We'd love to come back to Worcester."

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Brennan's career comes to a close

Worcester Telegram and Gazette

Mar 21, 2005

By Jennifer Toland

WORCESTER—Tom Brennan decided back in November that this was it. That the end of the 2004-05 season would also be the end for him, the close of his 19 years at Vermont and his 24-year head coaching career.

Brennan's final year and Vermont's magical season lasted one game longer, perhaps, than most people living outside the Green Mountain State thought it would, but after the Catamounts upset Syracuse in overtime Friday night for their first NCAA Tournament victory, the 55-year-old Brennan thought, why not, why not keep it going just a little bit longer.

As of 2:45 yesterday afternoon, Vermont stood as New England's lone NCAA representative. By a little before 5 p.m., UVM had joined Boston College and UConn as the region's dearly departed, the 15th-seeded Catamounts falling to No. 5 Michigan State, 72-61, before a sold-out DCU Center crowd, the majority Vermont backers.

"I had that whole karma thing going," Brennan said with a laugh after walking off the court for the final time. "I guess not enough. I thought we did. I thought we'd win today. To me, it was like, hell, this is kind of meant to be. I said that all season. We were meant to be (America East) champions; we were meant to win the tournament; we were meant to win a game in the NCAA Tournament. When we did that, I thought, why not two?"

"It's human nature," Brennan said. "You always want a little bit more. You always want one more."

The Catamounts struggled offensively, however, against an energized MSU squad. UVM big man Taylor Coppenrath had a long day, converting just 5 of 23 shots. Point guard T.J. Sorrentine tried to infuse his team, but also struggled from the field, making 9 of 23 attempts.

"We're crushed; we're devastated; but we tip our hats to the Spartans," Brennan said. "You know your program has



come a long way when you're crushed because you lost to Michigan State."

Vermont won a total of 14 games Brennan's first three years at the helm. This year, the Catamounts made their third straight NCAA appearance.

Brennan couldn't have scripted his last season any better. The coach was featured in a Sports Illustrated story, the Catamounts set a school record for wins (25-7), won their first outright America East regular-season title and captured the hearts of Vermonsters. They topped it all off with Friday night's thrilling NCAA first-round win over Syracuse.

"You live in a special place when your realities outweigh your dreams," Brennan said, "and that's where I am right now and I just thank God for that every day."

The gregarious Brennan won over many new fans in Worcester with his sense of humor, and his team did the same with two great efforts. Vermont's huge throng of supporters at the DCU Center seemed to continually grow all weekend.

"They were like home games," Brennan said.

Brennan accepted gracious handshakes and hugs from Michigan State coach Tom Izzo, his assistants and players as the game ended. In his postgame press conference, Brennan thanked his players, his staff, his administration, the media and the people of Vermont for a great ride.

Maryland assistant Mike Lonergan, the son of former Holy Cross baseball star Jack Lonergan, will take over for Brennan.

"One era's over; a new era is beginning," Brennan said.

The Brennan era ended in style.

"It ended badly, but not sadly, because I love these guys to death, where they've taken me and what they've showed me," Brennan said. "When you think you're going to win and you don't, it hurts. Nobody's happier than me when we win, and nobody's sadder when we lose, but I'll get over it quickly. As a matter of fact, I'll get over it by the time I get on (Interstate) 93. I'll move on."

"I'll ride home with my bride (Lynn), and I'll say, 'We did it, baby. We did it.' With this group and 19 years of great assistants and wonderful administrators and wonderful peo-

ple, we put this place on the map, and to me, that is very fulfilling."

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Mopa Njila's special night was worth the trip

The Boston Globe

By Jackie MacMullan, Globe Staff

March 20, 2005

WORCESTER -- You must understand something from the outset: Vermont forward Germain Mopa Njila will not score 20 points today against Michigan State in the DCU Center. It's also highly unlikely he will drill a nerveless 3-pointer to put his team ahead for good, like he did two nights ago against heavily favored Syracuse in an opening-round shocker in the NCAA Tournament. And the basketball world really will have turned on its ear if he shoots 9 of 10 from the floor again.

"Let's get one thing straight," Vermont coach Tom Brennan cracked yesterday. "Of the nine shots he made, eight of them I didn't want him to take."

There are always unlikely heroes who emerge during the run to the NCAA title, but good luck topping Germain Mopa Njila's splash onto the NCAA Tournament college basketball scene. With his offensive explosion against Syracuse Friday night, Mopa Njila was able to boost his season average to a whopping 6 points a game. That's right. The kid who dropped 20 on the Orange in the biggest game in Vermont history didn't even score that many in three games combined of the America East tournament. He is, after all, a career 42 percent shooter, not to mention a career 23.5 percent 3-point shooter.

He has happily played third (and often fourth) fiddle to pro prospect Taylor Coppenrath and team leader T.J. Sorrentine, who have been the cornerstones of this program for four years. Mopa Njila, too, is a senior, and has contributed greatly to this team with his defensive abilities and superb rebounding. Long before his remarkable performance against Syracuse, Mopa Njila already considered himself the luckiest guy alive. Someone actually paid for his education while he played basketball.

What a country.

"Germain is Eddie Murphy in 'Coming to America,'" Brennan said. "You must realize where he's come from. He walks around saying, 'Look at what I've got.' He has a tremendous appreciation for all this. He really gets it."

It was never just about basketball for Mopa Njila. How could it be? When his parents told him they were able to send him to a boarding school in Homestead, Fla., instead of continuing his education in his native Cameroon, he was truly grateful. His hope was to become an engineer, and the opportunity to study in the United States was a precious gift from his family.

That is why he did not tell them in the first few months that he was lonely and scared and unsure if he had made the right decision. He struggled to become acclimated in a strange town with unusual customs and few familiar faces. He yearned for his sister's crepes. He longed to stroll down the dirt road that led to the heart of his village and recognize almost every person he encountered.

"It was hard," Mopa Njila said. "I missed my friends, shopping with my family. I spent Christmas without them, and that was very lonely. At the same time, I knew I was living a dream. I knew I had a chance that was too good to pass up."

His sister, who had come to America before him, graduated from American International College in Springfield and moved to Amherst. Eager to be closer to her, Mopa Njila signed on for a year of prep school at The Master's School in West Simsbury, Conn. He drew limited interest from Division 2 schools, who were intrigued by his intelligence, agility, and basketball energy, but only one Division 1 school seemed truly committed: Vermont.

"We liked him for his athleticism," Brennan explained. "We didn't have anyone like him. And he was such a bright kid. I thought he'd be perfect for us."

Now even a kid from Cameroon knew enough about the harsh New England winters to wonder about the upside of going to school in Burlington, Vt.

"At first, I didn't want to go," Mopa Njila said. "People said it was cold -- and far. But I was already so far from home that didn't really matter.

"I went to visit in October. It was 80 degrees outside. Coach [Brennan] told me it was like that all the time."

The charismatic Brennan was persistent. Before he knew what was happening, Mopa Njila signed on to be a Catamount. The first morning he woke up on campus and realized it was 28 below zero, he undoubtedly cursed Brennan in his native Cameroon village tongue.

"I told Germain, 'When you graduate, I'm going to buy you the nicest topcoat anyone from Cameroon has ever had,'" Brennan said. "And I will."

If Mopa Njila had trouble adjusting to life at UVM, he's hidden it well. He is popular among his teammates and students on campus, for his boundless enthusiasm, and a smile that is both striking and illuminating. Although the official language in Cameroon is French, Mopa Njila already spoke excellent English when he came to America, so communication was not an issue.

"Honestly, I don't think it was that much of an adjustment for him," said senior guard David Hehn. "It's such a relaxed atmosphere in Vermont, and he didn't have any trouble making friends."

"That's the thing about him. He always walks around with this huge smile on his face. What happened to him [against Syracuse] couldn't have happened to a better person."

The fact that Mopa Njila is a student-athlete in every sense of the word must be comforting to an NCAA committee that must cringe every time Cincinnati and its 0 percent graduation rate advances another round closer to the Final Four. Mopa Njila loves the game, but he's never lost sight of the fact his degree is his end game.

"When we lost to Arizona [in the 2003 NCAA Tournament], they brought us back home on Mick Jagger's plane," Brennan said. "We had gotten all messed up with the weather getting there, so they flew us home on this jet that



Mick Jagger and [Bruce] Springsteen and the Yankees had used.

"There was this big round chair in the middle of plane, and Germain was sitting in it, studying. I said to him, 'C'mon, man, you're supposed to have a cocktail waitress on your lap, not a chemistry book. This is supposed to be a party plane.'"

Mopa Njila's time in Burlington is running short, which is why he asked his mother, Rose Tchoupouen, to visit him in his second home. Because the Cameroon government limits how long its citizens can stay abroad, Mopa Njila's mother was torn between seeing her son play and seeing him receive his degree in May. The government ultimately allowed her to come to Vermont in February, with permission to stay through May for graduation.

"One of the greatest moments ever was seeing his mom at Senior Night," Brennan said. "The only problem was I think there are about 15 verses to the Cameroon national anthem. It took the air out of us, to be honest."

Before Friday night, Mopa Njila's career high was 15 points. But with Coppenrath swallowed up by Syracuse's vaunted 2-3 zone, the Catamounts knew they would have to generate offense elsewhere. Mopa Njila was not exactly highlighted on the Orange's scouting report, so he figured, why not me?

"Going into the game, Coach had told us that Syracuse doesn't give up a lot of open shots," Mopa Njila said. "I figured if I'd have an open shot, I'd take it. And that's what I did."

"I usually give up a lot of shots. With Taylor inside, he's such a great scorer that I turn down shots because I know it's better for him to get the ball."

The game plan will be different today against Michigan State. Coppenrath is likely to get more looks, and you can expect him to revert to form and submit his usual 25 points and nine rebounds. That will likely mean Germain Mopa Njila will also revert to form and resume his role as a cat-quick defender and rebounder, who will pick up a basket here and there.

But no one will ever be able to erase the night of his life, on March 18, 2005, when German Mopa Njila lifted his team -- and himself -- to heights neither dared to imagine.

Rose Tchoupouen was in the building to watch that magical moment. She embraced her son following the victory, and gave a hug to Brennan for good measure. Asked what Brennan would be called if he lived in their Cameroon village, Mopa Njila answered, "We would call him 'aporna.' "It means, 'happy guy.'"

Guess that makes two of them.

Jackie MacMullan is a Globe columnist.

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Vermont concerns MSU, Izzo Cinderella team with folksy coach and dominant player is next for Spartans.

**The Detroit News
By Dave Dye
March 20, 2005**

WORCESTER, Mass. -- The coach, Tom Brennan, is a gregarious co-host of a popular morning radio show in Vermont.

The star player, Taylor Coppenrath, is a homegrown local legend who wasn't recruited by major programs but has developed into a likely NBA draft pick.

The point guard, T.J. Sorrentine, was considered too small and too slow to play at bigger schools such as Providence and Rhode Island in his home state.

These are the Vermont Catamounts, the No. 13 seed in the Austin Regional.

They are one of this year's Cinderella stories in the NCAA Tournament and the next obstacle for Michigan State in today's second round.

"If I wasn't playing them, I'd probably be cheering for them myself," MSU Coach Tom Izzo said.

Brennan, 55, announced in November he'll retire after this season, his 19th at Vermont.

After a 14-68 record his first four years, he turned the program around and went 89-35 the last four seasons.

The Catamounts had never been to the NCAA Tournament before he took them there in 2003.

"I don't know if they've learned any basketball, but they've become glib and funny around me," Brennan said of his players.

"This is a special time. I'm totally satisfied. Just beating Syracuse is enough for me. Thank God, it's not enough for them (the players)."

His 6 a.m. weekday radio show -- Corm and the Coach -- receives higher local ratings than Howard Stern and Don Imus.

Brennan has a one-liner for everything. He said Coppenrath "is like God's other son."

Coppenrath, a 6-foot-9, 250-pound forward, is the nation's second-leading scorer with a 25.4-point average and a three-time America East Player of the Year. He has great hands and tremendous toughness.

"He's so humble in what he does," starting guard David Hehn said. "All he does is talk about other people and want other people to feel good."

Coppenrath, who is from a small town in Vermont called West Barnet, said the only other schools that recruited

him out of high school were Albany, Bucknell and Colgate. He was redshirted his first year because he needed to get stronger.

Asked if he got overlooked by bigger programs, Coppenrath said, "I probably just developed a little more over the years. I didn't play varsity in high school until my junior year. I only played two years. I didn't score 1,000 points in high school."

Coppenrath and Sorrentine form one of the nation's top inside-outside duos.

Sorrentine, whom Izzo compares to former MSU guard Scott Skiles, was having a horrendous shooting night before launching a 28-foot three-pointer that proved decisive in overtime.

The Catamounts stormed the floor after time expired, and their celebration carried into the locker room, where they sprayed each other with water.

"It was an amazing feeling," Sorrentine said. "It validates what we've done in our four years."

In Vermont, this is as big as it gets.

The school, located in Burlington, is about a four-hour drive from Worcester. The Catamounts had a strong home-crowd advantage Friday, and it is expected to be even more decisive today.

"There's no professional teams in Vermont," Hehn said. "We're all they've got. I would equate this (winning a NCAA Tournament game) to the Red Sox winning a World Series. I guarantee you people were doing cartwheels and flips everywhere."

A kid from Pawtucket hits a shot heard around hoop world

**The Providence Journal
by Bill Reynolds
March 20, 2005**

Why is this such a great tournament?

Vermont upsetting Syracuse, that's why.

Vermont upsetting Syracuse, which proves that Cinderella is always waiting in the wings, just waiting to jump on to center stage.

Vermont upsetting Syracuse, a gift for dreamers everywhere.

Vermont, period.

For you can't make up the Catamounts, this team that plays in the relative anonymity of America East. This school that plays in a glorified high school gym and whose basketball team was always overshadowed by its hockey team. This team that's been fast-breaking through some unbelievable script for three years now, one that seems written by the basketball gods themselves.

How do you make up T.J. Sorrentine, the coach's kid from Pawtucket, who drained the big 3-pointer in overtime Friday night to send Syracuse back to the Carrier Dome, its season over? This kid, who made an unbelievably deep shot in the NCAA Tournament as casually as if he were playing in a pickup game in the tiny gym at St. Raphael Academy, where his father, Tom, is the longtime coach.

This kid, who had to go to Burlington to find his college career, and in the process has found himself a centerpiece in a basketball love story he undoubtedly would never have found anywhere else. This gym rat of a kid, who has had one of the best college basketball careers a Rhode Island kid has had in a long time.

How do you make up Taylor Coppenrath, the floppy-haired kid from the Vermont boonies who has become some Green Mountain version of Larry Bird, coming out of nowhere to become one of the most celebrated players in the country? This kid, who didn't even score 1,000 points in high school, was recruited only by Vermont, Albany and Bucknell, and is as Vermont as Lake Champlain.

How can you make up Tom Brennan, the wise-cracking coach always known more for his morning radio show in Burlington than his record, this basketball lifer in his last year as coach who is going out in the middle of a fantasy? This 55-year-old man, 14-68 in his first three years at Vermont, who told the Boston Globe last fall that he was retiring because "I don't want to be Willie Mays in the batter's box."

How do you make all this up?

You can't.

Just as you can't make up the fact that college basketball's new darlings come from Burlington, the quintessential quirky college town where both Ben & Jerry's and Phish were born, one of those funky places that make Thayer Street look staid, about as far away from big-time basketball as the far side of the moon.

Vermont is everything refreshing in college basketball. It's an antidote to a sport that's become increasingly corporate.

For this isn't about boosters and seat licenses, not about the need for bigger weight rooms and more revenue streams, not about the program. This is not about some big-time jock school that's an express lane to the NBA, one of those places where the biggest questions are how many years the star players are going to stay before they go off to the big money and bling of the NBA.

This is about college basketball the way it used to be back when teams played in gyms instead of arenas, back when kids just sort of showed up unnoticed as freshmen instead of arriving with trumpets blaring.

In a sense, it's reminiscent of Providence College in the late '50s, back when Joe Mullaney was the coach, Lenny Wilkens and Johny Egan were the stars, and the Friars were coming out of nowhere to capture a state's heart. Back when it all took on a life of its own, springing out of the ashes of anonymity, as innocent as first love.

That's what is so wonderful about this Vermont story, the sense that it seems so rooted in some musty old past, about as contemporary as a faded old scrapbook in grandma's attic.

And it wasn't as if anyone sat down five years ago and devised a blueprint to bring a basketball team to Burlington that was going to turn a northern New England state into some hoops paradise. It wasn't as if there was ever a plan. This is all some wonderful fluke, the kind of basketball story that's not supposed to be able to exist anymore.

And maybe it can't.

At least for much longer.

Maybe this is just some wonderful aberration, some little blip on the basketball radar screen. After all, how far is a team that plays in a league where the two other best teams are Boston University and Northeastern supposed to go in the NCAA Tournament? How many times can Cinderella go to the dance without getting caught?

Odds are Vermont's great run ends today against Michigan State in Worcester. Michigan State, which plays in the Big 10 and won the national championship in 2000. Michigan State is not supposed to ever lose to Vermont.

Then again, the odds said Vermont's season should have ended Friday night against Syracuse.

No matter when it ends, though, it's been a sweet, sweet ride for this most improbable of teams, an unbelievable story. The kind of story that will be remembered long after this season ends, regardless of when that is. The kind of story that makes this a great NCAA Tournament.

The best story out there.

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March miracle Mopa Njila, Sorrentine shoot Vermont over Syracuse in NCAA shocker

**The Burlington Free Press
By Jeff Pinkham, Free Press Staff Writer
March 19, 2005**

WORCESTER, Mass. -- What does an upset look like?

It looks like Germain Mopa Njila picking the biggest stage to play the game of his life.

It looks like Martin Klimes standing toe-to-toe with Hakim Warrick, the Big East Player of the Year.

It looks like T.J. Sorrentine waving off the play from his coaches with 1:08 left in overtime and nailing a 25-foot 3-pointer.

It looks like a soaking-wet bunch of happy

Catamounts following the biggest win in the history of University of Vermont men's basketball and the team's first win over a ranked team since 1950.

It looks like 13th-seeded Vermont 60, fourth-seeded Syracuse 57, Friday night in overtime during the first round of the NCAA tournament in front of a very pro-Catamount crowd of 13,009 at the DCU Center.

Vermont (25-6) advances to the second round, where



it will take on Michigan State -- an 89-81 first-round winner over Old Dominion. Tip-off Sunday is set for 2:40 p.m.

"All I know is that we got more than them and in the end, that's all that counts," said Tom Brennan, whose UVM head coaching career was extended by at least one game. "I don't mean to sound like a wise guy, but I thought we could win this game."

His belief sprouted from guys like Mopa Njila, Klimes and Sorrentine, two seniors and a sophomore who refused to back down on the biggest stage.

Mopa Njila stood out in every phase of the game, leading the Cats with 20 points on nine of 10 shooting and grabbing a team-high nine rebounds. He also hit both of his 3-point attempts, including the long bomb that gave the Cats the lead for good with 1:57 left in overtime, while adding team-highs in assists (five) and steals (four). And he did it while playing all but two minutes. He had a chance to put the Cats ahead with 15.1 seconds left in overtime, driving past a Syracuse defender and laying the ball in. But the referee ruled Mopa Njila had stepped on the baseline, negating the basket and delaying the celebration.

"He single-handedly took that game over when we needed it, got us steals, hit some 3s," said UVM senior Alex Jensen, who watched the final minutes nervously from the bench. "Without him tonight, there's no way that game's even close."

Klimes' numbers don't jump off the stat sheet, but his contribution was just as valuable. The 6-foot-8, 225-pounder made life miserable for Warrick, banging, pushing and battling the Wooden Award finalist for 45 minutes. Warrick finished with 21 points, but he shot just eight of 16 from the field and committed 10 turnovers.

"You always want to play against the best you can," said Klimes, who also had seven points, five rebounds, three assists and one free throw with 13.4 seconds left in the game for the Cats' final points. "I just wanted to make his life as difficult as possible."

And Sorrentine made the shot he's been dreaming about for a lifetime, a beat-the-clock, shock-the-world 3-pointer in the biggest game of his life. And he did it on a play that wasn't called for him, instead giving Brennan a nod and nailing a 3-pointer with 1:08 left that put Vermont ahead 59-55.

"I just had a feeling come over me: 'You gotta make this; you've got one more in you,'" said Sorrentine, who hit five of 16 from 3-point range and finished with 17 points. "I'm just glad it went down."

Taylor Coppenrath was lost in the shuffle. The Cats' Wooden Award finalist and three-time America East Player of the Year scored 16 points and had four rebounds in 45 min-

utes. And he didn't care one bit.

"Somebody steps up big every game," Coppenrath said, "actually, a lot of people do."

That's what it took to pull off the biggest upset in this year's tournament to date. And the Cats did it without playing their best; at least on the offensive end. Vermont shot just 26.9 percent (seven of 26) in the first half, which ended with the Orange ahead 23-19. The Cats did it by hitting just seven of 21 from 3-point range and being outrebounded 37-30.

"I thought we had to shoot the ball extremely well to win, and we didn't and that's just how it worked out," Sorrentine said. "I don't know what this means to the state and the university. I don't know Vermont history, but I gotta think it's one of the top five events that's ever happened in Vermont."

Stay tuned, there might be another chapter yet.

Brennan saving best for last

The Boston Globe

By Jackie MacMullan, Globe Columnist

March 19, 2005

WORCESTER -- For most of the game, he resembled a debonair yachtsman leisurely enjoying the view. All that was missing last night at the outset of the Vermont-Syracuse game was the martini in Vermont coach Tom Brennan's hand.

For everyone in the NCAA Tournament, it's one and done. But for Brennan, the amiable king of Burlington, Vt., it was one and done forever. He announced before the season he was retiring whenever the team's remarkable run came to an end, and only the most optimistic of Vermont groupies believed their season would extend beyond last night.

But Brennan's lovable band of brothers wasn't ready to say goodbye. The Catamounts shocked Syracuse, 60-57, in overtime at the DCU Center by taking the air out of the ball and milking the clock like one of the dairy cows that dot their state's beautiful landscape. In doing so, they forced an exasperated Syracuse squad into taking hurried shots and forcing the action. The result: 24 turnovers for the Orange, and the biggest win in team history.

Vermont basketball has rightfully centered on big man Taylor Coppenrath, point guard (and 3-point bomber) T.J. Sorrentine, and the ever quotable Brennan. But last night, the accolades extended to senior Germain Mopa Njila from Cameroon, and Czech native Martin Klimes. Both made huge plays with the game on the line to account for the most electric win in this NCAA tournament.

"You've got to realize, with the conference we play in, when we get into our [league] tournament, it's one game and we're out," Brennan explained. "These kids are used to playing to win, or go home. The games are always close."

"I don't think some of these other teams face that. They know they're going. It's not something they have to worry about."

It sure looked as if Syracuse worried about Vermont a little too late. Josh Pace, the kind of slashing player who should have exploited a slower, smaller, less athletic team, was strangely silent much of the game. Credit Vermont guard David Hehn for playing a role in that. Hakim Warrick, the gifted Syracuse forward, did his best in the final minutes to take over, but ultimately shuffled off with the kind of triple-double he'd like to do without: 21 points, 12 rebounds, and 10 turnovers.

Warrick tried a little too hard down the stretch to bring this one home. With the score knotted, 51-51, with 55 seconds left in regulation, Warrick tried to elbow his way to the hole. Klimes stood his ground, and ended with a mouth full of blood and an offensive foul on Warrick for his efforts. Asked if his player's nose was broken, Brennan cracked, "I hope so. That would make it all the better."

In case you were wondering if Vermont was tough enough to pull off a win of this magnitude, consider that Klimes and Coppenrath went the full 45 minutes last night, with Sorrentine and Mopa Njila earning a break of just two minutes. Consider, also, that when this game went into overtime, Klimes and Sorrentine were lugging around four fouls.

"When we went into overtime, I was thinking it was time to pack the trunk for me," Brennan confessed, "but then

we came out and we made some plays. It's like I told you guys [Thursday]. These guys have synergy, and karma. The stars are aligned. There's a lot to that."

He has a point. Mopa Njila is your classic energy player, but hardly a sniper. And, yet, there he was drilling a three to wipe out Syracuse's 55-53 edge in overtime. There he was again, stealing the ball and giving his team a chance to pad the lead.

Sorrentine, who had his share of troubles in the opening half (1 for 7 with 3 turnovers, even though the stat sheet said only 2), worked the clock, as he had done all night. When the shot clock had ticked down to 7, he was standing 24 feet from the basket. No, make that 26 feet. Heck, it might have even been 28 feet. Let's just say there was a whole lot of real estate between him and the basket.

So what did the kid do? What he always does -- he leaned back and let it go.

Swish. 59-55, Vermont.

"We were just happy to have the ball," Sorrentine said. "The clock was running down, and Coach started saying to me, 'Run red, run red.' I told him, 'No, hold on, relax.' He said, 'OK.' I kind of looked at their guys and I said, 'All right, run the play,' just to distract them. Then I put it up. I knew I had one more in me."

"For the record," Brennan interjected, "it's not the first time he hasn't listened to me."

Brennan has coached against enough Goliaths to know how to offset a team as deep and as talented as Syracuse. You must thrust them into unfamiliar territory. That means slowing the pace, and passing and passing and passing around its vaunted 2-3 zone until you find the tiniest of cracks in the Orange's defensive armor. More often than not, the opening was at the foul line, where Klimes received the ball and turned to look for Coppenrath underneath.

The strategy worked beautifully. Vermont frustrated the Orange to no end with slowdown tactics, drawing even veterans such as Gerry McNamara into rushed shots and bad decisions. By stalling its way through the game, it all but eliminated Syracuse's fast-break attack until the final minutes.

So Brennan and the Boys live to play another day. The coach, looking dapper in his postgame blazer and his polka-dotted yellow tie, did not come to the press conference with a martini in hand, but, he reported, he planned on indulging in a few spirits as soon as he got the chance.

"I hope I can find my way back for [tomorrow]," he said.

The kids will make sure they get him here for the second-round game against Michigan State. Coppenrath, who had a quiet (for him) 16 points, knew he wouldn't get much against Syracuse's front line. He's eager to do some serious damage tomorrow. Mopa Njila, who submitted a line for the ages (9 for 10, 2-2 from 3-point range, 9 rebounds, 5 assists) just wants to keep riding the wave of emotion that has left the Orange green with envy. Brennan, who has cornered the market on winning and having fun, just wants to coach one more time. Or maybe two . . .

"Write about the kids," Brennan pleaded. "I've gotten way, way too much publicity already. Like I've said before, I'm sick of me."

We're not, Coach. See you tomorrow.

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Cinderella, With an Orange Twist

The Washington Post
By John Feinstein
March 19, 2005

WORCESTER, Mass. -- This is why the NCAA tournament is like no other event in sports: Vermont.

Read this final score, remember it, savor it: Vermont 60, Syracuse 57. Overtime. Forty-five minutes of absolutely scintillating basketball. Neither team led by more than six throughout and that happened just once, when Vermont point guard T.J. Sorrentine drilled a three-pointer with 10 minutes 59 seconds left to give the Catamounts a 35-29 lead.

Every time it looked like Vermont's dream was dead,

someone made a play. Taylor Coppenrath would make a cut to the basket or get a rebound. Sorrentine would hit from somewhere near Burlington. Germain Mopa Njila, the unheralded hero, would make a steal. Or a jump shot. Or a three. Martin Klimes, the only non-senior starter, would take an elbow in the mouth from a frustrated Hakim Warrick and draw a foul.

Coach Tom Brennan couldn't stop smiling the whole game. This wasn't a first-round game for Vermont; this was the national championship. A school from a tiny state meeting one of the sport's giants, a team many people picked to reach the Final Four. Three years in a row, Vermont has won the America East championship. Two years ago, it was blown out in the first round by Arizona, but it didn't really matter. "I did my job," Brennan said when the team returned home. "I won the press conference."

Last year, the Catamounts played Connecticut closer, but never had any real chance to win. This year, everyone knew it was the last go-round: for Brennan, who announced his retirement before the start of the season, and for the four senior starters, Coppenrath, Sorrentine, Mopa Njila and David Hehn. The Catamounts became media darlings because of their wisecracking coach, their image as the game's would-be Davids and because Coppenrath and Sorrentine had come from relatively obscure high school careers to become icons throughout the state.

"We've gotten a lot of publicity," Brennan said. "We were a good story because we had good kids, who were good students and we could play. All year long, we played under tremendous pressure because we were supposed to win. If we didn't get back here, it would have been a huge disappointment. These kids have dealt with everything thrown their way. But this, well, this validates everything. This is a night we'll all remember for the rest of their lives."

This was one of those first-round NCAA tournament games that CBS will be showing on highlight tapes years from now. Brennan's leap with his arms in the air when Sorrentine buried a 26-footer to make it 59-55 with 1 minute 6 seconds left in overtime may not quite equal Jim Valvano's mad dash in 1983 in air time, but it may not be far behind. What might be lost in all the celebrating is just how many shots the Catamounts took from the Orange, a tournament-tough team that started four players Friday who played key minutes on their national championship team two years ago.

"I thought both teams played tremendous defense," Syracuse Coach Jim Boeheim said. "We just made too many turnovers in an NCAA game to win."

When you grow up as a basketball player in this country, especially in a small town, you grow up dreaming of being a star in this tournament. When you end up at a small school in a one-bid league where only an act of Congress might get you a seed higher than No. 13, you tell yourself over and over that something like this can happen.

"But as much as you might talk about it, you have to go out and actually play to make it happen," Coppenrath said. "Tonight we actually made it happen."

They made it happen in large part because Sorrentine chose to ignore the most revered man in the state of Vermont since Ethan Allen. After Mopa Njila's steal, Vermont ran the shot clock down just as it had been doing since the final six minutes of regulation. "I just felt we had to shorten the game," Brennan said. "We had a chance to win at that point and making the game shorter was our best chance. I don't like to do that normally, but I felt we needed to do it tonight."

With the shot clock ticking toward 10 seconds, Sorrentine dribbled near the bench so he could hear Brennan's voice over the din at DCU Center.

"Run red," Brennan screamed, wanting an end-of-clock play where Sorrentine dribbles into a gap, Coppenrath slides across the lane and Sorrentine tries to find him for a quick shot.

Sorrentine shook his head. "It's okay, Coach," he said. "I got it."

"Let me say for the record, that's not the first time he's ignored me," Brennan said laughing. "And, I might add, with good reason."

Sorrentine kept dribbling a good 30 feet from the basket, then yelled, "run the play!" to make the Syracuse defenders think he was about to start a move to the basket. Instead,

he pulled up and shot from two steps beyond the NBA three-point line.

"I knew it was good when it left my hand," he said. "I thought I had one more in me. I didn't realize until I looked down how far out I was."

Suddenly, Vermont had a two-possession lead, and the impossible seemed possible.

"When that shot went in I thought I would burst," Brennan said. "I thought you'd find me in pieces around the arena."

When it was finally over, with Coppenrath holding the ball and an entire state going completely crazy, the players rushed over to where their fans were sitting while Brennan shook hands with Boeheim before joining the party.

"I just hope I can get back here by Sunday," Brennan said. "I can promise you this is going to be one big party for your boy tonight."

As of now, Brennan is this tournament's poster boy along with his version of the Green Mountain Boys. Just east of Burlington is Mount Mansfield. It may well be come next week that Brennan and Coppenrath and Sorrentine and Mopa Njila and Hehn will find their images carved into the mountain. "We were a pretty big deal before this happened," Brennan said. "Now . . ." He shook his head. "Boy, what I wouldn't give to be Coppenrath and Sorrentine right now. Young, single and them."

Being Brennan right now isn't half-bad. Being in this building to see what Brennan and his boys pulled off was also pretty damn good.

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Tom's Foolery Jokester Brennan has another game left to coach

ESPN.com
March 19, 2005
By Andy Katz

WORCESTER, Mass. -- An hour before tipoff, in what could have been the final game of Tom Brennan's coaching career, the most famous man in Vermont was in the media room chomping on a pre-game sandwich.

"Do you think (Syracuse coach) Jim Boeheim is coming in here?" the retiring Brennan quipped with his typical wit. Don't think so.

Brennan wouldn't have it any other way but to work a room an hour before he's on stage. It didn't seem he was ready to leave.

Now he won't have to just yet.

Vermont's stunning 60-57 overtime win over No. 4 seed Syracuse on Friday night at the DCU Center gave this rather staid tournament its first Cinderella. (They were joined by 14th-seeded Bucknell later in the night)

So what did Brennan say after the game, by far the biggest win in Vermont history?

"It's not like we're winning five more and meeting the president," he remarked in the postgame locker room frenzy.

Just when did Brennan think this magical season would end?

"I thought it would end today, to be honest with you, and then when it went to overtime, I was sure it would end today," he said. "I just wish we were playing next Friday instead of Sunday so we could stretch it out a bit. I'm the first to admit that I'd kill for a split (this weekend) but now that's not enough."

Self-deprecation aside, the Catamounts' story could go down as one of the greatest tales told about this game.

Think about this for a second. This is Vermont.

VERMONT.

Vermont just beat Syracuse led by a Vermont native (Taylor Coppenrath) who had to redshirt; a tough point guard (T.J. Sorrentine) from Pawtucket, R.I., who couldn't get in-state schools to give him a look; a Cameroonian (Germain Mopa Njila) who had to learn the game in the United States; and a headband-wearing, fun-loving shooter from Ontario (David Hehn). Throw in a sophomore from the Czech Republic (Martin Klimes) and a handful of freshmen and that's essentially your squad.

"This could never, ever be duplicated here," Brennan said in the locker room, sweat dripping down his forehead, the words still flowing out of his mouth in rapid succession as if a late-night band was ready to hit the drums after each one-liner.

"We live in a state where there are no stars, the governor doesn't live in a mansion, he doesn't have a limo," said Brennan, who according to a Vermont spokesperson will be only the third person ever to have Ben & Jerry's name on an ice cream after him, calling it Tom Brennan's Retirement (Jerry Garcia's Cherry Garcia and Phish Food are the others).

"You can't steal because the state is too small because everybody is watching. We've got a star over there (Coppenrath) who is a typical Vermonter and he's a star, but he handles it the right way. We have a solid mid-major program and that's all we ever wanted to do," Brennan said.

Amid Brennan's one-liners, sports information director Bruce Bosley handed Brennan the phone. It was Vermont senator Patrick Leahy.

"Excuse me, I've got to take the call from the senator. ... Yes, sir. Oh man, is this great or what? What a great, great day for Vermont. Hey, Senator Leahy bet with Hillary Clinton," Brennan remarked, drawing euphoric laughter in the locker room. "Oh, you enjoy it, my friend. We're always trying to make you proud. Thank you, sir, appreciate the call."

Brennan hung up the cell phone and said, "The senator loves me."

What was the bet?

"Who cares? A hot dog against some maple syrup," Brennan said.

How is this for some history -- this was Vermont's first NCAA Tournament victory in only its third appearance ... in 105 years of basketball.

This win was built over the past three years when Brennan took his act on the road to play at UCLA, Kansas and North Carolina.

"Those games were actually for me," Brennan laughed. "I wanted to coach at Pauley (Pavilion) and coach at Allen Fieldhouse."

But the games that really created this win could be traced back to playing Arizona in the first round two years ago in Salt Lake City as a No. 16 seed and then playing Connecticut last year as a No. 15 seed in Buffalo.

Assistant coach Pat Filien said after Friday's game that Sorrentine sat in the locker room after the loss to the Huskies last year and said, "We're going to win a first-round game."

"We believed we could win this game, we always did," Hehn said. "We've got older guys and that's why we could do this. We said if we could win one, we could win two. We're definitely going to the Sweet 16. That's what we believe."

Michigan State is up next on Sunday.

"We've never been here before but we've got nothing to lose," Coppenrath said. "I was just hoping for an NCAA win and now we got one and the ride is still going."

And guess who is driving the bus for another few days?

Brennan. Who else but Brennan?

"We're playing with house money now. We'll be nice and loose on Sunday," Brennan said. "Oh, I shouldn't say house



money in the NCAA Tournament ... if we get one on Sunday, we'll get ready for Duke next week. That would be neat, wouldn't it?"

Can't wait.

Glorious dream comes true Biggest shot of his life has elevated Sorrentine

**The Providence Journal
by Bill Reynolds
Saturday, March 19, 2005**

WORCESTER -- There was only a minute left in overtime when T.J. Sorrentine made the biggest shot of his life.

Only a minute left, Vermont clinging to a one-point lead over heavily favored Syracuse, poised for one of the most unbelievable of upsets. And there was Sorrentine hitting a deep 3-pointer that is right out of adolescent fiction. In overtime. In the NCAA Tournament. The dagger that beat Syracuse. The kind of shot little kids dream about when they're shooting by themselves on some lonely playground, playing imaginary games in their head and dreaming of glory. The biggest shot of his life.

"We were running the play and the shot clock was winding down," Sorrentine said afterward. "The coach was yelling for me to call a play and I said, 'No, no,' and just pulled up. I didn't know how deep it was, but I knew it was down. I had one more in me."

So it continues for T.J. Sorrentine, in this twilight of his great college career, in these waning days of what has been one of the best college basketball careers a Rhode Island kid has had in a long time.

For no one could have made up Sorrentine's story, even before last night. Did you ever hear about the frog who dreamed of being a king and then became one? Change the names and this is Sorrentine's basketball life.

It's all but become part of Rhode Island basketball lore now, how Sorrentine was one of those innumerable local kids whose head was full of basketball dreams, one of those innumerable kids who closed their eyes and saw themselves playing for either Providence College or URI, where the basketball lights are bright.

Except that it didn't happen.

Not that Sorrentine was really surprised when it didn't. He says he knew as early as the ninth grade that he never was going to be the biggest kid, or the quickest kid, never going to be the most athletic. He knew then it was going to take all those other things if he ever were going to see his dreams fulfilled. Things like hard work, will, heart, determination. All those words that hang on locker-room walls, all those words that became the articles of his faith.

Still, he was the kid no one believed in, the 5-foot-11 kid from St. Raphael Academy who eventually came to understand that neither PC nor URI had any interest in him. Just another kid deemed too small and not athletic enough. Just another kid judged and found wanting. So he went to Vermont, a place where Tom Brennan gave him the ball and told him it was his team.

The rest is history.

Player of the year in America East as a sophomore.

Someone who entered this season seventh in the country in career points among returning seniors, eighth in scoring average and second in free-throw percentage.

A career spent in the middle of a media explosion, the Catamounts becoming one of the best stories in all of college basketball, media darlings, and Sorrentine right in the middle of it.

For there is no overestimating the amazing story that's become Vermont basketball. The emergence of Taylor Coppenrath as a great player, arguably as big a sports hero in Vermont as the state has ever seen. The end of Tom Brennan's era at Vermont, the charismatic coach who ends his career out of the pages of some storybook, a man perceptive enough to know that few coaches ever get a chance to go out like he is going out. The lovefest that's been Vermont basketball the last few years, one of those once-in-a-lifetime stories for a small school in the middle of nowhere. And in the middle of it has been Sorrentine, the Pawtucket kid who went to Vermont and

became a folk hero.

"I couldn't even have dreamed of this," he said in January. "When I first came here I was just going to work hard and see what happened."

Certainly, he couldn't have dreamed of last night. Vermont is not supposed to beat Syracuse. Not ever. Syracuse plays in the cavernous Carrier Dome. Vermont plays in a glorified high school gym. Syracuse plays in the Big East. Vermont plays in America East. Syracuse plays in the big time. Vermont plays in Vermont.

Yin and yang.

Two different basketball worlds.

But none of that mattered last night.

Not when Vermont battled the bigger and more athletic Syracuse team from the opening minutes, hanging in with a team it was not supposed to be able to hang in with, slowing it down, putting more and more pressure on Syracuse the longer they stayed in the game.

And in the end, in overtime, clinging to a one-point lead with only a minute left, the shot clock winding down, Sorrentine became the embodiment of every playground fantasy, every kid who shoots by himself while playing imaginary games in his head, dreaming of glory.

Truth be told, he hadn't had the greatest of shooting nights, had made only one jumper in the first half. But he is nothing if not resilient, and last night, when his team needed it most, he came through with the shot of the night.

"This is something everyone dreams about," he said, "but it doesn't happen to everyone. It just happened to happen to me. I guess all those hours in the gym paid off."

Yes, they did.

The biggest shot of his life.

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Putting Off Retirement 13th Seed Vermont Stuns Syracuse

**The Hartford Courant
By KEN DAVIS
March 19 2005**

WORCESTER -- As T.J. Sorrentine's three-point shot fell through the net in overtime Friday night, it's quite possible the roar emanating from the DCU Center could be heard all the way to Burlington, Vt.

Retiring Vermont coach Tom Brennan, who went into the evening contemplating the end of his career, wasn't sure he would survive the excitement.

"When that went in, I thought I may burst," Brennan said. "I thought you might find me in pieces around the arena. There's nothing in the world that is that feeling. There's nothing that can make you feel like that except competition."

Sorrentine's three-pointer from 28 feet came as the shot clock was about to expire, with 1:10 left. It gave Vermont, the No. 13 seed in the Austin Regional, a 59-55 lead over Syracuse, the 2003 national champion and one of the favorites to reach this year's Final Four.

The folks at Ben and Jerry's better name a new flavor of ice cream after the Catamounts - and add a hint of orange this time. Sorrentine and his teammates earned it with a 60-57 victory over No. 4 seed Syracuse before 13,009. Vermont (25-6), in its third consecutive NCAA Tournament, will play No. 5 Michigan State Sunday.

Syracuse (27-7), led by senior Hakim Warrick's 21 points, was held to a season-low scoring output. Junior guard Gerry McNamara had 11 points on 4 of 18 shooting. He was 1-for-7 from three-point range, including a miss on a three at the end of regulation.

Vermont became the first No. 13 seed to win a first-round game since Tulsa beat Dayton in 2003. The Catamounts are the first America East team to win a tournament game since Drexel in 1996.

"T.J.'s bomb was like a desperation shot and he knocked it right in," Brennan said. "It's a wonderful win for our program and the biggest win in the history of our school without a doubt."

Germain Mopa Njila scored 20 points and grabbed nine rebounds and Taylor Coppenrath contributed 16 points

as the Catamounts won for the first time in 12 attempts against a Big East opponent. But the three by Sorrentine will be the one that Vermont fans replay over and over.

Mopa Njila, a native of Cameroon who spent one year at Master's School in Simsbury, gave Vermont a 56-55 lead on a three-pointer with 1:58 left. He followed that with a steal on Syracuse's next possession and Sorrentine worked the shot clock down as he dribbled well beyond the faded image of the NBA three-point line.

"We were just holding the ball," Sorrentine said. "It got to be about 15 [on the shot clock], I looked over at Coach and he said, 'Run red, run red.' I said, 'No, hold on. Just relax.' He said, 'OK.' I was dribbling and I yelled at our guys to run the play, just to kind of distract [Syracuse]. Then I just pulled up. I knew it was down. I didn't know how deep I was, but I knew I had one more in me."

Brennan, who announced Nov. 4 that he would retire after this, his 19th season at Vermont, got the most out of all his players.

Forward Martim Klimes drew the tough defensive assignment on Warrick, who also had 12 rebounds but never took over the game. He committed 10 of Syracuse's 24 turnovers.

"Just a lot of disappointment," Warrick said when asked to describe his emotions. "I just didn't want to end my career the way it ended today."

Syracuse, eliminated in the first round for the first time since 1999, led 23-19 at halftime but trailed 41-36 when Sorrentine hit a three with 5:53 left in regulation. That prompted Orange coach Jim Boeheim to switch to a full-court press, and eight consecutive points by Warrick gave Syracuse a 51-49 lead with 1:13 to go.

"We're not a great pressing team," Boeheim said. "I was hoping I didn't have to use it. But the press got us back into the game."

An offensive foul by Warrick with the score tied at 51 gave Vermont a chance to win it. But Mopa Njila stepped out of bounds as he drove the left baseline with 3.7 seconds left. His layup didn't count.

"Every player dreams of taking the last shot," Mopa Njila said. "When I stepped on the line, I was kind of mad at myself. When it went into overtime, I was just thinking that I had to step up."

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Extra, extra

Upset of Orange by Cats in overtime is Vermont-made

The Boston Globe
By Mark Blaudschun
March 19, 2005

WORCESTER -- It was all planned. Applause at the start of the game. One last 40-minute trip up and down the court, and then a goodbye to the sellout DCU Center crowd in last night's NCAA Austin Regional first-round game against Syracuse.

But a strange thing happened on the way to the end of Tom Brennan's coaching career. His Vermont Catamounts botched the plans, and Brennan will have to save his farewell speech for another day.

Vermont, champion of the America East, stunned fourth-seeded Syracuse, 60-57, in overtime.

Next up for the 13th-seeded Catamounts (25-6) is a meeting tomorrow afternoon against Michigan State, which beat Old Dominion, 89-81, last night.

"Synergy, the stars being aligned, that stuff means something," said Brennan, who announced his retirement at the start of the season.

Who is going to argue with him?

When the NCAA brackets were announced last Sunday, the Catamounts and their fans knew Syracuse, the Big East tournament champion, which boasted conference player of the year Hakim Warrick and the long-range shooting of Gerry McNamara, would be a tough matchup.

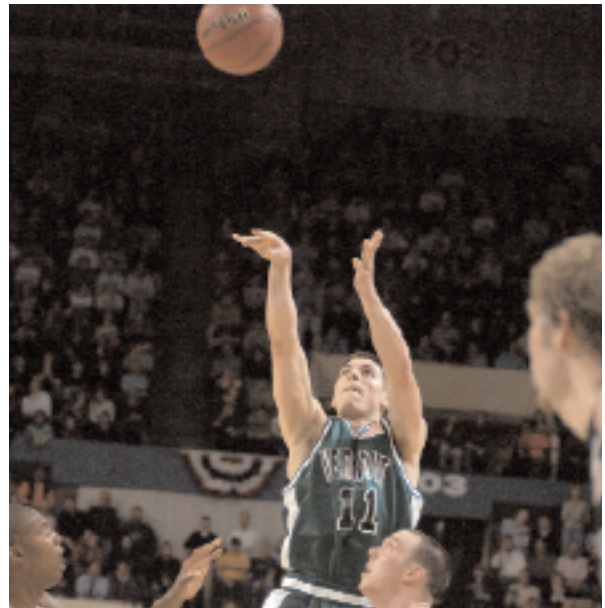
But that overpowering Syracuse team never showed up last night. Warrick was a prime example, recording a dubious triple-double of 21 points, 12 rebounds, and 10 turnovers for a team that committed 24 turnovers, including mistakes at

the most crucial times.

For Vermont, it was another chapter in the success story of the last three years, with Taylor Coppenrath (16 points) and T.J. Sorrentine (17) guiding the Catamounts to three straight NCAA Tournament appearances. And this time, senior forward Germain Mopa Njila joined the party, scoring a career-high 20 points, including a basket that gave Vermont a 56-55 lead with two minutes left in overtime.

But it was Sorrentine who provided the exclamation point, burying a 3-pointer from well beyond the top of the key with 1:11 left in the OT.

The Orange held only a 23-19 lead at intermission and quickly fell behind in the second half as Vermont, which had only four players who scored, kept applying pressure.



But

when Vermont turned the ball over with 3.7 seconds left as Mopa Njila stepped on the baseline with the score tied at 51-51, even Brennan thought Vermont's season could very well end in overtime, since Syracuse had fought back to tie the game.

"When we went to overtime, I thought it was time to pack our bags," said Brennan. "But we were able to come out on top."

When Mopa Njila put Vermont up, 56-55, the feeling was one of cautious optimism. But after a turnover by Warrick on a steal by Mopa Njila, Vermont had a chance for the knockout punch.

And then with 1:11 left, Sorrentine hit his long 3-pointer, which gave Vermont a 59-55 lead the Orange could not overcome.

Not that Syracuse didn't try. It got a quick jumper from Josh Pace to cut the lead to a basket with 1:01 left, but then another turnover by the normally reliable McNamara, on a backcourt violation when the ball bounced off his foot, gave Vermont possession.

With 13 seconds left, a foul shot by Martin Klimes gave the Catamounts a 3-point lead. And this time there were no miracles for Syracuse.

"They did a good job defensively," said Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim. "We just made too many mistakes."

For Brennan and the Catamounts, it was a night worth remembering, long after the season ends.

As for future plans, Brennan would only look ahead to tomorrow.

"I think we can win," he said. "I really do."

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His best foot forward Mopa Njila shakes off earlier misstep

The Boston Globe
By Jerome Solomon, Globe Staff
March 19, 2005

WORCESTER -- Germain Mopa Njila put his best foot forward, and then some.

His feet are size 11 1/2, but it was a size 12 sneaker on his left foot that touched the baseline on the would-be game-winning drive with less than four seconds remaining in the Vermont-Syracuse first-round NCAA Tournament game last night at the DCU Center.

If he wore shoes that fit properly, he may have been a hero for Vermont in regulation. Instead, it took overtime for the 13th-seeded Catamounts to topple fourth-seeded Syracuse, 60-57.

The one glitch in an almost perfect night -- Mopa Njila's layup that would have put Vermont ahead, 53-51, was waved off with just 3.7 seconds left -- won't be the only memory for the native of Cameroon.

Mopa Njila scored a career-high 20 points on 9-of-10 shooting (2 for 2 on 3-pointers), with 9 rebounds, 5 assists, and 4 steals in what Vermont coach Tom Brennan described as the biggest win in school history.

"It's unbelievable, a dream come true," Mopa Njila said. "You watch March Madness on television and see all the guys having success and advancing to the Sweet 16 and the Elite Eight -- having fun. You wonder, 'Man, when am I going to have that chance?' Tonight was our night."

"If you play college basketball, that is your dream."

Of course, Mopa Njila's childhood dream featured World Cup soccer, not NCAA basketball. But he looked right at home against Syracuse. The senior, who came in averaging only 5.5 points a game and had never scored more than 15, torched the Orange.

The Catamounts needed every point of his contribution. Leading scorers Taylor Coppentrath and T.J. Sorrentine combined to score 33 points, but they needed 36 shots to get them. Martin Klimes (7 points) was the only other Catamount to score.

Subtract Mopa Njila and the Catamounts were just 13 of 49 (26.5 percent) from the field.

"I was just trying to help out," Mopa Njila said. "This is a team effort. Today Taylor wasn't the high-scoring guy he's been all season long, and that's time for other guys to step in. That's what we do."

"Sometimes it's [teammates], today I was lucky to make some shots."

And unlucky that one made shot didn't count.

"This is something every player dreams of, taking the last shot to win the game, and I stepped out of bounds," Mopa Njila said. "When we got into overtime, I said it's time to step up and win this game."

He helped do that by ripping the nets with a 3-pointer that put Vermont ahead for good. Entering the game, Mopa Njila was just 9 for 34 on treys this season.

Makes one think it was meant to be.

"When we packed to come here, some guys were packing for spring break, but I told them, 'No, we're going back to Vermont [to practice]," Sorrentine said. "You gotta believe."

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One shining moment

Sorrentine's fearless 3 makes history for Vermont

By Luke Winn

Sports Illustrated.com

Saturday March 19, 2005

WORCESTER, Mass. -- Years later, what will remain of the epic contest that played out here tonight -- No. 13-seeded Vermont's stunning, 60-57 win over No. 4 Syracuse in overtime -- is a few precious seconds in an NCAA tournament video montage. An editor will make room in the upset heroics file -- a reel of gigantic feats by small-school guards -- alongside Bryce Drew, Richie Frahm and the like for a crew-cut Catamounts senior named T.J. Sorrentine, whose gutsy, NBA-range 3-pointer with 1:06 left in OT sent the Orange to a first-round big-dance exit.

But in the here-and-now at the DCU Center, Sorrentine's 3 was more than just another exhibit for the tourney museum: This upset marked the real start of March Madness in 2005. The dance may have tipped off at 12:20

p.m. on Thursday, but it didn't begin, in truth, until Sorrentine's shot sailed through the net late Friday night, and Vermont held on for the victory.

As its quartet of senior starters -- Sorrentine, Taylor Coppentrath, David Hehn and Germain Mopa Njila -- and its retiring character of a coach, Tom Brennan, danced on the hardwood to make it official, the NCAA tournament goose bumps set in. The Catamount faithful, who turned out in droves to Worcester, were already overwhelmed by emotion, but all others present -- those not in Syracuse orange, that is -- became instant converts. If not Vermonters by blood, they were Vermonters in spirit. And the feeling, carried on the airwaves of national television, rapidly spread beyond the arena walls.

Let UW-Milwaukee and Bucknell enjoy their moments in the sun, but America found its Cinderella on Friday night: Vermont. And its story stacks up against any fairy tale.

Sorrentine's shot was a product of improvisation -- beautiful improvisation -- made in crunch-time from the top of the Orange's 2-3 zone, the scoreboard reading Vermont 56, Syracuse 55. "[The shot clock] got down to 15, and I looked at coach, and he said, 'Run red! Run red!'," Sorrentine said, in reference to a play calling for a screen-and-fade by a post-man. Red -- well, red was never put into action.

"I just shook him off. I gave coach this [shaking his head], and said, 'No, I got this one.' And he looked in my eyes and said, 'OK.' It got to six seconds and I looked at [Syracuse guards Gerry] McNamara and Louie McCroskey and said, 'Run the play!'" -- just to decoy them so they didn't come out at me."

And that was when the dagger flew. "Once I let it go, I knew it was in," Sorrentine said.

Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim called timeout immediately, and Sorrentine ran to the bench pumping his chest while Brennan flailed his arms in jubilation. A dejected McNamara -- the same gunner who was a tourney star in 2003 (hitting six 3s in the title game) and 2004 (scoring 43 against BYU in round one) -- walked the other direction with his head down in disappointment. He would later turn over the ball with 15.9 seconds left, dribbling it off Terrence Roberts' foot, and then miss a potential game-tying 3 attempt with three seconds on the clock. McNamara would finish 4-of-18 from the field, and 1-of-7 from the line in the loss.

"This is the worst I've ever felt," McNamara said in the locker room afterward. "We were out of rhythm in the first half and we never picked it up. It's hard to explain."

The 'Cuse being out of rhythm -- shooting 41.8 percent from the field and just 25 percent from beyond the arc -- was one way to explain how the Catamounts could slay the Orange while shooting just 37.3 percent from the field themselves. Or how Vermont could manage a victory while star Coppentrath (who averaged 25.7 points coming into the game, and had scored 30 in his three previous contests) was largely contained by the long, athletic bottom line of 'Cuse's 2-3 zone, scoring 16 points and grabbing just four rebounds.

But credit is also due to two Vermont role players -- sophomore center Martin Klimes, who drew the daunting defensive assignment of Hakim Warrick and harassed him into committing 10 turnovers, and Njila, who played the game of his life on Friday, scoring 20 points on an unconscious 9-of-10 shooting effort and pulling down nine rebounds.

Vermont was hardly flying under the nation's radar -- with a Brennan-themed Ben & Jerry's flavor (Retire Mint), features in Sports Illustrated, and starring roles in ESPN's The Season -- but Coppentrath, the three-time America East Player of the Year, and to a lesser extent, Sorrentine, who averaged 18.6 points per game on the year, were the team's only household names. It took an unknown like Njila -- a forward from Yaounde, Cameroon, who averaged just 5.5 points -- to make the upset a reality while 'Cuse's defense keyed on the Cats' stars.

Njila had two mammoth buckets down the stretch: He stole a Josh Pace pass and threw down a pumping slam in the open court with 5:05 left in regulation to put Vermont up 45-41, and later hit a crucial jumper to tie the game at 49-49 with 1:32 left. Njila also sank what appeared to be the game-winning shot, banking in a driving layup with 3.7 seconds remaining in regulation -- but stepped out-of-bounds on the baseline, causing the basket to be waived off. That miscue was easily

forgotten, given the final result.

"This is like your dream come true," Njila, grinning wide, said afterward. "You watch March Madness on TV and you think, one day, when am I going to be there, and win a game there? Today it happened. It's unbelievable."

This was a day that began with Syracuse, winners of the Big East tournament, penciled into many an expert's Final Four bracket. And also a day that began with Vermont's nucleus -- Brennan, 17-year assistant Jesse Agel and the team's senior quartet, which had won three straight conference titles and made three straight NCAA tourney trips -- wondering if the Orange would be their final collegiate opponent, marking the end of an era. The tiny darlings of Northeast college hoops, who had bowed out to UConn as a No. 15 seed in '04 and Arizona as a No. 16 in '03, had one last chance to play Cinderella.

According to Sorrentine, Brennan told his boys in the locker room beforehand, "There isn't time for speeches. This is what you played all year for. I believe you guys are going to win this game."

And as the Catamounts huddled in the DCU Center tunnel prior to taking the court, Hehn said, "One more time. We've got one more." One final shot to make history.

Sorrentine challenged his teammates before the tip. "I kept telling the guys, 'If we believe we can win, we'll win. If you don't believe we can win the game, stay here.' I just ran out, and everybody followed me."

More than two hours later, when the final gun had sounded and the arena erupted, the believers were transformed into victors. They celebrated on the floor, and then retreated to the locker room, where Hehn said, "It was pandemonium -- and it was the best feeling of my life. Guys were just wheeling their shirts around; there was no champagne or anything, just a bunch of buckets of water -- and we were drenching everyone."

University of Vermont president Daniel Fogel stood outside the chaos and proclaimed, "This is the biggest victory in the history of UVM athletics."

Inside, Sorrentine smiled, still amazed at what had unfolded -- the upset, his shot, his instant stardom -- and said, "You can't write a better script."

He was right. The greatest era in the history of Vermont hoops will soon come to an end via graduation and retirement, but Friday's thriller enshrined its cast of characters into NCAA tournament lore -- and the hearts of the nation.

Sorrentine, along with Coppenrath, Hehn, Njila, Brennan and the rest of the Cats, bought themselves at least one more game of college basketball. And not just as lovable Vermont, but as America's Cinderella, with fifth-seeded Michigan State as their next potential victim.

Reminiscing about the legend the Cats have created --

-- that can wait.

"Next week, you're going to be saying, 'I was David Hehn,' 'I was T.J.,' 'I was coach,'" Brennan said of his now-famous team, and its imminent departures. "We're all gone, at some point -- but we're riding it now."

Vermont Gives Retiring Coach Victory to Cherish

The New York Times

By PETE THAMEL

March 19, 2005

WORCESTER, Mass. -- For the past two seasons, the Vermont men's team has reigned as one of college basketball's most endearing novelties.

With their remote location, floppy-haired star and charismatic coach who doubles as a radio-talk show host, the Catamounts had been happy participants in the past two N.C.A.A. tournaments.

Coach Tom Brennan joked the past two seasons that at least Vermont always won the tournament news conference.

But with a surprising 60-57 overtime victory over fourth-seeded Syracuse on Friday, the No. 13 Catamounts transformed themselves from a mere basketball oddity.

In Brennan's final season as coach, the Catamounts won a game that epitomized the timeless beauty and searing pain of the N.C.A.A. tournament.

"The magic of the tournament is a night just like tonight," Brennan said. "We'll never forget it, and I'll never forget it."

Syracuse's loss rekindled memories of its past N.C.A.A. tournament troubles. This was Syracuse's worst N.C.A.A. loss since 15th-seeded Richmond upset the No. 2 Orange in 1991.

Vermont (25-6) continues an improbable dream built by a native son, Taylor Coppenrath, and guard T. J. Sorrentine, the nation's leading scoring twosome. The Catamounts earned their first N.C.A.A. tournament victory by winning for the first time against a Big East team and against an opponent ranked in the Associated Press poll.

They did it because Sorrentine made the game's biggest play, a 26-foot 3-point heave that swished with 1 minute 6 seconds remaining. It followed a 3-pointer by Vermont's Germain Mopa Njila with 1:54 to play.

The Vermont assistant Jesse Agel had instructed Sorrentine to run "red," a zone offense play. But Sorrentine looked to the bench, waved him off and barked out a fake play to fool the Syracuse defense before making the shot, which gave Vermont a 59-55 lead.

"I thought I was going to burst," Brennan said of his reaction to Sorrentine's shot. "I thought you were going to find me in pieces around the court. There's no drug or nothing in the world that can give you that feeling."

Sorrentine provided the defining play, but Vermont won primarily because of its aggressive man-to-man defense and ball-control offense. The Catamounts ground out the game by milking the shot clock. They methodically picked at Syracuse's 2-3 zone, limiting the possessions of the game and never letting the Orange get in an offensive rhythm.

The Orange (27-7), the Big East tournament champion, shot 41.8 percent from the field, with Gerry McNamara shooting 4 of 18. Hakim Warrick scored a game-high 21 points, including Syracuse's final 8 in regulation to force overtime.

But Syracuse turned the ball over 24 times and registered only 8 assists. They dressed 8 scholarship players, as the junior point guard Billy Edelin did not make the trip because of unspecified off-court issues. The freshman point guard Josh Wright did travel with the team, but was a no-show at the arena. Coach Jim Boeheim would not disclose why.

Instead, Boeheim repeatedly credited Vermont's pluck.

"No question, Vermont's defense deserves a lot of credit," he said. "But we made too many mistakes."

Coppenrath and Sorrentine did not play particularly well.

Mopa Njila led the Catamounts with a career-high 20 points on 9-for-10 shooting. He nearly became the hero of reg-



ulation, but his 6-foot baseline runner, which would have given Vermont the lead with 3.7 seconds left, was disallowed. An official, Reginald Cofer, ruled that he stepped on the baseline, setting the stage for overtime.

Sorrentine shot only 5 for 20 but scored 17 points. Coppenrath struggled against Syracuse's zone, finishing 6 for 16 shooting and scoring 16 points, nearly 10 below his average.

"I honestly don't think we played that well tonight," Sorrentine said.

The Catamounts will play fifth-seeded Michigan State, which defeated No. 12 Old Dominion, 89-81.

And after the Catamounts celebrated in the locker room by spraying each other with water bottles, the players said that they could advance even further.

"If we win on Sunday, it will just keep getting better and better," forward Marin Klimes, who guarded Warrick tough, said. "That's what we want. We took the first step."

Brennan said the victory did not particularly surprise him. He talked brashly in the news conference on Thursday about his team coming for more than the memories on their video cameras. He said they had played win-or-go-home games for two weeks, and his team had adopted that mentality.

But Brennan's immediate focus was on the postgame party, something he has been known for as much as his in-game coaching.

"I just hope I don't stay out too long that I don't make it back here on Sunday," he said. "That's my biggest concern right now."

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SAY HI TO CINDERELLA

The New York Post
By STEVE SERBY
March 19, 2005

WORCESTER, Mass. — T.J. Sorrentine was the first out of the halftime locker room, dribbling a basketball. Now the Vermont Catamounts huddled in the corridor that leads to the court, where Syracuse waited to shatter their dream. A voice rang out, "This is our time," and they clasped hands and left a legacy that will be remembered forever.

It sure was their time.

This is why we watch, for dream teams like this who never stop believing they can wear that glass slipper, who will not leave the building until they have shocked the world.

It took this incorrigible No. 13 seed 45 minutes of drama that had the DCU Center standing for them and cheering them on during the last desperate, white-knuckle minutes when most of America outside Syracuse prayed for the arrival of Cinderella. Every one of the Iron Man starting five played at least 40 minutes. Taylor Coppenrath, Vermont's Paul Bunyan, played the whole game. So did Martin Klimes. Sorrentine played overtime against Gerry McNamara with four fouls. Klimes played overtime against Hakim Warrick with four fouls. Catamountstanding!

When Vermont 60, Syracuse 57 was over, the victors sprayed each other with water and accepted congratulations from the governor.

"We had a bunch of bottles of water over there and we were just spraying 'em everywhere," David Hehn said with a great big smile. "It was unbelievable. It was amazing. You can't plan those things, so we just made the best of what we had."

It was Sorrentine, the driven gym rat, who had been 4-for-18 to that point, who swished a monster trey from somewhere near his Pawtucket, R.I., home that gave Vermont a 59-55 lead with 1:06 left in overtime. They were playing overtime because Germain Mopa Njila, from Cameroon of all places, had stepped on the end line driving on the left baseline with 3.7 seconds left, and McNamara missed a prayer of a running jumper at the buzzer and cursed to himself as he walked to the bench.

The designed play is called Red. "The plan was to drive," Hehn said. Sorrentine looked over at coach Tom Brennan, who is retiring after the season after 19 wonderful years to concentrate on his morning talk show, and shook his



head, and scrapped the plan.

"It's one of those big shots you dream about when you're a kid; in the driveway I've shot around so many times, you know, three, two, one . . . you make it, sometimes you miss it," Sorrentine said. "I just had a feeling come over me saying, 'You got one more in you.'"

When the ball went in, Brennan leaped to his feet, his arms thrust to the roof. Before the game, this is what he had told his team: "You were born to win this game."

Klimes, from Prague of all places, could see the look of devastation on the faces of the Orange players. "I knew we were gonna win," Klimes said.

But now it was 59-57 and McNamara, who had suffered through a 4-for-18 shooting nightmare, stunningly lost the ball on an over-and-back violation with 15.9 seconds left.

Now Klimes, with 13.7 seconds left, stepped to the foul line with his 53 percent mark. "I was just concentrating to shoot 'em like I always do," he said.

He made the first. The second was an airball. "It slipped out of my hand," Klimes said.

Now here came McNamara, dribbling furiously out of the backcourt, desperate for redemption.

He tried a double-clutch heave with one second left. Sorrentine was to his left.

"I looked at the ball, it was right on line and I was like, 'No, don't do this to us!'" Sorrentine said.

No good!

Now they play the Michigan State tomorrow. "We're not gonna win the national championship; nobody's naive enough to say, 'Only five more and we meet the president,'" Brennan joked.

No matter. "We wanted to leave a legacy," Hehn said. Cinderella always does.

Cinderella fancies the green

The Albany Times Union
by Brian Eitkin
March 19, 2005

WORCESTER, Mass. -- She is here now, drenched with pixie dust, enjoying this ride. She will keep dancing, believing in princes, upsets and fairy godmothers, because the glass slipper fits as snugly as 28-footers through rabbit holes.

Ladies and gentleman, start your carriages.

Finally Cinderella has arrived at the dance.

Vermont 60, Syracuse 57, in OT.

Through this NCAA Tournament's first round we waited. We hoped. We longed. Because everyone knows you can't have a ball without Cinderella.

Well here she is -- and she's a knockout.

She's these Vermont Catamounts.

"Guess we're Cinderella now," said Vermont guard T.J. Sorrentine.

So glad she made it Friday night.

Now, it's not as if Vermont came from nowhere. After never making an NCAA Tournament this is the program's third straight appearance. The Catamounts have won 25 games and on Nov. 19 at Allen Fieldhouse led Kansas by four with 4 1/2

minutes left, and are one of the nation's better defensive teams yet possess two bona fide stars.

But come on. This was 13th-seeded Vermont vs. No. 4-seed Syracuse.

The America East pitted against the BIG East.

Patrick Gym's fold-out bleachers (capacity 3,226) vs. the cavernous Carrier Dome.

The delightfully comic Vermont coach who will retire after this season with a losing record against Syracuse's gracing coaching legend.

A program that hasn't had a player taken in the NBA Draft since 1947 (Vermont's Larry Killick, by the Washington Bullets in 1947) standing mug to mug with a team that nearly always fields at least one future NBA player.

Yet here Cinderella was, rearing her beautiful head with the score tied 51-all. Vermont coach Tom Brennan thought he spotted her after Hakim Warrick, holding the ball with his back to the basket, spun and threw an elbow that caught Martin Klimes in the nose, resulting in an offensive foul and turnover with 33 seconds left, giving Vermont a possible final shot. Brennan pumped his fists and grinned, but it wasn't she.

"I'm not one of those guys who waits till the end to celebrate, because if you wait till the end what happens if they catch you?" Brennan would later say.

She wouldn't be announced until overtime. You know how women like to make guys wait.

She would saunter from her carriage when Germain Mopa Njila stole the ball from Warrick with 1:27 left in overtime, after which Brennan would call for Sorrentine to run a play called "Red" in which Sorrentine would look for a cutter off a screen near the foul line. And Sorrentine, the hard-working standout point guard to whom nobody besides Vermont offered a scholarship, told Brennan, "No." Told him he intended to hold the ball. Told his coach, "Relax, OK."

And with 1:06 remaining Sorrentine sank a 3-pointer from somewhere near Church Street in Burlington, Vermont, lifting the Catamounts near celestial bodies, up 59-55.

They won because Mopa Njila, who left his mother, Rose, in Cameroon, so he could attend college in the United States, scored 20 points on 9-for-10 shooting, and had nine rebounds, five assists and four steals.

They won because Brennan saw enough in Taylor Coppentrath to offer him a scholarship when UAlbany was the only other Division I school to do so.

They won because Syracuse committed 24 turnovers and the Catamounts committed to each other, believing after two consecutive tourney first-round losses that this would be their year.

"There's synergy, karma and stars being aligned," Brennan said. "There's a lot to it."

There's a glass slipper that now fits, too.

Syracuse is stunned by Vermont

Newark Star-Ledger
March 19, 2005
BY TOM LUICCI

WORCESTER, Mass. -- Syracuse was still clinging to hope that it wasn't going to be the first major upset victim of this NCAA Tournament, the look on sophomore Louie McCroskey's face betrayed that feeling.

Just 1:10 was left in last night's Austin Regional first-round game, with upstart Vermont desperately hanging on to a one-point lead. With the shot clock winding down -- it was now at seven seconds -- Catamounts senior T.J. Sorrentine eyed the basket from 26 feet, checked Syracuse's zone, with McCroskey at the top of it guarding him, and almost seemed to say "why not?"

Sorrentine launched a 3-pointer from there -- and swished.

McCroskey's look was a combination of disbelief and simply being dumbfounded.

Fueled by the shot, 13th-seeded Vermont stunned No. 4 Syracuse with a 60-57 overtime victory, sending the Catamounts to the second round tomorrow for the first time in school history.

"The biggest win in the history of the school -- without a doubt," said Vermont coach Tom Brennan, who hails from Phillipsburg and will retire when this season ends.

Sorrentine, Vermont's point guard and one of four senior starters, was having a rough night, almost seeming to trade misses with Gerry McNamara, his counterpart at Syracuse, before the biggest shot of his life.

He said Brennan called a play with 15 seconds left in overtime from the bench, but that he waved the coach off, telling him "to relax."

"I said 'Don't worry, I've got it,'" said Sorrentine.

"It's not the first time he didn't listen to me," Brennan said, smiling.

Sorrentine then simply pulled up and fired.

"I knew I had one more (big shot) left in me," said the senior. "But I didn't know how deep I was."

Sorrentine finished with 17 points but was just 5-for-20 overall and 5-for-16 on 3-pointers. McNamara, meanwhile, was 4-for-18 overall and 1-for-7 on 3s, with his off-night and the loss confirming a long-held belief about the Big East Tournament champions: This is a two-man team (Hakim Warrick being the other) that is vulnerable if one of the two is off.

The Orange (27-7) also were victimized by 24 turnovers (compared to just 23 field goals).

"This is something you dream about," said Sorrentine.

"This win really validates us. It shows just how good of a team we had," said Brennan, who had announced he would retire effective the end of the season.

Syracuse had plenty of chances, but saw Warrick called for a charge with 33.8 seconds left in regulation in a 51-51 game. Vermont forward Germain Mopa Njila then stepped on the baseline on a drive with 3.7 seconds left that could have boosted the Catamounts (25-6) to the victory in regulation.

"As a player, you dream about being able to take the last shot in that situation," said Mopa Njila, who was 9-for-10 from the floor, finishing with 20 points and nine rebounds. "When I stepped on the line I was mad at myself for sending it into overtime. I told myself I had to step up in overtime."

Syracuse had a 55-53 lead with 3:25 left in overtime when McNamara scored on a drive off a steal from Taylor Coppentrath. But Mopa Njila answered with a 3-pointer to give Vermont a 56-55 lead with 1:58 to play.

When Warrick was then guilty of a turnover pass, that set the stage for Sorrentine's dead-on clutch 3-pointer.

"I don't mean to sound like a wise guy, but I thought we could win this game and I told you (Thursday)," Brennan said.

Coppentrath, the three-time America East Player of the Year, fought through double teams and game-long attention to score 16 points and grab four rebounds while playing the entire 45 minutes.

"I've always said upsets can happen, but when it comes to game time, you have to do it. I guess we did it," said the 6-9, 250-pound Coppentrath.

Warrick had an unenviable triple-double -- 21 points, 12 rebounds, 10 turnovers -- as the Catamounts constantly collapsed on him.

"We had too many turnovers to win an NCAA Tournament game," Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim said.

Remarkably, Vermont pulled off the upset with just four players scoring -- Sorrentine, Coppentrath, Mopa Njila and Martin Klimes, who had the game-long defensive assignment on Warrick.

Vermont slew the Syracuse giant

Metrowest Daily News (Mass.)
By Lenny Megliola
Saturday, March 19, 2005

WORCESTER -- If only they could stay with them for 30 minutes, a college hoops guru said before the game, that would be a good story.

Vermont stay with Syracuse for that long last night in the first round of the NCAA Regionals? You nuts? You mean the Vermont team that just five games earlier dropped one by 21 to Maine? That Vermont? No, this was the night the nice little

fairy tale would end for Vermont. Stay with the 'Cuse for 30 minutes. Take a hike.

Oh, but Vermont did. Not 30 minutes, 45, and when it was done, one overtime come and gone, so was Syracuse. Come and gone, 60-57, the fourth seed falling to the 13th. Yep, Vermont.

And that's why after the final horn coach Tom Brennan did an Irish jig a day late but not without justification. The popular Brennan, in his last year, gets to coach another day. "Biggest win in the history of the school," the excitable Brennan proclaimed. No doubt.

Naturally everybody in America not from Syracuse was rooting for Vermont, even though some fans would have a hard time finding it on the map. The two programs -- the two coaches -- couldn't be more contrasting. Syracuse was just a couple of years removed from a national title and had long been a heavyweight in the Big East at the Big Dance. Vermont was from ... hmm, just where was Vermont from? Oh yeah, the America East Conference. Even some college hoops junkies would be hard-pressed to name another team in that conference.

They'd recognize Hakim Warrick and Josh Pace. Besides Taylor Coppenrath, they'd need photo IDs to recognize Germain Mopa Njila and T.J. Sorrentine. Syracuse collapsed on Coppenrath every time he got the ball on the blocks, so every one of his 16 points came with bruises. Sorrentine (5-of-20) finished with 17, and basically won it with a ridiculous tray for a 59-55 lead with 1:06 left.

In one breath Brennan said, "I'm not surprised" by the win; in another breath he said, "When it got to overtime, I thought it was time to pack the trunk for me."

But Sorrentine, Coppenrath and Mopa Njila wouldn't let it happen. Mopa Njila was a monster with 20 points and nine rebounds. "I just had to step up," he said.

"Germain has just been getting better and better," said teammate David Hehn. "I love the guy. Coming from Cameroon, he's a stranger here." Not in the state of Vermont he's not.

Maybe they're up there in the woods, but because Vermont has had modest success and Coppenrath is a fairy tale, this team isn't totally unknown around the country. And it's easy for writers and TV types to embrace the quoteable Brennan who said, "I've gotten way, way too much publicity. I'm sick of myself." See?

It was all about the players, and on a night like this, "Nobody deserves it more than these guys," said Brennan.

Even when the little hotshot Sorrentine changes the play, like before his big three-pointer. "I was just holding the ball and it got to 15 seconds," said Sorrentine who waved off a play from the bench. "It's not the first time he hasn't paid attention to me," said Brennan.

After Sorrentine nailed it, the last minute seemed a lifetime. "When there were 24 seconds left," said Sorrentine, "I was saying, 'Geez, get it to three zeroes'."

Roommates Coppenrath and Sorrentine have been front and center in Vermont's success. After last night, Brennan wonders to what heights their popularity will rise back home.

"I can't even imagine what it'll be like." Not only are they March Madness heroes, "They're young and single," Brennan pointed out.

The coach believes the America East tournament, where only the winner gets to go to the NAAs, helps his team in games like this. If they had lost to Binghamton or Northeastern, they wouldn't have gotten to Worcester without a ticket. And here's what Brennan said about Syracuse. "I feel empathy for those kind of teams. They gotta win these games."

They usually do, then every once in a blue moon a Vermont shows up.

If the programs were a contrast, so were the coaches. The pouty Jim Boeheim gave off a privileged courtside air, his nose higher than the rims, which didn't win over any neutral observers. He didn't smile as much as he smirked. He seemed to complain about every call against his team. It was hard to warm up to the guy, although he was gracious in defeat.

Then there's Brennan. The man's always cheerful, always positive, a "How ya doing?" kind of guy. Remember when you were a kid and you had a favorite uncle because

every time he came over he gave you a quarter? That's Brennan. Nice. Genuinely nice and guile-less. You wonder why he got in this racket in the first place. Second-grade teacher you could see.

Brennan has a morning radio show that pulls in more listeners than Howard Stern and Imus. Think they look at life a little differently in the Green Mountain State?

The Vermont story was a slamdunk, almost sappy if it weren't so tempting. I mean, VERMONT! Come on. After this year you might not hear about Vermont basketball for years. You'll forget the nickname. Catcombs? Catwalks? What?

In 103 years of playing hoops, Vermont got to The Big Dance for the first time in 2003. So the Catamounts had just arrived, and yet they were already talking about an end of an era at Vermont. Era? It lasted two years? Brennan was retiring. Coppenrath and Sorrentine were seniors. This team was just a bunch of loveable hayseeds that got lucky, right? Found a diamond-in-the-rough in Coppenrath, who turns out to be part Lil Abner, part Larry Bird. French Lick meets West Barnet, Vt., population 200, wildlife not included.

How could you not buy into a story like Coppenrath's? Come on, a Vermont player a National Player of the Year candidate? That would have been a joke once, like saying Whitey Bulger had a shot at grabbing a Boston city councilor seat. But this kid's legit. The next time you see him will be at the New Garden, either as a Celtic or some team they're playing.

The Catamounts were a great story. And to the surprise of many, they still are. "I don't mean to sound like a wise guy," said Brennan, "but I thought we could win this game."

These Catamounts just won't go away.

Orange crushed

The Pawtucket Times
March 19, 2005
by Brendan McGair

WORCESTER -- It was a matchup of two teams with starkly different backgrounds Friday night at the DCU Center. One team (Syracuse) plays its home games before audiences of 30,000 Orange-clad fans and features a coach (Jim Boeheim) who owns more than 700 career wins and is a finalist for the Basketball Hall of Fame.

The other club (Vermont) plays its home games in a 3,266-seat barn with a coach (Tom Brennan) who's not short on wit despite his sub-.500 record.

In the end, the team with less acclaim delivered the biggest upset thus far in this year's NCAA Tournament, in the process picking up the school's first-ever tourney win. And the person who delivered the knockout blow is a name certainly no stranger to the Blackstone Valley.

Starring at the possibility that this could be his final time playing college ball, Pawtucket's T.J. Sorrentine made sure that his team would make it a full weekend in Worcester. Sorrentine's 3-pointer with 1:06 left in overtime helped propel the 13th seed Catamounts to a 60-57 stunner over No. 4 Syracuse.

With his team up a point, 56-55, Sorrentine held the ball in his hands at the top of the key. Head coach Tom Brennan screamed in a play for his senior point guard to run, but Sorrentine, full of confidence, shook it off. "That's not the first time T.J. hasn't paid attention," joked Brennan afterwards.

With seven ticks left on the shot clock, Sorrentine launched a shot 26 feet away that gave the Catamounts some breathing room at 59-55 as the game headed into the final minute. It's the kind of shot that makes the NCAA Tournament full of special memories, a shot that Sorrentine couldn't wait to go celebrate with his parents, Tom and Karen.

"Coach Brennan was telling me to run 'red' and I told him just to relax," said an exhausted Sorrentine who had 17 points on 5-for-20 shooting. "I knew that I had one more (big shot) in me."

Just about everyone outside Catamount Country had penciled in Syracuse over Vermont. After all, this is a Orange program who two years ago cut down the nets in New Orleans to become national champs. Last Saturday in New York City, Boeheim's club won the Big East Tournament, a win which made many believe that the Orange were poised for a deep

run.

Instead, Syracuse now heads back to upstate New York, all thanks to a team that plays its home games deep within Vermont's maple-covered trees. The balance of power in college basketball was slightly altered Friday evening with a conference (America East) which gets just one bid in the Big Dance getting the better of a school that comes from a conference (Big East) which put seven teams in this year's tournament field.

"The stars must be aligned for something like this to happen," said Brennan. "No doubt this is the biggest win in our school's history."

The main reason why the Catamounts live to fight another day is because they were the grittier team on defense. Vermont held Syracuse to 42 percent from the floor for the game, just 3-for-12 from three. Syracuse finished with 24 turnovers, 10 of which were by Hakim Warrick despite the senior recording 21 points and 12 rebounds.

The player which Sorrentine was responsible for checking, fellow point guard Gerry McNamara, was held to just 4-for-18 shooting, 1-for-7 from beyond the arc. McNamara had a chance to end the game in regulation, but his three-ball attempt with 3.7 seconds left bounced harmlessly off the backboard, never hitting the rim.



"We pride ourselves on our defense," said Sorrentine whose club held opponents to 41 percent shooting coming in to Friday's date-with-destiny. "We know that our offense will come, but for this time of year, you win games on the defensive end."

Starring at the possibility that could be his last go-around in Green and Gold, Sorrentine got to one of those starts that he probably would soon like to forget. Sorrentine missed his first six shots, five of which were three's.

All of the looks he got were fairly good ones. Sorrentine was able to separate himself at least temporarily from the 'Cuse's clutches, only to have his shots fall back into the maze of jerseys tugging underneath the basket.

Despite Sorrentine being off-target, Vermont was still very much in the ballgame. The Catamounts trailed 16-12 with 3:49 left until halftime before generating some sort of success against Syracuse's zone. Taylor Coppenrath (16 points) nailed two free throws and Sorrentine hit Germain Mopa Njila (team-high 20 points) for lay-in, tying the game at 16-all.

Sorrentine's first basket - and it was a key one - came at 2:49 of the first half, a three which he swished home from the elbow. After letting out a yell that probably could have been heard on the Vermont campus, Sorrentine's teammates quickly came out to greet their senior captain with the Catamounts going ahead 19-16. Sorrentine's three helped cap off a 7-0 run for Vermont.

Vermont stayed with Syracuse virtually the entire second half, matching their opponent shot-for-shot.

A three by Sorrentine put Vermont up 35-29 with 11 minutes left in the second half.

The lead continued to stay on Vermont's sideline, up 47-45 with under three minutes left. The Orange then turned to their top gun in Warrick as he delivered two consecutive slam dunks to give the Orange a 51-49 lead inside a minute remaining.

An elbow jumper by Coppenerath tied the score at 51, sending the first game of the Worcester pod into an extra session. Brennan fretted about his team's chances in overtime, going into battle with Sorrentine with four fouls, but when was all said and done, the former St. Raphael Academy star didn't have to worry about a premature exit.

Instead, Sorrentine and the Catamounts now move one win closer to making it a Sweet 16 season.

"It wouldn't have been the end of the world if we had lost out there tonight," said Brennan. "It's time for these kids to really get the respect and love they deserve. The win really validates us, it shows just how good of a team we are."

Vermont turns into a Giant Killer Catamounts pull off a major upset by ousting highly favoured Syracuse

Toronto Globe and Mail
By DAVID NAYLOR
March 19, 2005

WORCESTER, MASS. -- They were already as compelling a story as there is in this year's NCAA basketball tournament, with a coach who is retiring after 19 years and a group of five seniors who took a program where no one thought it could go.

And last night, the story of the University of Vermont Catamounts took a giant leap forward by pulling off the biggest upset in this year's March Madness by downing the Syracuse Orange 60-57 in overtime.

It was a game where the underdogs led most of the second half, surrendering the lead briefly during the final few minutes before tying the score and having the ball for one last possession.

When that attempt failed, they went to overtime where March Madness Magic took over.

With the entire DCU Center on its feet for the extra period, Vermont's T.J. Sorrentine hit a shot from several feet beyond the top of the three-point arch that gave the Catamounts a four-point lead with just over a minute to play.

That lead was cut to two when Martin Klimes went to the line with 13 seconds left in overtime, made the first of his attempts and missed the second.

Moments later, what has to be proudest moment in the tiny green state's sporting history was official and the on-court celebration was on.

It was the first National Collegiate Athletic Association tournament win for Vermont and the first for any school from the America East since 1996.

This was a match-up featuring a basketball superpower that plays in front of nearly 30,000 at home games against a school where the field house holds 3,500. A National Basketball Association factory against a place where even dreaming of March Madness was farfetched not so long ago.

A coach, Jim Boeheim, who has 700 victories and a national championship on his resumé against a guy, Tom Brennan, whose winning percentage is far south of .500.

To the enthusiastic chants of "U-V-M, U-V-M", the No. 13 Catamounts held a 19-16 lead over No. 4 Syracuse late in the first half in an affair dominated by defence at both ends of the court.

The Catamounts successfully turned the contest into a half-court game, staying away from the run-and-gun style against the much more athletic Orange.

And though they often struggled to find an open shot against the stifling Syracuse defence, Vermont was equally stingy at their end of the court when the Orange had the ball.

There had been many times during the first half when the Orange looked ready to take control, including a 9-0 Syracuse run midway through the half, the Catamounts trailed by just four at the half.

This despite the fact their outstanding guard Sorrentine, was only one of seven in field goals during the opening half, one of six at three-point attempts.

But with a slim margin for error, the Catamounts were already in tough by going to the dressing room at halftime down 23-19. Unfazed, Vermont came out and outscored Syracuse 11-4 to open the second half, jumping to a 30-27 lead..

And when Sorrentine hit a three-pointer with 5:51 to play to give Vermont a 41-36 lead, even the skeptics were starting to believe.

Vermont has been two this tournament just two other times in its history. Two years ago they were blown out against Arizona and last year it was the eventual national champions from Connecticut.

But this time, they had promised, would be different. And indeed it was.

Sorrentine is UVM's leading man

The Boston Globe
By Peter May, Globe Staff
March 18, 2005

WORCESTER -- He's the Other Guy.

But make no mistake, T.J. Sorrentine is every bit as indispensable to the success of University of Vermont basketball as his more decorated and celebrated cohort, Taylor Coppenrath. It says something that the Vermont fans serenaded Sorrentine with chants of "Thank you, T.J.," after the Catamounts' America East-clinching victory last Saturday over Northeastern.

Sorrentine is the two-year captain. He's the 5-foot-11-inch point guard from Pawtucket, R.I., who is winding up his fifth year in Burlington (he redshirted a season) and has been running the show in Patrick Gymnasium since he first set foot on campus. He was there for the last bleak year (12-17 in 2000-01) before helping to lead the Catamounts to four 20-win seasons and three straight NCAA appearances, the latest of which is tonight against Syracuse at the DCU Center, while also winning a host of individual awards.

Coppenrath may be, as described yesterday by coach Tom Brennan, "Paul Bunyanesque." Or, "Larry Bird, Bill Bradley." But if you're looking for the engine that drives the Vermont bus, look no farther than the ultrafeisty Sorrentine. As Brennan said, "If I had his intensity, I'd be coaching in the Big Ten somewhere. But I don't need to have it because he's got it. And it is his team. He's the leader. I don't have to do too much."

Sorrentine has been first-team All-America East in each of the last three seasons he has played. He was the MVP of the conference as a sophomore after being the conference's top freshman. He described himself yesterday as a "little, short, rugged kid" when he recounted meeting Coppenrath at freshman orientation. And he bristled a bit when a New York reporter wondered if he and Coppenrath might be the "mid-major" equivalent of the Syracuse tandem of Hakim Warrick and Gerry McNamara.

"We don't look at ourselves as mid-anything," Sorrentine sniffed. "We're just basketball players."

Said Brennan, "I love that answer."

Brennan knew he had a keeper when he recruited Sorrentine out of St. Raphael's Academy in Pawtucket. Sorrentine is the coach's son right out of central casting, playing for his father, Tom, a longtime prep coach. Sorrentine was the state's high school player of the year and led St. Raphael's to consecutive state titles, but he was (pick your pejorative) for Rhode Island or Providence or anywhere else around here except for Burlington, where Brennan had established a tradition of sorts with point guards.

"We've had a history of giving the ball to a guy for four years at a time," Brennan said. "In my 19 years at Vermont, we've had more [school] presidents than point guards. We knew T.J. was going to be good right from the jump. And when he first got here, he said, 'They brought me here to win championships.' And that made me laugh. We never brought anybody from anywhere to win championships. We're just trying to hold on. But that's what he did. And even when he wasn't play-

ing, he's still the greatest leader we've ever had here, not even close."

It was, in fact, the season Sorrentine did not play that really convinced Brennan that he had the real deal in Sorrentine. Both Coppenrath and Sorrentine showed up as freshmen in 2000, but Coppenrath was a redshirt that season. Sorrentine started all 29 games as a true freshman and averaged 14.8 points a game. He led the conference in assists as America East rookie of the year, and, said Coppenrath, "after that first year, when I watched him play, I thought it'd be a good thing if we roomed together . . . It turned out to be really good."

The following year, Sorrentine elevated his game to conference MVP status, averaging 18.8 points a game and leading the Catamounts to the first 20-win season in the history of the school. Only four sophomores have ever won the conference MVP: Sorrentine, Coppenrath (who did it the year after Sorrentine), Reggie Lewis, and Speedy Claxton. Coppenrath was the conference's top rookie that season. But Vermont lost to Maine in the America East semifinals.

Then came an intrasquad scrimmage in the fall of 2002. Sorrentine broke his wrists and was redshirted. Vermont went 21-12, won the conference title with a miracle victory over Boston University, and was served up as first-round fodder for Arizona in the NCAAs. And all of that came without the guy who had been the conference MVP the year before. Coppenrath took that title, too, and never relinquished it.

"[Sorrentine] left the scene and not only did he leave the scene, we won the [conference] championship without him," Brennan said. "Without a point guard. It was amazing to me. We were the champions. And everything that T.J. wanted in his life, we got without him. I was anxious to watch him and see how he reacted when he came back because now, Taylor was the MVP."

"So you have two guys who were MVPs," Brennan continued. "One guy has the ball all the time. And the other guy has to get the ball to be effective. If either one of those guys is a jerk, a little bit of a jerk, you've got problems. But each of those guys completely subjugated his ego. T.J. started slowly and never pointed fingers. That is why we are where we are today."

This season, Coppenrath, again, was the conference MVP Sorrentine, again, joined his teammate on the all-conference team while leading the conference in 3-point shooting. His 343 3-pointers over his career is an America East record and the 18th highest total in NCAA history. He has 105 treys this season alone.

"He can shoot. He can drive. He's a competitor," lauded Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim. "He's a tremendous player. He can play anywhere in this country."

And, Sorrentine said yesterday, he wants to keep playing in whatever country will have him. While Coppenrath might wind up hearing David Stern call his name on NBA draft night, Sorrentine knows his options are much more limited. He did own up to one flaw in his portfolio -- the absence of a driver's license. Growing up in the city, he never needed one. Living in Vermont, he never bothered.

"If I go play somewhere, I've got to be able to drive," he said. "I don't have it yet, but I'll get it sometime soon."

He was talking about his license. But, listening to Brennan and Sorrentine, you could also make the case that he could be talking about anything he wanted, be it a pro career down the road or a victory over Syracuse tonight.

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In Vermont, Tears of Joy For Brennan

The Washington Post
By John Feinstein
March 18, 2005

WORCESTER, Mass.-- Tom Brennan insists he is through crying. Chances are, that's not the case.

Brennan isn't Dick Vermeil or Roy Williams, coaches who cry regardless of time or final score. But last Saturday, when the crowd at Patrick Gym began repeatedly chanting, "Thank you, Bren-nan," it all crashed. Nineteen years as the

coach at the University of Vermont were culminating with a third straight America East championship and Brennan was riding into the sunset, retiring at the age of 55 because the fire has gone out.

"I'm completely satisfied," he said. "You can't be satisfied and still coach. It doesn't work."

So there he was, on national television, crying a blue streak as his Catamounts blew Northeastern out of the gym. The party that day at the Brennan house started at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and ended near midnight after close to 300 people had come and gone. The next morning, the first phone call was from Dennis Wolff, his longtime rival at Boston University.

"I'm really proud of you," Wolff said. "But what in the world was all the crying about?"

"We were up 30," Brennan answered. "I had nothing else to do."

The case can be made that Brennan's retirement is as big a story in Vermont as Dean Smith's was in North Carolina. He has taken a school that had never made the NCAA tournament to three straight, and he is the co-host of the most popular morning-drive radio talk show in the state, "Corm and the Coach." If there is anyone in the state of Vermont who doesn't know and love Tom Brennan, no one can pinpoint exactly who that person is.

"I've gotten way too much publicity," Brennan said Thursday afternoon, relaxing inside the building formerly known as the Centrum. "I told a guy the other day that no one loves Tommy Brennan more than I do and I'm sick and tired of me."

Brennan knows the chances are good that Friday night's NCAA tournament game against Syracuse likely will be his farewell. Naturally, that's not the approach he's taking.

"I told the kids this ain't about video cams and good memories," he said. "We're going down there to win. I know how talented Syracuse is, but we're a good team. Maybe Taylor [Coppentrath] is Larry Bird or Bill Bradley. I don't mean getting us to the Final Four; I mean winning one game."

Coppentrath, who scored 37 points in the championship game, was an un-recruited kid in high school who has blossomed into a star in college. When Coppentrath was a high school senior at St. Johnsbury Academy, a tiny Vermont prep school, his main asset was being 6 feet 9.

By his sophomore year, he was the America East player of the year and the star on Vermont's first NCAA team. The presence of T.J. Sorrentine, a hard-nosed point guard with big-time range, gave Vermont a consistent inside-outside presence. When the Catamounts won a second straight America East title, with Coppentrath coming back to score 43 in the championship game after missing three weeks because of a broken wrist, Brennan knew it was time to get out.

"We had all these people over at the house after the final, and I looked around at everyone and how happy they were and I thought, 'It can never get better than this,'" he said. "We were just on such a high. I wanted to coach these seniors [Coppentrath, Sorrentine and three others], and I knew, to be honest, I wouldn't have to coach them very much. I don't think I could have coached another group this year. I just wouldn't have been into it enough."

Brennan would be the first one to tell you that his longtime assistant coach Jesse Agel does most of the planning and scouting and technical coaching. He had hoped Agel would succeed him, but Vermont chose Maryland assistant coach Mike Lonergan.

"I was disappointed for Jess, but as I've told people, it isn't Mike's fault that he got the job," he said. "People ask me what kind of coach he'll be and I tell them, 'I'll tell you one thing I know for sure: He'll be a better basketball coach than me.' Of course that may be damning with faint praise."

Lonergan's problem will not be coaching, it will be following what Brennan has built, especially with the builder still on the radio every morning and still the most beloved man in the state. Brennan will almost certainly end up working for ESPN next year, but he has no plans to leave Burlington.

"I love these people," he said. "They took me in when I was nothing, stood by me when I was losing, which was for quite a while. My third year we had shirts made up that said, 'We're gonna keep doing this until we get it right.' It took a

while."

Brennan was 14-68 his first three seasons, a record that would get almost any coach at any level fired. He didn't get fired and ever so slowly he built a program. Then, the last four seasons, he hit paydirt, winning 20 games each season. He hasn't gotten rich -- the last two seasons he has made \$100,000, by far the most he has been paid in his career -- but he has loved it all.

"I know I could have gone to the school and demanded 200 grand a year for four more seasons and they would have done it," he said. "But I didn't want to do that. For one thing, I'm done. For another, I owe these people for sticking by me."

Brennan is almost a Runyonesque character. He routinely calls coaches he is about to play live on the air at 6:30 a.m. When an opponent comes to town, Brennan takes the visiting coach to dinner the night before the game. Jim Boeheim, his opponent on Friday, was on "Corm and the Coach" Wednesday morning.

"I like to look at tape right after games," Boeheim said. "I've always found that I'm wound up and can't sleep, so that's a good time to get it done. How about you, TB, you the same way?"

"Actually the only tape I see after a game is whatever highlights come on the TV set in the bar I'm in," Brennan said.

Ready as he is for the next chapter, the last few days have been bittersweet.

"When we won the semifinal [against Binghamton], I felt relieved," Brennan said. "I've always thought in coaching, you should feel joy if you win and look at a loss as a means to an end. I never wanted to feel relief. This time I did. I was so tired after the game I let Lynn [his wife] drive home. I never let her drive."

"This week, everywhere I go, people are telling me how great this has been, how much it means to them. I went to pick up my cleaning at the dry cleaners and the lady started to cry. I had to work not to cry, too."

As he got ready to leave his house Thursday morning for the trip to Worcester, Brennan found himself standing in his living room looking out at Lake Champlain.

"It suddenly hit me that unless lightning strikes twice the next few days, the next time I walk in here, I won't be a coach anymore," he said. "That got to me. I know there will be other moments, but I'm okay with it. I've always said that with space, comes peace. I've always had space at Vermont, even when we were losing. Now, I'm completely at peace."

That doesn't mean he won't cry when it is over. And, whether he likes it or not, an entire state will probably cry right along with him.

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Vermont No Sap

The New York Post
By Steve Serby
March 18, 2005

WORCESTER — The coach is retiring after 19 years to concentrate on his popular radio show, and not for one minute has he taken himself or the game too seriously, so you could reach him on the bus that the Vermont Catamounts took on the dream journey to their Last Dance at the Austin Regional yesterday.

"We got 'Shark Tale.' We put it on right now," Jersey guy Tom Brennan was saying. "We just watched 'Don't Bet On It.' They sent out a gambling video — Dick Vitale tells you to behave yourself."

This is the syrupy tale of a basketball coach and basketball team that have captured the imagination of a state better known for skiing, hockey and Howard Dean's scream.

The 24-6 Catamounts come out of the America East and into March Madness for the third straight year, led by the happy-go-lucky coach who is the polar opposite of a Bob Knight and the quiet, unassuming hometown star — the name is Taylor Coppentrath — who is the polar opposite of Allen Iverson. They come out of a ma-and-pa town — Burlington — that is the polar opposite of Tammany Hall.

They rode 31½ hours for one last shining moment,

past the beautiful, snow-laden landscape, stopping at D'angelo's for steak sandwiches, and tonight Syracuse stands in their way.

Brennan is asked: Do you have a shot?

"We got a very good shot," he says. "We're playing great right now, and there's so much synergy with this group. Maybe Taylor Coppenrath is [Bill] Bradley; maybe he's Larry Bird, I don't know. I don't think we can go to a Final Four or a Sweet 16. But we can win a game."

And that was the very message Brennan had for his tournament-hardened team when the trip began. "I said to 'em on the bus, we aren't going down there for memories and a video shoot," Brennan said. "We're going down there to win."



The mood of your team? "That they really believe," Brennan said. "There has to be some karma involved, the stars have to be aligned right, but we're good. We don't stink."

No fear? "No fear. We're dangerous, that's how I would classify us."

How do you match up with Syracuse? "We match up poorly right now. The problem is they play that zone; it affects Taylor on the inside. We're gonna have to move him and take him outside and try to find a soft spot in the zone."

Coppenrath, a 6-9, 250-pound senior (25.7 ppg), and T.J. Sorrentine, a driven 5-11 senior point guard (18.5 ppg), are Vermont's version of Hakim Warrick and Gerry McNamara.

Brennan would compare Coppenrath with Jack Sikma and Sorrentine with Dan Dickau. The other important names — also seniors — are David Hehn, Germain Mopa Nijila (Cameroon) and Alex Jensen.

"We're really a team. We really are a team," Brennan said. No pettiness, no jealousies.

"As Bill Bradley said to Howard Cosell, 'You gotta minimize the conflicts. That's what great teams do,'" Brennan said. "This team is like Hoosiers — not in the fact there's gonna be a miracle. In the fact, they have taken ownership. They built this unbelievable legacy, and they didn't want it to end."

Brennan's buddy, Jack Fontaine, supplies the pre-game meals at his Rusty Scuffer restaurant in town. "Tommy's more popular than Howard Dean in Burlington," Fontaine says. "Coppenrath could be governor if he wanted."

The Catamounts don't turn the ball over. They will shoot the trey. They even graduate. "All five [seniors] will graduate in May; our senior class has the highest GPA of any graduating class in the country with three or more," Brennan said.

The pressure is on Jim Boeheim.

"I was 22-88 at one point," Brennan said. "I hear Parcells or Pat Riley say, 'There's winning, and there's agony.' Winning for me is ecstasy. Losing is a means to an end."

Over long haul, one sweet ride for Sorrentines

**The Providence Journal
by Paul Kenyon
March 17, 2005**

St. Ray's boys basketball coach Tom Sorrentine, who has put many miles on his car in recent years, drives to Worcester tomorrow to watch his son T.J. and Vermont take on Syracuse in the NCAA Tournament.

The NCAA Tournament is making life easy for Tom Sorrentine. It's going to be a piece of cake for Sorrentine to get to see his son, T.J. play for what could be the final time in what has been a fabulous college career.

For sure, it is going to be much easier than many of the other trips Sorrentine has made to watch T.J. play. Rather than a four-hour drive to Burlington, Vt., it will be barely an hour from the family's Pawtucket home to Worcester, Mass.

T.J. Sorrentine and his Vermont teammates take on Syracuse tomorrow at 7:10 p.m. at The Centrum in a first-round NCAA game. Tom Sorrentine, the longtime St. Raphael basketball and baseball coach, found out later than most where his son would be playing.

When the tournament draw was announced Sunday night, Tom Sorrentine was coaching his Saints team in the R.I. Interscholastic League Division I title game against Mount Pleasant at the Ryan Center. Shortly afterwards, one of Sorrentine's assistants came over to him.

"You got what you wanted. You don't have to worry about flying anywhere," he said.

"They got Worcester?" Sorrentine shot back.

"Yes," he was told.

"Who do we play?" Sorrentine asked, making his allegiance to Vermont clear with the "we."

"Syracuse," came the response.

"Oh. That's a tough draw," Sorrentine said. Told Vermont had been given a 13 seed, Sorrentine sounded like a disappointed coach, which he was at the time -- his team had just lost to Mount Pleasant.

"I thought we'd be an 11 or 12," he said.

Still, worrying about Vermont's draw was less of an immediate concern than knowing he would not have to travel very far. Sorrentine has put many miles on his car over the last five years.

"I've seen him play more than half his games," he said of the roughly 114 contests in which his son has played. Many have been in Burlington.

"There have been some games I've gone up and back the same night," Sorrentine said. "It's been good. The people up there are great. They love (Taylor) Coppenrath and T.J. and (coach) Tom Brennan and everyone on the team. They've never won before, so they've really enjoyed it. It's been worth it."

This season, the father's desire to see his son play impacted many teams in Rhode Island's Division I basketball league.

"I did what I could to work my games around (the Vermont schedule)," Sorrentine said. "If (T.J.) had a game that night, I would try and switch our game to a different day. Most of the guys agreed. They knew the situation."

Sorrentine sometimes drove by himself. Many times his wife, Karen, went with him. On occasion, Karen's sister, Barbara Swanson, joined them.

The traveling went beyond Burlington. The Sorrentines saw games at Boston University, Northeastern, Hartford and Albany. The best, though, was in Chapel Hill, N.C., against the powerful University of North Carolina team. That was doubly special, not only because T.J. got to compete against one of the greatest programs in the country, but because his grandfather got to see him play.

Dominic Sorrentine, who is 98, had moved to North Carolina to live with his daughter, Peggy Turnage.

"He has Alzheimer's. He has to be in a nursing home now," Tom Sorrentine said. "But we got him and brought him to the game. We didn't know what to expect, but it was good because he was the one who helped raise T.J. He was his baby sitter a lot when he was growing up."

"He watched the whole game," Sorrentine continued. "We don't know what was cooking in his mind, but it was just

nice to have him there."

In all, Tom Sorrentine got to see his son play 19 times this season. Over the last five years, he has seen many of the 1,903 points T.J. has scored, as well as the 326 3-point baskets, 536 assists and 162 steals. Now, for the NCAA Tournament, he only has to go to Worcester.

Already, though, Sorrentine is planning on doing more traveling to Vermont next year. His younger son, James, is completing his freshman year at St. Michael's College, just outside Burlington.

"It's one exit up," Tom Sorrentine said. "It worked out great. Four times this year they both had home games on a weekend. One at 1 o'clock, the other at 3:30. We got to see them both. It was perfect."

The two brothers got to spend time together. James Sorrentine had a terrific year himself, leading his team in scoring at 14.4 points and hitting 97 3-pointers, finishing at 40 percent beyond the arc. He even got some national air time on ESPN when his brother and other Vermont players went to St. Michael's for a game. The visit was shown on ESPN's "The Season" program which chronicled Vermont's season.

The entire Sorrentine family has caught the Vermont fever.

"They are all such good kids, great kids," Tom Sorrentine said. "It really has been fun for us."
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Coppenrath one of a kind Vt. town hangs on hero's every move

**The Boston Globe
By Bob Hohler, Globe Staff
March 15, 2005**

WEST BARNET, Vt. -- It's almost mud season in this tiny town without traffic lights, just up the frost-heaved road from Mosquitoville. Soon, the ice fishermen will haul their huts off the lake and the syrup makers will start boiling the maple sap in their sugar shacks. The kids will return to the basketball court across from the white clapboard church in the village center, and sometimes after they work up an appetite they will stroll over to the 150-year-old general store for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

In a picture postcard way, life will go on as usual in this idyllic corner of Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. But townspeople know better.

One day soon -- perhaps as early as Friday in the NCAA Tournament -- a native son, Taylor Coppenrath, will play his last basketball game for the University of Vermont. The self-made, 6-foot-9-inch sensation could become the first native Vermonter to reach the pinnacle of professional basketball and take his game to the NBA (he would relish playing for the Celtics, who have their eye on him). Or he could play in Europe for a princely sum.

Either way, being a fan of Vermont basketball as West Barnet knows it -- indeed, as the entire Green Mountain state knows it -- will never be the same.

"It's very sad," Paula Stevenson said at Paula's Place, one of two village stores where townsfolk and grocery delivery drivers from miles away have stopped the last four years to borrow videotapes of Coppenrath's games. "I hope we can still find a way to follow him, wherever he goes."

In a storybook rise, Coppenrath burst from West Barnet to rescue Vermont basketball from a century of irrelevance and capture national acclaim as one of the era's most intriguing collegiate stars. As he prepared yesterday to lead the underdog Catamounts into the NCAA Tournament Friday against Syracuse in Worcester, Coppenrath ranked as the country's second-leading scorer, a three-time Player of the Year in the America East, and a finalist to join another small-town prodigy, Larry Bird, as a recipient of the John R. Wooden Award as the nation's most outstanding college player.

In Vermont, he is bigger than Ben and Jerry. Bigger than Howard Dean. Bigger than Phish, the von Trapp family, the ghosts of Ethan Allen, Rudyard Kipling, and Calvin Coolidge.

"I just hope Taylor doesn't want to run for governor next year," said first-term governor Jim Douglas.

Why aim so low?

"Taylor for president," read the message on a placard at Patrick Gym in Burlington Saturday as Coppenrath scored 37 points to lead Vermont past Northeastern for the America East championship and a ticket to the NCAA Tournament.

State Republicans are so enamored of Coppenrath's name recognition that they have recruited his father, George, as a leading candidate for Douglas, a Republican, to appoint to succeed State Senator Julius Canns, who died last month. But Taylor Coppenrath's immediate ambitions are limited to the hardwood.

Stacked high on a table in the family home -- overlooking a picturesque dam that harnesses Harvey's Lake and spills into South Peacham Brook -- are nearly 20 written requests from sports agents eager to represent the cult hero. George Coppenrath has formed an advisory committee to narrow the field to five or six, and Taylor plans to sign with one of them before he attends the Portsmouth (Va.) Invitational Tournament for prospective NBA players next month.

"The kid can certainly make a living in pro ball," said NBA scouting director Marty Blake. "He has done a remarkable job of making himself into a basketball player. He's going to get every opportunity to play in the NBA."

Coppenrath, 23, would land a guaranteed contract if he were to exceed expectations and become one of the 30 players selected in the first round of the NBA's June draft. If he were to go in the second round, he would be more likely to begin his pro career in Europe, as Concord, N.H.'s, Matt Bonner did before he joined the Toronto Raptors this season.

Blake said every NBA team has heeded his advice to scout Coppenrath. The Celtics watched him work out in Vermont last October and saw him score 28 points at Northeastern in January to lead the Catamounts to a 75-60 victory.

"The guy is Mr. Productivity," said Celtics general manager Chris Wallace. "He wins. He puts points on the board. He rebounds. And he's done it against the best teams on their schedule."

Coppenrath struck for 38 points last season at UCLA, one of the five highest-scoring performances in the 40-year history of Pauley Pavilion. And he scored 23 points this year against Kansas, then the top-ranked team in the country, in Lawrence, Kan.

"He's very strong around the basket, he's got a mid-range jumper, and he's one of the best offensive rebounders at any level in college basketball," Wallace said. "You also have to be impressed with what he has meant to turning Vermont into such a winning program. That always catches your eye as an NBA evaluator, the impact a player has on the bottom line: winning."

A model player

When Coppenrath worked out for the Celtics last fall in Burlington, he rammed home a dunk that captured the attention of several pros, including Walter McCarty.

"Rattle that rim, big fella!" McCarty hollered, jumping to his feet. "Rattle that rim!"

Coppenrath, as unpretentious as the town he put on the map, privately cherished the moment.

"I'm far from doing what Walter McCarty has been able to do," he said, "but that was a little confidence booster."

As for the Celtics, Coppenrath said, "I would just love to get a chance to play there. Being so close [to home], that would be a lot of fun."

After all, he noted, "They had Larry Bird there."

Coppenrath is no Bird, who all but singlehandedly led Indiana State to the 1979 NCAA finals before he signed with the Celtics for \$3.25 million over five years, then the largest rookie contract in NBA history. But the big fella from West Barnet has come far from his regional high school, St. Johnsbury Academy, where he didn't make the varsity until his junior year and where only two colleges, Vermont and Albany, offered him a full basketball scholarship. Now, as he appears headed for a big payday on one side of the Atlantic or the other, Coppenrath has become a model for college coaches trying to squeeze the most out of their players.

"He's what college basketball players should strive to be," Boston University coach Dennis Wolff said. "He deserves

the opportunity to prove himself at the next level. I wouldn't sell the kid short."

By all accounts, Coppenrath's success springs largely from his work ethic, which he appears to owe in part to his parents. His father doubled for many years as the town's fire chief, answering alarms in the dead of the night, while maintaining a small insurance business. And his mother, Sue, raised three children while she helped run the family business and served on the school board.

"The thing that amazes me about Taylor Coppenrath is that he never quits working," said Northeastern coach Ron Everhart. "He has never taken a play off in his life."

That started at a tender age. To this day, Coppenrath recalls traveling with an all-star team from Vermont to an 11-and-under AAU tournament in Florida. As jarring as it was to lose every game, Coppenrath said he received "a wake-up call" when he saw an 11-year-old from Memphis dunk the ball.

Stunned, Coppenrath committed to making himself better, a pledge he has yet to break.

"I realized there are players out there who are better than me and probably always will be," he said. "I knew I had to do the best I could wherever I went."

A rock star here'

After he sat out his freshman year at Vermont to work on his game and gain muscle, he emerged as the conference Rookie of the Year. Then he matched Reggie Lewis, the late Northeastern and Celtics star, by winning three straight conference Player of the Year awards. Now he is a finalist for the Senior CLASS (Celebrating Loyalty and Achievement for Staying in School) Award, given to the nation's top senior player, in addition to the Wooden Award.

"I never want the reason I might not be successful to be that I didn't work as hard as I could," Coppenrath said. "I guess it comes from not wanting to disappoint people."

He applied the same approach to preparing for a career after basketball. A math major on the secondary education track, Coppenrath is scheduled to graduate this year and has begun preparing for the test to receive his Vermont teaching certificate. He worked as a student math teacher last year at Colchester High School and delivered the commencement address at Winooski High School.

"He's a rock star here," said Vermont coach Tom Brennan. "But what makes him so impressive is that he faces such an immense amount of pressure every day of his life, and yet he never lets anybody down in the classroom or on the court."

Or in West Barnet. Now that the annual town meeting has passed and the snowmobile club has held its last bean supper of the season, townspeople have at least one more of Coppenrath's games to galvanize them. At least one more videotape to share with neighbors. At least one more game to discuss over the homemade strawberry rhubarb pie at the general store and the maple sugar treats at Paula's Place.

"Thank you, Taylor," the sign says outside the village store.

But the pleasure is his.

"Knowing that I'm one of them," he said of the state's love for him, "it sends chills down your spine."

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Sorrentine's on local list of hoop elite

Providence Journal
By Bill Reynolds
Tuesday, March 15, 2005

Notes from a basketball grab-bag . . .

T.J. SORRENTINE

The coach was crying on the bench, all the emotion of his last home game after 19 years as the Vermont coach on his face for everyone to see.

The best player, Taylor Coppenrath, in the state's history was playing his last home game.

Vermont was blowing out Northeastern, only minutes away from the Catamounts' third trip to the NCAA Tournament.

The game was on ESPN.

And the crowd was chanting "Thank you, T.J. . . . Thank you, T.J."

Movie scripts don't get any better than that.

Maybe that's only fitting.

There have been only a few local players in Rhode Island history who have ever had a college basketball career any better than T.J. Sorrentine, the former St. Raphael star who defied all the odds. Too small. Too slow. Too Rhode Island. Too something. Those were the negatives that trailed Sorrentine like an afternoon shadow five years ago when he was a St. Ray's senior. At the time, he was just another Rhode Island high school kid who was being called not good enough to play for either PC or URI, a kid who went to Vermont primarily because it was the only school that really wanted him. The school that gave him the ball his first year and let him grow into what he's become.

Now he's in the twilight of a career that no one ever could have envisioned. A onetime player of the year in America East. Part of the lovefest that Vermont basketball has been, as good a story as there's been in college basketball the last couple of years.

For you can name all the great local basketball success stories in the last 30 years. Ernie and Marvin. Joe Hassett. Tommy Garrick. Jeff Kent. Maybe a couple of others. It's a relatively short list, and now we can put Sorrentine on it. And how good he could have been at PC or URI is not the issue. How good he could have been at a higher level isn't, either.

No matter how it happened, T.J. Sorrentine found the right situation for himself and took advantage of it, getting the most out of himself, succeeding in ways that seem to come right out of some hokey script no one ever could have made up. Succeeding in Division I college basketball in ways that few Rhode Island kids ever have.

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Cats draw Orange in the first round

The Burlington Free Press
By Jeff Pinkham
Free Press Staff Writer
March 14, 2005

The University of Vermont men's basketball was in a zone Saturday, pounding Northeastern 80-57 to win its third straight America East championship.

Now they're going to have to beat a zone if they hope to win a game in the NCAA tournament.

The Catamounts (24-6) celebrated Sunday at the Rusty Scuffer when they were given a 13th seed and a matchup against Big East tournament champion and fourth-seeded Syracuse (27-6) on Friday at 7:10 p.m. in Worcester, Mass.

The party ends today when UVM coach Tom Brennan, associate head coach Jesse Agel and the rest of the Cats search for ways to break down Syracuse's difficult two-three zone defense.

"We'll just get as much film as we can on Syracuse, then turn it over to the genius (Agel) and let him work his magic," Brennan said. "Hopefully, we'll come up with some kind of a plan."

Agel knows the challenge ahead.

"They're perennial powers, they've had a great season and they're going to force us to shoot the ball on the perimeter," Agel said Sunday night. "They're going to cause us some problems because of their size and athleticism, but I'm sure our guys will be ready for the challenge."

The Cats were pleased to be playing so close to home after their experiences in the last two tournaments. A snow storm stranded the UVM team in Denver for two days in 2003 on their way to Salt Lake City, where they eventually lost to Arizona. Last year the Cats had a much shorter delay on their way to Buffalo, where they were beat by eventual national champion Connecticut.

There should be no such travel issues this week.

"It's a home game for us," said UVM senior David Hehn. "We have amazing fans and I don't doubt at all that we'll have at least two or three thousand at the game and hopefully more."

The support will be needed against Syracuse, a peren-

nial contender for the national title. Three names stand out for the Orangemen.

The first is coach Jim Boeheim, who won his 700th career game earlier this season. Boeheim won the national championship in 2003.

"We're playing against a legendary program and a legendary coach," Brennan said. "It couldn't be better for our program. You always want to play against the best and challenge yourself against the best. Jim Boeheim has 20 wins 20 straight years ... it don't get any better than that."

The other two are first-team Big East selections Hakim Warrick and Gerry McNamara, who will go head to head with UVM's own one-two punch of Taylor Coppenrath and T.J. Sorrentine.

Warrick is an athletic 6-foot-8 forward who averaged 21.4 points and 8.5 rebounds per game.

"He's tough and really talented," said Coppenrath, who averages 25.7 points per game, second in the nation.

McNamara, who averaged 16.0 points per game and hit 105 3-pointers this season, is a 6-2 junior point guard.

"He's a good player and it'll be a good challenge," said Sorrentine, who averaged 18.6 points, 4.4 assists and hit 105 3-pointers this year. "I see (Syracuse) on TV a lot, so I'm excited. When you get a chance like this you're got to be excited about it."

Syracuse will be the clear favorite by oddsmakers and in office pools across the country, but the Orangemen are wary of UVM, a senior-laden team that has been to the Big Dance before.

"Vermont is a very good basketball team," Boeheim said of the Cats. "Its RPI was in the top 30 all year, it has experienced players and it's just a good basketball team. Unless you're a one seed, there are no easy games in the NCAA tournament anymore, and Vermont is as tough as they come for a first-round game."

And Boeheim will have to deal with an early-morning call from his coaching peer sometime this week.

"We'll have Jimmy on our (radio) show (Corm and the Coach on Champ 101.3) and see if we can extract some secrets there," Brennan said.

The Feel-Good Story of College Basketball

**Hoopville.net
by Phil Kasiecki
March 14, 2005**

BURLINGTON, Vt. - Tom Brennan couldn't have said it any more concisely to his players before the game.

"You were born to win this championship. You were born to do it. That's all there is to it."

Brennan's Vermont Catamounts blew out Northeastern 80-57 to win their third straight America East tournament championship on Saturday. Based on his team's performance, the coach certainly knew what he was talking about. The Catamounts were the clearly better team from start to finish in the game, much like they were over the entire season.

But Saturday's game, as well as the season and the current run of three straight championships, go beyond the final score. This is, after all, the University of Vermont - a school known more for hockey than basketball, a school where the first 101 years of basketball never saw a 20-win season prior to four straight years with at least 21. It's in a state that has never been known as basketball country by a long shot. But spend some time around this campus and community, and it becomes clear that the current times are just one example of the love affair between the state and this team.

Saturday's game was also the last game at Patrick Gym for Brennan, who is retiring at the end of the season. He is as much a part of this team's story as anyone, as his story is a fine example of a late bloomer. For many of his early years, the team struggled and was hardly relevant outside of Burlington. The best thing about Vermont, save for stars like Kevin Roberson and Eddie Benton, was that Brennan was a character and a good guy.

He's still very much a character and a nice guy, but now he's more decorated with the sudden success of his team.

Success has only made him appreciate what he has, and Saturday brought it all to light.

"People have always taken care of me," Brennan reflected. "Like I said, when I was broke, when I had nothing, people took me in, and they took care of me, and now that I'm rich, and I've won the lottery three times in a row, I'm just able to give it back, give it back, give it back. And I think that's what makes this place so special and what makes this program so special, and what allows me to take such pride in having been the coach here for 19 years. I just can't tell you how much it's meant to me, and I will tell you until the day I die that I will never forget today."

If there was any doubt that he hasn't lost his touch with self-deprecating humor, another reflection took that away.

"What people don't understand is, I'm the all-time leader in wins by one; I'm the all-time leader in losses by a gang," he quipped.

The Catamounts have been carried by two best friends, seniors Taylor Coppenrath and T.J. Sorrentine, but that's just where it begins. Classmates David Hehn and Germain Mopa Njila have had a large hand in the three titles, with Hehn getting the winning basket two years ago in the championship game and Mopa Njila making the last two All-Tournament teams. Sophomore forward Martin Klimes, always a solid role player amidst the more heralded players, was the star of the first half on Saturday as he had a career-high 15 points on 7-of-7 shooting in the first half. For good measure, he had five assists.

To watch the Catamounts play is to see enjoyable basketball. Coppenrath has an amazing sense of where he is relative to the basket and is almost automatic finishing close to the hoop. Sorrentine hits three-point shots you wouldn't advise your kids to take, especially in the clutch. Mopa Njila is always around the ball at either end, and always seems to know when to shoot even though he's often given space. Hehn makes solid decisions with the ball and will defend anyone he has to.

Off the court, it only gets better. The program has consistently had solid students, and like many who have been at the school, many current players have reflected fondly on the ties the school has to the greater community and the state. Alumni have continued to support the program; one notable example on Saturday was the attendance of Matt Sheftic, who was the Most Outstanding Player in the 2003 America East Tournament. Sheftic's story has been documented here before, and for those who are wondering, he's in great spirits and doing well as he has begun his career as an officer in the U.S. Army. His work goes right along with how Brennan has taught his players about giving back to the community, and in Sheftic's case, serving the country.

The fans and supporters certainly enjoy this team, and they enjoyed and supported this team when they weren't winning. Patrick Gym was never an easy place for visiting teams to play, but now it's nearly impossible to win there. Every game this season sold out, and the place always had plenty of energy well before the game started. Indeed, it is college basketball at its finest - an amazing atmosphere with a team worthy of all the love the fans give them. Some might say that Patrick Gym, like a lot of mid-major arenas across the country, is just a glorified high school gym - but so what? The relative size of it, as well as the packed house and the noise the fans generate, make the atmosphere what it is. It wouldn't be the same otherwise.

The fans didn't stop showing their love for this team on Saturday. In the final minutes, chants thanking the seniors, Brennan and long-time associate coach Jesse Agel could be heard. They know what this program came from, and like fans of any team that didn't win for a long time, they appreciate what this team has done perhaps more than if they had been perennial winners.

"It's neat, it's really neat," Brennan said of the chants. "I don't think there's any doubt that this is a very special place. What's happened here is never going to happen again, and it doesn't happen many places."

"It was very moving, and it's something that doesn't happen to a lot of people."

The Catamounts are the No. 13 seed in the Austin region and will play Syracuse in the first round in Worcester, Mass. It's not out of the realm of possibilities that they could

knock off the Orange, as they match up well with them and run a patient offense that will make them work in their 2-3 zone defense. Such a win would prolong what Brennan calls a "magic carpet ride" and just further write him and the current players into the program's record books.



Champs Again! Hoop Cats clinch league title

The Burlington Free Press
By John A. Fantino, Free Press Staff Writer
March 13, 2005

"You can't stop us!"

The chants erupted in unison during the waning minutes of Saturday's America East championship game at Patrick Gym.

And Northeastern couldn't.

As a result, the University of Vermont men's basketball team is heading to its third consecutive NCAA tournament.

Senior Taylor Coppenrath scored 37 points as the Catamounts rumbled to an 80-57 victory over the Huskies in front of a thunderous crowd. It was a fitting home finale for Brennan and five seniors who helped bring the program to prominence.

"It's a very emotional day for me," said Brennan, who will retire after 19 years as UVM's coach. "I love these kids to no end for how they've taken me on this magic carpet ride."

Saturday, the Cats bolted to a 48-34 halftime lead by capitalizing on a career-high 15 points from sophomore Martin Klimes.

Coppenrath took care of the rest.

The West Barnet native and three-time America East Player of the Year scored 21 straight points in a 14-minute span during the second half to seal the victory.

Northeastern star Jose Juan Barea scored 14 points before suffering an ankle injury midway through the second half.

"We feed off the crowd," said senior T.J. Sorrentine, who scored 11 points. "We knew if we could start fast, we'd be OK."

Crowning moment

The Burlington Free Press
By Jeff Pinkham, Free Press Staff Writer
March 13, 2005

Taylor Coppenrath really knows how to share the spotlight.

The 6-foot-9 senior from West Barnet added to his legend Saturday by scoring 37 points to lead the University of Vermont to an 80-57 win over Northeastern in the America East men's basketball tournament championship game at

boisterous Patrick Gym.

But it was Coppenrath's mere presence, as much as his points, that led to a career day for a teammate.

Sophomore forward Martin Klimes slipped into the openings created by a Huskies defense focused solely on stopping Coppenrath and scored a career-high 15 points, all in the first half, as the Cats (24-6) dominated the paint and earned their third straight trip to the NCAA tournament. Vermont will find out today at approximately 6 p.m. where it's headed and whom it will play later this week.

The 6-foot-9 Coppenrath was his dominating self, hitting 17 of 24 shots and scoring 21 straight UVM points over a 14-minute stretch of the second half on his way to being named the tournament's Most Outstanding Player. He hit nine field goals during the scoring binge: eight were layups, the other was a 3-pointer. He also made two free throws.

"Coppenrath is just that good," Northeastern coach Ron Everhart said. "We game-planned this thing to really take Coppenrath away, and believe it or not, even though he scored 37, in the first half (when Coppenrath scored 12 points on six of nine shooting) I thought we did a pretty good job on him."

Everhart's problem was that his defenders were paying so much attention to Coppenrath that they forget about Klimes, and the 6-8 native of the Czech Republic made them pay.

Klimes assisted on the first basket of the game, a layup from Coppenrath, then scored nine of the next 14 points to give the Cats a 16-7 lead 5:27 into the game. He finished the half with 15 points, beating his season high by four and bettering his career high by two while adding five rebounds and five assists. Klimes came into the game averaging 4.1 points per game.

"I had a really good time putting them in," Klimes said of his 7-for-7 shooting in the first half. "A lot of it comes from Taylor. They really focus on him, and because of him I got a lot of open looks."

"He played with confidence today, and the more he scored the more his confidence built up and the team fed off of that," said UVM coach Tom Brennan, who will retire following the NCAA tournament. "We always have guys that step up in these games."

It was a scene Everhart had seen before. When the Cats beat the Huskies 75-60 in Boston on Jan. 5, David Hehn scored nine points and grabbed 16 rebounds. In UVM's 72-64 win over Northeastern on Feb. 5, Germain Mopa Njila had 10 points and 12 rebounds.

"It's always been the story when we play Vermont," Everhart said, "and it was that way today. This is just the way it is against those guys."

This was Vermont's game from the opening tip (won by Coppenrath) as the Cats put together their best half of the season. UVM built the lead to double figures on Mopa Njila's layup with 13:53 left, stretched it to 31-13 on a Klimes layup 5:52 later and was up 48-34 going into halftime.

Vermont's first-half stats were overwhelming: 61.8 percent shooting (five of eight from 3-point range), 20 rebounds to 11 for the Huskies, and 14 assists on 21 field goals.

"That was a big key for us," said senior point guard T.J. Sorrentine, who finished with 11 points, all in the first half. "We wanted to jump on them early and see how they responded."

"We knew if we could start off fast, we'd be OK." Northeastern scored the first points on the second half to cut the lead to 12, but Klimes' big first half forced the Huskies to stop double-teaming Coppenrath, and that led to 21 straight points from West Barnet's finest.

"In the second half he just stepped up, and I just had to make sure I gave him the ball," Klimes said. "It was neat that I could kind of give him back what he gave me in the first half."

Mopa Njila was an all-around star Saturday, finishing with nine points, nine rebounds, seven assists and three steals. He also shut down Northeastern's Marcus Barnes, limiting the league's fifth-leading scorer to six points on two of 11 shooting.

Mopa Njila was named to the all-tournament team along with teammates Coppenrath, Sorrentine and Klimes and Northeastern's Jose Juan Barea.

Barea scored 14 points to lead the Huskies before

spraining his right ankle with 14:05 remaining in the game. He didn't return. Adrian Martinez added 11 points for Northeastern (21-9), which shot just 36.2 percent from the floor and committed 16 turnovers in its first title-game appearance since 1995.

"It's always a difficult place to play, but our guys have played in difficult environments before," Everhart said. "I didn't think that we would react the way we reacted today. I was a little surprised by that."

Now the Cats will set out to do the one thing they haven't yet accomplished: to win in the NCAA tournament. Coppenrath wouldn't predict a win, but he was convinced his team is ready for the challenge.

"We're heading in the right direction," Coppenrath said. "We had two great games in Binghamton (tournament wins over UMBC and Binghamton) and a great game (Saturday). It was an all-around performance by everybody; everybody contributed, and that's what we'll need in the tournament."

It's a three-peat for Catamounts Brennan is given going-away gift

**The Boston Globe
By Bob Hohler, Globe Staff
March 13, 2005**

BURLINGTON, Vt. -- Sweet fortune wrapped him in a warm embrace, and all Tom Brennan could do yesterday was weep.

Coaching the last game on his home court at the University of Vermont, Brennan had just guided the Catamounts to an 80-57 rout of Northeastern for their third straight America East title and NCAA Tournament berth. And while the capacity crowd of 3,266 surged onto the hardwood in a celebratory frenzy, Brennan, who is retiring after a 19-year career, was so overcome with emotion he barely could speak.

Blame it on the big guns he calls Butch and Sundance: Taylor Coppenrath and T.J. Sorrentine. Like Brennan, the fifth-year seniors competed for the last time on their home court, ending a sensational run in which they helped put basketball on the map in Vermont and give their coach a memorable retirement gift by transforming him from a symbol of futility to a local folk hero.

"I love these kids no end for what they've done for me personally and how they've taken me on this magic carpet ride," Brennan said.

"What happened here is a phenomenon beyond belief."

After launching his Vermont career by losing 50 of his first 58 games, Brennan has notched his fourth straight season with 21 or more wins, thanks largely to the 6-foot-9-inch Coppenrath, the conference's three-time player of the year, and Sorrentine, the feisty point guard, team captain, and 3-point specialist. The roommates struck again against Northeastern as Coppenrath torched the Huskies with 37 points and Sorrentine added 11 points, 4 assists, and some early fire with a two-handed shove of star point guard Jose Juan Barea in a skirmish for a loose ball.

"I feel lucky this has been such a great run," Coppenrath said, after he was named the tournament's most outstanding player on his journey toward the NBA or pro ball in Europe. "It's been a lot of fun."

The Catamounts (24-6) retreated after the game to a party at Brennan's home on Lake Champlain. They will reconvene tonight at a downtown restaurant to learn their first-round matchup in the NCAA Tournament. They appear destined to secure at least a 12th seed, their highest ever, after losing to second-seeded Connecticut last year as a 15th seed and to top-seeded Arizona in 2003 as a 16th seed.

Vermont won its third straight America East title, joining Drexel (1994-96) and Northeastern (1984-87) as the only teams to accomplish the feat.

"Until the day I die, I will never forget today," Brennan said. "When we did it the first time, I thought, 'Man, this is neat.' When we did it the second time, I thought, 'This is unbelievable.' The third time, I'm thinking, 'God almighty, how does this keep happening?'"

Northeastern appeared nearly as perplexed. Within minutes of Brennan striding out of Vermont's locker room to

his signature anthem -- Van Morrison's "Jackie Wilson Said (I'm In Heaven When You Smile)" -- the Green Mountain gang seized control of the game. Northeastern never led and tied the score only once, 2-2, before it spiraled out of contention.

The Huskies (21-9) made their first appearance in a conference title game since 1991.

"Quite frankly, we played like a team that hasn't been here before and they played like a team that has been here twice already," Northeastern coach Ron Everhart said. "They made us pay for every mistake we made, and we made a lot of them defensively."

The Huskies now must hope for an NIT bid, though Everhart worried their chances may have been hurt by their poor performance in the nationally televised game.

"I would hope we are deserving," he said. "I think we are a lot better than we played today."

The Huskies entered the game planning to quiet Coppenrath by double- and triple-teaming him. But in holding Coppenrath to 12 points in the first half, they created opportunities for Vermont's 6-9 Czech sophomore, Martin Klimes, who scored a career-high 15 points, all before the break.

As a consequence, Northeastern opted for solo coverage of Coppenrath in the second half. That gambit also failed as Coppenrath all but scored at will, going 11 for 15 from the floor after the break as the crowd alternated between chants of "Thank you, Taylor," "Thank you, T.J.," and "Thank you, Brennan."

The Huskies had little to be thankful for as they fell behind by 19 points in the first half and failed to creep closer than 12 points after the break as the Catamounts dominated every phase of the game. Vermont outrebounded Northeastern, 41-28, and prevented Everhart's high-paced offense from scoring on the fast break.

The Huskies have lost their last nine games in Vermont since 1997.

"It's always a difficult place to play, but I didn't think we would react the way we did today," Everhart said. "I was a little surprised by that."

No one struggled for Northeastern more than senior guard Marcus Barnes, who went 2 for 11 and mustered only 6 points. But the crushing blow for the Huskies came when Barea, who led Northeastern with 14 points, sprained his right ankle and was assisted to the locker room with 13:58 to play and didn't return. Barea was named to the all-tournament team with Coppenrath, Sorrentine, Klimes, and Vermont's Germain Mopa Njila.

"That was kind of the turning point," Coppenrath said of Barea's injury.

"We knew we could kind of keep going and play like we play."

It was enough to make a grown man cry.
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Vermont cruises: Routs NU to retain crown

**The Boston Herald
By Rich Thompson
March 13, 2005**

BURLINGTON, Vt. - Vermont coach Tom Brennan walked away from his final game at Patrick Gym after 19 seasons with enough memories to blissfully carry him into retirement.

The two-time defending champion Catamounts played a near-flawless game and pounded red-hot Northeastern, 80-57, in yesterday's America East tournament championship game.

"I could have never believed it could get like this, and until the day I die, I will never forget today," said Brennan, who is the school's winningest coach with 263 victories.

"What has happened here is a phenomenon beyond belief as far as I'm concerned. When I was broke, when I had nothing, people took me in, and now I've won the lottery three times in a row. I take great pride having been the coach here for 19 seasons."

The Catamounts improved to a school-record 24-6 and 13-0 at Patrick Gym. Vermont, which has climbed to No. 23 in the latest RPI rankings, advanced to its third straight

NCAA Tournament, and Brennan hopes the big win against Northeastern and the high RPI will turn into a No. 11 or No. 12 seed.

"Selection Sunday is now a real big deal in this state, and for 15 years I just watched that show," Brennan said. "The experts are saying 11 or 12, I don't know, but the school president, Dan Fogel, said he wants a 12, and I think we got him that."

The Huskies had won 12 of their previous 13 games and had averaged 80 points per game in their past eight, but they quickly wilted under the glare of a nationally televised game and the noise from a rowdy Vermont crowd. The Catamounts bolted to a 48-34 halftime and performed like a team that had walked this path before.

Northeastern looked like a team not quite ready for prime time, and any comeback hopes it harbored ended when two-time all-conference point guard Jose Juan Barea sprained his right ankle with Vermont up, 62-40, with 13:58 to play.

"I'm obviously disappointed we didn't play better," Huskies coach Ron Everhart said. "We missed some easy shots, layups and things like that, and when you miss easy shots against these guys and you don't rebound the ball, it can get ugly really quick."

"We played like a team that hadn't been here before, and they played like a team that had been here twice already."

Vermont shot 54.7 percent from the floor to Northeastern's 36.2 percent, and the Catamounts dominated the boards, 41-28. Three-time America East Player of the Year Taylor Coppentrath led Vermont with 37 points, and he added nine rebounds and four assists. The Catamounts outscored the Huskies, 48-20, in the paint and held Northeastern without a fast-break basket.

Vermont got key contributions from point guard T.J. Sorrentine (11 points), senior forward Germain Mopa Njila (nine points, nine rebounds) and sophomore forward Martin Klimes, who netted all of his career-high 15 points in the first half. Barea led the Huskies with 14 points, and sixth man Adrian Martinez added 11.

"Coppentrath made us pay for every mistake we made today, and we made a lot of them defensively," Everhart said. "We talked all week about not getting down early. That's exactly what happened to us, and we could never catch up."

Emotional Cats return

The Burlington Free Press
By Jeff Pinkham , Free Press Staff Writer
March 7, 2005

VESTAL, N.Y. -- With the game all but over and his work done for the day, Taylor Coppentrath pointed to the crowd, hugged his coaches and banged into his teammates in celebration.

It was a rare show of emotion for the University of Vermont's humble, quiet senior star. It was also thing of beauty to teammate and roommate T.J. Sorrentine.

"To see a humble guy like that show emotion brings a smile to your face," Sorrentine said of the 6-foot-9 forward from West Barnet. "He realizes that this is our last go-round, and it's more special than it's been in the past so you want to try and cherish it even more."

Sorrentine and Coppentrath provided themselves and their loyal following a few more memories Sunday, leading the top-seeded Catamounts (22-6) to a 76-65 win over fifth-seeded Binghamton in the America East Conference semifinals at the Events Center. The Cats will play second-seeded Northeastern at 11:30 a.m. Saturday at Patrick Gym for the America East championship and a spot in the NCAA tournament.

"It's my last year and this was a game to bring it back to Patrick," Coppentrath said of his late-game emotional display. "You've got to lay it all out there."

Coppentrath had plenty to celebrate after hitting 12 of 15 shots from the field and 10 of 12 from the free-throw line on his way to 34 points, one day after scoring 33 against UMBC in the quarterfinals. He also had a game-high 12 rebounds, seven on the offensive boards.

"He's a great player," said Binghamton junior forward

Sebastian Hermenier, who guarded Coppentrath much of the day.

"I don't think people realize how good he really is," said UVM sophomore forward Martin Klimes.

The same could be said of the Bearcats (12-17), who were routed by Vermont twice during the regular season (83-53 and 71-44) but who came ready to play Sunday in front of a rowdy crowd of 5,003. Binghamton hit four of its first six shots in the first four minutes, but in a sign of things to come, found itself in a 10-all game at the under-16 minute timeout.

"I told the kids at that timeout it could easily be 10-2 (Binghamton)," said UVM coach Tom Brennan, who passed John "Fuzzy" Evans to become the school's all-time winningest coach with victory No. 262. "The place was nuts, they were making shots, but it was 10-10. I thought that was a big key for us."

"We took their punch early and we weren't down," said Sorrentine, who tied the America East single-game tournament record with seven 3-pointers on his way to 25 points. "We were even."

The game stayed close over the next 10 minutes, and Binghamton led 27-24 after Andre Heard's driving layup with 6:11 left. The Cats slowly took control over the next six minutes, outscoring the Bearcats 17-6 behind nine points from Coppentrath, 3s from Sorrentine and fellow senior David Hehn, and two free throws from Klimes.

"It was a great way to finish the first half," said Hehn, who had three points, three rebounds and three assists in 33



minutes.

Binghamton made another run early in the second half, cutting the Cats' lead to 41-37 in the first 53 seconds. Vermont answered once again, this time with two hoops from Coppentrath and three long 3-pointers from Sorrentine to increase the lead to 54-41 with 13:45 left.

"I know 3s kind of break people's back if you make a tough one," said Sorrentine, who hit 13 of 22 3-point attempts in the Cats' two tournament games in Binghamton. "I just try to get 'em up there and hope they go down so I don't have to go in the huddle and listen to ... (Brennan) say 'What are you doing?'"

Coppentrath was overpowering in the second half, hitting all six of his shots from the field, knocking down seven of nine from the line and scoring 19 points.

"I had to work for a lot of my baskets," he said. "It was a battle."

The Cats have done what they set out to do before the season started -- brought the championship game back to Patrick Gym and given the best senior class in program history one final home game.

"People don't realize how hard it is to win in this tournament," Sorrentine said.

"Coming back home is going to be great," Hehn said. "I've been telling ... (the freshmen) that they're in for the best week of their lives."

Cats' Klimes plays key part

The Burlington Free Press
By Jeff Pinkham , Free Press Staff Writer
March 7, 2005

VESTAL, N.Y. -- A quick glance at the box score won't show what Martin Klimes means to the University of Vermont men's basketball team.

The truth lies with his teammates or the opposing team's best post player, who spends most his night banging against the 6-foot-8 sophomore center from the Czech Republic.

"That kid, he's a warrior," said UVM senior captain T.J. Sorrentine. "He plays as hard as anyone I've ever played with. He takes a beating in practice and in games. He doesn't get a lot of love but we appreciate him as much as any other guy on our team."

Klimes averages just 4.1 points and 3.5 rebounds in 21.6 minutes per game. He also averages 3.5 fouls per game while trying to stop the opposition's best inside player. He's happy to give up fouls, and his body, for the good of the team.

"I've always played hard," said Klimes, who Sunday scored three points, grabbed six rebounds, handed out a team-high four assists and repeatedly kept balls alive that teammates would eventually grab. "I think my teammates like that. I don't mind playing hard; I don't mind taking the fouls. I like to battle, I like to play physical; I always have."

He knows his role on this senior-dominated team is simple: rebound, play defense, set screens and, if necessary, send messages.

"He gives us a toughness," Sorrentine said. "If guys are getting banged around, he's gonna bang one of their guys and get a foul. He's our tough guy, and every good team needs that."

"Martin just gives his body up," said UVM senior David Hehn. "It's a thankless job, but the guys inside the locker room thank him all the time. Sometimes things don't go quite his way, but he's never ever complained once."

Klimes said he's simply doing his job.

"I just try to complement wherever they need me," Klimes said. "Every team has a guy that steps in wherever necessary, and I'm that guy on this team."

Just ask the big guy over there with all the bruises.

Cats dispel concerns

The Burlington Free Press
March 6, 2005
By Jeff Pinkham
Free Press Staff Writer

VESTAL, N.Y. -- Taylor Coppenrath had been feeling a little sluggish during practice the last few days, fighting off the effects of a stubborn case of the flu.

T.J. Sorrentine had practiced just once in more than a week, trying to give his balky right hamstring the rest it needed heading into the America East men's basketball tournament.

So, of course, the University of Vermont senior stars combined to hit 19 of 34 shots and score 53 points to lead the top-seeded Cats to a 76-61 conference quarterfinal win over UMBC in front of 5,222 fans Saturday at Binghamton University's Events Center.

Vermont takes on host Binghamton at noon today in a semifinal game. A Catamount win would send the league championship game back to Patrick Gym on Saturday.

The 6-foot-9 Coppenrath did much of his damage in the first half, pounding the Retrievers inside for 19 points while making nine of 10 shots from the free-throw line and leading the Cats to a 41-33 lead.

"They didn't have an answer for ... (Coppenrath)," UVM coach Tom Brennan said.

"He finds a way to score," UMBC coach Randy Monroe said of Coppenrath, "and that's a sign of a very good basketball player."

With the Retrievers focused on stopping Coppenrath, the floor opened up. Senior David Hehn started the second

half with a 3-pointer from the wing, Coppenrath scored twice on layups and Hehn found fellow senior Germain Mopa Njila for another easy basket and the Cats' lead had grown to 52-40.

Sorrentine took over from there, drilling three long 3-pointers and scoring on a drive in a three-minute span to increase the lead to 65-43 with 11 minutes left in the game.

"He buried those shots that kind of opened the game up," Monroe said, "but what can you do? Our guys were near T.J., but T.J. has uncanny ways of scoring. He can come down and stop on a dime and pull up and knock a shot down; he can penetrate and get to the basket, and he's very good; one of the few guys that I know who can fade away and knock a shot down. His form, his technique, is terrific."

Coupled with Coppenrath's presence, UVM's inside-outside combination was unbeatable Saturday, and that's a problem the Cats' duo has presented opponents for four years.

"We tried a little bit of everything," Monroe said, "but they found a way. Taylor Coppenrath and T.J. Sorrentine are two of the best players in the league, there's no doubt about it, but I also think Vermont has some other pieces to the puzzle."

Those pieces weren't flashy Saturday, but they were solid.

Hehn, for instance, scored four points, had four assists and played solid defense on UMBC freshman Brian Hodges, who lit up New Hampshire for 28 points Friday night.

"Hehn was pretty much shadowing me everywhere I went," said Hodges, who finished with 14 points Saturday.

Mopa Njila was a pest on defense with two steals, added four assists and helped Sorrentine break the UMBC press in the second half.

Sophomore Martin Klimes grabbed five rebounds, while freshmen Kyle Cieplicki (eight points, no turnovers) and Josh Duell (three points, four rebounds) were steady in their postseason debuts.

Still, it was Sorrentine and Coppenrath who filled the box score during the game, then later joked with the media. They're also the two who know as well as anyone that the Cats' work is far from over.

"This is a stepping stone," Sorrentine said.

"It's important for us to come out fired up and ready to go (today)," Coppenrath said, "because if we win, we go back to our house."

Sorrentine pushes his limits

The Burlington Free Press
March 6, 2005
By Jeff Pinkham
Free Press Staff Writer

VESTAL, N.Y. -- T.J. Sorrentine couldn't help himself.

The University of Vermont senior guard had just knocked down three 3-pointers, each from well behind the arc and each longer than the one before.

The baskets had given the Catamounts a 22-point lead over UMBC with 11 minutes left in the game, but Sorrentine wanted to do more for the large group of UVM fans who had traveled watch the game. So when he found himself open on the left wing 30 feet from the basket, he couldn't stop himself.

"That one was a little too far," Sorrentine said of the shot, which hit the front of the rim and fell out, "but if I get it going, I feel I can make any shot I take."

That's all you need to know about Sorrentine, the Cats' captain and unquestioned floor leader. He finished behind teammate Taylor Coppenrath (33 points) in the scoring column, as he has done often over the past two years. But no one in this weekend's America East tournament at Binghamton University's Events Center enjoys hitting the big shot more than Sorrentine.

"(The Retrievers) had no answers for (Coppenrath) in the first half, and then in the second half T.J. did what he does best," UVM coach Tom Brennan said, "and that's put daggers in people. They take the life right out of you, those long 3s, and he's been doing that for years."

Sorrentine hit six of 10 from 3-point range and broke

the school and league records for 3-pointers in a season with 95. He did it while playing with a right hamstring injury that forced him to miss the second half of last week's Senior Night win over UMBC and all of Sunday's loss at Maine. The 5-foot-11 guard from Pawtucket, R.I., didn't practice until Friday, and was still a little tentative on the leg in the first half.

"I was just trying to see if my leg would hold up and see what I could do and couldn't do," Sorrentine said.

The leg passed the first-half test, so Sorrentine, always up for a challenge, pushed harder in the second half.

"I wanted to see what I really could do," Sorrentine said, "I kind of tweaked it in practice, so I was kind of nervous (Saturday). But ... (UVM trainer Chris Poulin) did a great job getting me ready and it felt pretty good."

Last March at Vermont

New York Daily News
By Dick Weiss
Daily News Sports Writer
February 28, 2005

BURLINGTON, Vt. - There will be other Senior Nights at the University of Vermont, but it is hard to believe any will be more emotional.

When Taylor Coppenrath, T.J. Sorrentine, Germain Mopa Njila, David Hehn and Alex Jensen were introduced to the sellout crowd of 3,300 who crammed into red-brick Patrick Memorial Gymnasium Thursday night, Tom Brennan had trouble watching. He was too busy drying his eyes.

This was the final home game for the Class of 2005, a group that has lifted Vermont further than anyone in this tiny state of 615,000 could have imagined and made the Catamounts part of the national discussion in college basketball.

This "Public Ivy" has won 20 or more games for four straight years and has gone to two consecutive NCAA Tournaments. Vermont is 21-5 this season and going for a three-peat after clinching the top seed in the America East tournament with the 6-9 Coppenrath scoring 30 in a 66-61 victory over Maryland-Baltimore County.

"These guys are charmed," said Brennan, their coach. "I've been charmed. I was going to quit before this all started three years ago. I go from being an also-ran to this. I was 22-88 and thinking about selling insurance."

The 55-year-old Brennan, a fast-talking Jersey guy from Phillipsburg with a quick wit and a wonderful sense of humor, has been here for 19 years. The house he and wife, Lynn, own on Lake Champlain is home. But he decided in November to walk away at the end of this season.

"I love these guys," he said of the seniors. "I couldn't coach the next group. They're going to need more than I can give them. I'm satisfied. I'm just looking for a Guinevere to lie down with me and drink the Kool-Aid with because it can't get any better than this."

The words are idyllic. So is the program. The school is surrounded by the Green Mountains, just 30 miles from the Canadian border. But Brennan helped put the school on the map.

"We used to be known as the University of Burlington to people from other parts of the state," said Barry Stone, a South Burlington resident who played here with Rollie Massimino in 1956 and attends every home game. "But throughout the state, because of Tom and Taylor and T.J., we've become known as a basketball school."

Brennan has become a beloved figure - primarily for the way he has galvanized the state but also for his work with various local charities. "He was more popular than Gov. Howard Dean was in this state before he ran for President," said Jack Fontaine, one of Brennan's closest friends. "And he's definitely more popular now."

Fontaine and his wife, Eileen, run the Rusty Scuffer, a restaurant on downtown Church St. that feeds the team its pregame meal. He sees Brennan as a regular guy who comes in after games with friends and watches the scores on "SportsCenter." Brennan, who has a future in TV, has been making more cameos these days on ESPN, which has a crew up here to film his team as part of a documentary, "The

Season."

Vermont has a raucous following that includes members of the rock group Phish and ice cream kings Ben and Jerry, who came up with "The Slam Chunk" sundae in honor of the team. But this is primarily a PTA crowd - moms, dads and children, many wearing the jerseys of their heroes.

Aside from this run, Brennan's legacy always will be his everyday kindness. He made a special trip to Sally's, the local florist, to personally pick up flowers for the mothers of his seniors.

Brennan also arranged to fly Chris DiJulia, the wheelchair-bound son of a long-time friend, St. Joseph's AD Don DiJulia, up here to see the biggest game of the year. He called Rich Tarrant, the chairman of IDX, the computer firm in town, and got him to send his private plane to Philly to pick up Chris, who has cerebral palsy. Brennan made sure DiJulia, who came dressed in a Vermont sweater, had the seat right next to him. When the Catamounts finally made their run against UMBC, he tapped his fist on DiJulia's forearm before he hugged his players. It was a poignant scene, one that typifies what Brennan is all about.

Brennan also knows how to leave them laughing. Will Brown, the SUNY-Albany coach, had referred to Coppenrath as a great actor who gets off on flopping for calls.

Brennan filed that away, saving the punchline until after the Catamounts won, 62-45, at Patrick.

"I see (Sir Laurence) Olivier got 36 today," he said.

Coppenrath epitomizes what the program is all about. He grew up in the small town of West Barnet, Vt. and was a late bloomer at St. Johnsbury (Vt.) Prep. He has developed into one of the most fundamentally sound low-post players in the country, a 2,200-point scorer who is a candidate for the Wooden Award.

"He's one of maybe two great players in the history of this state," assistant coach Jesse Agel said. "The next one hasn't been born yet."

The other central figure in Vermont's success story is Sorrentine, a 5-11 point guard and coach's son from St. Raphael's Academy in Pawtucket, R.I. Sorrentine was the America East Player of the Year in 2002 before missing the following year after breaking both wrists. He has more than 1,900 points.

This team is so easy to root for. So is the coach, who hit the lottery and has made sure to share the wealth. "I'm so thankful I have been able to give so much back to the people who have given so much to me," Brennan said. "That's all we wanted to do here. You look up in the stands and see the smiles on the faces of the kids and it means so much to them when we win. All we ever wanted was for people to be proud of us and share our success. It took a long time for me to get that back, but I'm leaving on higher ground."



Vt's Brennan going out in style

ESPN.com
By Andy Katz, Senior Writer
February 25, 2005

BURLINGTON, Vt. -- The party at the Rusty Scuffer on Church Street was still going well into Friday morning.

Forget about the bitter cold outside. The air inside was about as warm and cozy as any postgame party at any

Division I school in the country.

We're not overselling this one bit. This was as genuine an evening as you'll ever see in college sports, let alone college basketball. NCAA president Myles Brand should have been here to witness what college athletics is truly about at its core. This was amateurism, academic performance and kinship at its purest form.

"When I first had this for the seniors, it was me and their parents and the coaches," Rusty Scuffer owner Jack Fontaine said. "Now look at this place. You can't move."

At one end of the restaurant were the officials who worked the game, who actually hugged retiring coach Tom Brennan before and after the game.

"He makes the game better, and everyone respects him," official Stephen Uno said. "I've been with him for about 17 years. He's been a character as long as I've known him."

At another end of the bar was Brennan's family and a close friend, wheelchair-bound Chris DiJulia, the son of Saint Joseph's athletic director Don DiJulia, whom Brennan had flown up on a private jet from Philadelphia for his final home game.

Mixed throughout the establishment were three of the five seniors -- Vermont native son Taylor Coppenrath, Cameroon's Germain Mopa Njila and Ontario's headband-wearing David Hehn -- and their families. The Coppenraths, who have snowmobile trails that run through their West Barnet land, were standing near Mopa Njila's mother, who made her first trip to Vermont from her native country. All here in a bar along a cobblestone street not too far from the Canadian border.

Brennan was working the room with the locals, the Vermont administrators, writing greats Bob Ryan of the Boston Globe and Dick Weiss of the New York Daily News, members of the ESPN Original Entertainment crew for "The Season" and anyone else within earshot.

Over and over, Brennan remarked about how it couldn't get any better than what he was experiencing Thursday night.

He's right. This was an ESPN Classic without the need for a headline game.

Let's start at the beginning:

Brennan -- who announced Nov. 4 that he would retire after this, his 19th season at UVM -- said his day began picking up people at the airport and getting flowers for the seniors.

"And we still had to play a game?" said Brennan, issuing one of his many one-liners.

Patrick Gym was sold out. This isn't the Carrier Dome. It's not Cameron. It's big-time high school with 3,266 loyal subjects sitting in pullout bleachers. There is a coat check for some, while others just hang their winter garb over a railing. They sell a 50-50 raffle at the door. Even the president of the university, Dan Fogel, who was once at LSU, sits in the middle of the mayhem on the hard bleacher seats with his yellow and green-striped tie and sport coat.

Everyone is involved in making a Vermont game go off without a hitch. We mean everyone in the athletic department.

Students handed out posters of Brennan, the seniors and lyrics to Brennan's entrance song for a final serenade of Van Morrison's "Jackie Wilson Said." Katie McNamara, who just went over 1,000 points for the women's basketball team, was sweeping the floor under one basket. "I've got to earn my keep," she quipped. Hockey players were tossing T-shirts into the crowd. Wearing the mascot uniform was another women's basketball player.

This was a collective effort. A member of the basketball staff wheeled DiJulia out to the bench, positioning him next to Brennan's chair. A most poignant moment would come later in the night when the Catamounts tied the score at 54-54 and Brennan touched his fist to DiJulia's outstretched arm before he slapped anyone else's hand.

Earlier, Brennan made an entrance worthy of a sitting U.S. president, walking out with a strut, taking a victory lap and hugging fans and slapping hands along the way.

Then it was time for the player introductions. The school surprised Mopa Njila by finding a recorded version of the Cameroon national anthem and a flag to put on the wall. Hehn's Canadian national anthem also was played, the Maple Leaf flag positioned below Old Glory, before "The Star-

Spangled Banner."

When the seniors were announced, they met their families along the baseline in front of a section that Brennan termed Nicholson row, a bunch of seats against the back wall that were within five feet of the basket. The players cried. Their parents were teary-eyed. Brennan couldn't even watch, hiding behind his underclassmen with a towel. When it was over, the seniors' parents hugged each other and their son's classmates in a show of affection hardly ever seen by a senior class.

And why shouldn't they rejoice? This senior class was directly responsible for turning Vermont basketball into a winner, producing two years ago the school's first NCAA trip after 100 years of basketball. The Catamounts went again last year and could go this season after beating UMBC 66-61 Thursday night to clinch the America East regular-season title. The win earned Vermont the right to host the conference tournament title game March 13 if it wins quarterfinal and semifinal games in Binghamton, N.Y., the previous week.

"I've been here for 20 years, and when I first got here I could yell at the coaches and the refs and they would hear me," said Richard Belisle, who sat courtside across from UMBC's bench. "Now look at this place."

"I waited a long time for this," Belisle said. "Taylor is from this state, and they say he's the first pro to come out of here in 100 years. I won't be around another 100 to see another one like him."

Of course, this game had to have drama. The Retrievers (we're not making this nickname up) had only four league wins, yet held a 12-point lead in the first half. The lead was eight at the break, and any chance the Catamounts had of earning an NCAA at-large berth was about to dissipate.

To add to the team's anxiety, senior point guard T.J. Sorrentine was done for the night after 25 minutes with a strained hamstring (leaving him questionable for Sunday's finale at Maine).

When did Brennan make the decision that Sorrentine couldn't play?

"He makes the decision," Brennan laughed. "I would have put him in there with one leg, like Monty Python where he's asking for a fight [with the knights in a classic scene from the British comedians' Holy Grail movie]."

But the Catamounts rallied, just as they did at Albany last week when they were down 17 in the second half. Coppenrath finished with 30 points, despite playing with a head cold, to hold off the upset-minded Retrievers.

Before the game, Brennan said Coppenrath stopped him in the hallway and said he had to talk to him.

"I thought, OK, this is one of those moments where I'll need a whole pack of Life Savers, and I said, 'What's up, buddy,' and he said, 'I don't feel good,'" Brennan said. "I said, 'You didn't have to tell me that.' That's the last thing I wanted to hear."

What will the university, the community and the program miss when Brennan leaves next month?

"A lot of jokes," Coppenrath said. "There are so many fun stories. He comes into the gym every day with so much energy. He's already been up at 4:30 (for his morning radio show). I get up at 12:30 (p.m.) and still feel like crap."

"These guys are charmed, and I've been charmed," Brennan said. "I was going to quit before this all started [three years ago]. I go from being an also-ran to this. I was 22-88 and thinking about selling insurance."

The last three seasons have left Brennan quite content.

Now he's on the verge of the unthinkable -- three straight trips to the NCAA Tournament.

"Sunday becomes a big game, and we won't be the darling of the selection committee if we go to Maine and lose," Brennan said. "I think we'll go there and play well."

When the news conference was ending Thursday night, Brennan actually took a serious tone for a minute.

"I'm so thankful and been able to give so much back to the people that have given so much to me," Brennan said. "That's all we've ever wanted to do here. You look up in the stands and see the smiles on the faces of the kids, and it means so much to them when we win. That's all we ever wanted was for people to be proud of us and share in our success -- and it took a long time. For me to leave and get that back,

I'm leaving on higher ground."

The latter part of the Van Morrison classic fits Brennan perfectly (sing if you like):
I'm in heaven, I'm in heaven.
I'm in heaven, when you smile
When you smile, when you smile
When you smile.

And when you walk
Across the road
You make my heart go
Boom-boom-boom
Let it all hang out
Baby, let it all hang out

And ev'ry time
You look that way
Honey chil', you make my day
Let it all hang out
Like the man said: Let it all hang out.

"We started playing that on the radio show 12 years ago, and then we played it at the games to get people excited," Brennan said. "It's had a good run. But the shelf life is over."

There is one more encore forthcoming, possibly here for a bid to the NCAAs and then, who knows, maybe a final curtain call with a win in the NCAA Tournament.

"I can't even imagine that," Brennan said as he toasted a few friends.

When asked when Fontaine was going to close for the night, he shrugged and said he had no idea. No one wanted to see this era end, not Thursday night, Friday morning, not any time soon.

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Trio forges a new tradition at UVM

The Burlington Free Press

February 24, 2005

By Jeff Pinkham

Free Press Staff Writer

Nearly 3,300 people will cram into Patrick Gym tonight to celebrate the most amazing four-year run in the history of University of Vermont men's basketball.

And none of them saw it coming.

The run started inconspicuously Nov. 11, 1999, the day coach Tom Brennan announced that high school seniors Taylor Coppenrath and T.J. Sorrentine planned to attend UVM. Together, they would transform almost everyone's idea of what was possible for UVM men's basketball.

Coppenrath and Sorrentine joined a program Brennan had moved from irrelevant (14 wins and 68 losses before half-empty gyms in Brennan's first three years from 1986-89), to competitive (136-80 from 1994-2000). They provided the fuse and spark to rocket the program into a stratosphere Brennan admits he couldn't have reached alone.

This team has won 20 games or more for four straight seasons, played before sellout crowds and on national television. Next month, the Cats hope, they'll play in their third consecutive NCAA tournament.

Tonight, Coppenrath, Sorrentine and Brennan will share the court with seniors David Hehn, Germain Mopa Njila and Alex Jensen for their last regular-season home game. Coppenrath, the easy-going big man from West Barnet, Sorrentine, the intense point guard from Pawtucket, R.I., and Brennan, the fast-talking coach who will retire after this season, know it won't be easy.

"I don't even want to think about it," Brennan said.

"It's going to be real emotional," Sorrentine said of his Patrick Gym finale, "for myself, and for our team and for the fans, as well. We're looking forward to having one more game at Patrick, but this is our last official game, and it's going to be very tough, but that's part of basketball. You've gotta move on."

Unlikely star

Coppenrath came to UVM with limited high school playing experience and questions about his potential. The quiet kid from West Barnet in Caledonia County hadn't earned

a spot on the varsity team at St. Johnsbury Academy until 11th grade. He will leave as the best player in the history of the program, a two-time America East Conference Player of the Year who will finish second on the school's all-time scoring list, and a potential NBA draft pick.

Coppenrath has quietly endured the celebrity. He signs autographs and draws the attention of professional scouts. He has student-taught algebra at Colchester High School and bridged the gap between the no-nonsense Vermont work ethic and big-time college basketball.

"Taylor is so comfortable in who he is," Brennan said. "And the one thing I marvel about him so is he just never lets anyone down. He just doesn't."

"He's showed me how to be humble," Sorrentine said of Coppenrath, his roommate for five years. "That's a big key to success, and he's the best example of that to not only me but to a lot of people."

Like the kid who was supposed to meet Coppenrath for a school project but missed the scheduled appointment when his father got stuck in a meeting.

"He called the kid and said, 'I've got a car, where do you live and I'll come over,'" Brennan recalled. "The dad walks into the house all disappointed and there's Taylor sitting at the kitchen table with his son. I mean, to me, that's the best."

That's how Coppenrath will leave UVM -- as one of the best. He'll be the school's second-highest scorer, finishing behind guard Eddie Benton, who played from 1992 to 1996. Coppenrath hopes he has plenty more points left in him at the NBA level.

"I'll definitely try to get there," Coppenrath said. "If I fall a little short, then I'll try to go to Europe and play for a couple years and see how it is. Then again, I'd like to go teach, as well."

His veteran coach has been taking notes.

"With Taylor I've learned composure," said Brennan, who is finishing his 19th season on the UVM bench. "And another thing I've learned is be comfortable in your own skin. Be who you are and be happy with who you are. If you want to make it better, make it better, but don't forget who you are."

Making his point

Brennan's philosophy with point guards has been simple: Recruit them out of high school, hand them the keys to the team and get out of the way. It worked with Kenny White, Eddie Benton and David Roach before him, and it worked with Sorrentine, too.

Sorrentine earned the confidence. He lives by simple rules: Work hard, prepare the best you can and give it everything you've got on the floor.

"There's just a lot of core values with that guy," Brennan said. "Hard work, preparation, outworking people. He really believes in that stuff and he does it."

He does it with confidence, but without an ego.

Sorrentine had to call in late for practice the day after Christmas -- the bus he was riding back to Burlington was delayed in Boston.

"He's the player of the year, a three-time all-league performer, and he takes the bus back to school," Brennan said. "I think that's great. Talk about a guy that doesn't take himself seriously. To me, that was heart-warming."

Sorrentine scored 23 points in his first UVM game and that year was the league's Rookie of the Year. He improved on that in his second year, winning Player of the Year honors and leading UVM to its first 20-win season.

Two broken wrists before his junior season tested Sorrentine. While he watched from the sidelines for the entire year, Coppenrath took his spot as the league's top player and led the Cats to the NCAA tournament for the first time.

Because he lost the year to injury, NCAA rules allowed Sorrentine two more years of basketball. The NCAA didn't give him back his jump shot or his confidence. He still averaged 14.8 points per game when he returned. The team flourished. That season, Brennan said, tells you all you need to know about Sorrentine.

"Before he went out (with the injury) he was the man," Brennan said. "And when he came back Taylor was the man. But neither of them cared, and that's why they're so special, because if either one of them had bumped heads because of the glory, we'd have been cooked."

Winning isn't everything

Winning didn't make Brennan happy, it just made him happier.

Brennan didn't need the success he's had over the past four years to feel good about the job he did in his first 14 seasons, when he brought Vermont from a bumbling nonfactor to a steady, middle-of-the-pack, competitive program. Instead, Brennan sees the transformation of UVM basketball as a way to pay back all those in the community who didn't call for his head as the losses piled up.

"The appreciation here far outweighs the expectations," he said, "and that's neat and that's rare and that doesn't happen in many places. Who knows how long it will happen here, but every day I've been here people have appreciated what we've done way more than they expected us to do it."

As the years passed and his list of friends grew, Brennan realized he couldn't leave. He was tempted three years ago when his alma mater, Georgia, was looking for a coach. His wife, Lynn, quickly set him straight: What more could he possibly want that he didn't have, she asked.

He knew she was right.

He's found a new following and an outlet for himself through his role as co-host of "Corm and the Coach," a popular radio show. And tonight, as is customary, the fans at Patrick Gym will rise two minutes before the game when Brennan ambles to the bench to Van Morrison's "Jackie Wilson Said," just as they have done for the past decade. They welcome Brennan as an old friend, which is exactly the way he wants it.

"Some of it has to do with the radio, but you have this sense that people just feel like they know you," Brennan said. "You have friends that you don't know are your friends, but you see them in the mall or you see them at a restaurant and they say, 'Hey, coach, how ya doing?' And I say, 'Have we met?' and they say, 'No, we haven't, but I listen to your show.' And we spend a few minutes talking, and that's the way you want people to feel. I want people to come up to me and say, 'Hi.'"

Brennan wants his players to take the same approach. He tells recruits that he will have failed if he's not invited to their weddings, and he fosters a family atmosphere among players, his staff and their fans.

"He tries to connect with everybody, and that's important," Coppentrath said. "You can talk to him; he's your friend on and off the court."

The final chapter

There is still plenty left to accomplish for the Cats, who hope to add a third America East Championship and a third straight trip to the NCAA tournament. A win in college basketball's biggest event also would be nice, and give them another first for the resume. Although Brennan expects many tears tonight, many of them his own, he hopes it's a celebration of what the team has meant to the school and the state and each other, and not a time to be sad.

"It's a sad occasion in that they're leaving, but it's not a sad time," Brennan said. "It's a wonderful time, and what I've also loved about these kids is that they've always appreciated that and always understood that. And now I don't want them to miss a second of it."

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Coaching not the end for Vermont's class act

The Chicago Tribune
By Teddy Greenstein
Tribune staff reporter
February 14, 2005

BURLINGTON, Vt. -- It's three minutes to tipoff, and Vermont basketball coach Tom Brennan enters a sold-out Patrick Gymnasium as only he knows how.

Van Morrison's upbeat "Jackie Wilson Said (I'm in Heaven When You Smile)" greets Brennan as he strolls to the Catamounts' bench. It's the perfect tune for a coach who's naturally caffeinated and defines heaven as a place with two backboards and endless laughter.

"He's probably the only coach in the country with his own theme song," Steve Cormier says.

He's also probably the only coach who calls his players "my heroes" for their brainiac grade-point averages and

dedication to the community, who jokes he has become "softer than Barry Manilow" and tells recruits that if he isn't invited to their weddings, he hasn't done his job.

And he's definitely the only coach who has a morning radio show that trounces Don Imus and Howard Stern in the ratings.

For 12 years Cormier and Brennan (a.k.a. "Corm and the Coach") have enlivened Vermont's airwaves from 5:30 to 9 a.m. weekdays on WCPV-FM by talking sports, telling stories, interviewing Vermont's top politicians and rousing opposing coaches with predawn phone calls.

"He fills buckets," Cormier says, using one of Brennan's favorite analogies. "He loves making people happy. I can be in a real bad mood at home, and he'll call and make me laugh. My wife will say, 'The light of your life just called, didn't he?' I started calling him that on the air."

Until a few years ago it would have been easy to call Brennan a better broadcaster than coach, at least based on his won-lost record. His first three teams went a combined 14-68. His next 12 danced around the .500 mark. Although the state of Vermont never had produced an NBA player or an NCAA tournament team, Brennan, 55, always believed he would succeed.

"But as I got further along, I realized it's not just going to happen because you're a nice guy," he says. "You have to earn it. And you have to get some players."

Now the players are here, and Vermont, ranked 16th in the current RPI, is gunning for its third consecutive NCAA tournament berth. That's remarkable for a school that plays in an area better known for ski slopes, maple syrup, Phish songs and Ben & Jerry's flavors.

Brennan's Catamounts are 13-1 in the America East Conference and 18-4 overall, with two of the losses coming at North Carolina and at Kansas.

Vermont led the Jayhawks by four with 4 1/2 minutes to play. After a late call went against his team, Brennan drew a chuckle from referee John Clougherty by telling him, "Hey, I didn't expect to get [the \$50,000 guarantee] and the calls too."

Brennan punctuates many of his stories with a laugh that can be heard across Lake Champlain.

But he will have entirely different emotions on the evening of Thursday, Feb. 24, when Vermont's seniors take the home court for their last regular-season game.

It also will be a goodbye for Brennan, who announced in November he would retire after this, his 19th season at the school. He will continue his local radio show and might pursue TV opportunities.



"I wanted to leave before I fell in love with these guys," he says. "But it's too late. I'm just going to have to leave with a broken heart."

Mountain man, city slicker

College basketball's top scoring tandem sits down for a meal at Sweetwater's, a casual restaurant on Burlington's lively Church Street.

Taylor Coppentrath and T.J. Sorrentine have roomed together for four years, an arrangement worthy of its own

theme song, "The Odd Couple."

Coppenrath is a modern mountain man, a 6-foot-9-inch, 250-pound forward from the tiny Vermont town of West Barnet (population 200). Coppenrath is country. And he is quiet.

Brennan remembers his first dinner with Coppenrath as "the longest two hours of my life. He didn't say two words. Later on he told people, 'Coach is pretty funny.' Well, you could have laughed once or twice."

Sorrentine is the outgoing city slicker from Pawtucket, R.I. He's a 5-11 gym rat who only recently got his learner's permit to drive.

"I never really needed it," he says. "I lived in the city, so I'd walk to the gym and walk home. Then I'd order in. I don't really do much."

Except watch basketball. He might know NBA rosters better than David Stern.

"They're starting [Chris] Duhon now, huh?" he says, discussing the Bulls.

Speaking of Chicago, the players are asked about their 64-42 loss at Northwestern in 2000.

"Isn't that the game you scored two points?" Coppenrath asks Sorrentine.

"Thanks, Taylor," Sorrentine replies.

How far they have come since that game. Coppenrath, in the midst of his redshirt year, didn't even travel to Evanston.

Coppenrath, who now has the size to rebound and the touch to knock down three-pointers, didn't make his varsity team at St. Johnsbury Academy until his junior season. Although he was named the state's player of the year as a senior, only Vermont, Bucknell and Albany were interested.

"If he hadn't agreed to redshirt, we weren't going to take him," Brennan says. "How about that, huh? Real smart."

Coppenrath earned conference rookie-of-the-year honors as a freshman and was named player of the year as a sophomore and a junior, joining the late Reggie Lewis of Northeastern and Malik Rose of Drexel as the league's only back-to-back winners.

Coppenrath hit the national stage with a 38-point performance last season at UCLA, then did even better in the conference title game against Maine. With the home crowd chanting "You can't stop him!" Coppenrath scored 43 points in Vermont's 72-53 victory.

Brennan likes to joke about calling Coppenrath's father, George, and asking him, "What's it like to wake up in West Barnet, Vt., and realize you've sired Seabiscuit?"

Many project Coppenrath, who ranks third in the nation with a 24.3 points-per-game average, as a late first-round NBA pick. But he would rather talk about his future beyond basketball.

In the fall Coppenrath was a student teacher at nearby Colchester High School, tutoring 9th-graders in algebra and trigonometry.

"There's a satisfaction you get from watching kids learn," he says. "When you can get that light bulb to click, you're so happy."

Sorrentine, meanwhile, hopes to play in Italy after his superb college career. During Coppenrath's freshman season, Sorrentine was named America East player of the year after averaging 18.8 points per game.

That off-season Sorrentine played in a summer league at Providence College amid speculation he would upgrade conferences by transferring to Providence of the Big East or Rhode Island of the Atlantic 10.

"Everybody from home was saying, 'What are you doing up there?'" Sorrentine says. "Even my mom said, 'T.J., are you going to transfer?' I was like, 'Mom, relax. You'll be the first to know.'"

Brennan even showed up for one of the summer-league games, explaining he was "protecting my investment."

But Sorrentine couldn't leave Brennan. And after breaking both wrists during a scrimmage before the 2002-03 season, Sorrentine returned the next season eager to share the ball with Coppenrath.

"When T.J. left, he was the darling," Brennan says. "When he came back [from the injury], people didn't know his name. He could have been a jerk, and he never was, not for a moment. He had the ball, and he passed it to him."

'I love that guy'

It's Jan. 15, the day before Vermont is to face Boston University in a clash of teams with perfect conference records, and Brennan is putting his team through a rigorous 90-minute practice.

Brennan actually is more of an observer. Top assistant Jesse Agel, who joined Brennan in 1988 and hopes to succeed his boss, runs the players through drills.

Suddenly the action stops. Brennan erupts after seeing guard David Hehn fight through a screen with a flying elbow that nearly connects with freshman Ryan Schneider.

"Get the hell out of here!" Brennan yells at Hehn. "Get the hell out of here! That's the third time that's happened."

As a stunned Hehn walks to the locker room, Brennan screams, "And I'll let you know about tomorrow."

A few minutes later, a grinning Brennan explains: "The guy needed a wake-up call. He played right into my hands."

Hehn was an unlikely target for an ejection, considering he's a local favorite for his grit, hustle, well-placed headband (he was named to ESPN.com's "All-Hair" team last year) and eagerness to mingle with fans after games. Not only that, Brennan considers him a surrogate son.

The morning of the Boston U. game, Hehn drove with Sorrentine and Coppenrath to the team's pregame meal at the Rusty Scuffer, a casual downtown restaurant where Brennan has his own booth decorated with Larry Bird posters.

Hehn, a senior, was still angry and embarrassed about getting thrown out of practice. So when he saw Brennan, he pulled his hood over his head. After breakfast, the two apologized and made up.

"It would be the same with my own father," Hehn says. "You cool off, and then everything's all right. I love that guy. I'm going to miss him more than anything."

Hehn had a lousy first half against BU, committing two early fouls and a turnover while getting shut out on points, rebounds and assists. But he nailed a three-pointer to start the second half, sank another five minutes later and fought through the trees for a driving layup to put the game away.

Final score: Vermont 69, Boston U. 58.

While most coaches would try to hide Hehn's infraction to avoid controversy, Brennan brought it up: "He had to leave practice early yesterday. He had some personal commitments that he had to take care of. I wanted to make sure he had the game plan down, so we met for breakfast this morning and, sure enough, he did."

After the game, Hehn apologized to his teammates, later explaining: "That's definitely not me at all. I just lost my cool, and I'm glad I got a chance to contribute and make up for it."

With team-first attitudes like that, it's no wonder Sports Illustrated on Campus named the Catamounts college basketball's "Most Rootable Team."

That was then, this is now

The year was 1970, and LSU's "Pistol" Pete Maravich was on his way to a 37-point performance against Georgia. On one of his drives to the basket, Maravich pushed off a Georgia guard named Tom Brennan. But Maravich got the benefit of the call.

Brennan was incensed but didn't want to show up the referee. So he waited until the ref got close and calmly told him, "That was an offensive foul."

Recalls Brennan: "I didn't think he heard me because he took two or three more steps. Then he wheeled around and said, 'Hey, they ain't here to see you!'"

Brennan wasn't the star then, but he is now. When he arrived in 1986, his salary was \$34,000. He had hoped to parlay Vermont's offer into a raise at Yale, where he had gone 46-58 in four seasons. Instead his boss suggested he take the Vermont job, even though it meant a \$15,000 pay cut.

Brennan's first three teams went 14-68, and on many nights the school didn't even bother unfolding one side of the bleachers. Now the team sells out the 3,266-seat arena for every game.

The town has so taken to this team that the Burlington Free Press recently found a novel way to compare the snowfall in the ski resorts of Stowe, Vt., and Heavenly, Calif. The newspaper used a graphic to show that Heavenly, with 364 inches of snow, has received "4 1/2 Taylors."

"It's heaven here for them," Brennan says of his players. "People treat them like royalty."

Brennan's radio show made him popular even when his teams were scraping the bottom of the conference. He somehow manages to be cheerful at 5:30 on frigid winter mornings.

"One day I came into the studio and said: 'The show's probably going to [stink]. I don't feel good today,'" Brennan recalls. "I got home and [wife] Lynn said: 'What was that all about?'"

"I said, 'I like to be truthful with the people.' She said: 'They don't want to hear your problems. They have their own problems. You're supposed to make them laugh.' She was absolutely right."

Brennan's radio contract calls for him to work about three days a week.

"So if I'm hung over or something, I don't go," he says.

Brennan reacted to the Randy Moss mock-mooning controversy by telling a story on air from his early days in coaching, when he was the basketball and baseball coach at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, N.J.

While riding in the team van after a baseball game, Brennan saw one of his players moon someone on the highway. He ordered the driver to pull over, got in the player's face and yelled, "What if it was your mother or your sister in that car?"

Brennan then ordered the player out of the van, even though they were eight miles from campus.

"The kid says to me, 'How am I going to get back?'" Brennan recalls. "I said: 'Stick your [butt] out. Someone will pick you up.'"

"He said, 'You can't do that.' He was right. Can you imagine if I did that today? I'd be arrested. I'd be on 'SportsCenter.'"

Now Brennan is an ESPN favorite for other reasons. Last year he drove four hours each way to Bristol, Conn., to talk to ESPN News-for a six-minute spot. The network is eyeing him for a more permanent gig after the season.

"He'd be a perfect fit," ESPN Vice President Burke Magnus says. "He's a character, and people love characters."

Brennan decided this would be his last season after his Catamounts beat Maine in the final of last year's America East tournament to earn their second consecutive trip to the NCAA tournament. (They lost to eventual champion Connecticut 70-53 after taking a 7-0 lead.)

"I thought: What could ever be better than this?" he recalls.

Brennan knew it was the right time. His four best players, including Coppenrath and Sorrentine, would be seniors. Nineteen years in the same job would be enough.

"I just knew I had one more bucketful," he says.

Still, Brennan is giving up what he considers the best job in the country. He says:

"I've had people tell me: 'That's how smart you are. You're quitting it.'"

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Cats shoot first, save questions for later

By Kevin Hench
Special to FOXSports.com
February 9, 2005
www.foxsports.com

When I was a sophomore at the University of Vermont, I had a political science professor start a class by writing three numbers on the blackboard:

100 — 435 — 278

He circled each number as he explained its significance.

"One hundred is the number of senators in the Senate. Four hundred thirty-five is the number of voting representatives in the House," he said. "And 278 is the ranking of your college basketball team."

That was 1986, coach Tom Brennan's first year at Vermont. The Catamounts staggered to a 5-23 mark that year and would lose more than 20 games the next two seasons as well. My, how times have changed.

As Brennan enters the final weeks of his remarkable

run in Burlington — he is retiring after 19 seasons — he has the Catamounts riding high at 17-3 overall, 12-0 in the America East Conference and poised for their third straight trip to the NCAA tournament.

A couple of weeks ago my Vermont classmate Tony Reilly alerted me that the Catamounts had climbed into the Top 20 in the Ratings Percentage Index rankings. I had seen the Cats give Kansas all it could handle in their season opener and knew they had started their annual romp through conference play, but I had no idea how high they had climbed in the RPI, which I thought had been devised specifically to punish small conference schools like my beloved UVM.

Sure enough, when I checked the RPI standings, Vermont was tied with Villanova at No. 18. It's hard to explain just how nuts this is to anyone who didn't spend time in Vermont's cozy Patrick Gym in the mid-1980s when 'Nova was on top of the college basketball world and Vermont, according to Professor Gary Nelson, was No. 278.

When Rollie Massimino, who graduated from UVM in 1956, was coaching Villanova, he would schedule an annual game between his Big East power Wildcats and his alma mater. I remember one night in Patrick Gym when Villanova's Doug West, who would play 12 years in the NBA, took off his warm-ups just long enough to bury the Catamounts in eight shots. He scored 20 points on 8-of-8 shooting, including four bombs from beyond the arc, in the first 10 minutes and then sat and watched the rest of the blowout.

For me, one of the joys of watching Doug West or Northeastern's Reggie Lewis playing in Patrick Gym was knowing that I would be hoisting up threes on the very same court during the next day's lunch-hour game with assorted faculty and students (who shared my ambivalence about attending class). And if I were lucky, I'd be playing alongside coach Brennan. The guy was so much fun to be around, so relentlessly positive, your shooting percentage jumped 10 points when he said hello. Coach Brennan made me feel so good about my game, I was once emboldened to actually try to drive to my left. I turned it over but somehow managed to escape injury.

One day, when I was struggling mightily with my stroke and half-expecting a reprimand or a freeze-out from the coach, he smiled and shouted over to me, "Just keep shooting." And that, by the way, is everything you need to know about how Tom Brennan turned around the University of Vermont basketball program. If Coach could take a short, slow intramural gunner like me and make him feel like a Division I prospect, imagine what he could do with guys who arrived in Burlington with skills. Or even skillz. I may not know why the caged bird sings, but I do know why great practice shooters struggle in games: they simply don't think their coaches believe in them.

Any player who has ever taken a jump shot under threat of instant removal from the game should he miss understands what that kind of pressure can do to your shooting percentage. It's much worse than the comparatively benign pressure of a hand in the face. This is why gunners tend not to flourish playing for a knee-jerk coach whose lone talent as a player was drawing charges. The young men who have had the good fortune to play for coach Brennan at Vermont over the last 19 years have faced no such pressure. From Rob Zinn — whose range I'd like to think I stretched in losing some epic H-O-R-S-E games — to Matt Johnson, to Eddie Benton, to Tony Orciari, to current studs Taylor Coppenrath and T.J. Sorrentine. The one thing Catamount players have never had to fear is a quick hook from the coach. Has any other coach in the country had five different players hoist 16 or more 3-pointers in a game?

Why the constant, unblinking green light? Because Brennan, in spirit and practice, has always been, and forever will be, a gunner. From his record-setting, conscience-free high school career, to his playing days at Georgia, to his current radio gig, the quip-equipped New Jersey native has always shot first and asked questions never. Somewhere along the line, he decided being a college basketball coach should be fun. And so should being a college basketball player. Imagine that.

When his team had to survive a veritable Shackleton expedition — after being snowed-in in Denver — to reach its NCAA Tournament first-round game against No. 1 seed

Arizona two years ago, coach Brennan refused to let the ordeal diminish the extraordinary experience of Vermont's first trip to the Big Dance. If anything, the trek embodied the rigorous journey the program had completed in climbing from No. 278 to the NCAA Tourney. The Catamounts gave Arizona all it could handle for the first 10 minutes, before succumbing to a Wildcat team that had more size, more speed and more sleep.

Last year, the America East champs drew eventual national champion Connecticut in the first round. For a moment it may have seemed like the committee had done the Cats a favor by making them a 15 seed instead of a 16, until they found themselves matched up against the best team in the country, featuring current star NBA rookies Emeka Okafor and Ben Gordon.

Still, Vermont jumped to a 7-0 lead and was tied 24-24 after 11 minutes. Sure, the roof eventually caved in as the Huskies pulled away for a 70-53 victory, but not before the Catamounts had made a case for a higher seed in 2005. (It's worth noting that after beating Vermont by 17, Connecticut beat DePaul by 17, Vanderbilt by 20 and Alabama by 16 to reach the Final Four.)

So now, as they sit atop the America East, with their RPI up in the rarefied air of the major conferences, the Catamounts would seem worthy of an at-large bid — regardless of their conference tournament showing — and perhaps a 10-seed or higher. We may not know what seed the Cats will get, but we do know the strategy Brennan will employ as he tries to cap his career with a victory in the NCAA tournament. It's the same thing he'll utter over his shoulder when he leaves Patrick Gym for the final time as the University of Vermont basketball coach.

"Just keep shooting."

Growing Up In Vermont Duo Make Burlington Place To Be

**The Hartford Courant
By MIKE ANTHONY
Courant Staff Writer
January 30 2005**

BURLINGTON, Vt. -- Sometime in the next few weeks, T.J. Sorrentine and his family plan to visit Taylor Coppenrath and his family for dinner at the Coppenraths' home in West Barnet, Vt.

The gathering will be a celebration of the five years their sons have spent together at the University of Vermont — five years that have produced a friendship as strong as it once seemed improbable, five years of ups and downs for each.

Because of these two players, the Vermont basketball program, established in 1900 and having spent a century in futility, has become something of a cult phenomenon, and a winner.

Having led the Catamounts to at least 20 victories and the NCAA Tournament each of the last two seasons, Coppenrath, the shy forward from a town of little more than a general store and a few hundred people, and Sorrentine, the gym rat from Pawtucket, R.I., have become a tandem for the ages.

A visit to Burlington means being enamored with more than Sorrentine's three-pointers and Coppenrath's play in the paint. Their coach, Tom Brennan, is retiring after this season, his 19th at Vermont. The Catamounts play today at Hartford, and as what he calls the "Victory Tour" nears an end, Brennan is celebrating each day much like he has always celebrated his unique place in the community. Brennan's local radio show consistently beats Howard Stern and Don Imus in the ratings, and his colorful personality has warmed hearts and tickled funny bones through painfully cold winters.

Brennan, it could be argued, is the most popular person in Vermont. The state has always embraced him as a pillar of the community even as the losses piled up and Patrick Gym remained nearly empty, like the Catamounts' NCAA Tournament dreams.

Now Vermont is looking for its third consecutive trip to the Big Dance, and a ticket for a home game is nowhere to be found. Sure, a limited number returned from the student allotment can be had for those who endure the sub-zero tem-

peratures of this town on Lake Champlain by sleeping outside the night before games, but the Catamounts have sold out every home game for the first time.

Brennan hasn't suddenly become a better coach. This is the same guy who lost 50 of his first 58 games at Vermont. It would be convenient to say the program's rise is fate handing Brennan a going away present, but there are simply two reasons for Vermont's recent marches into March.

Coppenrath, 6 feet 9, is the blond, soft-spoken forward who is as thoughtful as he is frustrating for TV crews in search of a colorful sound bite. He didn't even score 1,000 points at St. Johnsbury Academy, but now he is the two-time America East player of the year (going on three) with a chance to be the first NBA player from Vermont. He is the nation's second-leading scorer (23.6) but is just as eager to talk about his student-teaching gig at a local high school.

Sorrentine is the brown-haired point guard from Pawtucket. There's more of a bounce in his step and an edge in his voice. The son of a high school coach, he spends more time in the gym than any other player in the program's history. An accurate shooter and shifty ball-handler, Sorrentine, 5-11 and averaging 19 points, might be the prospect Coppenrath is if he were a few inches taller.

"These guys have been holding me up," Brennan said. "They've carried me along. I don't want to give you any false humility. I've had a lot to do with what's gone on here, but not nearly as much as these guys. Not for one minute. The beauty is, I recognize that."

Sharing The Spotlight

It would have been easy for Coppenrath and Sorrentine to be blinded by the spotlight or get lost trying to chase it down.

Both fifth-year seniors, Coppenrath and Sorrentine have shared the attention and persevered through injuries that altered their careers.

They have followed paths suiting their personalities. Coppenrath redshirted as a freshman, taking time to put on muscle. Sorrentine played right away, averaging more than 14.8 points as a freshman and more than 18 as a sophomore in being named the 2002 America East player of the year. He sat out the 2002-03 season with wrist injuries and returned with Coppenrath having blossomed into one of the best players in conference history.

By that time, they were the best of friends. "It was never a problem," Sorrentine said. "It was never uncomfortable. I just love playing. I worried about getting better every day. Plus, when the team is playing well, it's a lot easier not to worry about who's in the spotlight or whatever."

Said Brennan: "T.J. could have come back and said, 'I was the man and I'm going to do everything I can to show I'm the man again. And the big fella, Taylor, could have said, 'Give me the ball. I'm the guy now. Everything goes through me.' They never did that."

Instead, they have worked together to put Vermont on the map. The Catamounts were thumped by Arizona in the first round of their NCAA Tournament debut in 2003. Last year, they were outlasted by UConn. But in getting that far, Coppenrath's legend grew.

He missed five weeks with a wrist injury before returning to score 43 points wearing a soft cast in a victory over Boston University in the America East championship game at Patrick Gym to give Vermont the automatic NCAA bid. Phish sang the national anthem that night and, by then, Ben & Jerry's had named an ice cream in honor of the team — Slam Chunk Sundae.

The cult following was alive among the free spirits of Burlington.

"Those guys, what they've meant to the program, it can't be put into words," senior guard David Hehn said. "What's happened here, I still can't even imagine. In Coach Brennan, I have a father away from home. In my teammates, I have brothers away from home."

Coppenrath and Sorrentine couldn't be more opposite. Still, they chose to be roommates the last four years.

"He kind of puts up a tough front," Coppenrath said. "It's like you have to earn your friendship with him. He'll give you some problems, tease you a little at the beginning. He's a pretty interesting guy, a little different than what I was used

to."

Said Sorrentine: "I remember seeing him at orientation. He was this real quiet kid. I didn't think we'd mesh that well off the court. But we're truly like the odd couple."

Sorrentine is the messy one. He says his mother lays into him every time she sees the mound of clothes piled up on his bedroom floor. Give Sorrentine a stereo to play hip-hop music, a computer to surf the Web and a bed - that will do.

"But he's converted me into some Marvin Gaye and country rock," Sorrentine said. "He's caught me singing in the car a few times. ... He's neat. He's the poster guy. He's got his swimsuit models up there, and some inspirational posters. Give me an Internet connection, that's it. I'll hop on there, watch some TV, that's all I need. I just want the simple life."

Speechless

One of Brennan's favorite stories involves a young local boy who lost all ability to think or speak in Coppentrath's presence. The boy's father had called Brennan's radio station, WCPV-FM 101.3, asking if he could get a shirt signed by Coppentrath. With no tickets available, this was his only hope. Brennan ended up making the boy and his father guests at a game, and now the youngster was standing in front of Coppentrath with one shot to hold court with his hero.

Nothing came out.

"This poor kid," Brennan said, "he was terrified."

Coppentrath, about as mild-mannered as his West Barnet upbringing would suggest, couldn't do much to make the conversation flow. He patted him on the shoulder, signed some autographs, but he couldn't erase the level of discomfort for this awestruck boy.

Though he couldn't kick-start the conversation, Coppentrath related well to that kid. He acted the same way the first time he met Brennan. He wasn't in awe of Brennan's stardom, just his fast-talking ways.

During the recruiting process, the two sat down for dinner together. Brennan reeled off one story after another. Coppentrath read the menu.

They ordered and - wouldn't you know it - something went wrong in the kitchen and the food was delayed ... and delayed ... and how the heck would the kid from West Barnet be able to hold a conversation for that long?

"I just sat there like this," Coppentrath said, putting his arms straight down to his side and shaking. "He seemed a little overwhelming, so out there."

But Coppentrath liked the idea of redshirting and wanted to remain close to home.

He has loosened up as his game has skyrocketed.

"We liked him. He had a good body. He came from a good program, but we had no idea how good Taylor was going to be," said associate head coach Jesse Agel, who leads recruiting and is expected to replace Brennan. "People think he's so quiet, but I kind of think he's outgoing and funny. You just have to get to know him first. He's one of the nicest human beings I've ever known."

And now he's one of the most influential figures in Vermont.

"The thing about Vermonters," Brennan said, "is that they are so proud to be Vermonters. That what makes what Taylor is doing so special."

The Other Extreme

Tightness has never been part of Sorrentine's demeanor. He shoots when he sees fit, even though Brennan's reaction to some of those shots is, "Yo, what was that?"

He was brought in to contribute immediately, while Coppentrath was the project.

Soon enough, through injuries and rehabilitation and getting to know one another over the years, everything has clicked. The shy Vermont kid and Rhode Island gym rat carry the hopes and dreams of a basketball program.

"The pressure on those kids is unbelievable," Brennan said. "And they never let anyone down."

Now they're floating toward the end of it all. Next season, Coppentrath could be in the NBA. Sorrentine will work toward his professional goals, too, saying he'll "collect a check somewhere."

Their RPI has soared to 17, but the Catamounts know they'll likely need to win the America East tournament to get back to the NAAs.

"It's going to get real emotional, the closer we get to the end of the year and the more people start to realize that this is over," said Coppentrath, probably a second-round draft pick. "I would have never thought we would be where we are right now, how things are with the team, the school, the community."

For all the fame, Coppentrath hasn't lost his innocence or perspective. He and teammates sign autographs for hours at a time. They attend functions with Brennan and enjoy being the butt of his jokes. They smile all the while, and you immediately get a sense that it's not a smile they were told to put on.

Standing in the gym after practice one day last week, he took five minutes to walk a lost stranger to a weight room near Patrick Gym, laughing about it as he returned to continue talking about Brennan.

"He'll do anything for you," Coppentrath said.

Then, fearing his statement might be misinterpreted, he said, "Anything within NCAA regulations, of course."

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Vermont hoops pure as maple syrup
Newsday (N.Y.)
by Joe Gergen
January 14, 2005

It will be the senior day to end all senior days late next month at the University of Vermont. There may be more famous and more talented players throughout the country than those honored before their final regular-season home game at Patrick Gymnasium, but none will be more admired or more sorely missed than Taylor Coppentrath and T.J. Sorrentine.

In addition, the coach who recruited and molded them into the core of the finest basketball team in school history also will be waving goodbye.

"I'm a senior, too," said Tom Brennan, repeating a line he has used since announcing his retirement before the start of the season, his 19th as head coach of the Catamounts.

You could make the argument that basketball was more a diversion than a major attraction at Vermont until those three got together in Burlington. The Catamounts had never won 20 games in a season, had never appeared in the NCAA tournament and were accustomed to playing before meager crowds in a 3,266-seat arena that, with its fold-down bleachers, resembles an enlarged high school facility. The last Vermont athlete drafted by an NBA team was Larry Killick, a 1947 pick of the Baltimore Bullets, and the two most famous graduates associated with basketball were both coaches, Herb Brown and Rollie Massimino.

The sport appeared so inconsequential on campus, Brennan recalled, "... that I was 8-50 in my first two years and no one said, 'Cut his head off.'" He may owe his job to the success of the hockey, skiing and soccer programs.

Brennan's term at the school likely will end in more



glorious fashion. If all goes according to plan, Vermont's five seniors will take their leave with a fourth consecutive 20-win season, a third consecutive America East championship and a third consecutive trip to the NCAA tournament. They also are likely to claim a fourth consecutive America East Player of the Year Award. Sorrentine, the 5-11 point guard from Rhode Island, received the tribute in 2002. Coppenrath, the 6-9 forward from the hinterlands of West Barnet, Vt., was honored in each of the last two seasons.

This year? Well, Coppenrath led the nation in scoring before being "held" to 22 by Stony Brook on Wednesday night. With the Seawolves concentrating on the big man, Sorrentine went for 31, hitting five of 11 shots from three-point range. Together, they have accounted for more points than any tandem in the country. "I wouldn't say pick your poison," Sorrentine said, "but ..."

The 76-59 victory raised the Catamounts' record to 10-3, including 5-0 in the conference. The losses include a narrow defeat at unbeaten and second-ranked Kansas and a thorough beating at third-ranked North Carolina. Before those games, as he did before a game at UCLA the previous season, Brennan told his team, "Let's see if we can slay a dragon."

"At Pauley Pavilion last year," Brennan recalled, "we're tied with three minutes to go and I'm thinking, 'Who am I going to call first [after we win]?' The next thing I know, an assistant taps me on the shoulder and says, 'Coach, we got nipped, let's go home.'"

Vermont lost that game by a single point but, by scoring 38 points against the Bruins, Coppenrath received national attention for the first time. The attention grew when he dropped 23 (and added seven rebounds and four assists) against a loaded Kansas team that had to rally in historic Allen Fieldhouse two months ago. Only North Carolina overpowered the Catamounts. "The dragon caught fire," the coach reasoned.

Back among the mid-majors, the Green Mountain Boys have resumed their successful ways. After playing before 16,000 screaming fans in Kansas and 19,000 at the Dean Dome, they had to kick start themselves against Stony Brook where the announced attendance on a foggy night was 1,081.

Then they faced a bus ride in excess of six hours back to Burlington, arriving barely in time for the coach's popular drive-time radio show.

"That's what you sign up for," Sorrentine said. "It's not all gravy."

Because of his size, the captain's future is uncertain. Everyone in Vermont expects to see Coppenrath in the NBA next season. Remarkably, this was a youngster whose own high school coach advised Brennan not to waste a scholarship, who was courted only by Albany and a couple of Patriot League schools, who redshirted his first season while growing into his body.

"I never would have guessed we'd be where we are today," Coppenrath said. "It would have been a lot different for me [at a big-time basketball school]. I made a good choice." The native son remains so humble that when a fourth-grader in Burlington sought to interview him for a class project, Coppenrath drove to the youngster's house. An education major, he taught math at a nearby high school during the fall term. "It's a great story," said Sorrentine, his teammate and roommate.

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Ex-St. Ray's star still beating the odds

The Providence Journal
By Bill Reynolds
Sunday, January 9, 2005

He plays in front of sold-out crowds at the University of Vermont.

Three years ago he was the Player of the Year in America East.

Last year, he played in the NCAA Tournament.

He and his team have been profiled in ESPN, The Magazine, Sports Illustrated, have been the center of countless newspaper stories, have become one of college basketball's cult teams, the unlikely Catamounts, a portrait of everything that's good about college basketball.

And how good has he been?

Coming into this season he was seventh in the country in career points among returning seniors, second in 3-point shots per game, eighth in scoring average, and second in free-throw percentage.

That's how good.

Could life be any better for T.J. Sorrentine?

"I couldn't even have dreamed of this," he said. "When I first came here, I was just going to work hard and see what happened."

What has happened is that Sorrentine has become one of Rhode Island's great sports stories, a testimony to grit and resolve, hard work and heart. What has happened is a script no one could have envisioned when he left St. Raphael in the spring of 2000.

Or, what were the odds then that a 5-foot-11 kid from Pawtucket was going to have this kind of impact on college basketball?

There were no odds.

At least not good ones.

One of the unfortunate truths about basketball around here is most careers end in the R.I. Interscholastic League. This is where the dreams die, crushed in a basketball world that's all about size and athleticism. This is when reality hits most kids right between the eyes, the reality that says it doesn't matter how many points you scored, or how many games your team won, you are either too small, too slow, too something.

In a perfect world Sorrentine never would have gone to Vermont. In a perfect world he would have gone to PC, or URI, would have stayed home to play, because the dream always had been to be a Division I player, even if he says, "I knew it was going to happen before anyone else did."

In a perfect world the Friars and the Rams would have been all over him, for hadn't he been the state's high school player of the year, hadn't St. Ray's won the state title in the Civic Center?

But neither PC nor URI was interested in Sorrentine.

"It was frustrating," he once said, "but I wasn't going to dwell on it."

He already had known for a couple of years that getting to Division I was going to be an uphill climb. He says he knew as early as the ninth grade he never was going to be more physical than other kids, was never going to have the athletic gifts that seduce coaches. He was going to have to work harder, be stronger mentally, all those intangibles. Even then there were no guarantees. There never are when you're a little man in a big man's game.

So when he got a scholarship to Vermont his dream had come true. T.J. Sorrentine had beaten the odds. He was a Division I basketball player.

"We felt we were getting a steal," said Vermont coach Tom Brennan.

Brennan quickly turned out to be a prophet.

Sorrentine was an immediate starter. In a sense it was his ball, and his team. There's no overestimating this. Many kids have to wait their turn in college basketball, wait for their chance. Some wait forever. Sorrentine got his chance right away and quickly made the most of it, making the transition to college basketball as easily as getting a shot off against Classical.

He was rookie of the year in America East, averaging nearly 15 points and leading the league in assists. The next year was even better, only the third player in league history to be player of the year as a sophomore, right there with NBA players Reggie Lewis and Speedy Claxton. He wasn't lightning quick, but he got in the lane and made plays. He knocked down 3-pointers. More important, he ran the team, made good decisions, played with all the poise and savvy he showed at St. Ray's.

In fact, he was so good he wondered about transferring, maybe closer to home, maybe to the Big East. Hadn't he proved himself? Weren't people saying he could play anywhere, not just in America East? Later, he would say that this was when once being snubbed by PC and URI bothered him the most, because he'd proved he could play with anyone. In fact, one night he was playing in a summer league at PC, the rumors rampant that he was looking to transfer somewhere, and there was Brennan in the stands.

"What are you doing here?" the coach was asked.

"Protecting my investment," he said with a smile.

Protect it he did, and Sorrentine returned to Vermont for his junior year, ultimately realizing that what he had at Vermont wasn't worth walking away from for the uncertainty of somewhere else, even if the lights might be brighter.

What he didn't figure on was hurting his wrist and missing the entire year.

And seeing things change.

"He was the golden boy," Brennan said, "and when he came back (Taylor) Coppenrath was the golden boy."

In the year Sorrentine sat out, Coppenrath, the 6-9 center from the Vermont backwoods became one of the best stories in college basketball, the floppy haired kid who became a local folk hero, as if Larry Bird had come out of the Vermont woods. Taylor Coppenrath, who was Sorrentine's roommate, was now the name synonymous with Vermont basketball. T.J. was the other guy, the one who had been on the sidelines for Vermont's first trip to the NCAA Tournament in 2003.

"T.J. could have been a jerk about it," Brennan said. "But he never was. He is such a leader. As good as we've ever had. And no one works any harder."

It was 10 days ago, minutes after Vermont had beaten Holy Cross in Worcester, in a close game where the Catamounts had trailed much of the time. Sorrentine had played all 40 minutes, ran the team, made good decisions, got the ball to Coppenrath when the big guy needed to get it, and also had scored 15 points. Vintage T.J. Then yesterday, he and Coppenrath both scored 25 points in a victory against Maine.

It was what he did last year when Vermont won America East and went to the NCAA Tournament, a dream season. A little of this, a little of that, always getting the most out of himself. It's what he's always done, now in the last year of a great college career, one that's been so much better than anyone ever could have predicted, one of this state's best sports stories.

"It's been a dream to me," said T.J. Sorrentine. "I couldn't ask for anything more."

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Couple O' Cats

**The Burlington Free Press
Burlington Free Press Editorial
December 1, 2004**

It's a real kick to see Vermont featured in the national media, often in glowing travel features or at the top of livability indexes.

This week, in the Nov. 29 edition of Sports Illustrated, a story familiar to Vermonters was shared with the nation -- the story of the University of Vermont's star basketball player, Taylor Coppenrath, and longtime Coach Tom Brennan.

There they are, the player and the coach, looking relaxed outside Wells Corner Market in Underhill Center, framing a sign that says, "Pure Vermont Maple Syrup For Sale Here."

Six pages from writer Alexander Wolff, a resident of Cornwall, and photographer Simon Bruty celebrate the partnership of the 6-feet-9-inch forward from tiny West Barnet and the New Jersey-born coach who is in his 19th and final year at UVM. It is a story, Wolff said in an interview Tuesday, that transcends any native/non-native tensions that sometimes smoulder.

Vermonters have been keenly aware of the basketball story on the hill, with Coppenrath a two-time America East player of the year and a preseason candidate for the Wooden Award, and Brennan so familiar at courtside and on the popular morning drive-time show "Corm and the Coach" on WCVP-FM radio. Sports fans know this kind of attention from Sports Illustrated is like the official stamp of approval. It might have even had an effect on boosting Vermont's profile this week to its strongest showing ever in the Associated Press weekly Division I poll, ranking No. 32.

They're feeling it at UVM, says Bruce Bosley in the college's athletics communications department. "It's a huge boost for the program and they are two of the most deserving people."

UVM has also had calls asking where the Sports Illustrated story is. The spread did not appear in all of the magazine's multiple editions. About 1.5 million of the magazine's 5 million subscribers received it, Bosley said. UVM was busy Tuesday trying to stock about 200 copies of the Coppenrath/Brennan edition in its bookstore.

Sports Illustrated is one of several national media organizations -- including Sporting News, ESPN The Magazine and USA Today -- that have focused on the men's basketball team this season.

It's a great story, Bosley points out -- a longtime basketball program with not a lot of success; a charismatic coach; a humble kid from the Northeast Kingdom who blossoms under the coach's leadership and becomes one of the best college players in the nation.

It's a great year to be a Cats fan -- and not just for basketball. The UVM's men's hockey team has been unbeatable of late and is also gaining respect in national polls. The Cats hold the nation's longest undefeated streak at 10 games.

Go, Cats, Go!



Hoops Played Here?

On the shores of Lake Champlain, led by an odd pairing of coach and player, the Vermont Catamounts have ignited an unlikely case of basketball fever

**By Alexander Wolff
Sports Illustrated
November 29, 2004**

Nothing better expresses what basketball teams need than Freedom and Unity, the motto of the state of Vermont. Let 'em play, but jeezum crow (as Vermonters say), make sure they look out for one another. Do both, and a team like the University of Vermont just might reach the NCAA tournament two years in a row after never having done so before. Might do it with the very coach who lost 50 of his first 58 games and couldn't beat the Division II school down the road. Might even do it with a homegrown star so lightly regarded in high school that his coach all but told the Catamounts' staff that it was wasting a scholarship.

The Vermont basketball team mustered for preseason practice last month just as the leaves around Lake Champlain were turning their most brilliant colors. Talk about your peak season: Catamounts senior Taylor Coppenrath, a 6'9" forward from West Barnet, Vt., is now a two-time America East player of the year and a preseason candidate for the Wooden Award, and his name is on the lips of NBA scouts. Coach Tom Brennan, who has decided to make his 19th season at Vermont his last, also dressed the America East player of the year of three seasons ago, senior point guard T.J. Sorrentine, when he took the Cats to Kansas last Friday, where they led by four points in the final five minutes before losing to the Jayhawks 68-61.

Vermont, which will also play North Carolina before Christmas, tried just such an into-the-lion's-den approach last year, only to open 0-4. But in one of those losses, at UCLA, Coppenrath sprang for 38 points and the Cats lost by one, vaulting the team and its star into the national conversation. They remained there all season -- through the five weeks starting in mid-February that Coppenrath sat out with a broken left wrist; through his first game back, the America East tournament final, in which he scored a myth-making 43 points wearing a soft cast; and through the Catamounts' NCAA first-round loss to eventual national champion Connecticut.

All of which guarantees another season of attention for Vermont, hardly something its coach dreads. When Brennan says, "We're a program now," he's referring to his Cats, but he might just as well be talking about Corm and the Coach, the wildly popular morning drive-time show he co-hosts with radio deejay Steve Cormier on WCVP-FM. It has made Brennan so familiar to so many Vermonters that, with minutes to go in a tight game, fans will wander down to the Cats' bench and ask, "Where we going afterward, Coach?"

"He wants everyone in the state to feel [the team's success] is theirs," says Brennan's brother Jim. "That's the way he enjoys something. When we were kids I remember him saying, 'I hope I can be a star someday, because I know I could handle it.'"

The two archetypes of contemporary Vermont are the native (with his pickup truck, antigovernment politics and laconic manner) and the flatlander (with his Volvo, alien views and fast-talking ways). They clash often enough that it sometimes seems the state's motto should be Freedom versus Unity. The two poles are embodied by Vermont's Northeast Kingdom and Chittenden County, homes to West Barnet and the university, respectively. Shortly after signing Coppenrath, Brennan took his recruit to an Italian restaurant -- and no sooner had they placed their orders than one of the two cooks, angry over something, quit. With the flatlander coach and the native player each playing to type, their small talk didn't begin



to cover the two hours before the food came. "It was painful," says Brennan. "And it had to have been worse for him because he had to listen to me."

Brennan went over better than he thought. "He was funny," remembers Coppenrath, who didn't yet realize that he had signed up for several years' worth of on-the-air wake-up calls.

The village of West Barnet huddles near several stores, a historic mill and the white clapboard church whose lawn Coppenrath mowed as a kid. When he and two of his friends hit the sixth grade, their dads led a successful effort to pave over the spot where the grange hall once stood and to raise a basket standard at each end. That the project involved approval of something Northeast Kingdomers despise -- a tax increase -- underscores the widespread support for basketball and the local kids' playing it. It wasn't long before Barnet Elementary enacted "the Taylor Coppenrath rule," which required kids to have a change of clothes available in case they got too sweaty at recess. In the meantime George Coppenrath hauled his son up and down the Eastern Seaboard, trolling for competition. When Taylor was 11, he and his Vermont age-group champs lost all six of their games at an AAU tournament in Florida; a few years later, at a point-guard camp in Pennsylvania, Taylor was rated second among

50 campers.

Brennan and his assistants liked Coppenrath's large frame and light feet, as well as the soft hands he had developed as a soccer goalie. Still, entering the 2000-01 season, they handed him a redshirt. "He was the slowest and weakest guy we had," says associate head coach Jesse Agel, "but in sprints he touched every line. He's honest and hardworking. Vermonters don't like shortcuts." By December, with the Catamounts on their way to an 11-17 record, the coaches realized they were wasting their best player in practice.

The following fall Coppenrath, who had put on 45 pounds and weighed 240, began deploying feet, hands and frame, in that order, in his dogged way -- getting position, fielding an entry pass and launching into a quick move, which often led to a foul and what he calls "old-style three-point plays." The course of Vermont basketball changed forever. At the West Barnet General Store, where George Coppenrath leaves game tapes for neighbors to check out, clippings about Taylor's exploits hang next to the picture of a local guy with the 19-pound, 38-inch trout he pulled from Harvey's Lake, which itself sits a few steps from the Coppenrath homestead.

The 55-year-old Brennan, by contrast, is all flatlander, a New Jersey guy whose home in Colchester fronts Lake Champlain. He had a comfortable enough gig as coach at Yale when Vermont came calling in 1986. Figuring he could wheedle himself a better deal in New Haven, he marched into athletic director Frank Ryan's office to announce that he had been offered another job. "I think you should take it," said Ryan. And so Brennan hauled his bruised ego north. "If you want to make God smile," he says, "just tell him your plans."

After three seasons spent pitying himself over Vermont's nine lousy basketball scholarships and emphasis on hockey, Brennan grumbled to his wife, Lynn, that the school lacked commitment. "You were 14-68, and they didn't fire you," she replied. "That's commitment." End of grumbling.

Brennan rejects many coachly conventions. The mindset of worrying about the next game the moment you hit the tunnel is not for him. "When we win on Saturday and don't have to play again till the following Thursday, that's the greatest feeling in the world," he says. Brennan would rather be a mensch like his late father, Joe, the longtime mayor of Phillipsburg, N.J., and phone new coaches to welcome them to the league or drag a visiting coach to his favorite haunts on Burlington's Church Street. "At first, some think it's a trick," says Tom's sister, Noreen Pecsok, the women's coach at Middlebury (Vt.) College. "Then they realize he's not trying to get you drunk and steal your out-of-bounds plays."

Vermont is still an arriviste among mid-majors. If not for his radio duties Brennan wouldn't make six figures, and until a year ago he didn't get a full complement of 13 scholarships. In a way, he's still near the bottom of the caste system he got to know as a player at Georgia, where, after he was whistled for a phantom foul on LSU's Pete Maravich in 1970, an SEC ref told him, "Hey, they're not here to see you." Nonetheless, as Brennan puts it, "in this business, to be totally at peace isn't something easy to come by." Indeed, to be in the business at all is something he pinches himself over every day. Coppenrath and Sorrentine are players so rare that Brennan has announced he'll go for a third straight NCAA bid -- "like Smarty Jones," he says -- then step down at the end of this season. "I'll be able to motivate them better," he adds. "I can say, 'I'm a senior too.'"

In 1992 Cormier invited Brennan to read the sports scores during The Steve Cormier Morning Show. Within three days Cormier told him, "Every time I open my mike, I'm going to open yours. We'll go wherever we go." The show, soon renamed Corm and the Coach, rose to the top of the state's morning drive-time ratings, from which it has looked down at Howard Stern and Don Imus during almost every Arbitron period since -- a run that Brennan likens to "Vermont going to Kentucky and winning."

Shortly before 6 a.m. most weekdays Brennan slides into his broadcast seat, next to a photo of Nipsey Russell and a copy of 1,001 Riddles for Children. He and Cormier might wake up a rival school's coach, make sport of New Hampshire or chat up some Vermont notable. (Former governor Howard Dean to Brennan: "I didn't have as good a year as you." Brennan in reply: "Better start, though.") Once a week they

check in with Brennan's brother Dan, who has his own hit drive-time show in Mobile. (One of the characters Dan plays on the air is Dr. Cory Windblown, an openly gay meteorologist.) And the coach regularly whips up doggerel like this, from a paean to Lynn several years ago on Valentine's Day:

So thank you for bringing joy to my
life, every crisis you get me through
I was just kidding about that Coppenrath
thing, I don't love him more than you

The gig's great value to Brennan comes after a loss. "When he's down, it forces him to focus on other people," says Jim Brennan, a college dean in Pennsylvania who has a Ph.D. in organizational psychology. "When we're upset, we're egocentric. On the radio you've got to be sociocentric. The show really balances him."

Before last season Brennan sensed something amiss with his star. "Taylor came back from the summer a little heavy and looking a little slovenly," he recalls. Brennan, as the oldest of seven kids in an Irish Catholic family, knew enough to wade right in. In response, Coppenrath did what taciturn Vermonters aren't supposed to do: He bared his soul. When he had first shown up on campus, Coppenrath said, he just wanted to play and wound up America East rookie of the year. Then he had just wanted to start and wound up conference player of the year as the Cats reached the NCAAs. What could he possibly do now? He felt he was being set up to fail.

"I told Taylor that nobody had given him a thing," says Brennan, who for good measure patched his star through to brother Jim, the psychologist. "That he'd earned all of it and didn't have to stop there. That he's playing with house money now."

Soon Coppenrath had regained his pathological competitiveness. He played intramural soccer his redshirt year and flag football last year. He has also participated in the two-day tournament called Field Hockey Frenzy, playing the sport his six-foot-tall mother, Sue, played in college. "I can see why mom complains about a bad back," Taylor says. His willingness to give almost anything a try extends to the silver ring that hangs from his left ear. It's fodder for Brennan when he ambushes his star with a wake-up call. "He claims his brother Dr. Cory sent it to me," says Coppenrath.

Over the summer Coppenrath led a college all-star team in frontcourt scoring during a two-week tour of China, then hustled back to Colchester High to begin student-teaching in math, one of his obligations as a secondary-education major. "Math gets a bad name," he says. "Everybody hates it. But I liked it through high school and did fairly well. I try to make it interesting." If pro ball doesn't pan out, he'll glide right into teaching and coaching, he says, "just to stay around sports." But a week he spent in suburban Cleveland, going through combine-style paces at the Speed Strength Athletic Training Center, touched off a new round of buzz among NBA people. For years New England kids who stepped into Boston Garden gawked at the house of Russell, Cousy and Bird; last month, as the Celtics walked into Patrick Gymnasium in Burlington for preseason camp, an equipment manager said, "This where the dude with the broken wrist scored all the points?"

Speaking of which, now it can be told: Vermont's trip to last season's NCAA tournament may have hung less on Coppenrath's left wrist than on a few bars of a Van Morrison song. Before every game in Patrick Gymnasium, precisely three minutes and 20 seconds before tip-off, Brennan takes the floor to the same flourish that introduces his sports report on Corm and the Coach: the da-da-da-DUM-DUM, da-da-da-DUM of Jackie Wilson Said. Although Vermont hosted the America East title game against Maine, a factotum in the league office ruled that Van Morrison would give the Catamounts an unfair advantage. Brennan, superstitious to the bone, was distraught. Athletic director Bob Corran vowed to play the song and pay the fine. Cormier volunteered the Mitch Miller option, offering to lead the crowd a cappella.

In the end Brennan appealed to John Giannini, then the Maine coach. Giannini had gotten the Brennan treatment on previous visits to Burlington, and now all that hospitality paid off. "Come on," Giannini told conference officials, "we're not going to get beaten by some song."

As Brennan recounts the tale, you can see a that's

what you think thought balloon form over his head. The Van played on, and those few bars touched off a two-hour long Vermont-o-rama. The four members of Phish, three of them Vermont grads, sang the national anthem, with keyboardist Page McConnell wearing Coppenrath's number 22 jersey. Virtually every mover in the state, former governor Dean included, sat in the stands, which led to a small scandal when it came out that some had figuratively jumped the line for tickets. ("For 12 years I couldn't give tickets away," says Brennan, still bemused, "and now they're worried about who's getting 'em?")

Coppenrath sank his first six shots and ended the half with 28 points, five more than Maine had. By the end of Vermont's 72-53 victory he had made 14 of 19 from the field and 14 of 15 from the line -- bum wrist and all. On the ESPN telecast, thanks to the hamster-power lighting in Patrick Gymnasium, Coppenrath seemed to leave ghostly streaks behind him, which made his performance look even more dreamlike. "This wasn't a game," Catamounts guard David Hehn said afterward. "It was a party. And Taylor was the deejay."

For the after party, several hundred people found their way to Brennan's home. An hour went by, then another, and Coppenrath still hadn't shown up. When he finally arrived, Brennan asked where he had been.

"I was taking a nap," Coppenrath said.

"Taking a nap!" the coach exclaimed.

"You played me 39 minutes."

"I would have played you 40, but I wanted you to get an ovation."

The flatlander always knew he could handle the applause. The news from Vermont is that the native is learning how, too.

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Vermont coach tickled by showing

Lawrence (Kan.) Journal-World
By Ryan Wood, LJW Sports Writer
November 20, 2004

Always good for a witty one-liner, Vermont men's basketball coach Tom Brennan approached reporters after Friday's game glowing with pride and ready to entertain a crowd.

"I feel a little bit like coach Mangino," Brennan quipped after his Catamounts lost a late lead to big, bad Kansas University and fell, 68-61, at Allen Fieldhouse.

Brennan was referring to KU football coach Mark Mangino, who made headlines after losing a late lead to No. 6 Texas last week, then saying the officials wanted the Longhorns to win. It cost him a fine and reprimand by the Big 12 Conference.

Vermont's coach was only kidding, adding, "I ain't got \$5,000 to give anybody," when asked tongue-in-cheek if he was willing to go that route.

But in all seriousness, Brennan was beaming after he saw the unfazed and poised Catamounts put a scare into the Jayhawks, the top-ranked team in college basketball.

Led by super senior Taylor Coppenrath, who carried Vermont with 23 points and seven rebounds, the Catamounts led 58-56 with less than four minutes to go before KU slug-gishly pulled away.



Coppenrath, a finalist for the Wooden Award along with KU's Wayne Simien and Keith Langford, scored 17 of his points in the second half.

Simien scored 25 points and grabbed 14 rebounds, making the showdown underneath the most intriguing aspect of Friday's game.

"It was definitely a battle," Coppenrath said. "We knew it was going to be a war with them. They've got tough players and great players, and when you combine them, you get a great team."

Brennan -- who will retire at the end of this season after 19 years on the job -- had nothing negative to grumble about afterward, pointing out that Vermont actually had a bad day shooting and still came close to victory. The Catamounts' top shooter, guard T.J. Sorrentine, finished with 13 points but was just 4-of-22 shooting.

For once, KU fans got their money's worth in an early season nonconference matchup. Usually, the Jayhawks roll through November against lesser-known foes, but Vermont wasn't having any of that Friday.

"I've had a lot of losses in my day," Brennan said. "I ain't had too many as exciting as that one."

It was a promising start to what could be a big season for Vermont. The other high-profile, nonconference game on the schedule is at North Carolina on Dec. 21, but most games will be against teams like Binghamton, New Hampshire and Boston University -- and most won't compare to the atmosphere of Allen Fieldhouse.

If Friday was any indication, it could be a special season for the Catamounts -- one that could unite the tiny New England state even more.

"Our program has come so far that a television station bought the game back in Vermont," Brennan said. "There's a half a million people in the state, and I kept thinking of how proud they must be."

Simien impressed by scrappy Catamounts

Lawrence (Kan.) Journal-World
By Gary Bedore, LJW Assistant Sports Editor
November 20, 2004

Wayne Simien asked a question of his own while seated comfortably in the interview room after Kansas University's 68-61 basketball victory over Vermont on Friday at Allen Fieldhouse.

"Who scheduled that? The first game of the season is supposed to be easy," Simien, KU's Preseason All-American, exclaimed with a big grin after making it look easy personally with 25 points and 14 rebounds.

"That's why they've been to the NCAA Tournament back to back. They gave us a great game tonight. We were fortunate enough to get a win."

KU coach Bill Self said he expected Vermont to return to the NAAs a third straight year. Same goes for senior Keith Langford, who struggled from the perimeter versus the Catamounts with 3-of-10 shooting.

"I read ESPN Magazine yesterday. It said they've got four or five seniors and had some interesting things to say about them. It's not like these guys are a bunch of stiffs. They've got a great coach and seniors," Langford said.

Yet the Catamounts entered unranked, while the Jayhawks opened the game No. 1 in the land.

"The No. 1 by the Kansas name is cute," Langford said, "but it doesn't mean anything. So many teams play easy schedules they get a false sense of where they are. Anybody can beat anybody on a given night."

"Everybody likes to win by 50, but that was good for us."

The Jayhawks were impressed with Vermont power forward Taylor Coppenrath, an All-America candidate who hit nine of 18 shots -- but just five of 12 free throws -- for 23 points.

"He's one of the best I've faced," Simien said.

KU also was impressed by guard T.J. Sorrentine, who hit two 24-foot three-pointers and finished with just 13 points off 4-of-22 shooting.

"Aaron did a great job on him, a great job," coach Self

said of Aaron Miles. "He made two that were bad shots. They were way out there, maybe not bad shots for him, but bad shots for any other human."

Cats are the talk of Kansas

The Burlington Free Press
By Jeff Pinkham, Free Press Staff Writer
November 21, 2004

Jayhawk Nation won't soon forget the University of Vermont men's basketball team.

The Cats played top-ranked Kansas to a standstill Friday night in the season opener in front of 16,300 fans at legendary Allen Fieldhouse, despite struggling from the free-throw line and hitting just 33.8 percent from the field. Vermont led by four with 4:31 left in the game before Kansas closed the game on a 14-3 run.

UVM senior All-American Taylor Coppenrath shook off a bad first half (2-of-6 shooting, six points) and finished with 23 points and seven rebounds in front of 10 NBA scouts. T.J. Sorrentine struggled from the field, but finished with 13 points in 40 minutes while hounding Jayhawks point guard Aaron Miles (1-for-9 shooting). And fellow seniors David Hehn (eight points, eight rebounds) and Germain Mopa Njila (four points, four steals) helped keep the Cats in the game with solid defense.

Here's what the folks in Kansas had to say following Friday's game:

"Vermont played the game close all night. The Catamounts were not just facing America's best preseason team, they were also facing a loud crowd that, according to the Vermont notes packages, had more people than all but two cities in Vermont. But they were undaunted. They led with 10 minutes left in the game. The score was tied with four minutes left."

Joe Posnanski
Kansas City Star

"Outsiders don't know how good Vermont is. Some people hear the name 'Vermont' and think, 'Oh, they're nobody.' But they're a good team -- a legit team."

Aaron Miles
Kansas senior guard

"I don't know if a lot of outsiders expected us to be challenged, but we certainly expected a fight from Vermont and got one."

Keith Langford
Kansas senior guard

"Who scheduled that? The first game of the season is supposed to be easy. That's why they've been to the NCAA tournament back to back. They gave us a great game tonight. We were fortunate enough to get a win."

Wayne Simien
Kansas All-American forward

"(Coppenrath's) one of the best I've faced."

Wayne Simien

"Oh man, you could see it in their eyes. They wanted us. That's what you get. People look at you as No. 1 and say, 'Oh man, they're overrated. We can beat them.' That's just natural. That's what I would think."

J.R. Giddens
Kansas sophomore guard

Nation's Most Rootable Teams

Sports Illustrated On Campus
November 11, 2004

It's preseason, but the court of appeal is officially in session. We've already rolled out the Glue Guys, the 16 unsung players most worthy of your admiration. Now we introduce SIOC's 10 easiest teams to root for in the coming season, programs defined by high graduation rates; colorful, offbeat personalities; a commitment to excellence in both men's and women's hoops; and even Bob Knight. In the interest of equal time, we also give you the 10 most difficult programs to root for, the schools whose past bad acts make them the obvious top picks in any fantasy draft of Programs You'd Most Love to

See Get Schooled by a 16 Seed in the First Round of the NCAAs.

1. VERMONT

Taylor Coppenrath is a 6'9" power forward who has won two campus intramural championships (in indoor soccer and flag football) in addition to a coed field hockey tournament title, teaches high school algebra, dropped 38 points on UCLA in a one-point loss at Pauley Pavilion last November and averaged 24.1 points for a team that has made two consecutive forays into the Big Dance. Colorful coach Tom Brennan cohosts a morning-drive radio show in Burlington that gets higher local ratings than Howard Stern or Don Imus. No wonder the Catamounts have a raucous following headlined by Phish and Ben & Jerry (who concocted the Slam Chunk Sundae last season as a salute to the home team). The clincher: All five starters have at least a 3.4 GPA. -- John Walters

2. WAKE FOREST

Forget Duke. Forget North Carolina. Forget N.C. State. In fact, forget the Triangle altogether and head down I-40 to the Triad area of North Carolina, where Wake Forest quietly churns out Top 25 teams with character (as opposed to Top 25 teams with shady characters) year after year. The program's cool vibe was set by Tim Duncan, a former swimmer who became the best player in college basketball and stayed in school for four years (1993-97). Now comes college hoops' Next Big Thing: ultrapoised, unassuming sophomore guard Chris Paul, a.k.a. the Mayor. Five days after his grandfather was murdered at age 61, during Paul's senior year of high school, Paul scored 61 points as a tribute. -- Maggie Haskins

3. XAVIER

A Cincinnati school has the No. 2 NCAA graduation rate for student-athletes. Impossible? For the Bearcats, yes, but not for the Musketeers. Xavier is everything Cincy (page 22) is not. Xavier's 2004 run to the Elite Eight is proof the team delivers in the postseason. NBA clubs have noticed the skills and work ethic of X-Musketeers, drafting four in the past two years. Cincy in that time? None. Xavier's big-man lineage includes Brian Grant, Tyrone Hill, Derek Strong, Aaron Williams and David West. Next up? Sophomore Justin Doellman. Perhaps the biggest compliment comes from the higher-profile colleges that have pillaged the Muskies' coaching staff (Pete Gillen to Providence in 1994, Skip Prosser to Wake Forest in 2001 and Thad Matta to Ohio State this summer). -- M.H.

4. TEMPLE

In a moment of frustration following a tough 1994 loss to UMass, Owls coach John Chaney threatened to open a 10-gallon drum of whupass on John Calipari, then the Minutemen coach. That moment alone forever endears the wizened Chaney to us. (Why? See: Least Rootable No. 2.) Other reasons we love Temple: Chaney's matchup zone defense, which confounds more talented teams and allows the scrappy, often undersized Owls to level the playing field; Chaney's Father Flanagan approach to recruiting, in which he takes academically challenged inner-city kids, teaches them discipline (5:30 a.m. practice) and gives them a chance at an education; and Chaney's brutal honesty -- the man is 100% real, quick to tell you when his team stinks, when he does a poor job and when he wants to open a drum of whupass on you. -- Arash Markazi

5. COPPIN STATE

Deering High = Hang Time. Coppin State = Fang Time. Coach Ron "Fang" Mitchell came by that moniker in junior high after a pal likened his gravelly voice to a TV character named White Fang. "The 'White' was dropped for obvious reasons," says

Fang, who in 1997 led the 15th-seeded Eagles to a Big Dance upset of No. 2 South Carolina, one of only four 15-versus-2 upsets in tournament history. This season the Eagles will face five schools before Christmas who have advanced to the Final Four in the past decade (Kentucky, Texas, Oklahoma, Utah and Marquette). All on the road. -- J.W.

6. SAINT JOSEPH'S

Things that will never die: rock and roll, the tomahawk chop, Heather Locklear's television career and, of course, that most unflappable flapper, the St. Joe's Hawk. Is there a better rallying cry in all of college hoops than "The Hawk will never die"? You gotta love a mascot whose wings flap at the same rate as Dick Vitale's gums, which is to say ceaselessly. You also gotta love a Jesuit school in Philadelphia that can earn a No. 1 seed in the tourney, produce the national player of the year (Jameer Nelson) and then have the cojones to tell Billy Packer to stick it. Peter Boyle look-alike Phil Martelli hosts the nation's best coach's show, and the Hawks play a smattering of home games at the Palestra, the Fenway Park of college hoops. The Hawks get by on much more than a wing and a prayer. -- J.W.

7. AIR FORCE

The new Princeton. Last winter the Princeton-style offense implemented four years earlier by then coach Joe Scott -- who left last April to take over the Tigers -- finally produced results: Air Force went from worst to first in the Mountain West Conference and made the Big Dance for the first time in 42 years. In the aesthetically pleasing system, every player has to be a passer, including honorable mention All-America center Nick Welch, who can zip bounce passes to cutters or step out for feathery threes. -- Matthew Waxman

8. CONNECTICUT

We know. This is akin to rooting for multinational corporations, for the preppy frat, for pre-Apprentice Donald Trump. All that power, all that wealth, all that goddam good luck. You call it front-running, we call it a Horatio Alger story: two model programs, each built from nothing by a single man. (Have you been to Storrs, so named, Lou Holtz once quipped, because the town now has two?) Men's coach Jim Calhoun inherited a program that had one winning season in the Big East; 18 years later it has eight conference titles and two national championships. Women's coach Geno Auriemma took over an 11-year-old women's program with one winning season; 19 years later it has 11 straight Big East championships and five national titles. The players (Bird, Hamilton, Okafor, Taurasi) are impossible to hate no matter how much they beat your brains in on the court. -- A.M.

9. ILLINOIS

Start with one of the best backcourts in the country, led by the underrated Deron Williams and the speedy Dee Brown. Add a home court, featuring the rowdy Orange Krush student section, that terrifies opponents and has helped the Illini to a 63-3 record at home over the last five years -- best in the nation. "It's kind of dark, and there's too much orange," Michigan State guard Chris Hill says. Finally, mix in an outspoken coach, Bruce Weber, who's not afraid to take on the game's sacred cows. We introduce into evidence Weber's priceless off-season quote that Dick Vitale could "take his Dookies and shove it." -- M.H.

10. TEXAS TECH

We assumed that Bob Knight's Texas Tech tenure would be brief after he went volcanic -- and balsamic -- last February on the school chancellor at a salad bar. Instead the General begins his fourth season in West Texas with a healthy appetite



for leading the Red Raiders to a fourth straight postseason appearance. This basketball Caesar runs a scandal-free program, has no problem sharing shelf space with the national-power women's team and always gets the most out of his sprouts. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Knight is the most intriguing coach in sports. Bar none. -- J.W.

Super Crunchy Nutty Buddies

By Seth Wickersham
ESPN The Magazine
11/22/04

Church Street is where piercings are in and bras are out. Where beer and coffee are served by the pint, and non-smokers are a minority. Where artists sketch and guitarists strum and kids kick hacky sacks while chatting into cell phones. Both Phish and Ben & Jerry's were born on this quarter-mile strip, an outdoor mall running through the middle of downtown Burlington, Vt. This is where UVM students from up the hill pour to get poured.

On the south end of Church Street, under a yellow awning, sits the Rusty Scuffer, a stained-wood tavern dressed in Americana, the kind of place where they don't close tabs or count carbs. On the door is a sign that says "No Crybabies Allowed," a rule that should be easier to follow now that the Red Sox have finally ended their drought. In the back corner is Coach's table, where Tom Brennan – everyone calls him Coach – eats his pregame meal and holds court for postgame toasts. When Brennan was first hired by Vermont 18 years ago, the walls surrounding his table were covered with pictures of Larry Bird. There was no reason to alter the decor. The Catamounts had suffered five straight losing seasons, and they dropped 85 games his first four years.

But these days, when Coach slides into his booth, he stares at three framed photos that have bumped Larry Legend aside. Here's an image of the Cats, sweaty and sprawled on the floor, pieces of nylon around their necks, index fingers raised, after winning their first America East tournament in 2003. Here's the team again in almost the exact same pose, only less giddy and more confident, as repeat champs in 2004. Here's another shot from last March, taken at the Scuffer, as the Cats await the Selection Sunday pairings for just their second NCAA Tourney ever.

Maybe it's all there on the Scuffer's wall: why Vermont hoops, a program that was invisible in Burlington, upstaged by snowboarding and Howard Dean and pot and foliage, has won over this city of 39,000 residents. Like the pictures on the wall, the Catamounts are now carving out their own space, thanks mainly to their quirky coach and a floppy-haired power forward named Taylor Coppenrath. The senior Wooden Award candidate leads a colorful contingent that includes the requisite veteran point man (T.J. Sorrentine), gritty lockdown defender (guard David Hehn) and feisty foreigners (wing Germain Mopa Njila of Cameroon and big man Martin Klimes of the Czech Republic). So maybe it won't add up to a Final Four. So maybe UVM won't become another UConn. For this season, at least, the Cats promise to charm us all by turning snowy Burlington into a hoops hotbed.

Today, three pictures. Tomorrow, who knows?

* * *

OKAY, FORGET the wall now. The wall isn't offering up any answers as to how Brennan's team has captured so many hearts along Lake Champlain. Maybe Threads of Zion can help. Draped in reggae apparel, this Church Street store also sells, uh, water pipes. Ley Anderson, a shaggy 23-year-old employee, loves the buzz he gets from Vermont ball. "No one used to care about the hoops team," he says. "When they made the Tourney, it was a big deal. I'll go to as many games as I can this year." (Brennan will be happy to have him. Coach not only welcomes the store's clientele, he also trusts their opinions. "After all," he says, "they watch the games in slow motion.")

Hungry? Ben & Jerry's honored the Cats last spring with a Slam Chunk Sundae. Or get your fill of hoops talk from Phish front man Trey Anastasio, who sang the national anthem before the America East title game last season, causing the entire UVM squad to rush the band in appreciation. "Are you kidding?" he told them. "Thank you, guys." Cats apparel sales

are four times higher than ever before. Radio rights fees have jumped from \$3,000 a few years ago to \$10,000. Season ticket purchases have quadrupled in the past three years, up to 1,400. And we're not talking about the Carrier Dome: the stands inside Patrick Gym unfold from the walls, seating 3,266.

Then there's Brennan, who at 55 lives as if he's the star of his own sitcom. He keeps his fridge stocked with Coke and Corona and ends each phone call with his wife, Lynn, like this: "Love you – mean it!" The book on their home coffee table is *What We Love About Our Dogs*. He doesn't try to wow you with X's and O's. "I know two plays," he says. "The Producers and 'Put the f---ing ball in the basket.'"

Brennan is sitting in his radio studio on a rainy October morning, during a commercial break from *Corm and the Coach*, the popular weekday show he co-hosts with deejay Steve Cormier from 5:30 to 9 a.m. Coach has been a regular on WCPV for the past 12 years, playing classic rock, reading sports scores, prank-calling opposing coaches. In fact, his celebrity status may owe more to his on-air presence than his being on the sideline. He's a Jersey-born guy who came to the Green Mountain State after four Division I assistant jobs and a head gig at Yale. "I figured I'd be at Vermont three years, tops," Brennan says. But after going 14-68 his first three seasons, he wasn't exactly flush with offers. He got into broadcasting because he needed the money. (UVM raised him to \$97,000 two years ago.) Now he's a "Big Monday" color guy waiting to happen.

"What did you run over this morning?" Corm asks him.

"My mailbox," Coach says.

"How the heck did you run over your mailbox?"

"My bag fell. I tried to reach for it."

"How many mailboxes did you take down?"

"I think two."

Later, after the show, when Brennan says he "owns" Vermont, he's only half-joking. He is the guest of honor almost everywhere he goes. To him, everyone is "my boy" – as in, "My boy gives me discounts on suits," or "This guy selling hot dogs, he's my boy." During most of his career, he's been a novelty in Burlington, the nice guy who goes .500 and yells, "Wake up, you sleepyhead!" five times a week. But now, with three 20-win seasons in a row, Brennan is their boy. He gets \$3,000 a speech. He gets old ladies to wear nose guards at home games, a show of support for Hehn, who wore a mask for his broken schnoz last season. He gets midnight calls from P.J. Carlesimo: "I can't believe you're 17-5!"

But as popular as Brennan is around the state, he might be hosting Corm and the Ex-Coach if not for the emergence of an unlikely star from an unexpected place. And that's why, to find the seeds of Vermont's recent success, you need to leave this small city and go someplace even smaller. A lot smaller.

* * *

THE HOUSE doesn't have an address number. Doesn't need one. "You can't miss it," George Coppenrath says. There are only so many homes in tiny West Barnet, a village of 300 people nestled in the northeast corner of Vermont. Theirs is the third one on Main Street, just before you hit the intersection with the only two stop signs around. (A few miles away is a farm so remote, there are no fences to keep the cattle in.) George and his wife, Sue, live in a small beige house, the same small beige house where George's mother was raised, and which now includes an office for their insurance business. You wonder how much smaller it must seem when their boys are home. Both parents stand about six feet, and all three of their sons – Ethan, Taylor and Drew – are taller than 6'4". Taylor, at 6'9", is the tallest. But it wasn't that long ago when he could play ball on the nearby roadside court without turning heads; when the local store, Paula's Place, didn't yet stock tapes of his games on the shelf for the locals to freely take and return; when folks actually cared about how George and Sue's day was going, and weren't just waiting to ask the follow-up: "Is Taylor gonna be in the NBA?"

Coppenrath didn't even score 1,000 points in high school, something he accomplished in just 54 games at UVM. He didn't make the varsity at St. Johnsbury Academy until his junior year. His coach, Layne Higgs, ran a guard-oriented offense, leaving Coppenrath so frustrated that he thought

about quitting. But after deciding to stick around for his senior season, he averaged 25 points and 10 boards a game to become the state's Gatorade Player of the Year. Recruited by only three D1 schools – Albany, Bucknell and Vermont – he spent his first year in Burlington as a redshirt, working on his handle and outside shooting. He began the 2001-02 season as a starter; he finished it as the America East Rookie of the Year.

That summer, Coppenrath decided to bulk up. But too many protein shakes and beers turned his tight size-36 waist into a blooming belly. By the time school started, he'd gained 20 pounds, up to 267, and was depressed. "I looked at myself and thought, 'Jesus, what am I going to do?'" he says. "How am I going to live up to expectations?"

He turned to Coach for help. Brennan referred Coppenrath to his brother, Jimmy, a therapist. They met just once, for the better part of an afternoon. Taylor questioned his basketball career out loud: "Is this worth all the time and effort?" Jimmy told him to find time in the day to relax, to escape from all the pressures. Instead of cranking the radio in his car, or watching TV before bed, Taylor started tuning in to his inner voice. He realized that he didn't want to slide into being an average player, whatever the expectations. He had to get back into shape. So he hit the rowing machine twice a day, ran in between that, played afternoon pickup ball. By the first day of practice he was 245. And happy. And nasty.

Coppenrath's teammates joke that he can't step on the court without taking an elbow to the cheek or scraping himself or bleeding somehow. He missed seven games last winter after breaking his left wrist diving for a loose ball against Stony Brook. It was the only thing that could slow him down. He averaged 24.1 ppg for the season, including 38 in a one-point loss at UCLA and 41 in a win over Northeastern. In the America East title game, his first one back from injury, he slapped Maine for 43, still sporting a brace on his wrist.

Brennan says Coppenrath reminds him of Bird, and you can see why. Watch his pale, undefined, arching body buying the inches and milliseconds needed to sink a three or a turnaround or a finger roll, all while warming up a cult following in the stands with every bucket. He's pure Vermont: a low-key white guy who loves waterskiing at the lake and drinking beer afterward. But unlike Bird, he's no hoops junkie. In Spring 2003, Sorrentine (see sidebar) was watching the NBA Finals when Coppenrath walked into their apartment. "Where the hell have you been?" T.J. asked. After all, it was Game 6, and the Spurs were about to win, and ... "I was playing Scrabble," Taylor answered, retreating to his room.

Becoming a star has brought a whole new set of challenges. He's learned to shorten his autograph into a Tylr Cppnth scribble. But what to do about all those pretty faces sidling up to him on Friday nights, the same girls who wouldn't give him a second glance a few years ago? "Sometimes it's uncomfortable," he says. "You don't want to come off as a jerk."
* * *

TIME IS precious these days, and everyone around Burlington knows it. Four of the five Catamount starters are seniors, and though Coppenrath might have an NBA future ahead of him (four teams have already called Vermont), he's also exploring other options. A whiz at math, he's student teaching at Colchester High this fall, getting a head start on the career he's always wanted. Meanwhile, Brennan announced on Nov. 4 that he's retiring after the season to pursue other interests. He's agent shopping, with an eye on a full-time broadcasting job. "That's the next step for me," he says. He knows how coaching goes. He's reached heights in Vermont that no one could have imagined. Now, 20-win seasons are expected; so are America East titles and trips to the Dance. "I've never felt threatened about my job," he says, pausing to give his punch line maximum effect. "Until now."

Coach and player are just trying to enjoy what they've got. At the moment, Coppenrath is sitting in his apartment, the one he shares with Sorrentine. It's straight college: dirty socks stuffed in the couches, tacky posters on the walls, a PS2, a dry-erase board scribbled with "Pay parking tickets." It's almost time to meet a friend for dinner, and for Coppenrath that means trying to look as inconspicuous as a 6'9" man can. He pulls a baseball cap low and zips his jacket high, covering his Vermont hoops sweatshirt. He's nervous that the restaurant will be full, and he'll have to wait. Waiting

brings fans. Fans bring attention. "And that'll get awkward," he says, walking out the door. But he's fretting over nothing, of course.

The Scuffer will always find room.

Brennan has the last word

The Boston Globe

By Mark Blaudschun, Globe Staff

November 5, 2004

He was, as usual, ready with a monologue that played well in Burlington or Barre or anywhere else in a state where he has become a beloved figure, known for his quick wit and engaging personality.

But this time the subject was tinged with sadness, as well as gratitude. Vermont basketball coach Tom Brennan announced yesterday that he is retiring, effective at the end of what he hopes will be another season with an NCAA Tournament berth.

"It was definitely time," said Brennan from his office in Burlington yesterday. "I don't want to be Willie Mays in the batter's box."

It was pure Brennan, using a reference of an aging Mays ending his career with the New York Mets.

Brennan is 55 and the coach of a Catamounts team that has hit unparalleled success the past three seasons with 21, 21, and 22 victories, including two NCAA appearances. Brennan, who came to UVM 18 years ago, appreciates the success as much as anyone, pointing out he won 14 games in his first three seasons combined.

"Only at a place like Vermont could you still be 30 games under .500 [239-269] and keep your job for 18 years," said Brennan. "I've had a nice run here. I used to say this was a mom-and-pop place. Turns out I'm Pop."

Brennan, who also has a full-time job as a morning radio personality in Burlington, conceded that the rigors of the job were starting to wear on him. He knew in his mind, if not his heart, that the commitment to match the recent excellence of the Catamounts would be difficult to maintain. He also knew the clock was ticking in his own mind on wanting to get on to the next phase of his life -- that of good-will ambassador for the state and for college basketball.

He said he has spent the past few months talking over the possibility of retirement with his family and friends.

"I've got a really good team coming back and I felt this was a real good chance to go out on a high note," he said. "I also knew that when I was recruiting and a player asked me if I would be here for his entire stay, I couldn't answer that question and keep my integrity."

Brennan says he also recognizes that success has whetted the appetite of a school that had seldom had such success. To maintain the level required more energy than he was willing or perhaps able to give.

"They need a young gun, someone who will be a 24/7 guy," said Brennan, who has endorsed associate coach Jesse Agel, a 1984 Vermont graduate who has been with Brennan for 16 seasons, as his successor.

But for this season, beginning with their opener at preseason No. 1 Kansas Nov. 19, the job belongs to Brennan, who will take a victory lap around the country no matter what the Catamounts do during the season.

And then it will be time to move on -- to radio, perhaps to television or as someone who offers good will for a sport that sometimes needs it.

"My momma told me, 'Don't overstay your welcome,'" said Brennan. "It's the right time to go."