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Merrimack's Warrior Reigns Supreme: Jordan Derkack Named NEC Men's Basketball Player of the Year

Bridgewater, NJ -- 'Tis the season - for awards, that is.

March has arrived and it's our chance to celebrate the NEC's standout men's basketball players who have lit up the court all year long.

Front and center among the league's honorees stood a remarkably talented sophomore and the driving force behind the NEC's regular season co-champions.

Merrimack's **Jordan Derkack (Colonia, NJ/Colonia (Spire Academy))** became the second Warrior in as many years to be crowned NEC Player of the Year, following in the footsteps of former teammate Jordan Minor as winners of the coveted prize.

This wasn't Derkack's only accolade. The Colonia, NJ native also captured the NEC Defensive Player of the Year award, marking the third straight season the NEC's MVP was also recognized as the top defender.

Merrimack added even more feathers to its cap.

Freshman guard **Adam "Budd" Clark (Philadelphia, PA/West Catholic)** was unanimously selected NEC Rookie of the Year and sophomore forward **Bryan Etumnu (Sugar Land, TX/Kempner)** earned the title of NEC Most Improved Player.

Patrick Sellers was voted NEC Coach of the Year by his peers for the first time after steering the Blue Devils to their first conference regular season crown in 17 years.

The award recipients were announced on the eve of the 2024 NEC Men's Basketball Tournament, which begins with quarterfinal round play at campus sites on Wednesday.

Two years into his career at Merrimack, Derkack has already begun to build an envious resume. He became just the third sophomore in conference history to win the NEC Player of the Year award, joining Sacred Heart's Cane Broome, who was lauded in 2015-16, and NEC Hall of Famer Myron Walker, the former Robert Morris star who received the honor back in 1991-92. He also earned distinction as the third Warrior in five years to win the NEC Defensive Player of the Year honor, joining Juvaris Hayes (2019-20) and Minor (2022-23). After earning All-Rookie accolades a year ago, the 6'5" guard lifted his numbers across the board as he became the focal point of the Merrimack attack this season. More than up to the task, Derkack flashed the ability to attack the rim, play bully ball down in the post, finish in transition, sweep the boards, distribute the ball to teammates and defend the perimeter. Derkack currently ranks in the NEC top-10 in six different categories. With an uncanny ability to draw fouls, he leads the NEC in scoring at 17.7 ppg and has posted ten games of 20+

points on the year. Derkack is also seventh in rebounding (5.9), fourth in assists (3.8), eighth in field goal percentage (.484) and seventh in assist-to-turnover ratio (1.0). In a testament to his defensive prowess, the 6'5" guard ranks second in the league with 2.1 spg and is among the top-75 nationally in steal rate serving as one of the ringleaders of Merrimack's unique zone defense that has become the program's hallmark. Further enhancing his credentials, Derkack was named NEC Player of the Week six times, tying the single-season record. Over two seasons, he has amassed 762 points, 308 rebounds and 207 assists, placing him in the NEC top-10 among active career leaders in each category. In Derkack's two years in North Andover, the Warriors have compiled a 25-7 NEC record and won their first NEC Tournament title last March.

In a year that featured a host of impressive rookie performers throughout the conference, Clark established himself as a star from day one for the NEC regular season co-champs. Stepping into a lead role in Merrimack's backcourt with the departure of 2022-23 NEC Rookie of the Year Javon Bennett, Clark was the perfect fit, both as a floor general and go-to scorer, as well as a ball-hawking presence within the Warriors' morphing zone defense. The 5'10" point guard finished the regular season as a seven-time NEC Rookie of the Week, just one shy of the conference record. On February 19, the Philly product became just the fifth player in conference history to be named both the NEC Player and Rookie of the Week. Following in the footsteps of Bennett and Merrimack defensive legend Juvaris Hayes, Clark paces the NEC and ranks eighth in the country with 2.6 steals per game. His 4.75 steal rate is the tenth-best mark in the country and his 77 steals ranks third on the NEC"s all-time freshman list. A mid-range maestro and ballhandling wizard who can finish in traffic with the best in the conference, Clark often had the ball in hands down the stretch and seemingly had ice in his veins, hitting a series of game-winning or game-tying shots in league play. Clark paces all NEC freshmen with 13.1 ppg and is also the third-ranked distributor on the circuit with 3.9 apg. Additionally, he is fifth in the league in assist-to-turnover ratio (1.49). Clark became the first freshman to earn All-NEC honors since Saint Francis U's Keith Braxton also landed a spot on the second team back in 2016-17.

Etumnu's transformation from a rarely utilized freshman to a pivotal contributor in his sophomore season was a captivating storyline within Merrimack's success this year. Seamlessly sliding into a starting frontcourt role following the departure of All-Conference standouts Jordan Minor and Ziggy Reid, Etumnu emerged as a bruising interior force, intent on attacking the rim with ferocity. The thunderous dunker leads the NEC with 33 slams on the season and his 57.7 percent success rate from the field ranks second in the conference. He raised his scoring average from 0.8 ppg to 7.6 ppg, and by season's end, began developing a reliable stroke from distance, shooting nearly 42 percent from deep over his last six games. Serving as one of Merrimack's "goalies," Etumnu developed into an elite rim protector within the Warriors' suffocating zone defense. He is currently second in the conference with 1.9 blocks per game and he ranks 27th nationally with a 9.09 block rate.

Now in his third year as the mastermind of the CCSU program, Sellers orchestrated an impressive turnaround at his alma mater that culminated on Saturday with the program's first NEC regular season championship and the first #1 seed in the NEC Tournament since the 2006-07 season. Under his tutelage, CCSU entered the year as a program on the upswing, and this year's breakthrough performance has further energized the Blue Devil faithful, who are eager to bring a tournament championship home to New Britain for the first time in 17 years. The Blue Devils hit their stride late in the non-conference season, turning heads with a win at UMass Lowell in December, and backing it up with another notable win at Fordham. CCSU opened conference play with an 8-1 mark and never looked back, winning its last four games to overtake Merrimack for the #1 seed on the final day of the regular season. Sellers led CCSU to 13 conference victories, the most for the program since 2006-07, and the team's 19 overall wins represents its highest total since the 2010-11 season. Powered by the stellar trio of Allan Jeanne-Rose, Kellen Amos and Jordan Jones, Sellers has compelled opponents to adopt a "pick-your-poison" approach against his squad. The Blue Devils rank in the top-three in the NEC in both offensive and defensive efficiency, and lead the league in rebound margin. As the top seed, CCSU will host NEC Tournament games as long as they remain alive, aiming for their fourth conference championship. CCSU coaching legend and NEC Hall of Famer Howie Dickenman won this award a record four times.

AWARD WINNER HIGHLIGHTS

Of the 15 All-NEC honorees this year, 13 are upperclassmen, six are graduate students and eight are newcomers to the league.

CCSU and Sacred Heart both placed a league-best three student-athletes on All-NEC teams, followed by two apiece from FDU, Le Moyne and Merrimack.

Clark became just the 11th freshman in conference history to collect All-NEC honors. He joined a prestigious list that includes Saint Francis U's Keith Braxton (2016-17 second team), RMU's Marcquise Reed (2014-15, second team), SFU's Darshan Luckey (2002-03, first team), LIU's Richie Parker (1996-97, second team), Rider's Charles Smith (1993-94, second team), Mount's Chris McGuthrie (1992-93, second team), FDU's Antwan Dasher (1992-93, second team), Wagner's Miladin Mutavdzic (1991-92, first team), St. Francis Brooklyn's Ron Arnold (1990-91, second team) and Monmouth's Alex Blackwell (1989-90, first team).

This year's All-NEC list features five repeat honorees, highlighted by a pair of Sacred Heart student-athletes.

SHU senior **Nico Galette (Rahway, NJ/Rutgers Prep)** added a second team selection to his first team accolade from a year ago. A versatile swingman with a penchant for taking - and making - big shots, Galette ranks eighth on the circuit in scoring (13.7), fifth in rebounding (7.2) and third in steals (2.0). He is the NEC's active leader in points (1,343) and rebounds (714). Teammate **Joey Reilly (Cromwell, CT/East Catholic (Holy Cross))** picked up his second straight third team accolade. One of the great knockdown shooters in recent NEC vintage, he leads the NEC in three-point percentage (.405). Reilly also boasts the second-highest two-point accuracy (.625), showcasing the 6-footer's exceptional finishing ability at the rim. It doesn't stop there. Reilly also ranks first in eFG percentage (.605), sixth in field goal shooting (.514) and ninth in made three-pointers (1.71), all while averaging 11.4 ppg.

FDU junior forward **Ansley Almonor (Spring Valley, NY/St. Joseph Regional (Montvale))** earned a well-deserved promotion from the third team to the first team following a stellar regular season. Establishing himself as one of the NEC's premier scorers and three-point specialists, Almonor leads the conference with 92 triples, and averages 3.0 per game, a feat that positions him 30th nationally. The Spring Valley, NY native is the league's second-rated scorer at 16.7 ppg, and has converted a healthy 39.5 percent from beyond the arc to rank second on the loop. Almonor reached a milestone on February 15 when he scored his 1,000th career point and enters the playoffs as the league's second-active leading scorer with 1,090 points to his name.

CCSU senior swingman **Kellen Amos (Houston, TX/St. John XXIII College Prep (Binghamton))** added third team honors to his second team selection from a year ago. A terrific athlete who effortlessly fills the lane on the break and is renown for his spectacular blocks and finishes above the rim, Amos can also heat up from three-point range, as evidenced by his 45 makes from beyond the arc. Amos has contributed 12.1 ppg to CCSU's balanced attack, while snaring 5.2 rpg.

Stonehill sniper **Max Zegarowski (South Hamilton, MA/Tilton School (NH) (Lynn/Franklin Pierce))** repeated as an All-NEC third teamer following another solid season from long range. The graduate student forward began to heat up from distance in NEC play and knocked down 59 triples at a 34.5 percent success rate on the year. He paced the Skyhawks with 12.5 ppg.

It's impossible to overstate the impact CCSU newcomers **Allan Jeanne-Rose (Saint Joseph, Martinique/Saint John Paul II (Fairfield))** and **Jordan Jones (Florence, NC/Trinity-Byrnes Collegiate School (Coker))** had on the Blue Devil fortunes this season. A consummate veteran on the court, Jeanne-Rose's graduate season saw him deliver consistent offensive output while defending at a high level every night. A near automatic bucket in the paint, his ability to finish at the rim may be unparalleled in the league. The 6'7" first team forward has put up 15.1 ppg to rank fifth in the NEC, and his 54.1 percent shooting from the floor is the third-best mark in the conference. A point guard with a scorer's mentality, Jones was just what the doctor ordered in the backcourt for the regular season co-champions. The All-Conference second team honoree made headlines by hitting a game-winning three-pointer at UMass Lowell on December 16 and his stock just kept rising. Jones can break down defenders and go strong to the rim, while also exhibiting one of the league's most fluid jumpers, The Florence, NC product has contributed 12.8 ppg this season. He's also fifth in the NEC in assists (3.8), fourth in steals (1.9) and seventh in free throw percentage (.762).

NEC newcomer Le Moyne showcased its offensive firepower all season long in building a 9-7 conference record that secured the Dolphins the #4 seed and an NEC quarterfinal home game, a notable achievement for the first-year D1 program. The Dolphins' dynamic graduate tandem of **Kaiyem Cleary (Manchester, England/Redemption Christian Academy (NY) (Florida Southern/Florida Southwestern/Ball State))** and **Luke Sutherland (Syracuse, NY/West Genesee (Siena/Bryant))** were recognized as first and second team all-stars, respectively. A gifted athlete with an uncanny ability to stick contest jumpers, Cleary's has built a reputation as an above-the-rim finisher on the break and reliable three-point shooter. The two-time NEC Player of the Week is the league's third-leading scorer at 15.5 ppg, and ranks sixth in rebounding (6.5) and eighth in made three-pointers per game (1.75). He also shoots 82.7 percent from the stripe to lead the conference. Sutherland can also score in a variety of ways, and like Cleary, is a thunderous finisher above the rim. He leads Le Moyne with 58 shots from downtown and ranks third in the NEC with 1.9 per game. He's also sixth in scoring (15.0), seventh in field goal percentage (.494) and fourth in three-point accuracy (.382).

Wagner junior and first team honoree **Melvin Council Jr. (Rochester, NY/University Prep (Monroe College))** made quite a splash in his debut season in Staten Island. Council exudes confidence on the court, and as such, is most comfortable with the ball in his hands in late-game situations. With his ability to break down defenders and go strong to the rim, the cat-quick guard made big shots in big moments throughout the year and excelled in end-to-end action on the break. Heading into the NEC Tournament, Council ranks among league leaders in a wide variety of categories, including scoring (15.3, fourth), rebounding (5.8, eighth), assists (3.6, sixth), free throw percentage (.790, third) and steals (1.4, tenth).

Sacred Heart senior forward **Alex Sobel (Setauket, NY/Ward Melville (Middlebury))** was a commanding interior presence for the Pioneers on both ends of the floor. Coming off a standout season that saw him earn D3 National Player of the Year honors at Middlebury, Sobel made a seamless transition to the D1 ranks, collecting second team All-NEC plaudits. Possessing a unique and unorthodox offensive repertoire and an uncanny ability to finish around the hoop, Sobel ranks first in the NEC in field goal percentage (.598), second in double-doubles (six), fourth in rebounding (7.3) and is the Pios' second-leading scorer at 12.2 ppg. A defensive stopper in the paint with impeccable timing, Sobel leads the NEC and is sixth nationally with 2.8 bpg.

Rounding out the All-NEC honorees were a pair of third team selections. FDU senior forward **Sean Moore (Columbus, OH/Reynoldsburg (St. Thomas Aquinas))** became a household name last March for his late-game heroics in the Knights' monumental upset win over Purdue, then built on that momentum this season. Moore is the NEC's second-leading rebounder with 7.6 per game and averages 11.8 ppg. LIU graduate student **Tai Strickland (Tampa, FL/St. Petersburg (Wisconsin/Temple/Ga. Southern))** served a creator, scorer and playmaker for the Sharks, while adding a touch of late-game heroics, including a buzzer-beater to sink Stonehill on January 25. Strickland put up 14.0 ppg in the regular season, good for seventh in the NEC. He is also fifth in steals (1.8), fourth in free throw percentage (.787) and tenth in assists (2.6).

Clark was joined on the All-Rookie team by a pair of student-athletes from the nation's second-youngest team. Saint Francis U's **Eli Wilborn (Middletown, CT/Middletown (South Kent))** and **Carlos Lopez, Jr. (Egg Harbor, NJ/Egg Harbor Township)** served as an integral part of an all freshmen starting five for the Red Flash for much of the conference season. Known for his highlight reel dunks, the 6'8" Wilborn ranks in the NEC top-five in rebounding (7.4, third), field goal percentage (.530, fourth) and blocks (1.6, third), while providing the Red Flash with 10.5 ppg. Lopez, a 6'2" guard with range, came on strong during conference play, hitting 37.5 percent of his three-point shots against league competitors. He averaged 9.4 ppg over the course of the regular season to rank fourth among NEC freshmen.

Always in attack mode, LIU guard **Eric Acker (East New York, NY/Eagle Academy for Young Men II)** sports a refined mid-range game and displays the ability to push the ball up the floor, find open teammates and finish at the rim in transition for a Sharks' team that prefers to play uptempo. Acker's 13.0 ppg ranks him second among NEC freshmen and tenth overall. The three-time NEC Rookie of the Week also dished 3.9 dimes per game, good for second overall in the league.

Rounding out the All-Rookie squad was FDU freshman guard **Terrence Brown (Minneapolis, MN/Columbia Heights)**. A high level athlete with a quick first step and incredible elevation, the 6'3" combo guard was inserted into the starting lineup in January and performed with the composure of a seasoned veteran. Brown heads into the postseason supplying FDU with 7.8 ppg and 2.2 apg.

About The Northeast Conference

Now in its 43rd season, the Northeast Conference is an NCAA Division I collegiate athletic association consisting of nine institutions of higher learning located throughout five states. Media coverage of the NEC extends to a number of the largest markets in the United States including New York (#1), Boston (#9). Hartford/New Haven (#34) and Syracuse (#85). Founded in 1981 as the basketball-only ECAC Metro Conference, the NEC has grown to sponsor 24 championship sports for men and women and now enjoys automatic access to 15 different NCAA Championships. NEC member institutions include Central Connecticut, FDU, Le Moyne, LIU, Merrimack, Sacred Heart, Saint Francis U, Stonehill and Wagner. For more information on the NEC, visit the league's official website (www.northeastconference.org) and digital network (www.necfrontrow.com), or follow the league on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, all @NECsports.

2023-24 Northeast Conference Men's Basketball Award Winners

Player of the Year

Jordan Derkack	Merrimack	G	6-5	205	So	Colonia, NY/Colonia (Spire Academy)

Rookie of the Year

Adam "Budd" Clark	Merrimack	G	5-10	155	Fr	Philadelphia, PA/West Catholic

Defensive Player of the Year

Jordan Derkack	Merrimack	G	6-5	205	So	Colonia, NY/Colonia (Spire Academy)

Most Improved Player

Bryan Etumnu	Merrimack	F	6-7	215	So	Sugar Land, TX/Kempner

Jim Phelan Coach of the Year

Patrick Sellers CCSU

2023-24 Northeast Conference Men's Basketball First Team All-Conference

Name	School	Pos	Ht	Wt	Yr	Hometown/High School (Previous School)
Ansley Almonor	FDU	F	6-7	219	Jr	Spring Valley, NY/St. Joseph Regional (Montvale)
Kaiyem Cleary	Le Moyne	G	6-6	185	Gr	Manchester, England/Redemption Christian Academy (NY) Florida Southern/Florida Southwestern/Ball State
Melvin Council Jr.	Wagner	G	6-4	185	Jr	Rochester, NY/University Prep (Monroe College)
Jordan Derkack	Merrimack	G	6-5	205	So	Colonia, NY/Colonia (Spire Academy)
Allan Jeanne-Rose	CCSU	F	6-7	200	Gr	Saint Joseph, Martinique/Saint John Paul II (Fairfield)

2023-24 Northeast Conference Men's Basketball Second Team All-Conference

Name	School	Pos	Ht	Wt	Yr	Hometown/High School (Previous School)
Adam "Budd" Clark	Merrimack	G	5-10	155	Fr	Philadelphia, PA/West Catholic
Nico Galette	Sacred Heart	G	6-6	210	Sr	Rahway, NJ/Rutgers Prep
Jordan Jones	CCSU	G	6-0	180	Sr	Florence, NC/Trinity-Byrnes Collegiate School (Coker)
Alex Sobel	Sacred Heart	F	6-8	230	Sr	Setauket, NY/Ward Melville (Middlebury)
Luke Sutherland	Le Moyne	F	6-7	220	Gr	Syracuse, NY/West Genesee (Siena/Bryant)

2023-24 Northeast Conference Men's Basketball Third Team All-Conference

Name	School	Pos	Ht	Wt	Yr	Hometown/High School (Previous School)
Kellen Amos	CCSU	G/F	6-7	190	Sr	Houston, TX/St. John XXIII College Prep (Binghamton)
Sean Moore	FDU	F	6-5	189	Sr	Columbus, OH/Reynoldsburg (St. Thomas Aquinas)
Joey Reilly	Sacred Heart	G	6-0	170	Gr	Cromwell, CT/East Catholic (Holy Cross)
Tai Strickland	LIU	G	6-2	185	Gr	Tampa, FL/St. Petersburg (Wisconsin/Temple/Ga. Southern)
Max Zegarowski	Stonehill	F	6-8	205	Gr	South Hamilton, MA/Tilton School (NH) (Lynn/Franklin Pierce)

2023-24 Northeast Conference Men's Basketball All-Rookie Team

Name	School	Pos	Ht	Wt	Yr	Hometown/High School (Previous School)
Eric Acker	LIU	G	6-2	160	Fr	East New York, NY/Eagle Academy for Young Men II
Terrence Brown	FDU	G	6-3	158	Fr	Minneapolis, MN/Columbia Heights
Adam "Budd" Clark	Merrimack	G	5-10	155	Fr	Philadelphia, PA/West Catholic
Carlos Lopez, Jr.	Saint Francis U	G	6-2	170	Fr	Egg Harbor, NJ/Egg Harbor Township
Eli Wilborn	Saint Francis U	F	6-8	210	Fr	Middletown, CT/Middletown (South Kent)