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Illinois Wesleyan Women Win 2012 National Championship

March 17, 2012

Photo Gallery of Championship Game (photos for sale)

HOLLAND, Mich. - The Illinois Wesleyan women's basketball team won the school's sixth overall national championship and first in women's basketball with a 57-48 victory over George Fox on Saturday (March 17) at DeVos Fieldhouse in Holland, Mich. The Titans finished fourth in 2011.

The Titans trailed 48-43 with 3:46 to play in the game but held the Bruins scoreless in a 14-0 run the rest of the game to claim the championship. With the game tied at 48-48, junior Melissa Gardner buried a 3-pointer to give IWU the lead for good at 51-48 with 1:02 to play.



2012 NCAA Women's Basketball Champions

"I was left wide open. I knew I had to shoot," said Gardner, who set a IWU single-season record with 94 3-pointers this year. "With encouragement from coach and my teammates, I knew it had to go up."

Senior Olivia Lett, who was chosen the tournament's "Most Outstanding Player" and was earlier named to the first team of the D3hoops.com All-America squads, made six free throws in the final 38 seconds to seal the title.

"It's unbelievable. You can't ask for a better way to finish out your career, to finish out your senior year," said Lett. "I couldn't ask for a better group of teammates to be with."

The Titans, who were 3-4 early in the season, finish with a 28-5 record and join five other IWU national championship teams: men's basketball (1997), women's indoor track (2008), women's outdoor track (2008 and 2010) and baseball (2010).

"There wasn't a moment in the ballgame where I felt we wouldn't be the national champion when the buzzer sounded," Titans' coach Mia Smith said. "Even when we were down four, down five, there was not a drop of fear on the bench. That's been that way all season. It's reminiscent of every time we stepped on that floor."

It was all George Fox early as the Bruins got out to a 9-0 lead and kept the Titans from scoring until 14:16 left in the half on a basket by sophomore Colleen McMahon.

George Fox's All-American 6-5 center Hannah Munger suffered a knee injury with her team on top 11-7 with 12:40 to play in the half but the Bruins continued to hold the lead without her, building up a 19-10 advantage with 9:09 remaining.

But the final minutes of the half belonged to IWU as the Titans outscored the Bruins 18-3 and kept George Fox scoreless over a 7:58 period to snag a 28-22 lead at intermission.

George Fox battled back to regain the lead at 42-41 with 6:25 left in the game and, thanks to a 13-0 run when down 41-34, took a 47-41 lead with 5:02 left.

Lett led the Titans with 22 points and seven rebounds, making 11 of 12 free throws and 5 of 15 from the floor. No other IWU player was in double figures but Gardner and sophomore Lexi Baltes each had eight points.

Taking advantage of Munger's absence, the Titans outrebounded the Bruins 40-36, led by senior point guard Brittany Hasselbring's eight boards.

Illinois Wesleyan shot only .320 from the field (16 of 50) and dialed in 5 of 15 from beyond the arc. But the Titans were deadly from the free throw line, making 20 of 23 (.870).

The Bruins, who got 17 points and eight boards from Keisha Gordon, also suffered a poor shooting night, going 17 of 53 from the

field (.321) and making only 1 of 16 3-pointers (.063). George Fox made 13 of their 21 free throw tries (.619) and committed 13 turnovers while forcing IWU into 16.

"There's an emotional toll when you lose a great kid and a great player (like Munger)," George Fox coach Michael Meek said. "Illinois Wesleyan is a great team. They played hard and were the better team tonight."

ALL-TOURNAMENT TEAM: Lett was joined on the 2012 all-tournament team by Munger and Gordon of George Fox, Caroline Stedman of Amherst and Maggie Weiers from St. Thomas.

MORE POSTGAME QUOTES: Lett on Titans' focus on this season after fourth-place finish last year on their homecourt: "We were focused on our goal for this year. Last year, it was nice to get to the Final Four. I think (losing twice in the Final Four) drove us this year."

Lett on stretch run: "I knew as a senior, I wanted the ball in my hands at that point. Mel's three was absolutely huge."

George Fox coach Michael Meek (regarding injury to Munger and decision not to put her back in): "We decide it wasn't fair to her to risk further injury. She's got a long life ahead of her, and we want her to be as healthy as she can be. I'm proud of the way the other kids stepped up and filled the void."

Munger on the play where she was hurt: "I went for a rebound and stepped the wrong way, and (Olivia Lett) fell on me. I didn't feel so good."

Munger on decision not to return: "The coaches made the decision not to let me play. It would have been selfish for me to ask to go back in when I had 100 percent confidence in my teammates that they would do perfectly fine."

Megan Arnoldy on physical nature of the game: "We knew going in it was going to be a battle. We had to hold our own and handle their pressure."

Gordon on leading Bruins' second-half run: "We needed someone to step up. I was going to whatever I could in the next 20 minutes."

THIRD PLACE GAME: St. Thomas (Minn.) rode the outside shooting of senior guard Ali Johnson and the inside play of sophomore center Maggie Weiers to an 87-60 victory over Amherst in the third-place game of the NCAA Division III women's basketball tournament at DeVos Fieldhouse. Johnson nailed six 3-point baskets, five of them in the first half, in scoring a career-high 24 points. Weiers added 21 points as the Tommies ended their season with a 31-2 record. The defending national champion Lord Jeffs, who had a 50-game winning streak snapped in Friday's semifinal against George Fox, finished 31-2. They suffered losses in consecutive games for the first time since 2009

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