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Ferez oversees major transformation for Whitman women

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It's been a tough nut to crack.

Over the past decade, women's basketball in the Northwest Conference has been as good as any NCAA Division III league in the country.

Since 1999, every school except Pacific University in the nine-team NWC has posted at least one 17-win season.

Five schools have nabbed the NWC title and gone on to the national playoffs.

Needless to say, when Michelle Ferez left a successful career at Okanogan High School, and a junior-high job the year before she was hired to lead struggling Whitman College, the rest of the conference powerhouses weren't exactly ready to step aside and welcome the newcomer.

But the Missionaries' ascent has been one of the more remarkable stories in the conference, and Ferez deserves credit.

Just ask any of her colleagues, past and present.

"It's a tough fraternity to break into, not just because of the other coaches and what they've been doing ... but if you want to compete at this level, you can't come in and say, 'I'll offer you a scholarship,' " said Gil Rigell, the former Pacific Lutheran coach. "That is what's made all the more special what Michelle has done. She's a great coach."

By 2001, the Whitman program was in shambles, at the bottom of the NWC standings. And the elite teams such as PLU, Whitworth, Puget Sound and George Fox were beating the Missionaries with ease.

A standout player for Auburn High in the 1980s as Michelle Spurr, Ferez took over as the third coach hired in three seasons at the Walla Walla school.

One of the first people she contacted was Rigell.

"He turned things around at PLU," Ferez said.

She picked his brain for the best ways to get the program up and running.

"She has to cast a bigger net in areas we weren't recruiting," Rigell said.

The reason was twofold. One, Ferez could not go head-to-head with the other successful coaches in the NWC when going after a recruit. And two, Whitman's academic standards are the highest in the NWC, so she had to get more athletes to apply, knowing approximately one-third of them will be accepted by the admissions office.

In her first recruiting class, Ferez had up to 60 recruits apply to get accepted into the university.

"As a coach, I make no guarantees," Ferez said. "There are so many kids we look at. And they're good students – but most aren't Whitman (level) students."

The advantage is that Whitman has a national academic profile – similar to UPS. Recruits from all over the country have contacted Ferez about joining the team.

The real break came in 2003-04, in Ferez's third season. Picked to finish last in the conference, Whitman broke through

and tied UPS for the league championship at 13-3 – after just 15 wins total the previous four years. In the past half-decade, more in-state players have started to put Whitman in their pool of viable programs to consider.

In September, coaches selected the all-underclassman Missionaries as the preseason favorite to win the NWC. After winning Tuesday, they are alone in second place behind George Fox.

“We’re in a situation where the NWC won’t look a whole lot different the next couple years, so we need to seize the opportunity,” Ferenz said.

Northwest focus

Eight Division III amendment proposals at the NCAA convention last week passed. One change requires head coaches to be certified in first aid, CPR and automated external defibrillator use by August. ... The NWC men’s game between Willamette and Lewis & Clark, suspended due to a power outage, was continued Monday, and the visiting Bearcats rallied to win, 75-73. ... UPS moved up to 11th in the latest Division III men’s poll, and The Evergreen State College men climbed to 10th in the NAIA Division II rankings. ... Tacoma Community College received votes in the preseason NWAACC baseball poll, as did the Pierce softball team.

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