

Aggies celebrate women's basketball national title

Written by Administrator
Thursday, 07 April 2011 12:00

COLLEGE STATION AP) — Thousands of fans packed Reed Arena on Wednesday afternoon to welcome the Texas A&M women's basketball team home with its first national championship.

The band played, and a huge banner and four smaller ones declaring the winners surrounded a stage on the court. The team and coaches gathered to address the crowd a day after the 76-70 win over Notre Dame.

University president R. Bowen Loftin called it a "great day in Aggieland."

"This belongs to the team, but it also belongs to all Aggies," he said. "It's been a long time coming."

Texas A&M's first All-American Danielle Adams, who scored 30 points, received a standing ovation. She thanked Texas A&M for recruiting her out of junior college when many schools shied away because they were worried about her weight and conditioning.

"They gave me a chance and I've worked hard at it since Day 1 and it all paid off in the end," she said. "Now we're national champions. It's great that they gave me the chance that I had." Coach Gary Blair, who won the title in his second trip to the Final Four after leading Arkansas there in 1998, didn't stop smiling during the almost hour-long party. He recalled a conversation he had with a fan about a week after he was hired in 2003.

"He said, 'Everyone loves us; we're lovable losers,'" Blair said. "I told him: 'That's not what I want to be a part of. I'm here to build champions.'"

And on Tuesday night he did, completing a major turnaround for a team that once played in front of only close friends and family.

Athletic director Bill Byrne, who hired Blair soon after he signed on at Texas A&M, called Blair's work remarkable.

"Last night is a precursor to more championships," he said. "This is not a one trick pony."

The Texas A&M football team has long drawn huge crowds to Kyle Field, but the more than 6,000 fans the women's team averaged this season is a number that was unheard of just a few short years ago.

"You see that women's basketball isn't all that bad," a beaming Sydney Colson told the crowd. "It can be pretty good."

A four-legged fan joined in the celebration as Texas A&M's collie mascot Reveille strolled around the arena. She wasn't the only famous Aggie there to support the women, as football coach Mike Sherman and several members of the Texas A&M men's basketball team also came out.

"I'm probably more excited than the girls right now," said B.J. Holmes, a senior on the men's team. "I don't think it's hit them yet. It's just a tremendous thing they did for the school and for themselves. Not a lot of people give us credit out here at Texas A&M ... but we've been on the rise for the past few years and we're trying to stay there."

Texas A&M went 9-19 in Blair's first season, but hasn't had a losing record since. He has led Texas A&M to six straight NCAA tournament appearances and this year's 33 wins are the most in school history.

The crowd gathered Wednesday is a clear indication of an impressive turnaround in attitudes at this formerly men-only military school.

When the school began admitting women in 1963, some alumni bristled at the decision and funding men's and women's sports equally after the passage of Title IX in 1972 was frowned

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Years ago the Texas A&M women's basketball team had to share uniforms, and its practice gym wasn't heated. Blair not only improved the product on the court, but made sure people in the community knew it. When he first arrived, he went door to door to introduce himself and ask people to come out to Reed Arena to watch the women play.

Even with a national championship on his resume, Blair hasn't stopped trying to drum up more support for his team. He informed revelers at the celebration that the ticket office was open and they could buy season tickets on their way out the door.

Adams looked at the crowd lined up for her autograph after the ceremony and shook her head at the number of people who came out to welcome the Aggies home.

"It's amazing to come back and see all these fans here," she said. "Just to bring home a championship to Texas A&M is an amazing feeling."

The homecoming party was a culmination of a wild 24 hours for the players. They were a bit bleary-eyed after celebrating into the wee hours of Wednesday morning after the win. They hit a Steak 'N Shake in Indianapolis about 2 a.m. Wednesday morning where they chatted with fans, shook hands with workers and caught a few highlights of the win on ESPN.