

2010 DUKE
BLUE DEVILS
National
champions



Duke players Brian Zoubek, right, Jon Scheyer, and the team mascot celebrate after Butler missed their final shot.

PAVING THE WAY

Tough seasons and disappointing losses only made the Devils stronger and ultimately led them to their first NCAA title since 2001

When the Comcast Center's visiting locker room opened to the media on March 3, you'd have sworn you had walked directly into a wake.

An uncomfortable silence hung in the air, 13 Duke players all lost in thought, staring blankly into the carpet and through the walls and up at the ceiling.

Junior guard Nolan Smith, not sure what to say, spoke in a library whisper.

All-American Jon Scheyer sat against a locker with his eyes red and puffy and a

Liberty Bell-sized crack in his voice.

The fourth-ranked Blue Devils had just delivered

Dan Wiederer

one of their best performances of the season, showing admirable heart and hustle and composure. Yet they had still fallen at Maryland 79-72, missing out on a golden opportunity to win the ACC regular season championship.

Scheyer thinks back on the moment now and can still feel the sting.

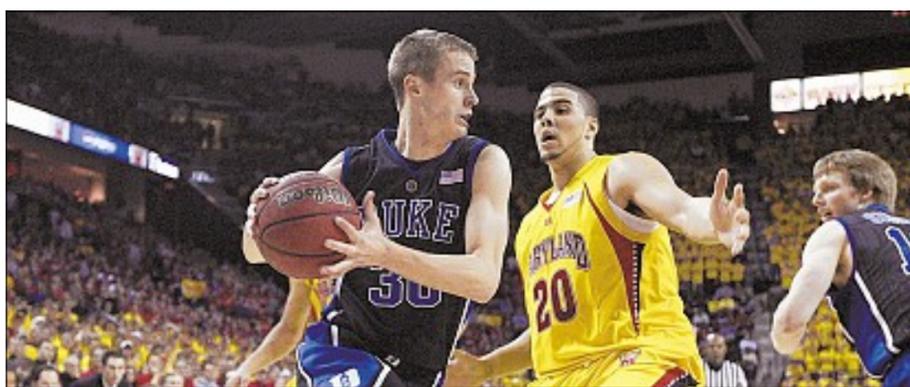
"I think that was one of the toughest losses we've ever had," he says. "We poured our hearts out in that game. That was one of the only losses in my career where it wasn't about being tougher or anything like that. They beat us, we played as hard as we could and we realized we still needed to get better."

For Duke's seniors — Scheyer plus Brian Zoubek and Lance Thomas — that loss had been sobering, perhaps even more than season-ending losses to VCU in 2007, West Virginia in '08 and Villanova in '09.

That Maryland loss left them face-to-face with a harsh reality. There in early March of their senior season, with only one regular season game left, their careers were almost finished and they had not yet experienced any of the magical triumphs they had come to Duke for.

They hadn't won an ACC regular season title.

They hadn't been to a



AP file photo

When Jon Scheyer, above, and Duke lost to Maryland on March 3, they had no way of knowing the crushing defeat would be their final setback of the season.

Final Four.

They had won only three NCAA tournament games overall.

Said Zoubek: "You sit there and you get a pretty brutal reminder that your career is about to end. And you have this hunger to accomplish so much more than you have."

The perfect 10

In that moment, Duke's seniors had no way of knowing the Maryland stumble would be their final college loss.

What followed was a five-week blitz that took them up the elevator of college basketball greatness, from a team considered gritty and tough to beat, to one that will forever be remembered as national champions.

Call it "The Perfect 10," Duke's 10-game winning streak to end the year, a surge in which the Blue Devils captured four different championships.

Three nights after the Maryland loss, they won the ACC regular-season title in the most emphatic fashion, obliterating rival North Carolina 82-50 on Senior Night and completing a perfect 17-0 season at Cameron Indoor Stadium.

The Blue Devils next headed to the ACC tournament in Greensboro with seemingly little to gain. They left with a championship and a No. 1 seed for the NCAA tournament, but more importantly with added momentum, confidence and an understanding that they had gotten better during a blur of pressure-packed moments.

Then came the six-game march through the big brackets, a run that was all sorts of unified and determined and at times, yes, fortunate.

Elsewhere in the NCAA tournament, fellow No. 1 seeds Kansas and then Syracuse and finally Kentucky all dropped through trapdoors, a development that sent Duke to the Final Four as the surprising favorite.

"When you're going through it, you're so focused on the goal that you have," Zoubek said. "It's hard to look around and enjoy everything. But in a lot of ways, I think that's what made this all possible."

On the rise

Hollywood certainly would have had a more marketable script had Butler emerged as the national champ, a possibility that didn't disappear until a breath or two after the season's final horn, when Gordon Hayward's potential title-winning half-court shot kissed the backboard and the rim and the cheek of destiny before dropping to the floor.

But Duke's story, even without the underdog charm, carried similar vibrations for those who cared to appreciate it.

This team, after all, captured the national title the old-fashioned way, the way coach Mike Krzyzewski enjoys succeeding. With five upperclassmen in the starting lineup, the Blue Devils grew up together, bonded with one another through disappointment and triumph and invested fully

in everything their coaches asked of them.

In that regard, Duke's starting five embodied the spirit of Blue Devil basketball, their victory total rising each season, their NCAA tournament experience lasting longer each year, too.

Above all else, this was a tale of perseverance from a group that had to dig so deep to earn their success.

Take Smith, for example, whose freshman season had enough bumps and frustration that he considered transferring after it was through, tempted to follow former Blue Devils assistant Johnny Dawkins to Stanford for a fresh start.

Instead, the gregarious guard remembered the guidance of his mother, Monica Malone, and his late father, Derek.

"When things get tough, you can't run," he said. "If you stick through tough times, when you feel like running but you don't, things are going to work out."

In the same vein, Zoubek's unlikely emergence will forever be pointed to as a testament to resolve. Injury prone and clumsy in his younger days, the 7-footer was often a punchline, never believed to be more than just a gigantic space-filler with five fouls to give. Then, in the final three months of his career, his drive paid off, his confidence spiked and his rapid improvement became the biggest reason Duke took the biggest final step in becoming a champion.

"I'm proud of you for doing that," Krzyzewski told Zoubek

shortly after the national title game. "I didn't think you had that in you."

Happily ever after

In the final months of the season, Krzyzewski tried to explain why these Blue Devils continued to improve all season long. A big part of the rise, he explained, came from their ability to throw themselves into each moment with past anxieties buried and no new worries about how their results would be judged.

Even the Hall of Fame coach, himself, stopped fretting about the accomplishments of yesteryear and the pressure-filled standards his teams often aim to uphold.

Instead, Krzyzewski enjoyed his players taking steps they had never made.

Duke won the ACC regular season championship, advanced past the Sweet 16 and reached the Final Four, all feats that these players never had experienced. And Krzyzewski talked sincerely about his ability to enjoy those achievements through his players' delight.

"To see how happy they are, to watch them, I'm very proud of them," he said. "That's a good place to be at this time in my life, where I can hang — an old guy hanging with some 22-year-old kids who are pretty good guys."

So on the final night of the season, after a heart-stopping 61-59 defeat of Butler, when the Duke locker room at Lucas Oil Stadium opened to the media, it had anything but a funereal feel to it.

Sophomore Miles Plumlee summed up the mood perfectly.

"My cheeks are tired as hell," he said.

Thirty-three days after that spirit-crushing loss at Maryland, the Duke Blue Devils had won it all.

Scheyer again sat up against a wall, this time wearing a national championship T-shirt and hat and a grin that will never be erased.

"I can't really believe we're national champions," he said. "It hasn't hit me yet. I just assume we have another game."

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