

# 2002-03: Great Expectations

The 2002-03 Cincinnati Bearcats faced higher expectations than any UC team in history. They were following a team that set a school record with 27 wins, won UC's first Conference USA Tournament championship and won an NCAA Tournament game for the first time.

The expectation were not self-imposed. UC opened the season ranked 18th in the Associated Press poll and 22nd by the coaches', the first preseason rankings in school history.

The league coaches also expected much from the Bearcats, selecting them, along with TCU, to win the C-USA title.

UC's stars were also singled out. While four preseason publications had the Bearcats in the top 20, *Street & Smith's* named junior Valerie King and sophomore Debbie Merrill as honorable mention all-Americans. Additionally, ESPN.com selected King as one of the top five wing players in the nation.

The advantage to having so many expectations was that the squad looked very similar to the previous years'. The Bearcats returned all but three regulars, including over 74 percent of the points, assists, steals and blocked shots. The one area of concern was on the blocks, where all three of those lost regulars played. A third of the rebounding was gone from the previous year.

The answer was found in Carolyn Alexander, the top guard off the bench as a junior. The 5-10 senior made the switch to power forward in the preseason and responded, joining the other four returning starters in a lineup that almost

never changed.

Alexander averaged 11.1 points a game and 6.3 rebounds a game. She recorded the first five double-doubles of her career, including a 23-points, 10-rebound performance in the championship of the Bearcat Invitational to earn MVP honors.

The other Bearcat stars shone brightly last season also. King moved up into seventh on the school career scoring list with 1,661 points by averaging 16.4 a game and making 92 three pointers.

Merrill responded to her C-USA Freshman of the Year honor in 2002 by averaging 18.0 points and 8.5 rebounds a game, second and fifth in C-USA, respectively. She scored in double-figures in every game and produced 12 double-doubles en route to honorable mention all-America honors.

Senior point guard K.B. Sharp outdid them all, showing the league and the nation her value to the Bearcats. She became UC's all-time assist leader early in the season and went on to move into second in C-USA history with 623. She was third on the team in scoring (13.6) and rebounding (5.7) and led the league in assist-to-turnover ratio (3.17).

The trio combined to do something never done before, becoming he first three teammates to earn first team All-Conference USA honors.

Their star power led the Bearcats to very nearly meet the extraordinary expectations. Their 23-win season included one of the nation's

## Home Sweet Shoe

Since the Fifth Third Arena at Shoemaker Center became the home of UC basketball in 1989, the Bearcats have gone 129-68 (.655) on their home court. Over the past six years they have been nearly unbeatable at home, posting an 84-14 mark (.857). UC went 15-2 at home last season.

The Bearcats had their school-record 21-game home winning streak broken on Feb. 2 by Tulane. The streak broke the school mark for consecutive home victories of 15 set during the 1980-81 to 1981-82 seasons.

The success at home has resulted in the setting of home attendance records in each of the past two years. Last season UC averaged 1,443 fans per home game and 24,534 for the year, bettering the year old records of 882 per game and 14,109 total.

longest home winning streaks and a new standard for consecutive C-USA wins.

UC stumbled away from the Shoemaker Center, where six of its eight losses took place, including a regular season-ending defeat that cost the Bearcats a share of the league title.

## King Leads Scoring Machine

The Bearcat offense opened the season ready to play. In the first five games, four of them wins, UC averaged 81 points a game and shot better than 50 percent in every contest.

King was the leader of the scoring spree, scoring 24.8 points a game and making 27-of-47 (.574) of her three-point attempts. She put 30 on the board against Eastern Kentucky, overshadowing Sharp becoming UC's all-time assist leader by making 6-of-12 three pointers to tie her own school record.

That proved to be small potatoes. King followed that performance with a not to be believed outing against Coastal Carolina. Limited to 20 minutes of playing time by foul trouble, King still found time to make a school-record eight three-pointers on just 11 attempts. She finished with 26 points as the Bearcats put 92 points on the board.

## Bearcats Cool Off

If the Bearcats could not get any hotter in the first five games, they certainly could not get any colder in their next contest.

At Nebraska, UC managed just 55 points, shot .309 from the floor in the loss and was 1-of-17 from behind the arc, dropping a 65-55 decision.

The Nebraska game started a marked down-

## Off to a Fast Start

Considering the accomplishments of Valerie King and K.B. Sharp, the fact that freshman Micah Harvey saw so much playing time in the backcourt is a testament to her abilities.

She showed those abilities right from the start, as she made the first five three-pointers of her career. In a four-game stretch early in the season she averaged 7.8 points and 4.8 assists.

The only reserve to play in every game, Harvey, came on strong in the C-USA Tournament, handing out four assists in the semi-finals and scoring seven points in the title game. She averaged over 18 minutes of playing time in the last six games.



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turn in the Cincinnati offense, as it averaged 69.1 points over the next 10 games, including cracking 30 first half points just twice.

The Bearcats still went 8-2 over those 10 games thanks to their improving defense, which surrendered more than 65 points just once.

### Record Streaks

UC went 15-1 at home in 2001-02, winning its last eight home games. The Bearcats went to work in 2002-03 to improve on that.

Cincinnati won its first four home games heading into the Bearcat Invitational. UC topped Bowling Green and UL Lafayette to run the home winning streak to 14 and stay undefeated in the seven-year history of the tournament.

A 15th-straight home win would tie the school record, but UC would have to topple crosstown rival Xavier to do it.

The Bearcats had won six-straight against the Musketeers, and XU came out strong, taking a six-point lead into halftime while holding UC to 26.5 percent shooting. The home team responded in the second half, scoring nine of the first 11 points of the final 20 minutes and going on to the 61-55 win, tying the home win-streak record.

UC proceeded to break the mark with a 64-57 win over Toledo and closed the preconference season with an 85-41 blow out of Lafayette.

### On Fire is an Understatement

The Bearcats equalled a season-high with 48 first-half points against Houston on Jan. 11 despite posting a season-low two second-chance points for the game.

They did it by simply not missing. UC made its first nine shots of the game, including three Valerie King three-pointers, and 14 of its first 16. At halftime the Bearcats had made 20-of-26 shots from the field (.769).

They cooled off in the second half, but still finished with a season-best .617 shooting percentage.

The Conference USA season opened at home against rival Louisville and UC was in search of not just its 18th-straight home win, but also its 10th consecutive C-USA regular season win and its first ever C-USA opener win.

A 23-0 run in the first half gave the Bearcats their first 1-0 league mark in C-USA history as they won, 67-48.

UC kept rolling from there, winning its next five, including impressive wins over TCU and Houston. After a 63-51 win over Southern Miss, the Bearcats had won eight-straight, 21

in a row at home and a new league record 15-straight C-USA games.

It all ended the next game, as Tulane limited UC to 33 percent shooting and 53 points in a 62-53 loss.

### What Goes Around, Comes Around

After back-to-back losses to Tulane and Charlotte, the Bearcats were two games behind the 49ers in the C-USA race. After topping East Carolina, they prepared for the rematch at Louisville.

The Cardinals had won their last 19 home league games heading into the contest. After having its streaks snapped by Tulane two weeks before, it was UC's time to play spoiler.

In a double-overtime thriller, the Bearcats prevailed, 73-66. Sharp scored a career-high 31 points, including the tying basket with less than two seconds left in the first overtime.

The win moved UC within a game of Charlotte as DePaul, which spent much of the season ranked, came into the Shoe.

The result was one of the best games of the season, as Cincinnati pulled off a 71-67 win in

overtime. It was the first time in program history that the Bearcats played consecutive overtime games and moreover, it was coupled with South Florida's upset of Charlotte to bring UC into a first-place tie.

### Missed Opportunities

With three games to go a C-USA championship was within reach. A senior day win over Marquette and blow out at Memphis took UC into the regular season finale still tied with Charlotte.

A win would at least clinch a share of the title and a win and 49er loss would give the Bearcats the top seed in the C-USA Tournament.

Neither happened as Charlotte topped Tulane and UC came out flat at Saint Louis and suffered a 69-63 loss.

UC headed back to Memphis as the two-

### Merrill for the Defense

All-America center Debbie Merrill is well recognized for her offensive talents, but her defense gives the Bearcats a large boost.

For the second-straight year she led the team in blocked shots. In the home opener vs. Dayton she swatted five shots, one short of the school record and the most by a Bearcat since the 1996-97 season. She added four more blocks in the double-overtime win at Louisville.

Her career total of 38 places her eighth on UC's all-time list. Additionally, she was one steal from the team lead last year.



seed in the C-USA tourney and put the loss behind it, turning in one of its best defensive performances of the year in a 61-42 quarterfinal win over Southern Miss.

The semifinals went just as well, as a rematch with DePaul produced a 81-64 Bearcat win as UC shot .549 from the floor.

UC's third-straight trip to the tourney finals was a match-up against co-preseason favorite TCU. The Bearcats had no answer for tourney MVP Sandora Irvin, as she posted 26 points and 19 rebounds in a 85-76 Lady Frog overtime win.

Merrill did, however, become the 17th member of both the 1,000-point and 500-rebound clubs, the 13th Bearcat to join both.

The Bearcats returned home as a host of first and second round games in the NCAA Tournament. UC was awarded a 10 seed in the West Region, making consecutive appearances in the NAAs for the first time.

The Bearcats faced an athletic Arkansas squad ranked 23rd in the nation. The Lady Backs were too strong, ending the Bearcats' season, 71-57.

UC was 23-8, winning the third-most games in school history, and continued the current era of success with its seventh-straight winning seasons, fifth 20-win season in the last six and sixth-straight postseason appearance.