

SENIORS LIKE THEIR CHANCES

This may be SBU's best opportunity yet to reach the NCAA Tournament

BY GREG LOGAN

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It's "now or never" time for Stony Brook senior Tommy Brenton, who has led the Seawolves to three America East regular-season basketball titles in his career but never has won the conference tournament, which begins tomorrow in Albany.

"Excitement and confidence" is how Brenton describes the team mood, but the Seawolves also live with the memory of immense postseason pain.

In 2010, they were the No. 1 seed when they were upset in the semifinals by Boston University, 70-63. Brenton missed the 2011 tournament after sitting out the season with a dislocated knee but shared the disappointment of seeing fifth-seeded SBU surprisingly reach its first conference final, only to blow a 15-point second-half lead in a 56-54 loss at BU. Then there was last season's 51-43 loss to Vermont in the championship game at Stony Brook Arena, in which the Seawolves shot 29.3 percent.

That epitomized the pressure faced by a school seeking its first automatic NCAA Tournament bid. "We had everything going for us, a home game, and Vermont came in and executed," Brenton said. "We couldn't get it done. Seeing them celebrate on our court, it was definitely hard for me to swallow. Hopefully, this year things can be a little different."

It's also the last chance for seniors Marcus Rouse, Lenny

Tomorrow

**America East
Quarterfinals
Binghamton vs. Stony Brook**
Radio: WUSB (90.1), 6 p.m.

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Hayes and Ron Bracey.

For Rouse, it's hard to differentiate between his three America East tourney losses. "All of them were pretty painful," he said. "I remember all of them quite well, so we're just trying to play with that motivation this weekend. That will be huge, not only for me but for the team, the coaching staff and everybody. Remembering that pain and not wanting to endure that. Not again."

The quest to reach the NCAA Tournament begins anew for the Seawolves (23-6, 14-2) in a quarterfinal game against Binghamton (3-26, 1-13) at 6 p.m. tomorrow at SEFCU Arena on the Albany campus. If they win, they play in Sunday's 7 p.m. semifinal against the winner of Albany (21-10, 9-7) vs. Maine (11-18, 6-10), which means Stony Brook might have to win what amounts to a true road game for the right to host the conference championship game on March 16 at Pritchard Gymnasium.



"Personally, my focus and leadership is better than it's ever been," Stony Brook's Tommy Brenton says.

How tough is it to beat a good team three times in one season? "It's really hard, especially when it's going to be at their place," Brenton said of a possible rematch with the Great Danes. "If that opportunity comes around, it will be a challenge, but we've had a lot

of practice in big games this year . . . From our record, we're great on the road — most road wins in the country."

These Seawolves have more winning ingredients than they had in the past. The addition of 6-8 freshman Jameel Warney in the low post provides inside

scoring and athleticism with forwards Scott King, Eric McAlister and Anthony Mayo, and freshman backup point guard Carson Puriefoy III adds speed to go with the experience of guards Dave Coley, Anthony Jackson and Rouse.

"We're probably more talented this year," Rouse said. "Jameel Warney should be freshman of the year; we have Tommy Brenton; we have a strong bench. We have so many weapons."

Rouse added that everyone on the team has one agenda: earning the NCAA bid. Brenton said his teammates have talked about it until it has become part of the collective mindset.

Is his last chance the best shot? "I've got to say yes," Brenton said. "Personally, my focus and leadership is better than it's ever been. So on a personal confidence level, I feel better about it . . . We have the regular-season title. That was our first goal. The next one is the NCAA. Hopefully we can elevate our focus and accomplish our next goal."

IS THIS STONY BROOK'S YEAR?

In the previous three seasons, the America East Tournament has been the place where Stony Brook's dreams of a first NCAA bid have gone to die. **Here's the litany of heartbreak:**

2010 — After winning the regular-season title behind Player of the Year Muhammad El-Amin, Stony Brook beat Albany in a tough first-round game but then was upset, 70-63, in the semifinals by hot-shooting Boston University, which got 24 points from reserve Corey Lowe.

2011 — Seeded fifth after Tommy Brenton missed the season with a dislocated knee, Stony Brook upset Albany and No. 1 seed Vermont to reach the title game at BU. The Seawolves had a 15-point second-half lead but lost, 56-54, on two foul shots with 2.4 seconds left by John Holland, who had 23 of his 27 points after halftime.

2012 — Stony Brook won the regular-season title, survived a first-round scare from Binghamton and then beat Albany, 57-55, on a buzzer-beating tip-in by Dallis Joyner to host the title game for the first time. Vermont scored only five points in the final 9:55 but held on for a 51-43 win over the ice-cold Seawolves, who shot 29.3 percent.