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THE SIDELINE SERIES

By [Paul Ofria](#) | [Email the author](#) | February 3, 2012

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Classroom and Courtside with MCC's Mary Roickle

First-year basketball coach transitions back to the game with the help of former Manchester High player Lindsey Nash.

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About this column: Paul Ofria was the assistant director of athletics and sports information at Manchester Community College from 2008 -2011 and was part of the sports information team with the Manchester Silkworms of the New England Collegiate Baseball League for ten seasons (2000-09). He is also a drummer in a local band (41prospect), enjoys the biking, hiking, skating, the Beatles, old movies and wishes he could have hung out with George Carlin.

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Mary Roickle playfully avoided the questions.

The first-year [Manchester Community College](#) head basketball coach had been away from the game for a number of years and "comeback kid" inquiries were being blocked as if she were Mitt Romney's tax lawyer.

Fair enough.

The gym floor squeaked as she ran up and down the court with her team in vintage Adidas footwear – the Chuck Taylor's were home resting – alternating instruction with a few defensive moves that just might work under game conditions. Her team had picked apart an opponent by 30 points the previous night, but there was still work to be done at this typically spirited practice.

What comeback story? It's like she never left.

The time machine says that Roickle led Niagara University to a NCAA Division II Final Four appearance in the early days of Title IX, and then built a nationally ranked Division I program at the University of Detroit. She left the coaching ranks with a combined record of 127-33 over seven seasons to pursue a career in the pharmaceutical industry, where she rose to a senior management position before taking over the highly successful MCC program last summer.

Roickle, who holds a BS in nursing from Niagara University and an MBA from Northeastern University, inherited just one returning player (Elise Chase, a captain) from Robert Turner Jr.'s sophomore-heavy team last season, but has led the Cougars to an 11-4 record through January.

"We were fortunate when we came in to have a collection of young ladies and it all kind of fell into place happen-stance in some respects," Roickle said. "We were able to recruit late and were fortunate to connect with some coaches in the area who still had kids who were up in the air as to where they were going."

The nine freshmen and their captain have all but clinched a spot in the NJCAA Region 21 tournament, but the team's academic record is more impressive - all ten players retained eligibility for the second semester, which is uncommon at the community college level. And three had GPAs over 3.0 - Nadiyah Bell/ 3.60, Amy Bellone/3.42 and Ann Hawthorn/3.75.

"When we started as a team, we sat down and talked about what we expected of each other; what are the guidelines for this team," said Roickle, who had a 100 percent graduation rate over four seasons at Niagara. "And they knew from day one that the guidelines fell under two areas: area number one is what we call priority 1A, and that's academics and number two is priority 1B, which is basketball. So they knew that in order to be successful, they had to commit to be academically sound and solid as well as what was needed on the basketball court."

Aside from the academic support provided by the college, Roickle's team has benefited from the volunteer tutoring services from retired Rocky Hill High teacher Shirley King. "Shirley has done a terrific job at just being available for the kids. She has helped them with little things in terms of how do I research a paper to big things like how do I write a paper."

On the court, the Cougars have been led by Chase, who is averaging 12 points and nine rebounds per game, and freshman Lindsey Nash, a 2011 Manchester High grad who runs the court well and has averaged 11.9 points and 4.7 rebounds.

"She is not a freshman in basketball skills and her basketball intelligence," Roickle said of the 5'10" Nash, who hopes to continue her academic and playing career at a four-year school. "You can see the passion on the court and she loves the game. She can play up top if we need it, but we have two fine point guards (Asia Beatty and Bell) but can play a wing and she's got the moves around the basket. One of her abilities is moving without the ball."

Cynthia Washburne has been the athletic director at the college since 1998 and has seen the program's torch handed from Peter Harris to Turner and now to Roickle.

"She just jumped back on the bicycle," Washburne said when reminded of Roickle's decade (or two) sabbatical. "She slid into the role without any hiccups. She is so organized and disciplined in her approach and it filters to the expectations of the players and she has built a cohesive family. You can see that on the court when they play."

Roickle feels the team is in a good state as far as preparation and ability to compete as it heads into the final month of the season.

"In the next few weeks it will be about how to get it to a great state," Roickle said. "And how do we make adjustments so this can stand up against any team. And I'm not sure we are there yet. We didn't show it early in the season and we are showing some promise now and we have a couple of weeks to stay focused on what is most important to us and that is qualifying for and being successful in regions."

The Cougars host Massasoit CC Saturday afternoon (February 4) at 1 p.m. at the Great Path Academy gym on the MCC campus.

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Thanks, keep up the great work.

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Way to go, Coach Roickle!

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