If you don’t think college memories last a lifetime, then you haven’t spoken with Riley Clarida or Eric Short lately. A few words with Tom Parks only provide more proof that the memorable moments made every March do, indeed, withstand the test of time.

Clarida, Short and Parks were all there in the beginning — and what a beginning it was for the ECAC-Metro Conference.

It was 30 years ago when what is now known as the Northeast Conference was born. The Big East had already formed, and what was once a mega-conference, the ECAC, continued losing member schools to the smaller leagues that were popping up all along the East Coast.

Athletic directors were scurrying to find new homes for their programs. In the aftermath of closed-door meetings, back-room negotiations and a great deal of jockeying, a group of 11 schools came together to form the ECAC-Metro Conference in 1981. The original membership consisted of Baltimore, Fairleigh Dickinson, Long Island, Loyola (MD), Marist, Robert Morris, St. Francis (NY), Saint Francis (PA), Siena, Towson State and Wagner.

Leading Off

After nearly all the dust settled in the league’s inaugural 1981-82 campaign, Long Island and Robert Morris were the last two left standing. The LIU Blackbirds, who were a household name during the golden years of New York City college hoops back in the 1930s and 1940s, were in the midst of a basketball revival under head coach Paul Lizzo. Meanwhile, the Robert Morris Colonials, led by Matt Furjanic, were only a few years removed from the big leap it took from the junior college ranks up to the NCAA Division-I level.

LIU’s Riley Clarida and Eric Short were on the floor of the old Brooklyn Paramount, one of the many unique band-box venues that were operation around the league at that time. The Blackbirds held an 84-83 lead over Robert Morris in the inaugural ECAC-Metro championship game.
Tom Parks of Robert Morris was there, too. He had made a strong case for the ECAC-Metro Tournament MVP award, but his team was on the brink of defeat.

“There was a second or two left,” said Lizzo, whose Blackbirds were on the cusp of victory, but were not out of the woods yet.

Robert Morris had the ball when, “I allegedly committed a foul that sent a guy to the line,” remembered Clarida, seemingly still in disagreement with the referee’s call three decades later.

Robert Morris’ Greg Junk was the beneficiary of the foul call, heading to the line with a chance to tie the game.

Giving the drama more time to build, there was a timeout called before Junk’s free throw attempt.

“All we gotta do is box out if he misses,” said Lizzo, recounting the words he told to his team in the huddle. “If he makes it, the game’s tied and we call timeout.”

What Lizzo was about to witness from the LIU sideline is a scene that would drive any coach crazy.

“Greg was at the line and they had a 6-foot-9 guy next to me on the inside of the block. I remember stepping on the 6-foot-9 guy’s foot so he couldn’t jump for the rebound [if there was one],” Parks said.

“He misses and the ball hits the floor,” Lizzo said. “The Robert Morris kid gets it, throws it up, and …”

In Parks’ words, “Phil Coles came up with the ball, put it in, and game over.”

Robert Morris silenced the Brooklyn Paramount and captured the inaugural ECAC-Metro Conference Tournament title and the NCAA berth that came along with it.

Clarida remembers the final seconds a bit differently.

“I got fouled over the back, but the referee didn’t call it,” said Clarida as if the play happened a mere 30 minutes ago, and not 30 years. Foul, or no foul, Robert Morris was going to the Big Dance.

Back in the Mix

Long Island was no stranger to the Big Dance. The Blackbirds had been there the year before by virtue of their win over Iona in the ECAC New York-New Jersey playoffs.

Short remembers 1981 well. The certificate hanging on the wall in his home office reminds him of that special season from time to time.

“I still have the Certificate of Appreciation that Long Island University gave to us for what we accomplished,” said Short as he reminisced about the time period.

Short and his Blackbird teammates had done more than clinch a berth in the 1981 NCAA tournament. They restored relevance to a program that was such an important piece of New York City’s basketball history.

LIU won a pair of National Invitational Tournament (NIT) titles in 1939 and 1941, but were mostly absent from the national stage after the program’s temporary suspension from 1951-57.

Now, they were back in the mix, headed down to Charlotte where they would face Virginia Commonwealth in NCAA play.

The Blackbirds, who defeated Wagner, Fordham and Iona to earn the tournament berth, ran out of gas against VCU, but not before they had become the darlings of New York. LIU was the lone New York City-based program to make the Big Dance that March.

“We received a lot of attention that season. If memory serves me well, I don’t even think Syracuse made it that year so we were the only team in the tournament from the entire state of New York,” said Lizzo, whose Blackbirds were whistled for 13 more fouls than VCU and shot 22 fewer free throws than their opponent in the 85-69 setback.

“I’m sure if you talked to Eric [Short], you heard him say that the officials crushed us in that game,” Lizzo said. “We hung tough and it was a competitive game until late in the second half.”

Short has been trying to track down video footage of the game for years now in hopes of showing his daughter, a college basketball player herself. You would be trying, too, had you performed like Short did that day.

The Brooklyn-born kid who had played his high school ball at Midwood poured in 24 points on 11-of-14 shooting during the NCAA first-round game.

“He played a great game that day,” said Lizzo, complimenting the man he labeled “a smart player.”

Coincidentally, Short’s prime performance came in the city that he would eventually call home.

He and his wife have lived in Charlotte for more than five years now, initially making the move to support their daughter in her collegiate playing career at a North Carolina-based Division II school.
Bobby Knight vs. Bobby Who?

He can’t remember what newspaper it appeared in, but Furjanic remembers the headline verbatim.

“Bobby Knight vs. Bobby Who?”

The inaugural ECAC-Metro champion had drawn Indiana and head coaching legend-in-the-making Bobby Knight in the 1982 NCAA first round.

“I had as many interviews as a coach could have because no one knew who Robert Morris was then,” Furjanic said.

Having just beaten LIU in the old Brooklyn Paramount Theatre that was converted into a 1,200-seat basketball venue, Robert Morris was headed to Vanderbilt University’s 14,300-seat Memorial Gymnasium to take on the defending NCAA champion Hoosiers.

“I don’t think we had an idea of what it meant to play in the tournament and what was in store for us,” Furjanic said.

Isiah Thomas was already in the NBA, but Indiana still had a rather formidable roster that included future NBA players Randy Wittman and Uwe Blab, along with Cam Cameron, who went on to make a name for himself as an NFL head coach.

“What Indiana did to us that day, it was a lesson in basketball,” said Parks, who scored seven points before fouling out in the 94-62 defeat.

Parks admits to having learned a lot that day, much of it from watching the boisterous Bobby Knight in action.

“They had a huge lead on us, but he was still laying into his players for missing screens and making mistakes.”

Parks got a much closer look at Knight after the game when “The General” visited Robert Morris’ locker room.

“He told us that we had nothing to hang our heads about,” Parks recalled. “He said that we battled against the defending national champions. He expected us to work hard to get back here next year and win a few games.”

Parks is still appreciative of Knight’s gesture to this day.

“That was a class act,” said Parks, summing up the whole experience. “What was a class act on Knight’s behalf wound up serving as motivation for Robert Morris the following season.

“He made us realize that we shouldn’t be happy just getting to the tournament,” Furjanic said. “He told our guys that every team’s goal should be to win the national championship.”

Building a Program

Greg Foster never made it to the Big Dance, but he and his FDU teammates hold a special place in the early history of Northeast Conference hoops.

The Knights won their first ECAC-Metro crown in 1985, one season after Foster and his teammates Mike Payne and Marcus Gaither had graduated.

Rome wasn’t built in a day, and neither was the program that has won more Northeast Conference games than any team in league history to date.

“We saw ourselves as the cornerstones that help put FDU back on the map,” said Foster, who has spent the past 25 years working for a major insurance company.

Foster’s collegiate career spanned five years and three head coaches. He redshirted his freshman year and endured a coaching change heading into his second season.

“Just as I thought things couldn’t get any worse after sitting out my first year, we got a new coach,” said Foster, who was wondering if he would ever get a chance to play at the time.

Head coach Don Feeley gave Foster an opportunity and the 6-foot-3 former walk-on developed into a beast on the boards.

LIU’s Riley Clarida was the league-leading rebounder during the ECAC-Metro Conference’s inaugural season before Foster claimed that title the following year.

“We had three players on the same team ranked among the national leaders,” Foster remembered. “I was in there for rebounding, Marcus Gaither was in there for scoring, and Mike Payne for field goal percentage.”

All three men entered their senior season at FDU with another new head coach at the helm. Tom Green, who would go on to post more NEC wins than any coach in league history, had taken over a program that was on the cusp of something special.

The 1983-84 Knights won 17 games and earned the No. 3 seed in the ECAC-Metro Tournament. A quarterfinal round win over Siena earned the first-year head coach and his Knights a semifinal date with two-time defending champion Robert Morris.

“We thought we had a real good chance to advance,” Foster said. “The game came down to the last possession and coach Green implemented what I thought was a real good strategy.”

Down by a bucket with one second remaining, FDU needed to go the length of the floor to tie the game. Instead of launching a desperation heave, the Knights tried to draw a foul while screening on the inbounds play.

“We didn’t get the call,” Foster said. “It was a hard way to lose my last game at Fairleigh Dickinson.”
Very much.”

“Just having the opportunity to play college basketball, there’s nothing like it,” said Foster, who still uses the lessons he learned on the hardwood as a manager in today’s business world.

“My experience of being on a team helps me to motivate and direct people in my job. Sports played an important part in preparing me for success in the business world.”

Not only did his time with FDU basketball provide him with a solid foundation for a successful career, but it also left him with lifelong friends.

“We [Marcus, Mike and myself] are still real good friends. It’s just one of those special bonds that you make,” Foster said.

Back-to-Back

Tom Parks sat there watching, rooting and remembering.

Robert Morris was leading for much of the game and on the verge of upsetting Big East power Villanova in the 2010 NCAA first round.

“The Robert Morris overtime thriller against Villanova last year brought back memories,” Parks said. “It reminded me of our Purdue game.”

After taking a beating from Bobby Knight’s Hoosiers in 1982, the Colonials fought their way back to the NCAA tournament the following year by again beating the Blackbirds in the ECAC-Metro title game.

“We were the little kids on the block trying to crash the big boys’ party and they didn’t like that very much.”

— Matt Furjanic

“You go from ‘Bobby Knight vs. Bobby Who?’ to being in your second straight NCAA tournament,” said Furjanic of his mindset in March, 1983.

Still, a lot folks were asking if Robert Morris really belonged in the championship bracket.

“Being that we were an automatic qualifier from a smaller conference, I had to answer more questions on why we deserved to be there rather than answering questions about my team,” said Furjanic. “We were the little kids on the block trying to crash the big boys’ party and they didn’t like that very much.”

Furjanic claims to have responded in the same way each time he was posed the question. The coach would say something to the effect of, “Yes, we deserve to be here because we won our conference and the league champion receives an NCAA bid.”

In retrospect, a response from the coach wasn’t even necessary because his players wound up answering the questions loud and clear for everyone to hear.

Before Parks and the Colonials could get their shot at Purdue, they had to get past Georgia Southern in an NCAA play-in held in Dayton, Ohio.

“We actually lost to Georgia Southern earlier that year in the West Virginia Tournament,” Furjanic recalled.

Avenging the regular season loss, Robert Morris’ top-tier backcourt tandem of Chipper Harris and Forest Grant combined for 33 points in a 64-54 win that sent the Colonials on a direct flight from Dayton to Tampa.

The back-to-back ECAC-Metro champions had a date with Gene Keady and his fifth-seeded Purdue Boilermakers at the Sun Dome in Florida.

Harris had scored 17 points and Parks 12, with both men shooting better than 50 percent from the field at this point. The Colonials and Boilermakers were deadlocked at 53-53 with only seconds remaining.

“I still remember the kid’s name — Steve Reid,” Furjanic said. “I’ll never forget it.”

Reid poured in 20 points that day, the last two of which came on the game-winning shot.

“They were trying to get the ball into their big kid and we were playing zone,” said Furjanic, recounting Purdue’s final possession. “All of a sudden, Reid pulls up from, to be realistic, about 30 feet out and puts up a shot. I almost cheered the shot at the time because I thought it was a terrible decision, but it went in!”

Purdue 55, Robert Morris 53. It was not the outcome the Colonials were hoping for, but nothing to be ashamed of either. The Colonials gave plenty of proof as to why the ECAC-Metro Conference deserved a chance to dance.

“Playing a top seed like Purdue to a two-point game is something I’m still proud of today,” said Parks, who has lived down in Florida for the past 16 years after spending much of his life in western Pennsylvania. “I still have my ECAC [wrist]watch.”

Memory Lane

Foster still remembers the compliment he received from legendary DePaul head coach Ray Meyer after a game one time. Yes, it’s been quite awhile since he played in the ECAC-Metro Conference, but he is not the only one who treasures the memory of his collegiate career.

After all, that certificate still hangs in Eric Short’s home office 30 years later. Tom Parks hasn’t lost the watch he received for winning the inaugural ECAC-Metro championship. Riley Clarida has yet to change his opinion of the over-the-back foul that was never called.

Each of these men were more than willing to take a trip down memory lane and share their stories as former student-athletes.

“It feels good to be remembered,” said Clarida right before wrapping up a phone conversation about his playing days.

Thirty years from now when someone asks Karon Abraham or Julian Boyd what is was like to play Northeast Conference basketball back in 2011, they’ll understand just how Clarida feels.