

Opinion: Le Moyne women's basketball team embracing transition to Division I

SYRACUSE, N.Y. — Cliches are cliches, but they stick for a reason, such as when one door closes, another one opens.

A new door has opened for Le Moyne athletics. It's a door that opens for athletic programs around the country every year, but what's happening within the Le Moyne women's basketball team is no cliché.

The college's move from Division II to Division I was first announced in May, but it was brewing in the background well before. Competition in the highest level of college sports began this fall.

With this in mind, I saw it fit to check in with the people living, competing, and winning through the transition at this very moment.

Women's basketball coach Mary Grimes is in her third season at Le Moyne -- a fearless leader, standing on the sidelines with the goals of bettering the young women around her and upholding the reputation of the school that reads across the front of each of their jerseys.

Leah Middleton is one of the newest dolphins on the roster. A 1,000+ point scorer at Auburn High School, she is an eager guard who finds ways to get her own while putting numbers in the assist column.



Leah Middleton evaluates the defense against the University of Southern California. Nov. 13, 2023. (Photo Courtesy of Le Moyne Athletics)

Haedyn Roberts is a senior captain, just as much on the court as off. She is gracefully navigating competition against new opponents at the upper echelon of the sport, not as an individual, but as a leader to her peers.



Haedyn Roberts plays defense against The University of Colorado. Nov. 8, 2023. (Photo Courtesy of Le Moyne Athletics)

They are three pieces working to build a revitalized version of a program that has developed a reputation for winning. It is work that comes with sacrifice – they won't have the chance to see the NCAA tournament until 2027-28, due to NCAA rules. But nothing worth doing comes easily.

For Grimes, the move came as no surprise. She was actively involved in the conversations and knew it was just a matter of time.

“It was kind of like when you're in a relationship with somebody, and like, oh, we should probably get married and you just keep having those conversations,” Grimes said. “And all of a sudden, they pop the question with a ring and you're like, 'Oh, yes.'”

For athletes that were enrolled, the news wasn't blindsiding. However, that didn't take away from the shock value of finding out they were becoming DI athletes. It was exciting for Roberts, but came hand in hand with so many questions, “It was a lot of unknown, I think a lot of the upperclassmen were just kind of on edge about it because we didn't know what it was gonna look like.”

Roberts had to reformulate her version of leadership, “Being an upperclassman, you try to guide your underclassmen and the women that are new this year to try to make that adjustment with you and you're kind of doing it with them. I'm just trying to give them advice and help them along the way the best way that I can.”

Her leadership, alongside 5th-year player and fellow captain Lytoya Baker, is proving to be vital. And Grimes would be the first person to tell you that.

I think they speak the same languages as me. They've been around me my whole career here and for the three years that I'm going into, and they understand just the team chemistry and that culture part. I think that bleeds over to the court.

Middleton was finishing up her senior year when the news broke. There was transparency throughout her recruiting process, so she knew it could be something coming down the road.

“Coach Grimes told me that they had already started making the transition as far as financials went,” Middleton said. “But I thought that it was gonna be a little bit into my time here.” In one moment, the outlook of her college career changed entirely. But it is change she's embracing.

Even with the jump being on everyone's radar, it meant a lot of changes that had to happen quickly. When you begin building a Division I schedule in May, a lot of the teams available to play are really good. It's just the nature of the sport. Most teams would rather get their feet wet in their first few games, but Le Moyne was given no choice but to dive right in.

“The timing was short, I had to get a full schedule within three months,” said Grimes. “So you know, that's the way why our schedule looked the way it did.”

Le Moyne traveled across the country to open their season in November. They faced Colorado State University and the University of Colorado, which was ranked No. 20 on the AP Poll. Today, they are ranked No. 3, comfortably sitting as one of the best teams in the entire sport. The Dolphins came home, only to later travel back to the West

Coast, and take on the University of Southern California, ranked No. 10 in the country. That team is now ranked No. 11.



Le Moyne women's basketball team outside of the Galen Center before a game against the University of Southern California. Nov 13, 2023. (Photo Courtesy of Le Moyne Athletics)

For Le Moyne, no matter the opponent, their outlook remains.

“It’s a great experience for anybody to go through,” Middleton said. “We always went in with the mindset like, ‘We’re going to hang with them, we can win these games.’ So even when we didn’t come out with a win, I think our morale was still pretty high, knowing that it’s only going to help us when we get into the conference.”

Wise words from a freshman tasked with swimming in uncharted territory.

“We kind of just threw ourselves in the deep end of the pool without a life jacket, so it was kind of hard to see, you know, what we were working towards,” admitted Grimes. “I think we went through those things that have only helped us prepare for what we’re facing now. You know, it gave some great experiences.”

As the end of January nears, Le Moyne has a 5-1 record in the Northeast Conference. Projected to finish eighth in a league of nine teams, they currently sit tied for first.



Le Moyne women's basketball celebrates its first Division I win over UMass Lowell at Costello Gymnasium in Lowell, Massachusetts. Nov. 18, 2023. (Photo Courtesy of Le Moyne Athletics)

“Playing those tough teams, we kind of come in, and we respect all teams we play but we're not going to be intimidated by teams. We're not going to be fearful,” said Roberts. “We're a team that should be at the top.”

The Dolphins are writing their own story. Or perhaps more accurately, they are adding new chapters to a success story that many have played a part in.

“It's important for me to continue to build what has been,” Grimes said. “Coach Caselli turned it around here at Le Moyne. I just want to continue that success and continue that tradition that she built.”

Throughout the conversation, it was abundantly clear how rich and sophisticated Grimes's knowledge of the game is. Only a fraction of the conversation was spent discussing the X's and the O's, but truly understanding the game goes far beyond what's drawn up on a whiteboard.



Le Moyne women's basketball head coach Mary Grimes leads her team against Saint Francis. Jan. 21, 2024. (Photo Courtesy of Le Moyne Athletics)

The jump to DI means facing new teams, new coaches and new strategies. It means a different level of preparation is needed going into each game. In past years, Grimes and her staff could call back to film from prior seasons when facing teams that competed in the Northeast-10. This year, there is more of a blank slate. But at the end of the day, Grimes said it best.

Basketball is still basketball.

Like any experienced coach, when she sees something on the court, it likely isn't the first time she's seen it. Through the first portion of the season, she's gotten into the practice of associating rotations and plays back to teams that returning players would have seen in the Northeast-10. "The more that I can help them relate, and understand, it alleviates some of that pressure of having to figure out things on their own," she shared.

The jump to DI has also meant a rise in exposure. "I think now it's more a national level," Grimes said. "We were on ESPN + in the non-conference more times than I could count."

The more eyes on your program, the greater the pool of players who might want to play for you. Now at the highest level, recruits will get the opportunity to play the best, which Grimes says won't change anytime soon, "They're going to have an opportunity to play some tough competition and honestly, I'm not afraid to play anybody. If Geno and UCONN want to come to Le Moyne and play, they are welcome."

Being in Division I has made it necessary for this team to adapt. But it hasn't changed anything at a foundational level. They are a tight-knit group, and each piece trusts the next -- a culture worth preserving and passing down to each person who wears the jersey.

When we think about success in the world of college basketball, it's so easy to jump to the postseason. For Le Moyne, the immediate future doesn't look like that.

The team will be eligible for NEC postseason play immediately, as the president's council voted to eliminate the two-year postponement this summer. However, the NCAA tournament is off the table until 2027-28. The rule is supposedly in place to help the athletic departments at these new Division I schools handle and absorb the complexities of being a Division I program. Yet, they are still allowed to compete for regular season conference championships. But if they win, that's the end of the road. It's curious, and there are a lot of questions that surround the thinking, but that's how it is. It is a reality that this team is choosing to embrace.

"Yeah, we can't go into the postseason," Grimes said. "But we can still win a regular-season championship. So when we're able to compete in the postseason, I don't want that part to be lost. You know, no one can take a regular-season championship away from us. So there are steps before you even can compete in the NCAA tournament that we would have to fulfill anyway."

For seniors like Roberts, it's a level of success that she will never get the chance to shoot for. But if you ask her, what they are building is worth the sacrifice.

We can still be competitive in our conference, we can play in the conference tournament, and I think we're just laying the groundwork for future teams to be able to get the opportunity.

Even though I might not be the one competing in the NCAA Tournaments, I'm setting the groundwork and the same thing for Leah. We might be giving girls you know, in 5-10 years the opportunity to play in the tournament where we might not have had that.



Haedyn Roberts takes the ball to the hoop against the Richmond Spiders. Dec. 3, 2023. (Photo Courtesy of Le Moyne Athletics)

In the short term, their coach wants the best from this team, recognizing what that looks like, is not completely clear.

“Last year, we were 21-7, and did I know we were gonna finish that way? No, that was what the team was built to do,” Grimes said. “I don’t want to, project anything, but I think we’re going to strive to be successful.”

Success is many things. Success is something that can be proven, or even given. But when it comes to teams like Le Moyne, I do not doubt that success will be something they consistently work to earn.

When one door closes, another opens, it forces each of us to make decisions.

What do you bring with you, and what do you leave behind?

Le Moyne women's basketball leaves behind a lot of what they know as they welcome new teams to Ted Grant Court, and pack their bags to take different bus rides than seasons past.

The past brought about lessons learned. The realities of transitioning will present challenges. But beyond that opened door, they are already finding a lot more space to evolve.