A Championship—and Seasons Cut Short

AFTER College administrators informed students that they must move out of their dorms by 5 p.m. on Sunday, March 15, Harvard Athletics began to make its own cancellations—a necessary response, but a brutal blow to athletes, coaches, and staff.

On Tuesday, March 10, the Ivy League canceled the men’s and women’s basketball tournaments (scheduled to take place in Lavietes Pavilion), and selected Yale and Princeton, the regular-season men’s and women’s winners, to represent the league at their respective NCAA tournaments. Two days later, the NCAA canceled them, too.

An initial lack of clarity from the University frustrated athletes who were set to compete in postseason championship events. Kieran Tuntivate ’20—who had run a Harvard-record 3:57 mile earlier in the season to qualify for the NCAA Division I Indoor National Championships—detailed in an Instagram post how the College had removed him and his teammates Anna Juul ’21 and Abbe Goldstein ’21 from the competition minutes before they were set to leave campus for Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The entire championship would be canceled. “Actually thanks to Harvard I’m not stuck in Albuquerque now,” Tuntivate posted on Instagram.

By Wednesday, March 11, at 3 p.m., every Ivy League spring sporting event was canceled, and the University declared that no Harvard athlete would participate in any individual or team postseason competition (nearly all of which were later suspended by the NCAA). The ECAC hockey men’s quarterfinal series, between Harvard and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute—previously scheduled to be played without an audience—was called off, too.

“We understand the disappointment that will be felt by many of you and many in our community,” wrote athletics director Robert L. Scalise in a statement to coaches and staff, “but we must be guided by what is best for the health and safety of all.” The sentiment applied especially to seniors—and likely Scalise himself, who retires at the end of the academic year.

Reports from the interrupted season follow. ~The Editors

“Drip, Drip, Drip”

Erwin Cai ’20 knew he should make a defensive move. The problem was execution. A sabre fencer since age eight, he predicted that his opponent was about to attack. If he could parry and riposte—block the Yale captain’s attack and go in for his own—he could win the point. The move was instinctual, drilled into his muscle memory.

A freshman at the time, Cai was competing in his first Ivy League championship, a tournament with almost fabled status among his older teammates. “It’s something you buy into from day one,” he recalls. “When you show up as a freshman and you see the level of motivation that all the upperclassmen have toward winning the event, the amount they talk about it, how hard they work toward this goal, you understand something is special about this.”

But in that 2017 championship bout, Cai began to second-guess his instincts. A natural “destructive” fencer known for dismantling opponents’ prepared strategies, he saw that a calculated risk was the best move. But another option clouded his mind: if he attacked at the same time as his opponent, per the rules of sabre fencing, no one would earn a point. The safer, risk-averse option weighed on him. Fencing not to lose, instead of to win, was seductive.

And what happened was I did neither,” Cai says. “I literally just stood there and got hit. And it was the most frustrating thing. I took my mask off and I was like, ‘Why didn’t I do anything?’ I couldn’t even do the safe thing.” Yale went on to edge Harvard 14–13.

The Crimson men ended with a record of 1–4, finishing second to last. The Crimson women ended with a record of 4–1, finishing second to last.

Last September, four months after the sudden dismissal of longtime head coach Peter Brand for a conflict-of-interest issue (see harvardmag.com/brand-19), Daria Schneider took charge of the men’s and women’s teams. A 2011 U.S. national champion fencer and a fixture in the Ivy League, she had competed, and was a two-year captain, for Columbia before joining that team’s staff as an assistant coach upon graduation. She then spent three years as head coach at Cornell, earning Ivy League Co-Coach of the Year honors in 2018.

When Schneider accepted the Harvard position, she was well aware of the men’s team’s talent level. A slew of them had competed on the international stage for both cadet (under 17) and junior (under 20) fencing squads, and had brought home individual and team medals. But it wasn’t enough to be Ivy favorites; Columbia had the NCAA’s top
For the opening round of the 2020 Ivy championship, the Harvard men, the second-ranked team in the country, were set to face Columbia, the one squad ranked higher. The winner would be the favorite to win it all. In a three-round, 27-bout matchup, Harvard would have to win 14. They knew it would be tight.

Cai was the first one on the strip, tasked with setting the tone. A defensive stalwart with a notoriously quick hand and powerful attack, he has an unmistakable fiery presence in person and in competition. “He’s got an emotional intensity that I think is unique,” Schneider says. “I think when he’s locked in to that intensity with the right balance, he is almost unbeatable in the college circuit.” The problem, at times, had been harnessing that energy.

Cai was facing off against Christopher Walker, a first-year at Columbia. The pair had fenced for years in the same club in Atlanta, under the same coach. What had started off as a mentor-mentee relationship had evolved into something different. Walker, a powerhouse in his own right, had recently won a major national tournament—a key Olympic qualifying step.

The foil and épée bouts occur simultaneously in the Ivy tournament, but sabre bouts take place alone. So when Cai fell behind 2-0, all eyes were on him. “Christopher came out with this level of fury that I don’t think I’ve ever seen from him before,” Cai recalls. “That is so frightening. Because of the structure of the tournament, everyone is just watching you—everyone on your team, everyone else on the other team.”

But unlike during that freshman-year bout, the nerves didn’t get to him; he’d done all the prep, and in a first-to-five match, he still had time. “There was just this calm understanding that I lost those last few points, not a big deal,” he recalls. “I still have the ability to win the next five in a row.”

Cai scored two points, and later, with the score tied 4-4, Walker went in for an attack that pushed Cai to the back of the strip. If they hit each other at the same time while Cai was on defense, Walker would be awarded the point. Counterattacking in this scenario is considered risky; if the opponent can touch in time, it’s a losing move. But when Cai saw an opening in Walker’s hand area, he went in, no hesitation.

Only one light flashed: he got the point. He ripped off his mask and roared as his teammates celebrated. “It’s kind of a special moment because it’s an action I practice a lot, and it’s very high risk,” he says. “I’m willing to do it in practice, but it’s so rare for me to trust myself to ever pull out in competition.”

The Crimson men would go on to narrowly beat Columbia, and then defeat Brown, Yale, Penn, and Princeton in a series of dominant performances. The women’s team—gutting out the tournament with no substitutes—finished with a record of 3-3, falling to three teams who ended the season in the nation’s top seven. The Crimson women themselves ended the season ranked number nine in the NCAA.

Erwin Cai says the team’s past performances speak for themselves: a combined 14 Ivy League titles for men and women and the 2006 co-ed NCAA team championship, among other accolades. Now, he adds “It’s more about how do we change from ‘We’re a serious competitor,’ to ‘We’re dominant?’ How do we reach that level where teams show up, and they’ve already lost?”

He might already know the answer: drip, drip, drip.

~JACOB SWEET

“Not Meant to Be”

When the Ivy league announced that Harvard would host the 2020 conference basketball tournaments, it appeared to set up an ideal situation for the Crimson teams. Both would be led by talented seniors playing in a gym where they had a combined 80-18 career record. But the women—weakened by injuries and attrition—failed to qualify for the tournament for the first time, and the men, who earned the number two seed, never got to participate after the event was canceled.

After losing to Yale in last year’s tournament championship game, the team adopted an ambitious motto for this season: “Best Ever.” That would mean reaching the Sweet 16 round of the NCAA tournament—an admittedly lofty goal, but an attainable one if seniors Seth Towns, the 2018 Ivy League Player of the Year, and Bryce Aiken, a 2019 first-team all-league honoree, were healthy. That never happened.

Towns, who missed the 2018-2019 season with a knee injury, had surgery in December, ending his Harvard career. (After the season, he announced that he would play as a gradu-