

2009 ALL-METRO BASLETBALL TEAMS GIRLS PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Morabito embraced role as Binghamton's leader

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As the lone returning starter and one of just four holdovers from last year's Binghamton team, junior Jen Morabito admitted to some uncertainty heading into this season following back-to-back seasons in which the Patriots captured the Southern Tier Athletic Conference Metro Division title.

"I was really wondering how it was all going to come out," Morabito said. "I just didn't know what to expect, but I think the work we've all put in throughout the season, we all stepped up and progressed really well." Binghamton did progress well, shaking a slow start to win its third straight STAC Metro Division title. And while the emergence of newcomers such as Phoebe Byrnes and Tiahana Mills, to name a pair, certainly played a role in the Patriots' success, there is little doubt that Morabito played the biggest role. Already an All-Metro performer a year ago, Morabito was thrust into a whole new role as the unquestioned leader of the Binghamton girls basketball team.

She embraced that role, averaging 21.1 points, 5.3 rebounds and 3.5 assists per game. Over the last 12 games, in which Binghamton went 8-4 to catch Union-Endicott for the Metro Division crown, Morabito averaged 24.3 points per game.

For her spectacular season, Morabito not only is a repeat member of the 10-player Press & Sun-Bulletin All-Metro girls basketball team — selected by this reporter after consultation with area coaches — but is also this year's All-Metro Girls Basketball Player of the Year. "For a coach, she's a dream," first-year Binghamton coach Kristin Lemon said. "She understands the game. She knows the hard work that goes into it. She's one of those kids you never have to worry about getting excited for a game, especially a big game." Watch Morabito and you'll see the total package.

Off the dribble, she drives fearlessly to the basket, either converting from short range or getting to the free-throw line, where she had a whopping 168 attempts this season. The middle clogged? No problem. Morabito can drill the 15-footer with regularity and when forced beyond the 3-point line, can convert there as well, having made 22 3-pointers this season. Defensively, the 5-foot-10 Morabito has the ability to not only clog passing

lanes, but to make opponents pay for offensive indecision, igniting Binghamton's solid transition game with a steal or a deflection.

U-E coach Laura Ansbro, who had to deal with Morabito four times this season and watched her average 22.3 points per game in leading the Patriots to three wins against the Tigers, is among the many impressed with Morabito's play. "Jen definitely has a passion for the game of basketball, she's proven that in her commitment to working on her game during the offseason and during the season," Ansbro said. "She sets very high standards. It's evident when she's on the court."

Though her season ended with a loss to Horseheads in the Section 4 Class AA title game, Morabito's season did reach a satisfying ending as she verbally committed to play Division I for Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference member Canisius starting with the 2010-11 season. But her rise toward the elite of Section 4 didn't happen overnight. When she first joined Binghamton's varsity team as a freshman, Morabito was a frail freshman who showed flashes of offensive talent but found herself often overmatched physically by stronger, more experienced players. Since then, she has worked with BX Player Development in Binghamton. Six days a week, for the past two years, Morabito has taken part in a program that combines weight-training with extensive work on basketball skills. The result is a faster, stronger, more confident Morabito.

"The drive, and the work ethic that she has, she was somebody that had a goal to play Division I basketball as a ninth-grader," said Mike Constantine, Morabito's trainer through BX Player Development. "She sacrificed, she dedicated herself to reach that goal."

"There were 8-9 girls that had trained with us and had aspirations to play Division I or II basketball. Jen was the only one that really committed to reach that level." The work didn't pay immediate dividends this season, as Morabito struggled to find cohesiveness with her new teammates and the Patriots stumbled to a 4-6 start.

"Individually, I knew I had to step up and be a leader," Morabito said. "I knew we had a lot of younger faces and newcomers, but you could see we were starting to get better." Binghamton did get better, winning eight of its final 11 games.

Lemon has no doubt that Morabito's hard work was a major reason behind her team's turnaround. "She does a lot of work in the offseason, and I'm a firm believer players are made in the offseason," Lemon said. "She knows she has to do more than what's required of her, and she does it."