From 1997-2004 the Woman’s Lacrosse program enjoyed a period of unparalleled success. In that eight-year span, the Panthers won a staggering five National Championships, and four of those teams were undefeated. To distinguish between them in terms of ability or success would be impossible. For this period of time it is safe to say that Woman’s Lacrosse program resembled a dynasty.

The 1997 team lost a game, which the four other national championship teams would manage to avoid, but the first championship is always the hardest to win. This group of girls started a winning tradition that still holds today and set the bar high for following years. After a dip in play in the 1998 season, the program began to exhibit true dominance.

1999 served as a critical year for the Panthers. With high expectations Middlebury delivered a magical season, and the first undefeated campaign in program history. The Panthers cruised through their regular season schedule without a hiccup. In the tournament, no game was close until the final against rival Amherst, where the Panthers managed to squeak by with a 10-9 victory for their second National Championship. The 1999 team reignited the tradition of excellence, and took it one further with their perfect 17-0 record.

For any other team in the country, the 2000 season would have been considered a success. The Panthers finished the regular season with only one loss, with Amherst avenging their National Championship defeat from the previous year. Come tournament time though, the mentality was title or bust. The Panthers easily advanced to the Final Four once again, and met Williams in the semi-final. The Panthers had beaten the same Williams team 14-8 the previous month, however this was not their day. Williams prevailed 11-9 in a tight contest and crushed the Panthers hopes of repeating.

The disheartening loss the year before served as motivation for the 2001 team. This team ran the table and coasted to the National Championship where they met a familiar foe. The Amherst Lord Jeffs were once again standing between the Panthers and a National Title, and although the Panthers had decidedly beaten them twice before that season, never should they be overlooked. The game proved to be a classic and needed overtime to be decided. In Overtime, Betsy Wheeler scored to secure the perfect 18-0 season and give Middlebury their third National Championship in five years.

The 2002 team was arguably the most dominant of the era. Their closest margin of victory was a 8-4 win on the road at Amherst. If you consider this 4 point differential a close game, then it was the only one. Led by Julia Bergofsky and Kristin Hanley, who posted an astounding 72 and 74 points respectively, The Panthers annihilated opponents en route to another National Championship. The 2002 team was also the only team of the era to repeat as National Champions.

If any team had rivaled the prowess of the Panthers over the previous few years, it had been the Lord Jeffs of Amherst. Time after time again the Panthers had to defeat their NESCAC rival to achieve their goals, and 2003 would be no different. After an undefeated season and tournament, the Panthers found themselves hosting the National Championship once again. Earlier that year, on the very same field, Middlebury destroyed Amherst 16-5. Perhaps this led to a little bit of overconfidence, and if results of the past few years have taught us anything it is that Amherst is always a quality opponent. The Lord Jeffs stunned the Panthers 11-9 and squashed hopes of a three peat.

Following years with a disappointing loss, it had begun to seem like a formality that the Panthers would bounce back in championship fashion. Led by First-Team All Americans Nuala O’Donohoe, Becca Brakely, and Sarah Grenert, the panthers would once again hoist the National Championship trophy. The Panthers would also once agin have to beat Amherst in the final four to make this a reality. Although this eight year span is predominantly a story of Middlebury dominance, the rivalry between Amherst and Middlebury over this time period is one seldom seen in sports. The programs won 6 of 8 National Championships over the time span, however Middlebury clearly won the war with 5 of them.

The dynasty was engineered by Missy Foote, who still patrols the Panther sidelines today. The 1997-2004 time period truly was a dynasty, with a record of 131-7 and a 51 game winning streak that spanned from 2001 into much of the 2003 season. Such dominance is rarely matched by any team at any level, and these years provide the Woman’s Lacrosse program with an unmatched level of tradition.