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HOTTEST TICKET IN SPORTS? COACH DAN HURLEY



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE /BILL LYONS

Dan Hurley, with brother Bobby, left, has turned around the men's basketball program at Wagner College. With a record of 15-4 heading into tonight's game at Sacred Heart, the team is a force to be reckoned with in the Northeast Conference and memorably knocked off the Big East's Pitt in December.

By CORMAC GORDON / STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

No matter where you travel on Staten Island these days, just about every sports conversation includes a discussion of where successful second-year Wagner College coach Dan Hurley is heading next.

Rumors abound.

Find a college hoops program with a losing record, and thorough sports fans will attach Hurley's name to it. Delaware, Rhode Island, Canisius, Western Kentucky — you name it.

Even better, did you hear the one about St. John's Steve Lavin returning to the West Coast to coach one of those floundering Pac-12 outfits, or Kevin Willard bolting Seton Hall for a coaching challenge with a few less built-in hurdles, and Hurley stepping right into the Big East?

The bottom line is the 39-year-old Seahawk coach with the brash

manner, pristine hoops pedigree and 15-4 record is the hot commodity these days, the next big thing.

Just ask Dickie V, or USA Today, or even "60 Minutes," for heaven's sake. Vitale has Hurley on his way to Springfield and the Hall of Fame, and that's a grand total of 49 games into the Seahawk coach's college career.

It's the sort of frenzy that occurs in this instant-news-cycle world when you begin a season by tripling the win total of two years back, besting the 13-17 record of

*After lifting the
Wagner Seahawks
to new heights,
he's in demand*

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Wagner College's remaining schedule

The Seahawks are off to a hot start under second-year coach Dan Hurley, compiling a 15-4 record (6-2 in the Northeast Conference). Home games in bold.

Today at Sacred Heart, 7 p.m.

Saturday at Quinnipiac, 2 p.m.

Feb. 2 vs. Robert Morris, 7 p.m.

Feb. 4 vs. St. Francis, 7 p.m.

Feb. 8 at Mount St. Mary's, 7 p.m.

Feb. 11 vs. Mount St. Mary's, 7 p.m.

Feb. 16 vs. Monmouth, 7 p.m.

Feb. 18 vs. Fairleigh Dickinson, 7 p.m.

Feb. 23 at Bryant, 7 p.m.

Feb. 25 at Central Connecticut State, 3:30 p.m.

March 1-7 NEC Tournament

To purchase tickets to the remaining home games, visit the Spiro Center ticket office, or go to wagnerathletics.com or call 718-420-4039.

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LOCAL NEWS

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Hottest ticket in sports? Wagner hoops Coach Dan Hurley

last year, and accomplishing all that with more than a month of the regular season left to play.

But what if Dan Hurley isn't in any great rush to get off Grymes Hill and move on to some bigger setting, the kind of place with chartered planes for road trips, player lounges for the stars to hang, and an unlimited checkbook for the coach's amenities?

What if Hurley — with his game-day wardrobe of semi-rumpled off-the-rack suits and his idea of a big night out as pizza and a beer — is pretty much a Staten Island-type guy to his bones, and what if he knows it?

'ZERO IMPACT'

"All the talk has had zero impact on me," Hurley insisted Monday afternoon in his small second-floor office above the Spiro Center court. "I never thought that climbing the coaching ladder was important. I always felt that finding a place where I fit in and felt comfortable was what this was all about."

So maybe, as some insiders have suggested, Hurley and Wagner will be coming to some understanding soon on what would be a multi-year contract, something the school has never offered to a coach.

If that's the case, a salary bump for Hurley from near the bottom of the Northeast Conference coaching pay scale to nearer to the top would undoubtedly be part of any proposal.

Both Hurley and college administrators refuse to address that possibility directly.

But Wagner's president, Dr. Richard Guarasci, who regularly sits courtside when the Seahawks play on Grymes Hill, is clearly more than just a casual fan of the coach, hired 21 months ago by athletic director Walt Hameline.

More on the web



For an interview with Hurley, go to silive.com/video.

For photos of his Wagner career, go to silive.com/photos.

"We're ecstatic with the job Dan is doing for us in terms of the quality of the program and the way he and his staff are educating the students," Guarasci said. "We will continue to make every effort to make him feel comfortable here."

Hurley sounds like someone in a sweet spot right now, commuting from his Freehold, N.J., home every morning, and having his brother Bobby as his top assistant. And his father, Bob Sr., is just a few minutes over the Bayonne Bridge in Jersey City, where the legendary high school coach can zip in for Wagner morning practices whenever he feels the urge.

Dan and Bobby Hurley's kids spend pregames shooting hoops on the Spiro court while the crowds file into the building.

It's all pretty cozy.

"I'm in the part of the country I want to be," explained Hurley, who turned down the Marist College head coaching position a few years back because Poughkeepsie was too far from Central Jersey. "I have great bosses here, and we have terrific kids with us now and some others on the way."

RECORD CROWD

The Seahawks, even with Saturday's 73-66 loss to Northeast Conference-leading LIU Brooklyn in front of a record-setting crowd at Spiro (2,412), are still 6-2 in league play. And the sports center staff was forced to turn so many people away at Spiro that snowy night that the athletic department spent time the last few days reaching out to disappointed fans.

"They've generated a ton of excitement," Hameline said recently of Hurley and his staff.

And why wouldn't that be the case?

Hurley took over a talent-thin 5-26 team in the spring of 2010, and turned it into a feisty group that went 9-9 in the NEC last year and battled for the league regular-season title before a five-game losing skid at season's end.

That's a substantial turnaround, but perhaps not the most important element Hurley brought with him to Wagner.

"We have a vision," he has said. "We want to raise the level."

And so far they have.

Prior to the loss to LIU, which snapped an eight-game win streak, the Seahawks received a vote in the Associated Press Top 25 for three consecutive weeks. That's precisely three more times than in the previous six decades the poll has been in existence.

And Hurley and his staff pulled off a recruiting coup this past fall when they convinced last season's Mr. Michigan High School Basketball, 6-foot-3 guard Dwaun Anderson, to enroll at Wagner after withdrawing from Michigan State University.

Anderson, the most high-profile high school player ever to choose Wagner, will be eligible to play in January 2013.

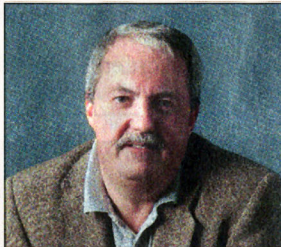
The Seahawks need eight more victories this year to reach the program's all-time win total, a record set by Mike Deane's 2007-08 club, which went 23-8.

That's not to say the team, or the program, is ready to rival the "small school" powerhouses like Gonzaga or Butler any time soon. Two of Wagner's losses this season are to NEC powerhouse and



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE/HILTON FLORES

Wagner's Coach Dan Hurley gets some pregame advice from son, Andrew.



CORMAC GORDON

reigning conference champion LIU, games in which the Seahawks were clearly outplayed by a more rugged and experienced opponent.

And Hurley is still learning, and growing more at ease, in the college game.

"I understand this level better than I did when I got the job," he says. "I see more where the pieces fit and I think I know where we want to be headed."

And where, exactly, is that destination?

"Our goal is to put this program on the map," Hurley declared.

That doesn't sound like a guy who's packing his bags any time soon.

Cormac Gordon is a sports reporter for the Advance. He may be reached at gordon@siadvance.com.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Dan Hurley played his college ball at Seton Hall. Here he's guarded by St. John's guard Tarik Turner in the first half of a game at Madison Square Garden on Feb. 17, 1996. Hurley, a senior, scored his 1,000th career point in the game.