



Sunday, January 29, 2012

Coach Hurley, brother, have Wagner on fast track

By HOWIE KUSSOY

It's a quiet Tuesday morning at Wagner College. Inside the Spiro Sports Center at the small Staten Island school, the emerging basketball team has just begun its first drill of practice. Mere seconds pass before head coach Dan Hurley screams in frustration.

In minutes, he shows the wear of a habit that stretches for hours, with a voice that grows hoarse as he reaches the crescendo of each infuriating moment. Each lull only serves as the transition to the next inevitable eruption.

"I ask for two of the 24 hours in their day to practice with great passion and great emotion and to communicate," Hurley said. "I'm not asking them to do it and I'm on the side sipping on my coffee. I'm in the fight with them. Practice time is my time to really push and drive and drag the very best out of them."

The team responds. As practice progresses, players voice similar emotion to their teammates, unified by potential. When sophomore Latif Rivers, the team's leading scorer, dives for a loose ball, the rest of the squad runs over and helps him off the floor.

"The culture is one of the things that had to be changed and has changed," senior Tyler Murray said. "Coach implemented that change right when he got here. He just told us that things aren't going to be easy, you're going to hate me some days, but hopefully some day down the road you're going to love the process that you'll go through."

After accumulating a record of 223-21 in nine seasons at St. Benedict's Prep in Newark, Hurley took over last season and inherited a Wagner team coming off a five-win season that was picked to finish at the bottom of the Northeast Conference. Instead, he led the Seahawks to an eight-win improvement, the best for any team with a first-year coach, and has followed it up by helping Wagner to its best start (17-4, 8-2 NEC) in 56 years.

"If you would've told me that we'd be [17-4], 20 months in, I would've thought you were out of your mind," Hurley said.

Wagner's story is evolving. The conversation is shifting.

Hurley's arrival made headlines when he brought along his older brother, Bobby, as an assistant coach. Dan, a former player at Seton Hall, and Bobby, the point guard of Duke's back-to-back NCAA title teams in 1991-92, derive their passion from their father, Bob, one of three high school coaches in the Hall of Fame thanks to a legendary run at St. Anthony's of Jersey City.

They are well aware of the cachet their name holds. Dan admits to regularly flashing Bobby's NBA Draft photo on the recruiting trail, but with their immediate success, it is not the only thing the brothers have to sell.

Next year's recruiting class already is off to a great start, having landed last year's Mr. Basketball from Michigan, 6-foot-4 guard Dwaun Anderson, who originally signed with Michigan State. He recently has joined Wagner practices and will suit up next season.

"That was one of the biggest hurdles we had is when you would call a recruit or coach, people didn't really know a lot about Wagner," Bobby said. "Some times, kids didn't even know if we were Division I. We sold ourselves and our backgrounds and what we've accomplished in

basketball. Now, we get to talk about tangible success and winning games, and it's not just lip service. What we're saying, it's actually happening."

Wagner has won 10 of its past 11 following yesterday's 51-50 victory at Quinnipiac. The start of that run was an eight-game winning streak, their longest in 23 years, which began with an upset at then-No. 13 Pittsburgh on Dec. 23. It was Wagner's first win over a ranked opponent since 1978.

In a one-bid league, Wagner would have to win the conference championship to make the NCAA tournament. With just one appearance in school history, a tournament berth would be enormous. But it isn't everything.

"We wanted to become a respectable program in our first year, and I think we've achieved that," Dan said. "The next jump for us is to go from respectable to good, but that's a big jump. We're trying to learn how to make that jump, and even though we're off to a great start, we're not there yet."