

Yankee goes home, finds comfort at Wagner

Jack Styczynski

Mike Deane is back where he belongs.

He's no longer in Milwaukee, where one mediocre campaign at Marquette can land you on the basketball coaching unemployment line, even if you've won almost 65 percent of your games and been to a post-season tournament in your four previous years.

Neither is he in Beaumont, Texas, where egomaniacal alumnus Billy Tubbs was destined to replace him on the Lamar sideline, even if Deane was the coach who led the school to its only NCAA Tournament appearance in 20 years and Tubbs pretended to have no such plans after being named athletic director in 2002.

Now he's back in New York as the head coach at Wagner College, where his skills can be appreciated the way they were when he began his Division I head coaching career at Siena in 1986.

That was more than 320 wins ago. Four NCAA trips ago. Five NIT trips ago. The résumé might deserve better than Wagner, but the person fits perfectly.

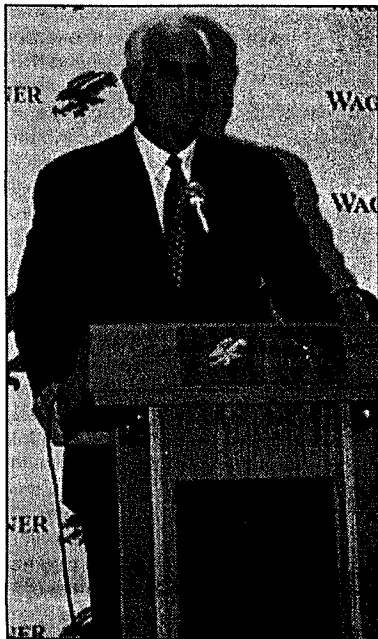
Deane is a "big fish in a small pond" type of guy. Things aren't quite as smooth when he's in a big pond (Marquette) or he's a small fish (Lamar). Like Siena, Wagner is his kind of environment.

After losing his job at Lamar last spring, the Stony Point, N.Y., native was quickly snapped up by the small school on Staten Island after the highly successful Dereck Whittenburg left for Fordham. Deane and Wagner athletic director Walt Hameline knew each other from their days as young coaches nearly 30 years ago. At his introductory press conference, Deane said, "my wife and I could not be happier to be returning to the Northeast, where we established our roots." Unspoken in this statement is the truth that he probably has no more "inner Texan" than Spike Lee. Bye, bye, Lone Star State.

Prior to coaching at Siena, Deane learned the Division I ropes as an assistant to former Michigan State coach Jud Heathcote, helping develop players such as Sam Vincent and Scott Skiles. Incidentally, Deane's position was filled by current Spartans' head coach Tom Izzo after he left for Siena, and Deane was later replaced by MSU assistant Tom Crean at Marquette after he lost his job there in 1999. Although they are three different men, much of what Izzo, Crean, and Deane have accomplished can be traced back to Heathcote.

Deane begins with D

Above all (and in stark contrast to Tubbs), Deane is a defensive coach. His teams at Siena, Marquette and Lamar frequently ranked among



Mike Deane

the nation's best in field-goal percentage defense, with one of his Marquette squads actually finishing first in that category. As of late January, Wagner was allowing opponents to shoot just over 41 percent from the field, stingiest in the Northeast Conference.

Aside from his coaching ability, Deane has a couple of notable qualities. First is his sense of humor, which is wickedly caustic, but also often self-deprecating. Everyone seems to have a favorite Mike Deane moment or one-liner.

Once, when describing a player with a little too much

heft in his backside, Deane quipped, "when he hauls ass, he has to make two trips." Another time, after a particularly ugly loss on the night of a nasty ice storm, he concurred with the analysis of a heckler. "One guy says, 'Hey, I risked my life to watch this tonight. You guys gotta play a little better.' I thought it was maybe as good a commentary as possibly could be."

Even deeper than Deane's sense of humor is his genuine concern for academics beyond the typical lip service most coaches pay. Early in his eight-year tenure at Siena, Deane showed no mercy when his high-scorer was charged with drug possession and declared academically ineligible. "We are not a basketball factory," said the coach at the time. "Degrees and players' futures are more important than basketball."

Thus, he established an attitude that has led to a stellar graduation rate among Deane's players, but hasn't necessarily helped his own career. What worked at Siena didn't prevent him from losing jobs at Marquette and Lamar.

"I got a bad deal at Marquette, I think," Deane says of being fired after a five-year stint that included four 20-win seasons, two NCAA Tournament berths and two NIT bids. "At Lamar, it was just never a real good fit. They didn't want the same things I wanted, and when Bill Tubbs came on as the athletic director, it was very transparent what was going to happen. So I have no bad feelings about it. It's actually worked out very well for me, because Wagner College is a much better situation for me to be in than that Lamar situation was. I'm

not a south of the Mason-Dixon line guy. I tend to say what I think, and I think my particular personality and style will be more appreciated here in the Northeast.

"This is where I belong, and Wagner College, like Siena, has a similar mission, similar statement and similar concern for the student-athlete, and that's the best matchup for me. That's always the way I've wanted to coach, and the last two stops I had, it was more about dollars and W's. I'm back in a place where it's about the kids, the students, the people around the program, and that's where I like to be.

"I'm much more proud of what we've accomplished during my career in regard to graduating players than anything that we've done on the court. I have a one-page contract and a one-year contract, and the only thing that's written in that contract is that I have to continue to graduate student-athletes representing Wagner College in basketball. I like that kind of philosophy. I'm comfortable in that atmosphere."

That's not to say Deane has turned apathetic about winning. His fiery sideline demeanor, typified by intense "chats" with players and officials, remains hot. Beyond that, the dark glasses he's been wearing the past several years to relieve an eye problem make him look more intimidating than ever, almost Darth Vader-esque. Earlier this season across town from his old Siena stomping grounds, the coach was at his best, using a triangle-and-two defense and a few "inspiring" words to turn a 21-point Wagner deficit into a 10-point road victory over the University at Albany. "I just told the guys at halftime, we're not gonna lose this game...in a few more words than that and with a different tone, as you can imagine," Deane deadpanned afterward.

What got Deane smiling was the sizable contingent of Siena fans that came out to see him, one of whom yelled out "We love you Mike!" before the opening tip. "Back when I was at Siena, we used to have on our stationery, 'Siena basketball, a family affair,' and it really was back then. It's a little bit different now. The nature of basketball as it's evolved is a little more corporate, a little more dollar-conscious. Back then, we were very people-conscious, and those were the people that were the core of the support I had during that time, and they all came out tonight, so I went over to thank them ... this game was very, very important to me."

A few days later, Deane saw many of those same folks when Siena invited him back for a 15th-anniversary celebration of his 1989 "measles team" that upset Stanford in the NCAA Tournament. He still questions his decision to leave Siena for Marquette in 1994. "In hindsight, I wish I would have just stayed here ... but that's easy to (say) now. It was time to make the move when I made it, and now I'm back at Wagner College, which is as close to Siena as you could possibly

be. I'm very happy there."

Now Deane must work on an encore to Wagner's first-ever NCAA Tournament appearance, after Whittenburg left to take over the win-starved Fordham program. ("I wonder some days if he really is glad he did," says Deane.). Their top two scorers from last year graduated, the Seahawks began this season with six straight losses. However, Deane is known for riding his point guards to success, and Wagner happens to have a good one in senior Courtney Pritchard. The team was still struggling during the early portion of the Northeast Conference schedule, but a late-season rally is not out of the question.

"You've got to play your best in February, and I've been pretty successful at getting my teams peaked at the right time," notes Deane, who's trying to lead his fourth school to the Big Dance. "I think this team could be very dangerous when the time comes late in the year. The nice thing is, if we are fortunate enough to be in that group that plays in the (NEC) tournament, it will be at home at least for the first two rounds here at Wagner College, and that has to be good for us."

In the 11-team NEC, the top eight qualify for the conference tournament, and all the 2004 event's quarterfinal and semifinal games will be played on Staten Island. Wagner was picked to finish fifth in the league's preseason coaches' poll, although the slow start has made that a taller order.

Winding up

Looking back to his younger days, Deane says he had no idea playing basketball at Potsdam State would lead to such a long and winding career coaching the sport, beginning with assistant coaching jobs at Potsdam and Plattsburgh State, then head coaching gigs at Delhi A&T junior college and Oswego State. Few even know that he also played baseball at Potsdam and coached it there and at Plattsburgh. A solid student as well, Deane was named the Chancellor Boyer SUNY scholar-athlete of the year as a senior in 1974.

"I went to college with the idea that I was gonna be a combination of Thomas F.X. Casey and Len Stirling," Deane recalls, not knowing he'd eventually rack up 1,447 points and 805 assists on the basketball court. "Len Stirling was my high school coach, and Thomas F.X. Casey was my Advanced Placement history teacher (and) also my New York State history teacher. I had him two years in a row. Those were the two people that I wanted to be like. My dad had been a history teacher and a football coach, and I saw myself doing that as I went to college. Then, because my (basketball) playing career took off in the last couple of years, my reputation helped me secure a position at Delhi, and from there things just fortunately broke for me."

So with his background established, how does a 52-year-old with a self-deprecating sense of humor sum up a basketball life that has ranged from small college All-America status as a player to NCAA Tournament berths at every previous Division I coaching stop, with a couple of NIT finals trips to Madison Square Garden thrown in for good measure?

"As Jud used to say, I'm in the twilight of an otherwise mediocre career."

Don't you believe it.

Comments may be directed to Jack Styczynski via e-mail at styczynski@hotmail.com

Cousy Award honors Celtic legend's heart



Doris Burke

Sometimes, maybe not enough, but sometimes, the most curious things can happen in sports that make you ponder more important things. It seems to happen, for me at least, at the strangest times.

On a frigid Sunday in late January, I was with my family at the Fleet Center watching the Celtics play the Spurs. The occasion was the tipoff of the Bob Cousy Humanitarian Fund. I've had the great pleasure of having come to know Mr. Cousy a bit over the past two years. I make no claim that I'm his friend at this point, but I'd be honored if he considered me one. Obviously, I know of his legend and accomplishment but, honestly, all that hasn't impressed me a whole lot since I got to know him. The Cousy "legend" is what he did with his mind and body. The Cousy I respect is what he's done with his heart.

It was a great treat to watch every eye in the Fleet Center follow him as he made his way across the court in a singularly old-fashioned way — holding the hand of his unabashed sweetheart, Missy, his lovely wife of nearly six decades. The calls of "Cooz" rang from different parts of the arena as they made their way to their seats, and I felt good about basketball and marriage at the same time.

The next day, I called a Connecticut women's game on MLK Day. The good folks of UConn coupled the celebration by honoring Sen. Birch Bayh, who was a primary sponsor of Title IX legislation over 30 years ago. Sen. Bayh is well noted as a longstanding supporter of civil and human rights. It was a very nice ceremony.

But the more I thought about its significance, the more my mind drifted to Cousy and the Humanitarian Awards that will carry his name. Cousy had been a champion of civil rights and human dignity from his first days in the NBA.

His rookie roommate Chuck Cooper was a black man. One day, the pair found themselves waiting to check into a North Carolina hotel after a Celtics game in 1950. The hotel would not accept Cooper. Typical of Cousy, he told Cooper that they would catch an overnight train back to Boston.

"We were standing on the train-station platform when we decided to hit the bathroom before we left. Then we were confronted by two signs. One said, "colored" and the other said "white." It was traumatic for me. I didn't know what to say. Tears came to my eyes. I was ashamed to be white," Cousy told a reporter years later.

No less than Bill Russell has said of Cousy: "I remember reading one of the local papers one day, and Bob Cousy said he wished he had done

more for me. Well, let me just say, Cousy did more than enough for me, because what he did was be himself and expect me to be myself, and that's all you can ask for. He respected my humanity, and I respected his. He will forever be my teammate and my friend."

In an age when some athletes make more in one week than Cousy made in his playing career, it is incredible to think that Cousy would take such a moral stand. It might be more incredible that some of today's athletes take for granted that very stand and the road paved by yesterday's superstars such as Cousy.

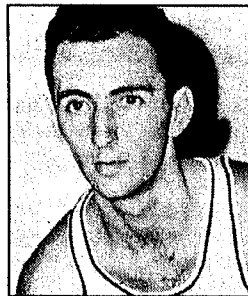
So, it is wonderfully significant and more than fitting that The Bob Cousy Fund, with a two-pronged mission to honor the legendary star and humanitarian, has been established by a group of business leaders from the world of sports, finance, education, medicine, media and commerce. The Fund intends to raise monies in support of a permanent memorial to Cousy on the campus of the College of the Holy Cross, Cousy's alma mater, and for an endowment of the Bob Cousy Humanitarian Award.

The late Boston Globe sports columnist Will McDonough, founding member of the Bob Cousy Fund Board, said in a Globe column: "When you combine talent, family, community, character and charity, Bob Cousy is the greatest 'all-around' premiere athlete in Boston history."

Cousy, of course, is more interested in the work of the people who will be honored with the Humanitarian Awards. "It is rather humbling to be recognized with a statue and an award carrying one's name with such far-reaching import. I'm especially gratified that the statue will be on my college campus and in the city where I've made my home for more than 50 years. But the real purpose of this effort is to honor individuals who have given their lives to using this great game to help others and, as importantly, to help further their work."

Nominations for the Bob Cousy Humanitarian Awards will be solicited from the international world of sport, education, media, community service, and youth programming. The award comes with a grant from the Fund and will be used for furthering the good work of the honoree.

The official tip-off of the Bob Cousy Fund will be March 28 at a Grand Celebratory Reception honoring Cousy in the Fleet Center prior to the Celtics-Philadelphia 76ers game. Dignitaries and celebrities from the worlds of sport, media, government, business and civic endeavor have been invited to share in this grand celebratory event. Reception guests will have the opportunity to meet athletes and legends from area sports teams, as well as coaches and administrators from all levels of basketball. The group has established a website at www.bobcousyfund.com.



Bob Cousy