

# MAAC on attack

*The Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference bounced back in 2002-03, rising in the RPI and other computer rankings. And the league's future looks even brighter.*

**By Jack Styczynski**

With apologies to the producers of a classic Life cereal commercial, even Mikey couldn't deny that 2002-03 was a good season for the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference. And Mikey hated everything.

Thanks to a vastly improved performance in non-conference games, the MAAC jumped half a dozen spots in the Sagarin computer rankings, and supposedly a few more in the NCAA's never publicly released Ratings Percentage Index (RPI). Manhattan defeated St. John's and Seton Hall. Siena knocked off Providence and Villanova. An Iona squad featuring four freshman starters shocked North Carolina. And that wasn't all. "Across the board, we did well in some of the non-premier games, where we have to do well," boasted MAAC commissioner Rich Ensor. "We beat the America East teams. We beat the Northeast Conference teams. So that gets you to a certain point, and then those other wins kind of push you up."

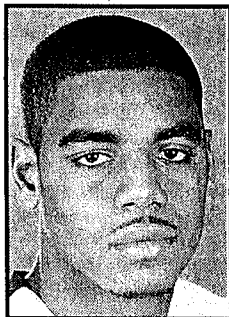
The end result was a better seed in the NCAA Tournament and the league's first instance of multiple NIT bids since 1996. Manhattan finally put together a complete season, winning the regular season and tournament titles, and receiving a 14-seed in the "Big Dance" rather than the play-in duty Siena got a year ago. Meanwhile, Siena and Fairfield each earned NIT bids, and the Saints even won a couple of games for good measure.

Perhaps the reason for all this was a bevy of individual talent not seen in the MAAC for several years. Last season, only four players in the conference averaged 15 ppg or more. This year, that number doubled to eight, with the top five scheduled to return next season. And that doesn't include any of Iona's talented newcomers, nor a single player from runner-up Fairfield, so the future looks bright.

Headlining the league in 2002-03 were Manhattan junior Luis Flores and Saint Peter's freshman Keydren "KeeKee" Clark, as both finished among the nation's top 10 scorers at just under 25 points per game. Flores took home conference player-of-the-year honors, while Clark was named MAAC rookie of the year. Furthermore, it would be remiss not to mention Siena power forward Michael Haddix, who won the MAAC rookie of the week award four times and broke a school record for scoring by a freshman.

#### Manhattan's Complete Season

Manhattan hadn't won a MAAC tournament game in coach Bobby Gonzalez's first three years,



Michael Haddix

but the jinx finally ended with a thrilling double-overtime win against Niagara in the 2003 semifinals. A new tournament format gave the top-seeded Jaspers a bye to the semis, making them wait a couple of days to prove this season wouldn't end with another thud. Flores simply refused to let that happen, as the 6-2 shooting guard's amazing consistency carried right through a championship game victory over Fairfield.

Flores was named the tournament's most valuable player in addition to MAAC player of the year. Often blessing himself on the court for strength, the league's iron man played at least 40 minutes in 13 of Manhattan's 30 games, including 50 in two double-overtime affairs. Equally dangerous in the paint or on the perimeter, he scored 10 points or more in every contest, averaging 24.6 (and 5.6 rebounds) per outing. He shot over 90 percent from the free-throw line.

Most incredibly, Flores has established a pace to break Manhattan's all-time scoring record with more than 2,000 career points, despite the fact he'll have only three years to do it after transferring from Rutgers following his freshman season. As a sophomore, he averaged 19.4 points per game and—by tallying 33 against Villanova—earned a spot on the 2002 NIT all-star team that toured Canada.

"He is a very humble kid," says Gonzalez of the Dominican dynamo, who pumped in 35.6 ppg as a senior at New York's Norman Thomas High School before making a last-minute decision to attend Rutgers instead of Manhattan. "He cares a lot about fixing his weaknesses. The thing about him is that he takes things so personal, he's such a competitor, that if I say to him, 'Luis, guys in this league don't feel you can shoot the three ball,' he'll go out and shoot 150 threes right after I say it to him. So I think that's how he maintains the focus."

Naturally, the aforementioned humility requires Flores to credit his coach and teammates. "Coach always calls on me to be the player that I am and to perform every night out, and I think the team believes that I can do it," said the subject of a February *Sports Illustrated* profile. "I feed off the team, and the team feeds off of me coming out every game and giving it my best. Whenever I'm not performing well, they'll pat me on my back and tell me, 'You're going to get there; the game's going to come to you; be patient.'"

Patience will be necessary during this off-season after the Jaspers suffered a first-round loss to

eventual national champion Syracuse in the NCAA Tournament. Despite an admirable showing to close out a 23-7 campaign, Manhattan undoubtedly feels it has unfinished business, and Flores and most of his key teammates will be back next year to address that.

#### Siena's NIT Run

The 2001-02 MAAC champ can relate to rebounding from a season-ending loss to the eventual national titlist, having fallen to Maryland last March. And while most teams wouldn't consider a season concluding in the NIT more successful than one ending in the NCAA Tournament, Siena might have been an exception this year. Granted, that's largely because the Saints finished last season with a losing record, but their surprising 21-win campaign in 2002-03 was impressive nonetheless.

Unlike Fairfield, which went "one and done" in the NIT, Siena hung around awhile. The Saints polished off a suspension-riddled Villanova squad in the opening round and then dispatched Western Michigan to become the only mid-major team to reach the NIT's "Sweet Sixteen." The string ended with a loss to Alabama-Birmingham, but not before



Keydren Clark's 25 ppg gives Saint Peter's hope.

Siena and its fans had enjoyed three extra games on their home court in Albany.

That meant three additional opportunities to see Haddix, a 6-foot-7-freshman bruiser. If the name sounds familiar, perhaps it's because his father of the same name played eight seasons in the NFL with the Philadelphia Eagles and Green Bay Packers. The younger Haddix's media guide entry says he'd be a football player if he weren't a basketball player, but he claims he chose hoops because it's more fun. "When I first played, I had success, and I kind of stuck with it ever since," he says.

In a normal season without Clark tearing through the conference, Haddix would have been a shoo-in for MAAC rookie of the year. He has a unique blend of power and finesse that seems more suited to the hardwood than the gridiron. "When you look at our league, I'm not sure there's a better inside scorer—in terms of catching it with his back to the basket and putting the ball in the hole—than Mike was this year, even though he was a freshman," said Siena coach Rob Lanier. Haddix averaged almost 14 ppg while shooting over 52 percent from the field, and led the Saints in rebounding to boot.

Ironically, expectations were not especially high for Haddix this season. However, his skills became apparent early, and he cracked Siena's starting lineup by the fifth game. "We thought he would develop into a tremendous player and play a great role for us (eventually), but he just kind of kicked the door right down," Lanier said. Thus, expectations could be burdensome from here on out. Yet, Haddix gives the impression that his famous father has already provided him the map to navigate any path.

"Seeing the things he did and the places he got was kind of my motivation on what to do and how to get there," says the aspiring orthopedic surgeon, who chose Siena over Penn and Princeton.

#### Team of the Future?

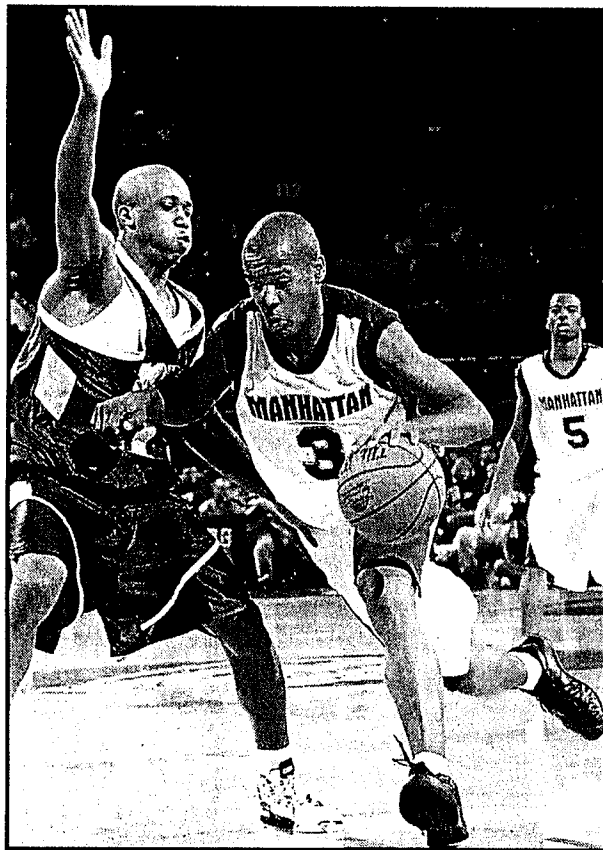
Ordinarily, a 10-win season would not be cause for celebration, but considering Saint Peter's combined for only eight victories over the previous two years, there's reason for optimism in Jersey City, N.J. The pint-sized Peacock "KeeKee" Clark exploded onto the scene, capturing MAAC rookie-of-the-year honors. After the 5-8 freshman scored 48 and 44 points in consecutive November contests, *ESPN*, *USA Today* and just about everyone else took notice. "Keydren Clark deserves all the credit that he gets," proclaimed Siena's Lanier. "He's the kind of young guy that comes around once a decade."

Maybe less frequently. Clark's 722 total points set a Saint Peter's record and were the most by a freshman in the 22-year history of the MAAC, while his average of 24.9 per game led the league. His 121 assists were the most by a Peacock since 1992. His 109 3-point baskets broke the national record for a freshman. Untiring, he challenged Manhattan's Flores for iron man status, logging 38.2 minutes per contest. Unfailing, he hit a game-

winning shot to upset the Jaspers, and scored 36 in an opening-round MAAC tournament victory over host Rider.

To say all this was unanticipated would be a huge understatement. "I thought I would be just an average freshman, playing about 20 minutes a game, averaging about 12 points," Clark said more than once this season. And since he averaged only 13 ppg as a senior at Rice High School in New York, there's no reason to believe he wasn't being honest.

Saint Peter's coach Bob Leckie expressed similar surprise. "I had no idea that he would be the prolific scorer he is," he admitted. Leckie claims a lot of schools on the recruiting trail were put off by Clark's height—particularly since he played off-guard at Rice—but the coach saw point guard qualities and continued his pursuit. "We virtually went to just about every event that we could. During the summer, we followed Riverside Church



Luis Flores, MVP of the MAAC, is a reason to get excited about Manhattan.

(AAU team) around, and we stayed on him. I think persistence made the difference in the end."

Now the trick will be to build on a 10-win season. Recalling some games when he lost his poise and the Peacocks faltered down the stretch, Clark says, "I need to work on controlling the game when we're playing with a lead." Meantime, Leckie realizes "Jersey City is not an easy sell," but hopes Clark's success will prompt better players to consider Saint Peter's. "I'm just hoping that we can recruit other pieces of the puzzle to go around him, and I think we're heading in the right direction," the coach says. Clark mentions transfers Ronald Yates and Jamie Sowers as potential impact players next year.

"This year was a stepping stone for this program," KeeKee declared after Saint Peter's lost in

the quarterfinals of the MAAC tournament. "We got 10 wins this year. (Next year,) I want to try to go out and get 15 wins, and make it to the semifinals of the MAAC championship."

Don't bet against him.

#### State of the MAAC

The new MAAC tournament format that awarded byes to higher-seeded teams was a smashing success in terms of giving an advantage to those that performed well in the regular season, thereby increasing the likelihood of better NCAA Tournament seeds and multiple NIT bids. For the second time in league history and first since 1989, the top four teams met in the semifinals, the top two advanced to the championship game, and the top seed won the title. The format definitely will return next year, and probably for the foreseeable future. "It's a two-year experiment and I'm certain we'll have more discussion about it, but I've been pleased with it," Ensor said, echoing prevailing sentiment.

As of now, it doesn't look like the format will have to be adjusted for more teams either, despite the occasional expansion rumblings that crop up in MAAC circles. The conference currently has 10 schools, and no additions appear imminent. "We haven't actually pursued anybody in about two or three years, and I don't anticipate anything coming up this June at the presidents meeting," reports Ensor. "We've said in the past we wouldn't be unhappy to go to a 12-team league with two divisions. It would open up a couple more non-conference games, but absent the right teams, I don't see it happening this year."

Ensor routinely mentions former MAAC members Fordham, Holy Cross, and La Salle as schools he'd welcome back in the league, but says he doesn't think any of them are considering a return at this point. Others have suggested St. Bonaventure as a potentially good fit, but the Bonnies now appear secure in the Atlantic 10, despite their recent problems. Anyway, with Canisius and Niagara already in the conference, Ensor feels a third Western New York team would create scheduling hassles. "Right now, we can go in, make a two-game swing, and then we're done," he explains. "We're not going to just add somebody for the sake of adding."

What about subtraction? Loyola has lost at least 21 games for four straight years and hasn't had a winning season since Skip Prosser coached the team to the NCAA Tournament in 1994. Players have transferred out on a regular basis; sophomore starters Lucious Jordan and Bernard Allen revealed such plans last month. But while the Baltimore-based Greyhounds may seem to be the MAAC's worst fit, Ensor views their athletic department as a whole. "They know all about national championships," he asserts. "They know how to run national lacrosse, national soccer — so they know how to run a quality program, and the basketball will catch up."

Regardless of whether or not that's wishful thinking, it's a credit to the MAAC that the league's only negative at the moment is one dreadful team on the court. Certainly, the conference does an excellent job avoiding off-the-court scandals like those at Fresno State, Georgia, St. Bonaventure and Villanova this winter. "I think our schools are committed to integrity, to enforcing the rules and following the rules," says Ensor.

Even Mikey would like that.

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