Everybody's pal

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Center Court

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First-year Villanova coach Jay Wright’s universal appeal amongst fans and media alike may be unparalleled in college basketball.

By Jack Styczynski

You’d have to kiss a lot of babies to beat Jay Wright in a popularity contest.

A number of coaches tell people they’d rather be called by their first name than “Coach,” but most of the time you feel uncomfortable obliging. With Villanova’s Jay Wright, the thought never crosses your mind to call him anything except Jay. Meet him once, and he’s your pal. God only knows how many hands Wright shook on the snowy afternoon he recently received the America East championship ring earned last season as head coach at Hofstra.

Born Christmas Eve, 1961, Jerold T. “Jay” Wright was the oldest of four children in a suburban Philadelphia family. The Churchville, Pa., native played three sports, with his father Jerry coaching him in baseball and football youth leagues. “But I just fell in love with basketball,” says Wright. He eventually dropped the other sports at Council Rock High School in nearby Newtown to concentrate on hoops and was named to all-county and all-area teams.

That led to a Division I basketball career at Bucknell in Lewisburg, Pa., but Wright’s choice of school was hardly cut and dried. “I was the first person in my family to go to college, so I didn’t know the difference between Bucknell and Slippery Rock State. I didn’t know anything about anything, and neither did my family,” he admits.

His decision mainly came down to liking Bucknell head coach Charlie Woollum, and the fact that the team played a good level of competition against Temple, Saint Joseph’s and LaSalle in the old East Coast Conference. “I actually made the greatest decision in terms of getting a good education for all the wrong reasons. I had a great visit and I liked their basketball team. I knew nothing about the school.”

He would learn enough to earn degrees in economics and sociology. Meantime, Wright was a four-year basketball letterman and two-year starter at Bucknell, and was honored with the team’s Most Valuable Player and Leadership awards as a senior. Despite all that, he claims he was the kind of player he would have hated to coach. “I was one of those players that thought I knew everything,” he says. “I played the way I thought I should play, and I don’t think I was very coachable. I also was very sociable (around campus). I did everything. I didn’t sacrifice as much as I should have.”

Ironically, Wright’s behavior provided a side benefit to his coaching career of today. “I think it’s helped me as a coach, because I realize what guys are going through. You know, if I wasn’t playing, I was a pain in the butt. All the things that I try to help guys with now, because I know what they think.”

How Wright got to where he is now is a bit of a story, because he never expected to become a coach. After college, he briefly considered a graduate assistant position at Drexel, but couldn’t see himself going back to school, so he went to work as an administrative assistant with the Philadelphia Stars of the old United States Football League. Not long after, current Bucknell head coach Pat Flannery recommended Wright for an assistant coaching job at the University of Rochester, and a career was begun.

Wright spent two years in Rochester and one back in Philadelphia at Drexel before getting his dream job as an assistant for Pollie Massimino across town at Villanova in 1987. “As a kid, Villanova was my favorite team, so he was always my idol,” remembers Wright. “When I got into coaching, I wanted to work at his camp. Working at his camp for me was as big as I ever thought it would get.” Then assistant Steve Lappas helped Wright secure both the position at Massimino’s camp and the Villanova assistant’s job. “Steve Lappas really helped a lot, and that’s why he and I have always been good friends, and I’ve always really valued what he did for me.”

After five years at Villanova, Wright followed Massimino to UNLV, where he spent two years. During the seven seasons alongside his idol, Wright believes the most valuable thing he learned was how to create a family atmosphere within a basketball program. Hofstra University was about to discover just how deep the lesson penetrated.

In 1994, Hofstra basketball was basically disregarded. Butch van Breda Koff had just retired from coaching after doing the bare minimum on the recruiting trail for the Long Island school. There’s the oft-repeated story about Wright saving an article from this very publication that gave Hofstra no respect. If you accept the theory that the best jobs to take are the ones where there’s nowhere to go but up, Wright’s decision to apply for the Hofstra head coaching position was a stroke of genius. And the school’s decision to hire him would prove no less intelligent.

Immediately, there was a change in the program. The win-loss record didn’t show it for a few years, but even when the team was losing, folks were raving about the affable Wright and the future of Hofstra basketball in the America East conference. By the time the Flying Dutchmen began earning the school’s first post-season bids in decades, everybody felt like a part of the success. Wright extended the family atmosphere farther than Massimino and maybe any other coach ever has. “The greatest accomplishments are those you share with other people,” Wright opines. “I just feel like college basketball is something that should be inclusive. We don’t have anything to hide. I want people to be a part of it. I want people to know what we’re doing. I want people to feel good about it. We’re always proud of our players. I want people to meet them and know what they’re like. I want them to know what they do.”

What they do is win basketball games, graduate, and become successful afterward. Hofstra went 72-22 over the last three years, making one NIT and two NCAA tournament appearances in the process. Perhaps more impressive is the list of all Wright’s Hofstra players who’ve earned degrees and where they are now. Naturally, that list includes Speedy Claxton of the Philadelphia 76ers, Wright’s first blue chip recruit. Fans and media alike still routinely congratulate the meticulously dressed coach who has equally meticulous standards, even though he can’t define any magic formula he used to resurrect Hofstra basketball. “You don’t really have a choice,” insists Wright. “I remember times just saying, ‘Hey, what’s my option?’ You’ve got to just keep working your butt off and believe it’s going to happen.”

Of course, Wright had a lot of help from long-time assistant Tom Pecora, who has now succeeded him at Hofstra. Pecora likens Wright to a brother, and Wright reports members of his real family were crying tears of joy when Pecora was announced as Hofstra’s new head coach last spring. The two apparently click because while Wright usually takes matters seriously, Pecora enjoys lightening the mood. That was certainly the case the day Wright attended Hofstra’s game following the aforementioned ring ceremony. "He
was down at our Drexel game and we lost, so I was very apprehensive about it," Pecora joked. "I told him, 'I don't know, if we don't win this one, you're not allowed back anymore.'"

Fortunately, Hofstra did pull out the victory, so the man who was awarded an honorary degree by the school last fall remains welcome.

Which is good, because as Villanova's head coach, he's still close enough to catch a few Hofstra games each year.

After seven seasons at Hofstra, Wright's move back to Villanova happened in a hurry last March. He was actually talking to administrators at Massachusetts, Rutgers, and Tennessee about openings at those schools, but had received no offers and wasn't sure he was going to leave Hofstra. Deciding Rutgers was closer to home and a better fit for him than UMass, he called UMass officials to tell them he was withdrawing his name from consideration, and later found out Villanova head coach Steve Lappas was interviewing there at the time. "They weren't even upset," Wright chuckles now. "I was like, wow, I thought they liked me."

The same afternoon, Wright says he heard from Villanova assistant Joe Jones that Lappas was taking the UMass job. He called Lappas to find out if it was true, and Lappas said it was. "Lap was like more apologetic because [the day before] I talked to Lap about the difference between UMass and Rutgers," recalls Wright. "I know Lap hadn't talked to them because he didn't know anything about the UMass job." Either way, Wright assured Lappas there was need to apologize. He didn't feel as if Lappas had stolen his job.

Then that night, Lappas and Wright were discussing the Villanova position, and Wright says Lappas told him he should consider accepting, if it was offered. "His wife Harriet got on the phone and she said, 'Jay, if they offer you this job, take this job.'" He adds that she even volunteered their camp information, which he eventually received. "They were very helpful, so Lap and I are fine. It's a little difficult situation, but there's nothing personal between the two of us or anything." Wright's story sounds nothing like the speculation on a New York radio show that he was negotiating behind the back of Lappas.

Villanova's president, Father Edmund Dobbin, phoned Wright the next day. "Father called me and I said, 'Father, are you offering me this job?' and he said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Father, I'm taking the job.' That was it." Just as quickly, Wright informed Rutgers and Tennessee of his decision. He was headed back to the school where his wife Patty was once a cheerleader and he had always dreamed of working. His Dad's commute to games would be much shorter. And his sons Taylor and Collin could continue to be ball boys, as they were at Hofstra.

After Wright's introductory press conference at Villanova, All-American Michael Bradley told the new coach it was nothing personal, but he was leaving school early to pursue a career in the NBA. "He said, 'I've already decided. I was going anyway.' Wright claims he didn't try to change Bradley's mind.

Wright started work on his first recruiting class. He landed coveted New Yorkers Jason Fraser, Curtis Sumpter and Allen Ray by using the connections he made while at Hofstra, but he cautions that Villanova fans should not necessarily expect a New York pipeline in the future.

What Wildcat fans can expect is that Wright will win an uncommonly large percentage of his recruiting battles. Whereas many coaches cast a wide net hoping to catch a few good recruits, Wright is known for targeting the few he truly wants and going after them hard. He eliminates more than he's eliminated. "If you come with us, you've got to be in 100 percent," explains Wright. "You've got to want to work out 12 months a year. You've got to be a good student. You've got to want to be a good person. So what we try to do is identify those people, and if we're recruiting somebody and we realize this kid is not going to be interested in those things, then we get out. So we really don't lose a lot because we wind up taking ourselves out a lot."

Meanwhile, Villanova is doing better than many predicted this year with the players Wright inherited from Lappas. In the first half of the season, the Wildcats lost three overtime games and two others decided by five points or less, including one to St. John's at Madison Square Garden the day after Wright received his championship ring at Hofstra. The only thing that appears to be keeping Villanova from being an outstanding team right now is a propensity to turn over the ball when pressured. "That's been a problem for us this year and everybody knows it," said Wright after the loss to St. John's. "We know when we play somebody, even if they don't have a press in their arsenal, they're gonna try it. We've just got to keep working against it."

When discussing broader goals, Wright is normally vague and says he wants his teams to be the best they can be, although he will admit he wants to be a contender in the Big East every year. At the same time, he doesn't want to put any limits on Villanova, despite the fact that no Catholic school has reached the Final Four since Seton Hall did so in 1989. "I don't want to lump us with other Catholic institutions," insists Wright. "I really think we're unique, because we have a good size. We're in a metropolitan area. We're an urban school, but we have a suburban campus. There's a lot of things unique to Villanova, so I don't want to put any limits on us at all."

Regardless, this is one case where the nice guy will almost certainly not finish last, and everybody knows it, including St. John's head coach Mike Jarvis.

"He didn't go to Villanova to lose."

Comments? Please e-mail Jack Styczynski at styczynski@hotmail.com.