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Two flies on the wall

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Eleven years ago, Jack Styczynski spent a game day with coach Matt Brady for Eastern Basketball. Recently, he did it again for Basketball Times, except this time, he had a co-writer embedded with the opponent, as well.

Two flies on the wall

By Jack Styczynski and Jerry Beach

It’s a universal truth in basketball – one team wins, one team loses.

Occasionally, you’ll read a story where a reporter shadows a team for a day, and while that perspective is enlightening, you’re left wondering what happened on the other side.

Not this time.

On Jan. 16, the two teams voted atop the Colonial Athletic Association in the preseason – Hofstra and James Madison – met on Long Island, and better yet, entered the contest living up to the hype. Hofstra boasted a perfect 6-0 record at home, while JMU was a spotless 5-0 in road games, so as we go back, something’s gotta give …

Approximately seven hours before tipoff, the Dukes arrive at the David S. Mack Sports and Exhibition Complex for a morning shootaround and head coach Matt Brady is happy to schmooze. He wastes no time mentioning that his team plays better on the road than at home, to the point where he’s tried putting everyone in a hotel the night before home games, with little success. He admits that part of the reason is to collect players’ phones at curfew, but apparently late-night texting isn’t the problem. He’s at a loss to explain what is.

Anyway, Brady thinks his squad should be 15-3 instead of 13-5, pointing to two losses he believes should have been wins, while claiming there were no lucky victories. Typical coach. Also typical is when he expresses concern about his job security. Warranted or not, it’s the paranoia of the profession.

The defensive walk-through is run by Rob O’Driscoll, Brady’s top lieutenant for all 12 years of his head-coaching career, starting at Marist. The boss chimes in here and there, but the whole session seems like an O’Driscoll clinic on the various ways to contain Hofstra perimeter marksman Brian Bernardi. Whenever a specific Hofstra player is named, 80 percent of the time it’s Bernardi. At one point, Brady tells the team “we’re stealing that pass” on an interior entry play, so it will be interesting to see if that happens in the game, but the main question is, will the big focus on Bernardi pay dividends?

Several minutes later, Brady orchestrates the offensive session. Mostly calm, he does get frustrated a couple of times, yelling “TODAY!” when defenders simulating Hofstra’s zone are slow to get into position, and letting everyone know they’re preparing for a game – not an intramural game – when things get a little sloppy. He runs a skip-pass drill and calls out sets named “Maryland,” “Texas” and “Carolina,” which he later says are taken from teams in those states, not necessarily the Terrapins, Longhorns and Tar Heels.

The shootaround concludes with Brady reminding the players that Hofstra eliminated them from the CAA tournament last March in embarrassing fashion. “Kicked our ass,” he repeats. He wants them to remember that. The team then huddles up and chants, “ALL IN!”

Shortly after JMU leaves the court, Hofstra coach Joe Mihalich can barely contain his anticipation, bounding down the stairs for his team’s morning shoot-around. He has been up for nearly six hours – during which he has watched film, attended Mass and fit in a “breakfast” consisting of a croissant.

Over the next 70 minutes, Mihalich’s actions are that of the hands-on CEO of the Pride program. He delegates responsibility – the shootaround is directed by assistant coach Akbar Waheed, who spent the previous several days watching James Madison film – but there is never a doubt that this is Mihalich’s team.

Mihalich – carrying a shootaround schedule that’s the result of two days and seven pages worth of note-taking – begins by unknowingly copying Brady’s idea to use last season’s results as motivational fodder. “Last year, they made fools of us,” Mihalich says, referring to the regular-season sweep by James Madison. “You can make fools of them by working hard.”

The focus is simple yet layered on both sides of the ball. Defensively, the staff knows point guard Ron Curry will get his points and his shots, so the bulk of the attention is on James Madison big men Yohanny Dalembert and Dimitrije Cabarkapa. Mihalich mentions the pair’s meager assist total multiple times and orders a collapsing double team anytime either player gets the ball.

“Hey, we’re not passing the ball back out,” Mihalich says.

Offensively, Mihalich spends several minutes

Rokas Gustys had 25 points and 20 rebounds.
Putting his mathematics degree to use on the Pride's “two-high corner” scheme. He keeps switching Juan’ya Green and Denton Koon at the top of the key, constantly searching for the perfect placement.

“That one yard makes a huge difference,” Mihalich says.

Another focal point is Bernardi, who drained at least four 3-pointers in eight of the first 17 games. With the expectation that the Dukes will overplay the perimeter, any 3-point attempts are under close scrutiny. Bernardi has the necessary skills to make them, but Brady says his hard-nosed defense is another issue.

“Too much fooling around, they agree, with Deane seeing the problem from the bench. Brady concurs: “You have to understand, I barely got my math degree, and I’m not going to work 12 hours a day.”

Deane’s increased intensity and Mihalich’s focus on the defensive end could be a product of the team’s willingness to change. As the group starts to break up, Thomas and Brady conduct a radio interview. One of the subjects is Hofstra’s lack of bench depth, which Brady admits he hopes to exploit with his deeper rotation. After Thomas departs, Brady provides more insight on his job situation, revealing that he’s in a contract year for the second time in four seasons. Since he’s calculated the exact number of days remaining on his current deal, it’s obviously weighing on his mind, but at the same time, he seems totally confident he’ll be employed somewhere next season. Particularly given the bad luck he’s had with injuries over the years, he feels he’s done a good job – with good kids, a good graduation rate, a competitive team and one NCAA Tournament appearance – he just thinks he needs another bid to control his own destiny. When Brady finally leaves the table, he takes a lunch plate to his wife, Mary.

Meantime, the Pride has gathered at the University Club for its pregame meal. Within 15 minutes, the players have headed back to their dorms. The only thing missing is the cartoon cloud indicating where they used to be.

“They don’t even taste the food,” Mihalich says. Before exiting, each player stops by the coaches table and exchanges fist bumps with each member of the staff. Mihalich has a specific greeting for everyone – none more notable than the one he offers to center Rokas Gustys.

“This guy’s gonna get 20 rebounds in a game someday,” Mihalich says. Mihalich spends most of his time checking his phone and occasionally, almost absent-mindedly, about Bryant is that, as a teen, he often played in the St. Joe’s gym when Brady was an assistant there, and he was recruited by one Joe Kolff. During his second stint at the helm of the Flying Dutchmen, “VBK” lived a few blocks west of campus in a university apartment complex typically reserved for law students. Mihalich also has a picture of Hofstra founder Van Breda Kolff stalking the Hofstra sideline with the accompanying quote attributed to the legendary coach: “All I know is life isn’t much different than that game on the court. If it’s run-right—with precision, with good, honest effort—it’s a thing of beauty. I know what it looks like and that’s what keeps me going.”

Less than two hours before tipoff, James Madison is back at the arena in its Spartan locker room. The players get dressed, and from now until the game begins, time can roughly be divided into four segments – two when the players are on the court warming up and two when Brady is addressing them. Brady spends that entire stretch in the locker room, and for most of the time the team is outside, he’s joined by assistant coach Mike Deane. The two seem genuinely pleased to have a reporter with them. Otherwise, they say, they’d just be discussing all the bad things that could happen in the next few hours. Instead, the conversation hops from Brady’s increasingly gray hair … to his desire for his sons to attend Catholic school as he did … to former Hofstra coaches Jay Wright and Tom Pecora … to Drexel coach Bruiser Flint’s penchant for standing on the court during games (and how unusual it is that he’s lasted 15 years in a job without going to the NCAA Tournament) … to the statistics most correlated with success … to the fracas following the previous night’s shootout between Iona and Monmouth. In an interesting take regarding the latter, Deane says he thinks backcourt handshakes lines are dumb and an invitation for trouble.

Brady and Deane refer to the final warm-up segment as “the worst 20 minutes in basketball.” If it’s so interminable to sit around in the locker room, why not go out to the court and watch the players? Too much fooling around, they agree, with Deane pointing out that it’s even worse now that dunking is permitted. To which Brady adds that his team rarely makes powder-dunk type plays.

When Brady addresses the team, he goes over the offensive and defensive strategies and once again reminds everybody of the metaphorical foot Hofstra administers to their collective derriere the last time they met, including his own. This game is for first place, and he wants “mental toughness.” He mentions that Hofstra hasn’t won this season when scoring fewer than 69 points. He emphasizes that containing Bernardi as the College of Charleston did would be a winning formula. One other point that would prove notable comes when he says Gustys cannot be allowed
to catch the ball in the paint or get offensive rebounds.

Another huddle, another “ALL IN!” and the whole team goes out to do battle. On the way, one player makes a Johnny Manziel “money” gesture and O’Driscoll rolls his eyes and says, “I’m getting old.”

Meanwhile, Mihalich began the last stretch before game time in his office. The family pictures that dot the bookcase behind his desk serve as more than the standard decor for a basketball coach. They’re also a reminder of his role as a patriarch in a coaching family.

All three of Mihalich’s sons coach Division I sports. His oldest child, also named Joe, is an assistant men’s basketball coach at Penn. His twins, Matt and Tony, serve as assistant coaches with the Hartford men’s basketball team and the Iona men’s and women’s cross-country and track programs, respectively.

“As a parent, you want your kids to be happy,” Mihalich says a little more than an hour before tipoff. “I hope they’re as lucky as I’ve been and as fortunate as I’ve been. College is tough – it’s a tough gig. It’s hard to get that break. But coaching is coaching.”

Father and sons converse, either via text or telephone call, before every game or track meet.

“I’m proud that they’re in coaching,” Mihalich says. “Coaching is a gratifying profession. It’s a rewarding profession. I think it’s a healthy profession. But I think it’s a tough business.”

Soon after, Mihalich resumes his CEO role and heads into the locker room to make sure it’s empty before he walks onto the court to watch the first few minutes of warm-ups.

On his way off the court, Mihalich greets the James Madison coaching staff, which is sitting along what will be the Hofstra bench.

“Hey fellas, it’s really good to see you!” he says in an exaggerated yet affectionate tone before exchanging hearty handshakes with everyone on the bench.

Back in the locker room, Mihalich studies the blank erase board like a teacher ready to write his lesson plans. He wipes the board down one more time, pulls out a marker and begins writing assignments, the keys on both sides of the ball and his motivational messages.

The words “FIRST PLACE!!!!!” are underlined. He writes an oversized E and finishes the words “energy,” “enthusiasm” and “effort” and adds several exclamation points.

Underlined three times each are the words “NOT THIS TIME.”

The lesson plan is complete. Mihalich sits down and looks at the clock, which began counting down at 60 minutes before tipoff.

“This is the longest 34 minutes and 23 seconds of the day,” he says, adding 14 minutes and 23 seconds to the sentiments of his JMU counterparts.

Time begins moving faster once the Pride re-enter the locker room at the 28-minute mark. Mihalich opens his pregame talk by reminding players of James Madison’s aggressive style of play and to not return any “pleasantries” that might come their way.

“The referee sees the second cheap shot,” he says. Reinforcements of the morning’s lessons are provided.

On Curry: “As soon as he’s out there, he’s in range.”

On Jackson Kent: “Play him like he can score 20. Because he can.”

On Dalembert: “Today, I said he’s not passing if he’s got three guys on him. I changed it to four.”

Mihalich ends the pregame the way he began the shootaround.

“Last year, they came here and they kicked our ass,” he says, continuing the theme of rear-end wreckage.

This prompts the normally quiet Craig “Speedy” Claxton, the former Hofstra star and NBA player who is in his third year on the staff, to have his “Silent Bob” moment.

“No today,” Claxton says.

They are the only words Claxton will say in the locker room all day, but they get the desired effect. The Pride players begin clapping and hollering as they gather for the final pregame huddle.

With the players back on the court, Mihalich sits down. He spends the last few minutes by himself, during which he prays and thinks of his late parents. The 553rd game of his head-coaching career is here.

As the game begins, a Jackson Kent 3-pointer puts the Dukes on top and they eventually widen their lead to 28-17. Bernardi is being stifled, but Gustys remains smoking hot and Bernardi, despite some good looks, is killing us.”

Another, stating the obvious, adds, “Gustys is killing us.”

Brady is not too upset, either. His team is 11-0 when leading at the half, and he conveys optimism to his players, telling them they’re ahead again without having played that well. If not for a few blown layups, the lead could be larger.

It’s not until the players go back out to the court that things get a bit more frantic. The coaches stay behind, and Deane and O’Driscoll start proposing alternate defensive strategies, mostly designed to deal with Gustys. But Brady mixes them, at least for now, fearing changes would open things up for Bernardi.

“Let’s not lose our heads,” he says, reminding them they’re leading without having played well. Deane contends that nobody is losing his head, but keeps muttering about Dalembert’s lack of defense.

Outside the Hofstra locker room, Mihalich huddles with his staff. “Tell you what, we’re lucky,” he says. Apart from Gustys, the rest of his team is just 8 for 27 from the field and the Pride has been beaten repeatedly in transition.

Mihalich is particularly worried about Bernardi, who is 1 for 4 from the field and missed his only shot from beyond the arc, and is concerned the staff might have overloaded him with information during the shootaround.

Inside, he is stern but supportive.

“We’re getting good shots,” he says. “Keep shooting.”

Barely a minute into the second half, Hofstra takes its first lead of the game and the two teams trade it from then on, with neither building more than a six-point advantage. James Madison ultimately does switch defenses, but it’s irrelevant. Gustys remains smoking hot and Bernardi, despite some good looks, stays cold, as does his teammate Ameen Tanksley. There’s some questionable officiating, but it goes both ways, so no one can rightly claim they’ve been robbed.

With seven seconds left, Hofstra’s Denton Koon tips in a miss by Juan’ya Green to tie the game at 75, and when JMU’s Curry can’t hit a 3-pointer at the other end, we’re headed to overtime.

James Madison scores first in the extra period, as Dalembert suddenly barrels down the lane and hammers home a vicious slam.

Pretty sure that’s a dunk Brady will remember.

Regardless, Gustys doesn’t relent. He puts Hofstra back on top with two free throws and another interior bucket. But with 2:34 remaining, Curry hits a short shot to re-tie the game and is fouled by Gustys.
The big man has fouled out with 25 points on 9-for-10 shooting, plus 20 rebounds – the first Hofstra player with a 20/20 game since 1982.

Only now is there a good indication of who’s going to win this thriller, especially when Gustys is replaced in the Hofstra lineup by reserve point guard Desure Buie. Less than a minute later, Dalembert makes a layup to put James Madison ahead for good, and the Dukes salt it away with free throws to win 86-82.

The result creates a six-way tie for first place in the CAA and the JMU locker room is jubilant. Brady chuckles when reminded that he couldn’t recall a dunk this season and lauds praise on Dalembert, who finished with 16 points and 16 rebounds. “He was terrific, and we don’t win the game obviously without his production,” Brady says.

Deane, too, seems to have forgiven Dalembert’s mutter-inducing defensive deficiencies, even claiming his big man outplayed Gustys down the stretch, although that’s debatable. “That was a great play that he made,” says Deane of the overtime dunk. “Those plays give you a charge on the road.”

As for how to defend Gustys in the future while also keeping Bernardi and Hofstra’s perimeter game at bay, Brady is perplexed. “I’m not sure there’s a lot of really good things you can do that we haven’t discussed or tried,” he says, having already attempted both man and zone.

In the other locker room, the outcome leaves the Pride staff feeling empty.

Director of basketball operations Colin Curtin absent-mindedly mimes writing on a wall with an uncapped pen. Assistant coach Mike Farrelly leans into the wall so hard that it swings back shut. Even Mihalich seems taken aback by the force he used as he shoves into his pockets. He is handed a box score, which he reads as he walks alone down the corridor.

“I’ll do it as long as I think I’m helping Matt and as long as he wants me here and as long as I’m enjoying it,” Deane says. “I’m not done yet and I think this would be a good year for Matt to get more time on his contract. He certainly deserves it. He’s done a great job at James Madison if you take a look at what happened before he came.”

Even better with Deane around, as Brady notes his assistant is particularly helpful with in-game adjustments.

“Mike’s been exactly what I needed when I hired him four years ago, so I’m really grateful that he came on board,” he says. “He’s been nothing but phenomenal for our team and our program, and really for JMU, he’s done an unbelievable job being a PR piece for our university. That’s something that goes a little bit unnoticed, but not underappreciated by me.”

Speaking of which, both Deane and Brady have enjoyed long marriages to women who are basketball fans, which they agree has been essential to the success of the relationships in an otherwise tough business. In fact, Brady’s wife Mary has a near-perfect record of attending games throughout his career, home and away.

The Deane and Brady marriage could last awhile, too.

“There are basketball fans, otherwise tough business.”

“William & Mary lost, too,” Mihalich says in a scratchy voice. A win would have left the Pride alone atop the CAA.

“This is our fault,” he says. “Our (expletive) fault.”

He opens the locker room door and slams it into the wall so hard that it swings back shut. Even Mihalich seems taken aback by the force he used as he re-opens the door and gently places it against the wall.

He calms down even more in the few feet it takes him to walk into the locker room. He stands, his back to the team, closes his eyes and stares at the ceiling. After a long sigh, he turns back to the Pride, sitting silently.

“One play here or there,” he says. “We all could have done a better job; I know I could have.”

His earlier words about the “tough business” of coaching resonate louder than he would have preferred.

“We’re close, fellas,” he says. “But we’re not there yet.”

Mihalich then heads out to conduct his postgame news conference.

“It kinda stings,” he tells the assembled media.

“A big toughness win for us,” says Deane at the other end of the arena.

It’s a universal truth in basketball – one team wins, one team loses.

Post-script: After almost 34 years between 20/20 games for a Hofstra player, Gustys posted another five days later in a triple-overtime victory at Northeastern and came within one rebound of a third the next week in a win over Elon. On Feb. 7, the Pride met James Madison in Virginia, and despite solid games from both Gustys and Bernardi, the Dukes twice rallied to erase second-half double-digit deficits and force overtime, where they again prevailed, 98-95, completing a second straight regular-season sweep.

As the teams continue to jockey for top seeds, a third showdown in the CAA tournament might be on the horizon.