

“I Owe Bonaventure the World”

Kalbaugh remembers 1970 Final Four run

June 10, 2016

By Cameron Hurst

It's been 46 years since Billy Kalbaugh played his final game in a St. Bonaventure basketball jersey and still, memories of the season that was and the outcome that could've been for a team destined to compete for and win the 1970 NCAA Championship, hits home with the former Bonnie.

“I get very emotional,” said Kalbaugh after viewing an excerpt from the documentary “Unfinished Dreams,” made about the legendary Bona squad, Thursday night at the Robert H. Jackson Center.

“Every year when I watch the Final Four, whenever I hear [“One Shining Moment”], I sort of break down. We, the twelve of us on that team, felt we were the best and felt we were gonna win the NCAA Championship. It's tough when I see that.”

Prior to his career at Bonaventure, Kalbaugh, who hails from Troy, NY, spent a great deal of time in the basketball gym at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute where his father coached for thirty years.

“I was luckier than most kids. The winters here are tough and the kids who are wanting to play ball are without a gym. Luckily I had access to my dad's gym all the time, so I used to go to his practices since I was in 5th grade or so. And, when I played poorly I heard about it, quite frankly, and when I played well I heard about it. It just gave me the opportunity to play a lot.”

His hard work would make him one of the top basketball recruits in the region out of Catholic Central High School and, after a potential offer from Xavier fell through, would lead him to an offer from Bonnies' head coach Larry Weise, placing him in the same recruiting class as Bob Lanier, future Bona great and eventual NBA Hall of Famer.

“We didn't room together as freshmen, but we were on the freshmen team together, and we said ‘let's room together,’” said Kalbaugh, citing that at the time schools would not let

athletes room together due to fear that both could get ill at the same time. “He was a warm guy, really good guy.”

He also discussed, in addition to Lanier’s very evident basketball skills, how hard the 6’10 center worked to get into shape between his freshman and sophomore basketball seasons, predicting that the future star lost nearly thirty pounds over the course of one summer, eventually leading to a physique perfect for dominant Division I play.

“It just came for him. He worked very hard at his game, though.”

Kalbaugh also discussed his admiration for head coach, Larry Weise calling him a very “low key” coaching figure.

“When he’d get on you, you’d deserve it. He went after [Lanier] one time and he’d start right at the top,” noting that NBA scouts had discussed with Weise that the star center hadn’t been rebounding enough.

“[Weise] then demanded that Bob get every rebound. That practice got very physical. I even at one point said ‘even though I’m 5’10, I’m going to get a rebound!’” Kalbaugh said, laughing. “But, that was Larry. When he got on you, it was for a reason.”

After graduating from St. Bonaventure in 1970, Kalbaugh would go on to coach one year at the University of Connecticut, before joining former teammate Jim Satalin’s staff at his alma mater as an assistant coach starting in 1973. In 1977, the team gained a birth in the National Invitational Tournament, which at that time, considering how small the NCAA was, was still a huge honor.

“We got invited in 1977 and I remember the day before we left to go play Rutgers, we had the worst practice I’ve ever seen and [Satalin] just threw the players out of the gym. But, we had two good leaders at that time, Essee House and Jim Baron, who brought the team back to practice on their own,” Kalbaugh said mentioning Baron who recently retired from his head coaching position at Canisius a few weeks ago. “We then went and beat Rutgers in overtime and then we went to the Garden, beat the University of Oregon Villanova by two, and then won the championship against Houston.

Those kids worked hard and they were a pleasure to coach.”

After his coaching career, which also included a stint as the Mercyhurst head coach, Kalbaugh served, along with Satalin, as executive director of the Coaches vs. Cancer

initiative, recently retiring after many years partnership with the American Cancer Society, while also working with coaches from around the country including UNC coach Roy Williams' and Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski to fundraise for cancer research.

Kalbaugh still credits all of his post educational success to St. Bonaventure and continues to remain proud of his alma mater for the strides they have made in returning the university to glory once more.

"I still am so thankful they are the only school to offer me a scholarship," Kalbaugh said. "I owe Bonaventure the world.

As for the future?

"I just pray they can do it again," Kalbaugh said, hoping for another run for the Bonnies' deep in the NCAA tournament. "I want everybody to say one day that the 1970 team was the second best team to play at St. Bonaventure."

Considering the current state of the program, under head coach Mark Schmidt, that future may not be too far in the distance.

And, with the recent support of the Jamestown community, it is a fact that the Bonnies will never be beaten.