

Kalbaugh, Lanier Defied The Odds At St. Bonaventure

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By Cameron Hurst

To say that Billy Kalbaugh had a pretty reliable reference in his attempt to get recruited to play basketball at St. Bonaventure University, may be a bit of an understatement.

It was, in fact, his own sister, a coed student at the university at the time, who recommended his basketball talents to the Bonnies' head coach Larry Weise back in the mid-1960's.

"She came into the office one day and said 'I've got a brother who I think is a pretty good basketball player,' and she recommended him," Weise recalled during a recent telephone interview.

The rest, as they say, was history.

Kalbaugh, who will be speaking at the Robert H. Jackson Center on Thursday evening, would end up having one of the most decorated careers in the history of the St. Bonaventure men's basketball program.

Kalbaugh was recruited out of Troy, getting noticed by Weise and assistant coach Fred Handler after trusting his sister's recommendation and making their way east to see the Catholic Central student play in a basketball tournament.

"His ball handling, passing skills, and ability to score (led us to him)," Weise said. "We definitely liked what we saw."

Upon arriving at St. Bonaventure, Kalbaugh was commissioned to room with another freshman recruit, Bob Lanier, who would go on to have the greatest career in school history.

And, despite the differences between them and opposite backgrounds from which they came, they immediately became the best of friends.

“They got along terrifically, really,” Weise said of his two eventual co-captains. “They hit it off immediately. Their friendship really created the nucleus of the teams to come.”

“Our relationship was very important,” Lanier said in a telephone interview earlier this week. “Talent makes you go places and chemistry causes the talent to come out. We came in together. He was a guard. I was a center. I depended on him a lot and our team depended on him for a lot.”

And, considering the time period, by rooming a black athlete with a white athlete, St. Bonaventure experimented with something quite revolutionary. And, it worked.

“It’s a great story,” Lanier said, “because here you have two guys of different ethnicities, and I think two guys that came from real different backgrounds formed a lifelong relationship with one another and it was evident by the way we played with each other, number one, and number two, the relationship has lasted over forty years.”

Referring to him as “the coach on the floor,” Lanier echoed the importance of Kalbaugh’s skills that Weise also emphasized, but went on to explain just where he came to acquire those skills.

“Billy had a great understanding of basketball because he had been around it for so long” Lanier said mentioning that Kalbaugh’s father had worked primarily as a basketball coach in the Albany area. “He had an understanding not only of the X’s and O’s, but also of the execution.”

That execution proved pivotal throughout their careers, particularly during the 1969-70 season, which was capped by a berth in the Final Four, at Cole Fieldhouse at the University of Maryland. The Bonnies, who lost to Jacksonville, 91-83, played without Lanier, who was injured in the regional final against Villanova.

“We had a darn good cast,” Lanier said. “Were we a little overmatched against Jacksonville? Yeah. But when you look at the game, it was a courageous bunch of guys that, as I sat in the hospital, made me proud to be a Bonnie, number one, and number two, if we didn’t have an architect like Billy to lead us, we just would not have done as well without question.

Weise agreed.

“We were in the game and Bill just did what he always did. He led our offense which was pretty balanced,” Weise said noting the importance of Greg Gary, Matt Gant, Tom Baldwin, Paul Hoffman, Dale Tepas, and Mike Hull. “Lanier just put us over the top, but without him, we still were a pretty good club and Bill was one of the best when it came to running that offense and it showed that night.”

Kalbaugh’s ability to run that team, even in the absence of Lanier, personified the underdog nature of that St. Bonaventure team, and exemplified the family-like atmosphere the team embodied throughout that 1969-70 winter and early spring.

“Great point guards on any level make teams better and to add the fact that he had a great personality and that our team had a great chemistry really proved that,” Lanier said emphasizing the team’s play as a family. “We protected each other, we had each other’s back, and Coach Weise had us focused on the one goal and that was winning the NCAA Championship.”

“I dare say we all loved each other.”

Love. How ironic. For the Franciscan message, that of which has been upheld by the friars and nuns in the Allegany/Olean area since St. Bonaventure’s establishment in 1858, is that of love. And if that was the case amongst those brothers in basketball forty-six years ago, then what proud representatives those students, led by Kalbaugh and Lanier, must have been on college basketball’s national stage that year in College Park, Maryland.

“We were a very, very close knit squad,” Lanier said. “Especially when you think of a little school like St. Bonaventure to getting to the “Final Four” and really having chance to win a championship, had I not had that bad situation happen to me. It’s unheard of.”

But then again, so was a 5-10 guard from Troy rooming with a 6-11 center from inner-city Buffalo.

Kalbaugh was a part of a team that continually defied the odds and reached heights that many young basketball players could only dream of. He’ll tell his story and more at 5:30 PM., Thursday in the Carl Cappa Theater at the Robert H. Jackson Center where he will be interviewed by Greg Peterson.