

By Bill
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Courting Rites

For Rutgers basketball, some of the toughest competition is for the favors of the nation's top recruits.

When Rutgers' men's basketball coach Bob Wenzel (RC'71) was a young assistant coach at South Carolina in 1980, he was locked in a recruiting battle with powerhouse North Carolina for a promising high school basketball star. Looking for an edge, Wenzel brought the young man and his parents to dinner at the governor's mansion. By the time the star player and the governor's son excused themselves to shoot baskets, Wenzel was convinced that he'd clinched the deal. "Unfortunately," says Wenzel, "we came in second. And when you recruit, second may as well be fifth. To this day, people from North Carolina's program tease me about that player."

That player was Michael Jordan, and the rest of his career is history. It may seem strange that a college basketball program can call on the governor to help lure a prospect to the state university, but in the big time, a lot is at stake: The decision of one 16-year-

old sensation can turn around a program's fortunes and deliver big bucks, pride, and national attention to both the school and its state.

When Wenzel came to Rutgers from a coaching position with the New Jersey Nets five seasons ago, he found a basketball program that was basically DOA. The Scarlet Knights were coming off three consecutive 7-22 seasons and were rarely on television; the few fans who showed up for games could hear the echoes of the ball bouncing and the coaches yelling as they sat in the near-empty stands.

Wenzel's first year was marked by a remarkable 18-13 turnaround that won Rutgers its first NCAA playoff berth in six years and brought him honors as Atlantic 10 Conference Coach of the Year. His 1989-90 squad won the conference championship, and the 1990-91 team earned another NCAA playoff bid. These days the Knights are on New Jersey Network almost every Tuesday night through the season, and last year they made a national television appearance against Duke.

But the last two years have been subpar—last year's 13-15 record was the Scarlet Knights' worst performance under Wenzel—and the coach and his staff are banking that last year's recruiting class will start paying dividends this season. The program is especially anticipating the debut of 6'4" sophomore guard Waliyy Dixon, who was one of the two highest-rated high school players in New Jersey in 1991-92. Other recruits making their court debuts this season are 6'2" All-New York City freshman guard Charles Jones; 5'7" junior-college transfer Pete Marcotte of Middletown, New Jersey; 6'5" freshman forward Sheon Givens of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; and 6'3" guard Rich Ashmeade, a transfer from the University of Connecticut.

Besides being the quintessential salesman, a good recruiter needs to bring several other ingredients to the table: research and networking skills, top-notch facilities, guaranteed television exposure, a winning record, the opportunity for the athlete to play, and a schol-

Full court press: Off the bench, the heat is on Coach Wenzel to land tomorrow's star players.



arship. Wenzel's task is complicated by the fact that, unlike Rutgers' Big East football team, the basketball team is part of the Atlantic 10 Conference, and not all prospects realize this.

In recruiting, luck and fate are almost always factored into the equation. When former Carteret High School star Keith Hughes decided to transfer out of Syracuse in 1988, Rutgers assistant athletic director Joe Boylan asked Hughes if he would wait and talk to Wenzel, who had just been named Rutgers' head coach, before deciding what school to transfer to. A few weeks later, not only had Hughes committed to Rutgers, but



Earl Duncan, Syracuse's starting guard and Hughes's former roommate, had called Wenzel and asked if Rutgers would take him, too. Hughes and Duncan went on to become the nucleus of some of the best Scarlet Knights teams in years.

Like many coaches, however, Wenzel wishes there were less emphasis on recruiting and more time to help players improve their game. And recent improve-

ments in the quality of Rutgers' conference make both recruiting and coaching more challenging. Last year RPI rated the Atlantic 10 the fourth-strongest basketball conference in the nation. This year the conference had three teams in the Associated Press Preseason Top 25. Rare is the opportunity to sign an athlete of a caliber to compete against the conference's stars: Temple's Aaron McKie and Eddie Jones, George Washington's Inka Dare, and Massachusetts's Lou Roe.

But that's just the task new assistant coach Tom Abatamarco, who came to Rutgers from Colorado this past July, has set for himself. An assistant coach on the storied North Carolina State team that the late Jim Valvano (RC'67) led to the national championship in 1983, Abatamarco, says Wenzel, is "one of the best recruiters in the country." Abatamarco comes with credentials: Besides working with Valvano, he served as an assistant coach at Colorado, St. John's, and Davidson and as a head coach at Lamar and Drake. He recruited several players that are now in the NBA, including Spud Webb, Dell Curry, and Chucky Brown.

"It's a matter of relating to kids and to people," says Abatamarco, who can often be found in his office at midnight, still writing letters to prospects. "You have to learn to be thick-skinned and not to take rejection personally. Most people see the glamorous side of college basketball: the hoopla, the cam-

eras, the television. But they don't see the other side of it: time away from your family; the road; and hours on the phone talking to players, scouts, and contacts across the country."

The coaching staffs of Division I programs—all 300 of them—begin to track players as early as eighth and ninth grade. The players' progress is monitored through high school, summer basketball camp, and, in many cases, junior college; indeed, it was out of junior college that the Rutgers staff recruited shooting guard Steve Worthy, the Knights' leading scorer last season.

Wenzel says Rutgers pursues every blue-chip prospect in the region. Last year's top NBA draft choices who played high school basketball in New Jersey—Bobby Hurley, Luther Wright, and Terry Dehere—were all pursued by Rutgers before they opted for other schools. Wright and Dehere ended up at Seton Hall, where a Big East television contract and more media exposure bestow a distinct recruiting advantage; Hurley wound up at Duke, where he played in three Final Fours.

Regulating the recruiting process is an endless list of guidelines. Many of them are "knee-jerk reactions to some bad publicity," says Wenzel. One guideline he particularly disagrees with: "We're restricted to evaluating high school players only 10 days a month during their regular season, but high schools mainly play their games on Tuesdays and Fridays." These are days on which many college games are also scheduled, creating a conflict for coaches, says Wenzel. "The result is you don't get to see many guys during their high school careers. You have to base your evaluations on what a kid did [during summer-league play]. That's unfortunate because many kids develop in their senior year [of high school]."

Because of this scouting restriction, July is the key month to evaluate players. A Rutgers coach joins as many as 200 to 300 other coaches who are constantly on the road viewing the best high school players as they compete against each other at camps or in tournaments. "In these situations, ninth and tenth graders compete against juniors and seniors," says Wenzel. "The overall quality of the player is better than in most high school leagues."

And the summer-league coach often has more influence when it comes to the athlete's decision on a school. "We're only allowed to phone a player once a week, but we can phone the player's summer-league coach 10 times a week," says Wenzel. "We're also not allowed to talk to the kids we evaluate at a summer camp, but any Tom, Dick, or Harry can walk off the street and interact with the players."

Each September, when Wenzel would prefer to stay on campus and help his new freshman and junior-college transfers make the adjustment to Rutgers, he and his staff have to take to the road to make from 20 to 30 presentations to high school prospects, their families, friends, and advisers. In many cases, despite their best efforts, it's often someone whom the recruiter never meets—a girlfriend

or a peer—who has the most influence on a prospect's decision. "Oftentimes parents decide to stay out of it," says Wenzel, "and the 16- or 17-year-old is left alone to make a decision that could affect the rest of his life."

Over the years, Wenzel has learned to roll with the punches, follow his instincts, and not take anything for granted. In helping put together Duke's national championship team in the late 1970s, Wenzel signed two of the most sought-after high school stars in the country: Mike Gminski and Gene Banks. Wenzel remembers finding out that Gminski was graduating from high school in his junior year: Wenzel had him signed while most coaches were waiting for the kid's senior year to pass. As for Gene Banks, Wenzel remembers going to the player's West Philadelphia home expecting only enough time to make his

sports

pitch. Instead, Banks's mother had laid out a home-cooked, full-course meal. Hungry or not, Wenzel ate.

As for this year's recruiting efforts, a new rule handed down from the NCAA has made things even tougher. The number of scholarship players that a Division I basketball team can have on its squad at any one time has been reduced from 15 to 13, making each scholarship more crucial. Although Wenzel and his staff had been tracking the current crop of prospects for years, three days before the week-long November signing period, they still hadn't had the takers that they wanted for two of their three open scholarship slots.

One recruit—Eric Clark, a 6'9" post player from Rockford, Illinois—had committed early, but the other two slots were up for grabs. Finally, as the signing period ended, Eriq Mason, a 6'9" center from Dallas, agreed to come to Rutgers. With one slot still open and the next signing period not until April, Wenzel will have to wait until spring to land his next big recruit. But the coach looks at it this way: Now he has the whole season to focus on finding that one choice prospect that could someday take Rutgers to the Final Four. □

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