

midnight

The lights dim. Artificial smoke billows. And laser beams shoot across the gymnasium as, one by one, the players of the Fordham men's and women's basketball Rams take the court for the first time this year. It's Oct. 15 — Midnight Madness — the day that marks the official start of the 1999-00 basketball season. The cheers of some 1,800 fans fill Rose Hill gymnasium as players jam the ball through the hoop during layup drills. During a three-point shooting contest



by Bill Glovin
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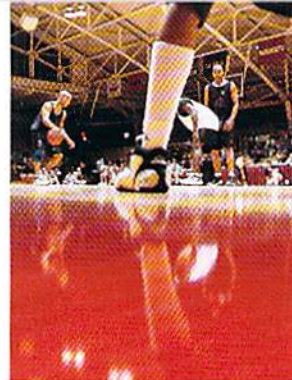
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featuring the Lady Rams, all eyes are on junior forward Nailah Wallace, the new co-captain and transfer student from North Carolina State, who buries shot after shot from the perimeter. Meanwhile, head men's basketball coach Bob Hill saunters over to the sidelines. Spectators erupt into applause, chanting "Bob Hill! Bob Hill!" The silver-haired coach with the movie-star looks, cool demeanor and NBA pedigree steals the show without uttering a word. photos by Alan S. Orling

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Bob Hill



In the crowd to offer support to the new coach is John Andariese — "Johnny Hoops" — broadcast analyst for the New York Knicks, who graduated from Fordham in 1960. A close friend of Hill's, Andariese says Fordham basketball will reach new heights under Hill's leadership.

"Bob is a very impressive guy: honest, articulate, persuasive and someone who projects a positive image," Andariese says. "I knew that he was at a career crossroads and that he and Fordham would make a great fit. Besides the fact that we have great academics and alumni and fan support, New York is the mecca of basketball and contains a tremendous pool of talent to recruit from. With Bob as coach, all the ingredients are here to create a winning program."

Midnight Madness marks Hill's return to the college ranks for the first time since his days as an assistant at the University of Kansas in the early 1980s. He rose to prominence during an NBA roller-coaster ride that included head-coaching stints with the New York Knicks, Indiana Pacers and San Antonio Spurs, where he coached star player David Robinson and registered a .681 win percentage over more than two seasons.

Hill was lured back to college coaching by the opportunity to teach the game to student-athletes, who are more eager to learn than professionals, he says.

"We've got an awful lot of work to do," Hill says of his team after the Midnight Madness festivities end. "Enthusiasm doesn't help you get back on defense, hit your shots, or play as a team. Tomorrow we start on the road to building what I hope will become something truly special."

The men's Rams last season showed marked improvement for the first time since they left the Patriot League in 1995-96 to join the more competitive Atlantic 10 Conference. This year, with Hill at the helm, the team likely will be under the microscope in one of the most visible markets in the world.

Though he's not expecting miracles overnight, Hill says, "The long-term goal is to get to the 'dance,' the Final Four in the NCAA tournament. We want it all."

In the short term, Hill says he plans to put a competitive team on the floor. He was hired too late in the summer to bring in his own players, but several solid underclassmen return to a team that won 12 games overall and five in conference play last year. Among the veteran stars are junior guards Bevon Robin (a 6-foot-2-inch second-team All-Atlantic 10 selection) and Jason Harris (a quick-footed, 5-foot-9-inch player who made 41 steals last year). New York *Daily News* basketball writer Dick Weiss calls the duo "one of the best young backcourts in the A-10."

Big things also are expected from 6-foot-8-inch Alejandro Olivares, an Argentinean who received contract offers of \$75,000 and \$100,000 during his freshman and sophomore years, respectively, to play professional basketball in Argentina. In both cases, Olivares decided to stay at Fordham, and he earned the A-10 award last year for Most Improved Player after increasing his scoring output from 3.0 to 15.0.

To prepare for the 2000-01 season, Hill hit the recruiting trail hard during the summer and fall. Accompanying him were assistants Frank Martin, Jean Prioleau (a star college basketball player who graduated from Fordham in 1992), and Mike Brown, whom Hill calls "the Michael Jordan of recruiting."



Kevin Morris

"The reception I receive from families on recruiting visits is phenomenal," Hill says. "It isn't so much that I'm a former NBA coach, it's more that Fordham, an outstanding university, also has a former NBA coach."

Hill rejects the notion that the quest for athletic success will jeopardize the University's high academic standards.

"Duke University and a lot of other competitive schools successfully blend academics and athletics," he says.

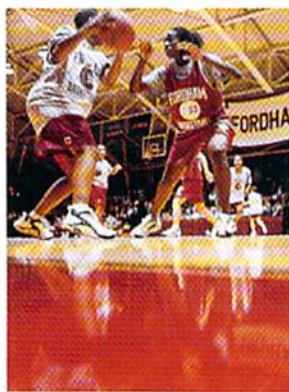
He also scoffs at the notion that Rose Hill gymnasium — one of the oldest facilities in the country and the smallest home court in the Atlantic 10 — will dissuade new recruits.

"Games at Madison Square Garden are already planned, and new-and-improved on-campus facilities and more television exposure will come in time," he says.

"I think we can bring in some quality talent immediately, players who will get substantial minutes next year as freshmen," Hill adds. "This season will be about laying the foundation and the commitment we need to succeed. The rest will follow."

For the Lady Rams, the 1999-00 season is about building on a foundation that was laid during the past five years, since the team joined the Atlantic 10 Conference. Head Coach Kevin Morris expects his team, which was 9-18 overall and 5-11 in the A-10 last year, to compete for the conference title this season and perhaps earn an NCAA tournament bid.

The women's team rose through the A-10 ranks quickly, placing last during its first three seasons in the conference, then third in the Atlantic 10-East last year. Last year's team also



finished first in three-point field goals overall and in league games.

"Granted, we lost three starting players," Morris says of this year's team, "but we're quicker, deeper and more athletic in every way. I guarantee that we'll

be better than last year."

Expected to play major roles are junior point guard Maureen Garvey, who started in all 27 games last season; junior Chinyere Vann, who averaged 13.5 points per game through the first 13 games last season before being side-lined by an injury; and sophomore Kady Kanoute, who has become more comfortable since coming to the Bronx last year from Reze, France.

The women's team will go as far as co-captain Nailah Wallace can take them. As a freshman, she played an average of 20 minutes each game on a North Carolina State team that went to the Final 4 of the NCAA tournament. She says she transferred to Fordham to attend a "great school" close to family and friends.

Says Morris, "Nailah is by far the most talented player we've had in my nine years here."

Both Morris and Hill plan to stress teamwork as the keys to success on the court. Players will work on staying in their positions and putting the team ahead of the individual during games.

"Teamwork is a very powerful thing and is the most elusive quality, whether you're talking about college or the pros," Hill says. "You have to have people who embrace the team to be successful."

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