BY JIM MALONEY
CRUSADER SPORTS STAFF

Students who have parents that graduated from Holy Cross have probably heard the stories about the intense rivalry that once existed with Boston College. Due to BC's close proximity and similar religious affiliation the two schools had a rivalry that lasted for years. The football team's most important game annually was against BC and fans filled the stands at Fitton Field when the Eagles came to town. The basketball team also has a storied history that goes back to 1906, when Holy Cross won the initial contest between the two schools, by a score of 35-14.

Today, however, with all due respect to Holy Cross' athletic teams, not much of a rivalry exists. While the football team had a successful 2000 campaign going 7-4 and the men's basketball team is making a strong bid for the NCAA tournament, both schools are the exceptions in many sports containing nationwide attention. The majority of the Eagles' football team attends BC on athletic scholarships, while Patriot League schools are not permitted grant scholarships for football. This gives BC a huge advantage over Holy Cross in recruiting top players.

While Holy Cross certainly has a great deal to offer student athletes, they cannot provide national exposure and full athletic scholarships. For these reasons, top players often overlook Holy Cross' academic reputation and respectable athletic program and choose a school with a similar reputation that can provide extra luxuries.

Beginning in the 1998-99 academic year, the Patriot League allowed basketball programs to offer scholarships to players. Interestingly, Holy Cross and Lehigh were the only schools to take advantage of this policy. Army and Navy were not affected by this rule change because students do not pay to attend school there, but Bucknell, Lafayette, and Colgate decided to refrain from offering scholarships. Both the men's and women's basketball programs at Holy Cross have been able to bring in top high school players, which has resulted in the women's team regularly competing in the NCAA tournament and the men's team regaining respect.

While the women's basketball program had been strong throughout the 1990s, the men struggled throughout the latter part of the decade. Holy Cross had suffered four straight losing seasons before this year's squad assured themselves a winning campaign with their 18-5 start. It is no coincidence that the men's basketball program has turned in the right direction after scholarships were returned for the 1998-99 season. Patrick Weirratty, Ryan Serravalle, and Dekker McKeever were the first Crusaders to receive scholarships since the 1989-90 season.

When both schools offered basketball scholarships and television revenue was not a major factor, the schools had an intense rivalry. Holy Cross leads the all time series 56-47, despite the fact they have not won since 1990. After a 21 year layoff, the two teams renewed acquaintances in 1946 and have played annually ever since. Holy Cross dominated the '40s, '50s, and '60s before BC started coming more competitive in the '70s.

The schools were fairly evenly matched until Holy Cross stopped giving scholarships which created a large disparity between the programs. In the '90s while Holy Cross was without scholarships, BC brought in superstars including Howard Eisley and Billy Curley who became NBA players once their days in Chestnut Hill ended.

Getting the top players is the most crucial element to a successful college program. Coaches certainly play a big role in developing players, but you need the best talent to be successful. BC knows what it is like not to be able to get top players, just ask former coach Jim O'Brien. O'Brien led BC to the top of the Big East in the mid '90s before an admission scandal at BC prompted him to leave in search of greener pastures.

The admissions office at BC would not accept O'Brien's top recruits, which destroyed the program and resulted into O'Brien leaving to take the head coaching job at Ohio State. The result of the scandal was the loss of a great coach and players that had committed to BC. This caused the BC program to fall to the bottom of the Big East, and go through a complete rebuilding process.

While the late '90s were tough times for the basketball programs at BC and Holy Cross, brighter days seem to be ahead. Ralph Williard (HC) and Al Skinner (BC) have turned around their respective programs and both have an excellent chance of competing in the NCAA tournament this spring. Although BC blew out Holy Cross in December, Holy Cross is making strides toward being competitive with BC due to the fact that Holy Cross can now offer scholarships.

While BC has dominated the series lately, Holy Cross still holds the all time advantage head to head and can also claim to be the only team in Massachusetts to win the NCAA title (1947). It appears that the BC - Holy Cross rivalry will soon be reborn on the court.

Those who wish to relive the days of Holy Cross and BC's football rivalry do not have reason to be optimistic.

The days of Doug Flutie and company playing at Fitton Field do not seem to be returning anytime soon. For starters, BC is in a Division IAA program while Holy Cross is a member of Division I-AA. Not only is interdivision competition very rare in college football, but it can be harmful to Division IAA teams that are competing for post season bowl invitations. The format currently used by the NCAA, the BCS ratings, do not credit a IAA team for a victory unless it comes against a fellow IAA opponent.

This year provided an example on how harmful playing a I-AA team can be, as Miami's strength of schedule was compromised by playing McNeese St. early in the season, and they were not given credit for a win under the BCS format.

For these reasons, BC will not be likely to agree to renew their rivalry with Holy Cross. With the money BC can receive from a post-season bowl, they would not be wise to compromise their strength of schedule by playing a I-AA team and risk losing a major bowl invitation.

The current structure of college athletics does not allow for the two football programs to compete with each other, so people will have to live with their memories of the past rather than experience new ones.

The Holy Cross - BC Rivalry: Does it exist?

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