CRUSADER SPORTS STAFF

With the success of the Men's Basketball team, a lot of the players have been given credit. Much praise is given to team leaders Juan Pegues and Jared Curry, the floor prowess of Jave Meade and Ryan Serravalle, the dominance of Josh Sankes, the versatility of Tim Szaiko, and the offensive spark of Brian Wilson among others. Though the players deserve much credit, the coaching staff has done a terrific job turning this team around after a difficult season last year. This year, in only his second season, Coach Ralph Willard has lead the Crusaders to their first Patriot League Crown.

Willard is the fourteenth coach in Crusader basketball history, and the seventh Holy Cross graduate to hold this position. He graduated in 1967, and played on the Varsity team for three years. In the 1966-67 season, Willard was the team captain and lead the Crusaders to a 16-9 record.

His experience in coaching includes many different levels of the game. He has coached in high school, for big time college teams, and in the pros. At the high school level, Willard coached for 13 years.

Willard then moved to Pittsburgh where he bolstered a team that had been struggling in the Big East.

Willard came to Holy Cross in 1999 hoping to turn yet another program around. In his first year at the helm, the Crusaders struggled, yet still managed to achieve the best record they had in the previous four years. This year, lead by a group of intensely motivated players and coaches, they have surprised many, finishing the regular season with a 20-7 mark.

"I think Coach Willard has done an excellent job," said senior Juan Pegues, "he's gotten us ready for every game in terms of knowing our opponents and getting us focused to play Holy Cross basketball." Any spectator watching the Crusaders knows this is true. They play an intense defense, stifling opponents, holding them to a mere 37.9% field goal percentage, a statistic in which they are the best in the country. They hold their foes to just 62 points a game, and out-rebound them by 7.9 boards a game. This is a testament to Willard and the tremendous job he has done in motivating his ball-players.

"I wish he had been around when I was a freshman," Pegues said, "he has taught me so much. He's taught me preparation in a mental sense, almost like a psyche. I feel that my mental approach to the game has improved, and I've definitely become a better player because of it." Coaching basketball is not just about X's and O's. Great coaches know how to connect with their players and can help give their players a mental edge on their opponents. Even the average spectator can see this edge that our Crusaders possess.

A winning attitude is prevalent in each player's demeanor and confidence abounds in each player's game.

Coach Willard also has a great staff behind him, all whom have devoted their time and concerns for the good of the team. Assistant coaches include Coach Kevin Nickelberry, Coach Sean Doherty, Coach Eric Eaton, and Coach Any Niedzwiecki. Along with Coach Willard, these men have worked hard to ensure success for this program.

"They have prepared us for practice and games. You really can't ask for more than that. But they have gone beyond, and they try to prepare us for life as well, teaching us to become better people," said Pegues.

Willard and the Crusaders enter the Patriot League Tournament having lost two straight against Boston University and Army. Despite these setbacks, the Crusaders are in good shape for the tournament. Right now Willard is one win shy of 175 for his career. Let's hope that he earns 176 in the Tournament final, and the 'Sader head to the NCAA tournament.