Josh Sankes and Dave Puloka:
Where are they now?

BY JIM MALONEY
CRUSADER SPORTS STAFF

When the class of 2001 graduated last spring, Holy Cross lost two of their most recognized athletes. Dave Puloka was a two-year captain of the football team and a record setting performer in track. Josh Sankes caught much of the region’s attention when he led the men’s basketball team to the NCAA tournament last season. Upon graduating, these two athletes took their games to the next level, as both were given tryouts with professional sports teams.

Puloka was the leader of the intimidating Holy Cross defense the last few years. A defensive end from Arlington, MA, Puloka received many personal accolades throughout his career on Fitch Field. Even more meaningful may have been the season Puloka helped lead Holy Cross to last year. After Holy Cross struggled during Puloka’s early years, he captained the team during his final two seasons, which culminated in a 7-4 finish in 2000.

After cracking the starting lineup halfway through his freshman year, Puloka impressed coaches with his play instantly. He ended his freshman year with 32 tackles and two sacks, numbers that would go up drastically as time went on.

The next three seasons Puloka was a All-League performer, receiving second team honors as a sophomore in 1998 and then taking home first team honors in ’99 and 2000. His career numbers were some of the most impressive in recent Holy Cross history, ending with 155 total tackles and 19 sacks. His best year statistically came in ’99 when he notched 33 tackles and eight sacks. In addition to his football ability, Puloka displayed athletic ability in other areas setting the Patriot League record for the discus at 53.37 meters.

This ability impressed professional scouts enough to give Puloka a look. Although he was not selected in the seven rounds of the NFL draft in April, the Cincinnati Bengals called asking immediately after the draft. They signed Puloka to a two-year contract with hopes of converting the “under-sized” Puloka (by NFL standards) to a linebacker.

Puloka worked hard in an attempt to make the transition to linebacker and easier one. He had been a dominant defensive end in college, but playing linebacker in the NFL would be totally different experience. Not only is the NFL comprised of the best players in the world, but Puloka would be playing a position where he had no game experience. Unfortunately for Puloka, he was cut by the Bengals on July 14. The Bengals were apparently in need for more linemen, and to had to cut the salary of Puloka and other rookies when they signed defensive lineman Bernard Whittington to a two-year contract.

Sankes was an impressive inside force for the men’s basketball team the past two seasons and will be sorely missed this year. The 7-1 center from Buffalo, NY dominated his competition in the Patriot League during his two-year stay in Worcester. After two years at Rutgers University, Sankes came to Holy Cross in 1998-99, but was forced to sit out a season by the NCAA.

In his first year at Holy Cross, Sankes established himself as the “go to” man on the team. He led the team in scoring (14.1), rebounding (11.9), and blocks (69). Not only did Sankes stand out at Holy Cross, but his rebound total was second best in the nation and his 19 double-doubles ranked third in the country. Despite Sankes’ efforts, the Crusaders did not enjoy much success in their 1999-00 campaign, finishing with a 10-18 record.

Sankes returned for his senior year prepared to lead the Crusaders to a better fate. With help from fellow seniors Jared Curry and Juan Pegues and regular season Patriot League Player of the Year Tim Szatko, Sankes provided many memories for Crusader fans. Despite battling a nagging Achilles injury much of the season, Sankes was able to provide steady inside play and was named to the First Team All-League. He was regularly double-teamed by opponents, but still posted very impressive numbers. Although he saw his season averages fall to 12.8 points and 9.6 rebounds, Sankes more importantly helped the Crusaders improve where it matters most, the win column.

There was less pressure on Sankes to carry the 00-01 Crusaders to a better fate. With help from fellow seniors Jared Curry and Juan Pegues and regular season Patriot League Player of the Year Tim Szatko, Sankes provided many memories for Crusader fans. Despite battling a nagging Achilles injury much of the season, Sankes was able to provide steady inside play and was named to the First Team All-League. He was regularly double-teamed by opponents, but still posted very impressive numbers. Although he saw his season averages fall to 12.8 points and 9.6 rebounds, Sankes more importantly helped the Crusaders improve where it matters most, the win column.

Upon graduating from Holy Cross, Sankes’ ultimate goal was to play professionally. There was much speculation last season that Sankes could be drafted, but his chances were undoubtedly hurt by the influx of underclassmen who declared themselves eligible for the draft. Sankes went undrafted in 2001 NBA draft, but he later was given a tryout by the Boston Celtics to make the team that would represent them in the Shaw’s Summer League.

Roughly 25 players, mostly rookies and other young players were given a weekend tryout. Notable players joining Sankes were Khalid El-Amin, Milt Palacio, Mark Blount, as well as the Celtics’ three first round picks, Kedrick Brown, Joe Johnson, and Joe Forte. “Josh did well, especially on the post,” said Holy Cross assistant coach Eric Eaton, who attended the tryout. “He was the biggest rookie there without question. He did the things he did here, blocked shots and rebounded the ball.”

Sankes worked well with some of the country’s best college players of years past. “He worked well on screen with El-Amin,” said Eaton, referring to the former NCAA champion at UCONN. Despite Sankes’ best effort, the Celtics did not decide to include him on their summer league roster. “Josh is a kid who gets every ounce of athleticism out of his body. He works incredibly hard, and he really knows how to play the game. We loved having him in camp and we were proud that being a local guy we were able to give him a shot, but unfortunately our roster size is small,” said Celtics director of player personnel Leo Papile of Josh.

Upon being cut by the Celtics, Sankes was not out of basketball long. He accepted a contract to play in Italy with a club in Milan, reaching his ultimate goal of playing professionally. Sankes recently finished pre-season camp in the mountains of Italy and is headed back to Milan awaiting the start of the season.

Both Puloka and Sankes had tremendous careers at Holy Cross. Even though they did not end up playing in the NFL and NBA, both were able to take from them what they accomplished at Holy Cross. They were both outstanding members of the community and were instrumental in turning around the programs of their respective sports.