A CALM BEFORE THE RED STORM
Wasn’t always scandal & chaos at St. John’s

By DICK WEISS, & ROGER and RUBIN | NEW YORK DAILY NEWS |

Feb 08, 2004 | 12:00 AM

In 1984-85, St. John's might have been the best college basketball program in the country. The Johnnies held the nation's No. 1 ranking and sold out every arena they played in. Their players were destined for NBA fame, and in New York, they were everyone's team. Nineteen years later, St. John's might be the worst college basketball team in the country. The Johnnies have won only a quarter of their games this season. They don't sell out the Garden, and they play to a half-filled campus arena. There hasn't been an NBA talent on the team in a couple of years, and in the last week they've gone from a laughingstock to a blight on their school, the city and their sport. The once-great program descended this week to a place no one could have imagined back when Chris Mullin and Mark Jackson and Bill Wennington were carrying the Johnnies into the Final Four. Rock-bottom came Thursday when three members of the 10-player traveling contingent to Pittsburgh were falsely accused of rape after picking up a woman at a strip club and taking her back to their hotel for sex. According to the police, when they refused to pay her, Sherri Ann Urbanek-Bach filed a false report accusing the players of rape. The three players - Grady Reynolds, Abe Keita and Elijah Ingram - avoided prosecution when they produced a video recorded on a phone camera. It appears, however, that all three soon will be expelled. "I am sure to some degree this is a low point in our history," athletic director Dave Wegrzyn says. "But we have to look forward. There are eight or nine players left in the program who are ready to represent St. John's."

"Those players - including four walk-ons - will play against Boston College today at the Garden. While this week's scandal appears to be the most serious, it is certainly not the only one in recent years: In November, guard Willie Shaw was arrested for drug use and dismissed from the team in December. Before the 2002-2003 season, Reynolds was arrested for assaulting a female student. In Oct. 2002, former team captain Sharif Fordham was busted for selling crack cocaine and is serving five years in a Georgia prison. During the 1999-2000 season, allegations that guard Erick Barkley took money from agents resulted in an on-campus NCAA investigation and a suspension for Barkley. In May 1998, allegations that coach Fran Fraschilla tried to motivate the team by showing them his genitals resulted in his firing. And not long after senior Willie Shaw's drug bust, the university's president, the Rev. Donald J. Harrington, made Mike Jarvis the first Big East Conference coach fired in the middle of a season. It took less than 20 years for St. John's to go from the top of the mountain to the lowest point in the valley. There have been some high points along the way - the 1999
NCAA Elite Eight, the 2000 Big East title - but the decline has been steady and reflects a slow disintegration of the school's relationship with the city's basketball community. "It was a thrill for everyone involved when one of your players would go to St. John's," says Jack Ringel, who sent Maurice Brown to the school in the early '90s and Tyrone Grant in the late '90s from Brooklyn's Grady High. "You felt like you were a part of something everyone could get behind. For players and coaches and even fans, St. John's basketball used to be a higher calling.

"Those days, of course, were marked by the tenure of longtime coach Lou Carnesecca, a beloved figure who was one of the city's own, from his pre-game meals at Dante's to his roots as a coach at St. Ann's (now Archbishop Molloy). He won 526 games in his 24 seasons at St. John's and reached a postseason tournament every year (18 NCAA tournaments) before he retired in 1992. In March, 12 seasons will have gone by since Carnesecca retired and St. John's will have finished with a winning record in only six of them. In the 30 seasons before Carnesecca's retirement, St. John's never had a losing record. "I just hope that they get back to where the program is supposed to be," says Mark Jackson, who now plays with the Rockets. "I hope they find a great coach because that program deserves to be one of the elite in the country.

"Most of the blame for St. John's demise is usually placed on the coaches who followed Carnesecca - Brian Mahoney, Fraschilla, and Jarvis - but the program actually began its decline during Carnesecca's final years, when it was unclear who would follow him. "It wasn't about anything more than the fact no one knew who would become coach," one long-time high school coach says. "You knew Louie would be there the next year, but what about after that? Players want a guy who they can play four seasons for and who will invest in them. It wasn't Louie's fault that he stopped being that.

"In Carnesecca's last three recruiting classes, only one player - Shawnelle Scott - was selected in the NBA Draft. Of the three coaches who've followed Carnesecca, only Fraschilla has been able to reconnect with the New York basketball community, but Fraschilla had his own problems, alienating his players and staff with his demanding nature and perceived ambition. Mahoney, the long-time Carnesecca assistant, cast his lot mostly with one AAU program, the Long Island Panthers, with less than stellar results, and once he was fired after finishing 11-16 in 1995-96, fewer and fewer members of the Panthers ended up at St. John's. "I would love for my kids to go to St. John's," says Panthers director Gary Charles. "Zendon Hamilton went there. I was very happy when my kids went there, but lately there hasn't been the same interest." Says Howard Garfinkel, longtime director of the highly regarded Five Star camp: "When St. John's had it going in the '80s, they had a Hall of Fame coach and a bunch of assistants who knew how to keep the local kids at home. Then Little Looie left. And the next few guys weren't able to keep it going.

"The talent pool on the team was already depleted when Fraschilla arrived but he managed to invigorate the program by landing players like Ron Artest, who would be the linchpin of the 1999 Elite Eight team, and Barkley, who would also go on to the NBA. "There are 10 top players who come out of New York City each year," Fraschilla says. "Five of them are leaving automatically. Five of them are just looking for a good reason to stay. I think I gave them that.

"But Fraschilla soon insulted school administrators by agreeing to an interview at Arizona State. His demanding nature helped the Storm win 22 games his second season but also
opened the door for his players to torpedo him when offered the chance, which came when Fraschilla employed the unusual motivational tactic of dropping his pants in practice. Most of the character issues that have arisen with the Johnnies occurred during the Jarvis administration, which with four 20-win seasons turned out to be deceptively destructive. He cast his lot with then-AAU superpower Riverside Church, which offended other AAU coaches, and when he failed to spend much time in the city's high school gyms, he alienated another important constituency. Top players from the area - Taliek Brown, Charlie Villanueva, Ben Gordon, Chris Taft, Carl Krauser, Mark McCarroll, Curtis Sumpter, Allen Ray, Mike Nardi, Randy Foye and Jason Fraser - dot the rosters at Connecticut, Pittsburgh and Villanova. St. John's has lost its identity in the city and is considered a stranger in the PSAL and Catholic League gyms. "When you recruit based on what you hear or maybe what you see, but you don't bother to speak much with a player's coaches, how can you expect to have a feel for how they behave?"

"asks one Big East coach who spoke on the condition of anonymity. Jarvis announced to a collection of high school coaches last fall that his new policy at St. John's would be to recruit only players from junior colleges, a risky strategy in many ways. "They know people are treating them as damaged goods," Jarvis said, when asked about his comment. "Maybe they've just made some mistakes that landed them there. Coming from a junior college doesn't have to mean anything."

"Some of the junior college transfers, however, have proved to be big liabilities. Marcus Hatten, the star of the team two seasons ago, was busted with Shaw for smoking pot last November. Reynolds, in addition to his exploits in Pittsburgh, was arrested before the 2002-03 season for assaulting a female student; the probation he was sentenced to as a result of the assault ended Jan. 31. And Fordham, who was captain of the 2001-02 team, was arrested in Georgia only six months after leading the Johnnies to their last NCAA Tournament and was sentenced to serve five years for selling crack. "Mike (Jarvis) never really got to know these kids," says one AAU source. "I mean, Grady was one of his kids, one of the guys he personally brought in here. But how well did he know him? I know when he was recruiting one of my kids, he didn't really understand the kid's family situation. "How can you trust a kid you don't really know?"

"Graphic: FROM REDMEN TO RED STORM - A LOOK BACK AT ST. JOHN'S BASKETBALL. 1985: St. John's with star guard Chris Mullin (l.) rises to the No. 1 ranking in the country, and makes the Final Four, but loses to Georgetown in the national semifinal. 1986: After winning the Big East Tournament, St. John's has a disappointing stumble to Auburn in the second round of the NCAA Tournament. 1987: St. John's has its 30-game Alumni Hall winning streak and 14-game Madison Square Garden winning streak snapped, then loses to DePaul in the second round of the NCAAs. 1988: With Mark Jackson gone as the last major contributor from the 1985 team, St. John's fails to win a postseason game for the first time since 1981, losing in the first round of the Big East Tournament, then the first round of the NCAAs. 1989: After a disappointing 15-13 regular-season record causes St. John's to miss the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 1981, the Johnnies get some consolation in the NIT, taking the title with a 73-65 victory over St. Louis. 1990: Boo Harvey posts the first 40-point game by a St. John's player in 18 years, and the Johnnies get back to the NCAAs, making it to the second round before falling to Duke. 1991: Lou Carnesecca (l.) earns his 500th career win and St. John's gets as far in the NCAA Tournament as it has since 1985, going to the Midwest Regional Final before falling to Duke. 1992: Carnesecca closes his career on a sour note with a first-round loss to Tulane in the NCAA Tournament. 1994:
After making it to the second round of the NCAAs in his first season, Brian Mahoney comes crashing down to earth with a 12-17 record. 1996: Mahoney's St. John's career comes to an end after the Red Storm goes 11-16, and once-heralded point guard Felipe Lopez proves solid, but not a star player in his first two seasons. 1997: Under Fran Fraschilla (r.), St. John's stumbles again, going 13-14 and losing to Miami in the first round of the Big East Tournament. 1998: Fraschilla gets the program back on track with a 22-win campaign, but Storm falls to Detroit Mercy in the first round of the NCAAs. 1999: In his first year as head coach, Mike Jarvis leads St. John's to the South Regional Final in the NCAA Tournament, but the Red Storm loses a three-point heartbreaker to Ohio State to miss out on the Final Four. 2000: Guard Erick Barkley is investigated for illegal payments of his high school tuition and a swap of cars with a Rucker League coach. A distracted Red Storm bows out of the NCAA Tournament in the second round. 2001: The wheels continue to fall for Jarvis as St. John's finishes 14-15 and is humiliated, 91-59, by Duke. During that game, St. John's players can be seen laughing on the bench, and Jarvis suspends forward Jack Wolfinger after the display. 2002: Willie Shaw is suspended for St. John's NCAA Tournament game after a positive drug test, and the Red Storm loses in the first round to Wisconsin. 2003-2004: Jarvis is fired, St. John's gets off to its worst Big East start ever, and up to six players are kicked off the team after an incident with a prostitute in Pittsburgh.