



From Behind the Bench

**Inside the basketball scandal
that rocked St. Bonaventure**

**Vinny Pezzimenti
and Bill Peters**

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FOREWORD

As the 2000-2001 college basketball season began, St. Bonaventure University possessed a program on the rise, a program that could legitimately compete for a postseason tournament berth on a yearly basis. The story was almost surreal. Only 10 years earlier, the once-proud Bonnies were horrendous, the school was hurting economically and it appeared the small city of Olean, N.Y. was soon to become a ghost town of college basketball, where legends once lived but only dusty paths of past greatness ceased to exist.

No one could have predicted that trip to the second round of the National Invitation Tournament (NIT) in the 1994-95 season. And no one in their wildest dreams could have envisioned that marvelous journey to the NCAA tournament in 1999-2000. Not in the early 1990s when hope was sparse, even for a congregation of supporters who only were able to endure the harsh winters because of the small doses of hope for the Bonnies they carried close to their hearts.

Every time the Bonnies stumbled, at every moment devastation struck, there had always redemption. When the great Bob Lanier was injured in the 1970 Eastern Regional final, thus destroying St. Bonaventure's aspirations of a national championship, the program rebounded with an NIT title in 1977. And when the blundering Bonnies of the late '80s and early '90s floundered, the stern point guard of that '77 team, his name Jim Baron, coached the program back to greatness.

Baron and the Bonnies were the toast of the small town as the 2000-01 season commenced. Times were good. The Bonnies were prosperous. It seemed, at that point, that they always would be. Or so we thought.

Then came a long series of events, one right after another, more unsightly and unbelievable than the next, that would doom St. Bonaventure in the worst of ways. The Bonnies had encountered bad days before, to be sure, but nothing like this. By March 2003, via a twisted plan gone painfully awry, the proud program laid mired in one of the worst scandals in the history of not only college basketball but college sports altogether. That is where this story begins, but by no means ends. It is our story, the mid-blowing events that played out through our eyes.

We began our journey as part of the St. Bonaventure basketball staff in the fall of 2000, just six months after the Bonnies battled the Kentucky Wildcats for 40 minutes and two grueling overtimes in the first round of the NCAA tournament on a bitter cold afternoon in Cleveland. In the end, the Bonnies fell, 85-80, but the gritty Baron had unquestionably restored the program to the glory it once maintained in the '60s and '70s.

There we were, just six months later, a couple of freshmen student managers on Baron's staff. We didn't know a lot about the nuts and bolts of college basketball—the so many things that went on behind the scenes of a major Division I basketball program. We were just sort of there, soaking in everything, enjoying every moment. Unfortunately, by the time our junior year had rolled around, we knew all too well that behind closed doors stood villains, corruption, and an unabated lack of an integrity. It was evil. We were woefully naïve.

Between 2000 and 2003, we saw Baron move on to Rhode Island after a trip to the NIT, and a new coach, Jan van Bred Kolff, come in and take us to another NIT berth. We experienced many highs and lows but nothing lower than what we witnessed that first week of March 2003. We were there. We stood in the midst of the crosswinds that rocked the college basketball world and St. Bonaventure community. We were exposed to the events that led up to and followed the unthinkable and ghastly basketball scandal at St. Bonaventure.

Our tale originated on an October afternoon in 2000. Midnight Madness had passed, and real practice was underway. Rays of sunlight, seeping through the windows high above the arena, glistened on the newly polished Reilly Center hardwood as a number of players warmed up for practice. That's when we met. One from Albany, N.Y., the other from Allegany, N.Y. One that knew little or nothing about the tradition of St. Bonaventure basketball, the other a lifelong fan. One a coach in training, the other just along for the ride. As that first practice played out we found out that we had much more in common than anticipated. Besides the obvious love of sports, basketball in particular, our vision, as misguided as it turned about to be, was also the same. We both wanted to see the continued rise of the St. Bonaventure Bonnies and were willing to sacrifice and contribute in any way possible.

To be a manager for a Division I basketball team is to be at the bottom of the food chain. As freshmen, unenviable tasks of laundry duty, cleaning the locker room and rebounding for players before and after practice occupied the majority of our time. While those jobs felt tedious and degrading, to us they were well worth it. As the famous scientist Jonas Salk once said, "I feel that the greatest reward for doing is the opportunity to do more." We were rewarded. We were given more responsibilities to show our worth. As we moved up, we gained more trust from the players, as well as the coaches. Thus, we grew closer to the players and coaches. The signs that once read "No trespassing" now read "Please enter". Our vantage point that was exclusively limited to on the court activities shifted to events and encounters that played out behind closed doors. We were thrown into all the inter-workings of a college basketball program. Our once skewed view from behind the bench was now in clear focus. We knew anything and everything about St. Bonaventure basketball, even the things we didn't want to know anything about, which was more than we ever bargained for.

Ultimately, we had a unique glimpse into life in major college basketball, and as it turned out, the impurity of college basketball. The scandal, St. Bonaventure's scandal, was front page news, for all to see, all to critique, all to shake their heads

at in utter amazement. The underlying events are important in understanding how an upright and honest college basketball program and university could be turned upside down. This is a story that hasn't been told. This is an account that, underneath the newspaper headlines, radio talk shows, Internet sites and 24-hour sports television, has yet to reach the public eye.

This is a view from behind the bench.

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Chapter 1

Beginning of the End

The bright sun reflected off the icy sidewalks and pathways of St. Bonaventure's sleepy campus. It was a late February afternoon, so, of course, the temperature had dipped into the low teens in the southwestern part of New York state. Although frigid, the beaming rays of light gave the St. Bonaventure faithful the hope—the everlasting hope that was never lost among Bonnies fans—that March would bear a postseason berth.

Our team, though often divided, stood at 12-13 on the season and had a realistic shot to close the season with a few victories, providing us some much-needed momentum going into the Atlantic 10 Conference tournament. George Washington was in town, and although the Colonials had struggled under second-year coach Karl Hobbs, they still had 2,000-point scorer Chris Monroe. But even with Monroe, we believed that, with the support of the Reilly Center crowd, victory would be ours by night's end.

We walked through the side doors of the Reilly Center after our customary mid-afternoon pre-game meal on the exclusive second floor of the school's dining hall, and that beautiful fragrance nipped at our noses. It was the smell of fresh popcorn that lingered all day, on each and every game day. From the smells, to the anticipation, to the excitement, there was nothing like a

game day at the Reilly Center. It consumed the St. Bonaventure campus.

By the time we left the Reilly Center and the basketball offices that afternoon to rest up before game time, our aspirations for that night and the season had tumbled slightly. We had learned that our starting center, Jamil Terrell, would not be in uniform. The reason: unknown. But we would find out soon enough.

After a quick nap and after putting on the customary shirt and tie we wore for games, we hopped into the car and drove back across campus to the Reilly Center. The typically short car ride took a little longer on this day and the discussion was a little more spirited.

Why was Jamil Terrell not playing? We couldn't solve the mystery.

There was an array of possibilities, the first and most likely one being that Jamil was not eligible due to his poor performance in the classroom. Jamil's shortcomings in his studies had been well documented throughout the year. Jamil also had encountered his share of difficulties on the practice floor. He often failed to fully comprehend coach Jan van Breda Kolff's complex offensive sets and defensive schemes, not to mention the tiffs he often got into with teammates and coaches.

Was Jamil struggling so much academically that he wasn't allowed to play? Was he being disciplined for some other reason?

The speculation ran wild, and by the time we stepped out of the car we were right back to where we had started: Why was Jamil not playing?

We arrived at the arena at 5:15 p.m. The excitement we were accustomed to before games was lacking. The locker room joking wasn't apparent. The players heckling one another was scarce. The pride that went with stepping out of the tunnel to 6,000 crazed fans wasn't there. In short, the competitive fire among the players was nowhere to be found. Jamil wasn't playing against George Washington and maybe not for the rest of the season. We were all stunned.

We wondered again. It had to be more than his performance in the classroom, or on the court. It had to be something much more complicated.

But there was a game to be played.

No where was this lack of emotion in the players more evident than on the court in the first half against George Washington. The Colonials controlled the tempo and clearly foiled our point guard, Marques Green, who to that point was the Atlantic 10 conference's leader in points and assists per game. Still, we led 39-37 at halftime after super sophomore Mike Gansey tipped in a shot at the buzzer. As the Colonials ventured through the tunnel and back to their locker room, coach Karl Hobbs lit into them with a flurry of a four-letter words.

Just moments into the second half it appeared that we had finally broken the spirits of the Colonials. We led by 12, and our run-and-gun pressing style was clicking. But just like that George Washington shifted the momentum of the contest. With under six minutes to play, the Colonials led 70-64. That sequence alone summed up quite nicely our season of ups and downs.

Still, crunch time was approaching and, for us, that meant Marques Green. Whenever we needed a basket, a rebound, a steal, an assist, anything you could think of, Marques was there to provide it. So when we went on 12-4 run, it was no surprise that the 5-foot-7 ball of might capped the splurge with back-to-back 3-pointers. We led 76-74 with 2 minutes, 12 seconds to play, but with under a minute remaining we trailed again, 79-76.

Of course, Marques had the ball in his hands. Driving into the paint, he willed in a shot over a pair of 6-foot-9 behemoths... plus the foul. The score was tied and we were headed to overtime. And overtime was just an extension of crunch time (or Marques Green time). Marques crissed and crossed defenders over with his quick dribble. He hit 3-pointers. He hit pull-ups. He hit mid-range jumpers. He drove for lay-ups. And he iced the game with free throws. All told, Marques poured in 13 of our 15 points in overtime. Simply, the performance was electrifying, inspiring even. Any college basketball fan would be hard pressed to recall witnessing a finer individual performance. Students who had given up on the team and season filed into the Reilly Center

at the start of overtime and buzzed in amazement as Marques applied the finishing touches.

The numbers were unbelievable—22 points over the final three minutes of regulation and overtime, and 32 points, 10 assists, six rebounds, just one turnover for the game. Classic Marques Green.

The game provided the special moments we had grown accustomed to at the Reilly Center. The rabid Bona faithful had pushed its beloved team again, and again the Bonnies didn't disappoint. The students, community and players celebrated afterward. This was St. Bonaventure basketball at its finest, even during our season of discontent. It was a moment we lived for. We hoped for many more . . . and soon.

Yet, that euphoria died quickly in our locker room. The excitement in the room had an uneasy undertone that consisted of fear, uncertainty, and confusion. Every comment about the remarkable performance of Marques Green, came with two comments or questions about why Jamil Terrell didn't compete and when the next time, if at all, he would. A few of the questions were soon put to rest. We discovered that a release from the St. Bonaventure sports information department was distributed along press row prior to the game. The media advisory read:

A question has arisen regarding the eligibility of St. Bonaventure's men's basketball player Jamil Terrell. The University has asked the Atlantic 10 Conference to work with the NCAA regarding this issue. In accordance with the NCAA guidelines, Jamil will not play while this matter is pending. Until this issue is clarified, the University will not have any further comment.

During the post game press conference, coach Jan Van Breda Kolff was asked about the eligibility of Jamil Terrell. "It's out of my hands," Jan said. "It's something that's in the hands of the NCAA committee. I'm a basketball coach, I try to work at that. I'm not a compliance officer, I don't really know the NCAA rules. This just happened, and there's a process. How long that process

takes is really hard to tell. Hopefully, we'll get a favorable decision in a short period of time."

If we had any thoughts of this being swept under the coat of snow that covered campus, forgotten about and resolved in a short period of time, that was put to rest the next day when Jamil did not practice in preparation for our next game, usually the toughest game of the year for the Bonnies, versus Temple in Philadelphia.

Athletic director Gothard Lane paced the upper decks of the arena during practice. Back and forth. Afterward, he and Jan chatted for only a few minutes. The discussion had to be about Jamil and his status. Jan shrugged his shoulders and wore a grimace of despair as he walked out of the gym. Things weren't exactly looking up. Then there was the matter of trying to tame Temple.

Since the first meeting during the 1928-29 season, Temple had dominated the series with St. Bonaventure. The Owls held a 40-6 all-time record over the Bonnies, including a 96-77 dismantling in a nationally televised game just months earlier before a packed house at the Reilly Center. Even more discouraging, no St. Bonaventure team had ever defeated Temple in Philadelphia. The chances of victory seemed slim, especially without our starting center in the lineup.

Jamil first stepped on the St. Bonaventure campus on an April weekend in 2002. An official visit was the occasion. Everything had to be perfect. This was important. Really important. "If we get him we'll win the A-10," assistant coach Kort Wickenheiser told us.

After watching Jamil play 10 minutes of pickup on the Reilly Center floor, the idea of him helping us win an Atlantic 10 title seemed extremely far fetched. He was raw and insufficiently skilled to prosper in Jan van Breda Kolff's up-tempo style of play. What he was, was athletic as anything, though. He could jump out of the gym and then some. He coasted up and down the floor like a Porsche on the freeway.

The potential was there. The big question we had was would the potential be met?

Jamil hadn't played a second of high school basketball due to his classroom struggles. In fact, Jamil hadn't merely earned a high school degree. Nevertheless, he attended Georgia Coastal Community College, where he earned a General Equivalency Diploma (GED).

After sitting out a semester, Jamil was on the court leading Georgia Coastal to many victories. By his sophomore season, the 6-foot-8 Jamil had blossomed into a star on the junior college ranks. He averaged 15 points and eight rebounds in leading the Mariners to the Sweet Sixteen of the National Junior College Athletic Association Tournament.

Division I schools took notice. Sure, Jamil appeared raw and unskilled but his athleticism would make any coach look twice. He wasn't going to play for Duke or Florida but Mike Krzyzewski or Billy Donovan would have had to stay for the entire game to make sure of it. Thus, a number of programs believed that they could polish Jamil's game. Coaches came from far reaches to Georgia Coastal Community College to see him in action. Louisville, Dayton, Indiana State and Idaho were the main players in the Jamil Terrell sweepstakes. Oddly enough, St. Bonaventure was the only school willing to give a scholarship to the Georgia native.

Jan was a little uneasy around the office on the May day the school had released a statement indicating that Jamil had signed on to play at the school. In the release, it stated that Jamil had earned a degree in welding from Georgia Coastal Community College. Jan figured the welding part of the equation would raise questions among media, fans and outsiders. He asked Kort if he had heard any negative feedback. Kort hadn't. Apparently people trusted that St. Bonaventure was doing things the right way and the proper steps were taken to prove that Jamil was indeed eligible to play.

None of it mattered, anyway. Jamil Terrell was coming to St. Bonaventure and we were going to win the Atlantic 10. He was the missing piece for a team with talented guards and wings. Well, at least that's what we were led to believe.

If there was any benefit to the uneasiness of the Jamil Terrell-eligibility situation, it was that we had a quick turnaround with the George Washington game on Wednesday and Temple on Saturday. There wasn't much time to focus on anything else but the challenge ahead. That was crucial, because Jamil's circumstance had officially caught the eye of the media. ESPN.com posted an article stating that there were serious questions regarding Jamil's eligibility. If it were confirmed that he was ineligible it could lead to us forfeiting our conference wins and possible NCAA penalties. We were stunned. We couldn't figure out why Jamil wasn't eligible to play. But with only one practice at the Reilly Center before the Friday departure to Philadelphia, we were zoned in and ready to prepare for the Owls. There was nothing else we could do but play the games and let the rest sort itself out.

With a new day, Bonnie fans tuned into their television sets, and read newspapers and Web sites hoping to hear the latest news the on the Jamil Terrell situation. No news came, but that was perfectly fine. The questions regarding Jamil quickly shifted from the front of the mind to the back. We had a classic battle between two hated rivals at the Liacouras Center on hand. There was nothing else to think about but the game.

In a highly competitive first half, we played perhaps the most inspired basketball of the season. The score was 37-33, Temple. We were down but well within striking distance of breaking the winless curse.

Midway through the second half and the score close, tempers flared when a physical altercation occurred among our back up center Calvin Brown and a couple of Temple post players. Players from both benches had to be restrained, particularly our guard, Joe Shepherd, who was ready to throw down. Jan and Temple coach John Chaney were livid and appeared ready to go at each other, too. The war had begun and would be played out on the floor over the remaining 10 minutes.

Unfortunately, Temple took the momentum from the scuffle. The Owls built a 16-point advantage and were up 11 with only 3:39 left in the game. But we didn't quit. A charge led by Marques Green and Mike Gansey brought us back. Gansey hit a 3-pointer

to tie the score with just over a minute to play before Temple star David Hawkins gave the Owls a two-point lead a half minute later on a fall away jumper in the final seconds.

It was once again Marques Green time. It was time for Marques to take us to overtime or maybe win the game. He took the inbounds pass and drove furiously from one end to the other through a bevy of Temple defenders. Not surprising, Marques made it all the way to the rim and was fouled on his attempt to tie the game. His shot rattled out as his headband was tugged over his eyes by a Temple defender.

Overtime was coming. The free throws were made and made. Marques was shooting a dazzling 88 percent from the line and had hit pressure free throws all season. How could he miss with the game on the line? Marques' first attempt ripped right through the net. It was that simple. One more equaled overtime. The release was perfect . . . the shot was right on line . . . it was going in . . .

Clank. Off the front rim . . . Another loss at Temple.

The loss stung. No one figured that would be our last shot at glory that season. There would be other chances. We had two more regular season games and the conference tournament to go. As it turned out, the loss served as an all too fitting conclusion for this edition of the Bonnies.

After the 6-hour bus trip back to campus, we had Sunday off to step away from the game, collect our thoughts and get ready to head back on the road to play the University of Massachusetts. Sunday came and went, and before we knew it, Monday was upon us.

Monday was the day the news on Jamil was supposed to arrive. It was reported that the Atlantic 10 presidents would meet that morning via conference call to decide whether our league wins would count and whether we'd be allowed to play in the upcoming conference tournament. This was serious stuff. Our fate would be decided over the phone, not on the hardwood.

We rolled into the arena at around 9:15 that morning for a 10 a.m. practice in preparation for UMass. We headed to the basketball office as we always did prior to practice. The plan

was to grab a practice itinerary, chat with head manager Tim McArdle, and then down to the floor to set up for practice.

We started off talking with Tim about our duties for the day. Not surprising, the conversation quickly shifted to the decision that would be made that day. What was going to happen? Were we going to have to forfeit games? What kind of punishment came with using ineligible player? Who knew?

The league presidents would decide.

Just minutes later, we heard the familiar clip-clop of feet on the stairs leading up to the office. Appearing was a man who none of us had ever seen before. He was short, balding, maybe in his mid-fifties. Who was it? What did he want?

"Is Coach van Breda Kolff in?" he asked.

He was, and the man quickly vanished from the main office into the film room that led to Jan's office.

Tim wondered out loud, "Who is that guy?" None of us had any clue. How odd. It seemed like everybody knew everybody at tiny St. Bonaventure. He had to be the bearer of the decision stemming from the league presidents' conference call.

We were quiet. Each one of us was wondering what this stranger was telling Jan. Just as we started to come up with some answers, the man reappeared just like that. He half-nodded to us, and left without a word. There was no more time to wonder. Practice was quickly approaching.

We darted down two levels to the court. We rolled the ball rack into the gym, and several players began to warm up like they always did. The start of practice was now less than 10 minutes away.

There was the usual joking around with one other on the court. Fellow freshmen and roommates Calvin Brown and Ahmad Smith picked at each other like they always did. Reserve swingman Cortez Sutton bragged like he always did as he drilled 22-foot jumpers. And Marques Green was quiet like he always was before practice, his full concentration on Umass and improving his game. Everything was normal, except the guys were a little worn down from the non-stop, rugged schedule of Atlantic 10 games. The good news was it was the first day of