

GEORGETOWN CHAMP

With hundreds of wins on his résumé and a local reputation, and his staff are looking to shake up this year's squad and the newly renovated

BY JULIA PARMLEY



When his day as a Catholic University student and basketball player came to an end, Mike Lonergan got on the red line at Brookland-CUA and rode the Metro to Foggy Bottom. With tickets in hand from his coach, Jack Bruen, Mr. Lonergan walked the few blocks to the Charles E. Smith Center, where he climbed up to the back of the stands. From his seat he watched high school classmate Chester Wood running up and down the court; Colonials head coach Gerry Gimelstob getting animated on the sideline; and legendary Boston Celtics coach Red Auerbach, BA'40, Med '41, cheering his old team in his favorite seat.

Mr. Lonergan listened to the crowd of thousands scream and stomp their feet—when the crowd got loud, the gymnasium had a reputation as one of the toughest places to play in the Atlantic 10.

These games, in the mid-1980s, were Mr. Lonergan's introduction to the Colonials. The Bowie, Md., native never thought that one day he'd be off the bleachers and on the sidelines as the new coach of GW men's basketball.

And he almost wasn't. Mr. Lonergan wasn't looking to move from Vermont, where he found success during his six years as head coach of the men's team. After inheriting the least experienced team in the nation, Mr. Lonergan led the squad to the best record in the America East Conference by 2010.

A man in a dark suit and green patterned tie stands with his arms crossed, looking off to the side. The background is dark with blurred lights. The word 'NOGGER' is written in a blue, pixelated font on the left side of the image.

NOGGER

Colonials head coach Mike Lonergan
Charles E. Smith Center.

(Previous page) Mike Lonergan was the head coach at the University of Vermont for six seasons before coming to GW. (right) (From left) Director of Basketball Operations Matt Lisiewski, Assistant Coach Pete Strickland, Assistant Coach Kevin Sutton, Head Coach Mike Lonergan, Associate Head Coach Hajj Turner, and Assistant Director of Basketball Operations Maurice Joseph

In short, things were looking pretty good for Mr. Lonergan, and other programs wanted him. He guesses he had about eight other Division I offers—some that paid more than three times his salary—when GW called. The Colonials’ offer was, well, a slam-dunk.

“I never really entertained the other offers seriously. I thought GW was special because of its location, academic reputation, and the tradition of its basketball program,” he says. “GW was the perfect job for me in this time in my career.”

This season, the Colonials will see the return of four starters from last year and two new faces: incoming freshmen John Kopriva and Jonathan Davis. The team has a challenging season coming up, with formidable nonconference matchups against Syracuse University, Kansas State University, Virginia Commonwealth University, and University of Alabama at Birmingham, as well as Atlantic 10 contests against University of Richmond, Temple University, and Xavier University, all of which qualified for the NCAA tournament last year.

Although Mr. Lonergan says the team has a good nucleus of experienced players, he believes all of them—veterans and novices—will have to prove their mettle this season.

“Hopefully these guys are going to look forward to the challenge of playing a tough nonconference schedule,” Coach Lonergan says. “I’ve always believed in that, and I think it will prepare us for the rigors of Atlantic 10 Conference play.”

Mr. Lonergan’s journey to GW’s basketball program began long before he sat in the Smith Center bleachers. Born in Holy Cross Hospital in Silver Spring, Md., he grew up in Bowie, Md., the youngest of six. His father, Jack, worked at the National Security Agency and was a former baseball star at Holy Cross; his mother, Maureen, was an athletic director and softball and soccer coach at Elizabeth Seton High School in Bladensburg, Md. The school’s playing field is named Lonergan Field in her honor.

Maureen, who died in 1995 of breast cancer, was Mr. Lonergan’s first basketball coach when he was 8 years old—when it was even less common for women to coach men’s sports.

“She was a pioneer for women’s sports in our area,” he says.



Mr. Lonergan can’t exactly pinpoint what drew him to basketball; his sisters and brother played soccer, so he thinks he may have just wanted to try something new. But he remembers with perfect clarity what drew him to coaching: a book, *From Orphans to Champions*, by renowned DeMatha Catholic High School Coach Morgan Wootten, that his godmother gave him when he was in eighth grade.

The book, written by Mr. Wootten with a foreword by Mr. Auerbach, chronicled some of Mr. Wootten’s coaching time at DeMatha, where he amassed the most wins of any basketball coach at any level.

The book had a big impact on Mr. Lonergan. So did watching his mother coach, and later attending and working at St. John’s High School basketball camp, run by Mr. Wootten and Joseph Gallagher, another famed local coach who played for GW from 1940 to 1943.

So throughout his high school days at Archbishop Carroll High School in Northeast D.C., and later as a guard and co-captain on Catholic’s basketball team, Mr. Lonergan cultivated his coaching skills at a number of local basketball camps, including St. John’s High School in Northwest D.C., and Mount Saint Mary’s University in Emmitsburg, Md.

“I worked at a lot of camps over the summer to network because I knew I wanted to coach,” he says. “And then I’d come to GW to watch games because I was a gym rat and a big fan of



(From left) Athletic Director Patrick Nero, Head Coach Mike Lonergan, and team members senior Tony Taylor and junior Lasan Kromah discuss the upcoming season during a Colonials Fan Forum, a telephone-based interactive conference call for fans.



GW basketball. Seeing Red Auerbach at the games was always pretty neat because I grew up a Celtics fan.”

One of Mr. Lonergan’s own summer high school basketball students—Chris Monroe, BA ’03—became the Colonials all-time leading scorer as a guard from 1999-2003. “He’s one of my all-time favorite players and he ended up playing at GW,” he says.

But Mr. Lonergan’s connections to GW went even further; as a coach at Catholic, one of his assistants, Jimmy McGovern, became an assistant to former GW basketball Coach Tom Penders, who coached the Colonials from 1999 to 2001. Mr. Lonergan became good friends with Mr. Penders, and also Mr. Penders’ predecessor Mike Jarvis, who led the program from 1991 to 1998.

By the time Mr. Lonergan left for Vermont in 2001, he had amassed quite the Rolodex of former GW coaches and players. “But I never really thought I’d coach at GW,” he says.

After graduating from Catholic in 1988, Mr. Lonergan began to work himself up what he calls “the coaching ladder.” Although he always knew he wanted to return to the D.C. area, Mr. Lonergan’s career took him away for a bit: to Springfield, Mass., as an assistant coach at American International College; to Hamilton, New York, as an assistant coach at Colgate University.

“I didn’t make much money at all in my first few stops in coaching,” he says. He was also navigating a long-distance relationship with the future head coach of Catholic’s women’s basketball team, Maggie Meagher. They met in the

dining hall at Mount St. Mary’s basketball camp in 1991, during one of Mr. Lonergan’s summer returns to the area. He married his “unofficial assistant” in 1998.

“When we were both coaching, we’d fight over the VCR because we’d both end the night watching tape,” says Mr. Lonergan. “When she isn’t coaching, Maggie is a different set of eyes for me and makes suggestions. She really knows the game well.”

The Lonergans have four children: Jack, Michael Jr., “Moe” (Robert), and Margaret. All athletic, the kids currently favor soccer, but they all enjoy watching and playing their parents’ sport.

In 1992, Mr. Lonergan returned to the District and Catholic, where he served as associate athletic director and head basketball coach—at 26 years old, he was one of the youngest head coaches in the country.

Mr. Lonergan went on to set more records at Catholic: He was the most successful coach in the program’s 100-year history, with an overall record of 251–88. He led the team to nine of its 13 NCAA Tournament appearances, including its first since 1964. Under his leadership, Catholic won the Division III national title in 2001. In addition, Mr. Lonergan was named the 2001 Division III National Coach of the Year.

Catholic gave the President’s Medal, his alma mater’s highest honor, to Mr. Lonergan in 2004. The following year he was inducted into the university’s Hall of Fame.

Coaching at the school he played for was a special experience for Mr. Lonergan, who cites winning the championship in 2001 as one of the most rewarding moments.



Mr. Lonergan and his family spent six years at the University of Vermont. (From left) Maggie Lonergan, Jack, 12, Michael, 5, Margaret, 10, "Moe" (Robert), 3, Mr. Lonergan

"We had the most successful Division III program in the country, so that was great, being a graduate and having so many of my friends come back for games."

And although he could have continued to coach at Catholic, Mr. Lonergan wanted to make sure he didn't have any career regrets, and there was still one hurdle: breaking into Division I.

So in an attempt to change his résumé, Mr. Lonergan took an assistant coach position under Coach Gary Williams at the University of Maryland in 2004. At Maryland, Mr. Lonergan helped the Terps to a season sweep of top-ranked Duke University and a Final Four appearance in the 2005 NIT.

"It changed my résumé and it definitely changed the way athletic directors viewed me," says Mr. Lonergan. "So I really owe Gary Williams a lot for giving me an opportunity, because it helped me get the Vermont job."

The Vermont job was Mr. Lonergan's first head coach offer at a Division I school, the offer he had been working toward for years. But in 2001 the Catamounts had the least experienced team in the nation, which Mr. Lonergan explains is "a nice way of saying the whole team had graduated." Almost all his friends and mentors advised him to decline the offer, except for Mike Brey, BS '82, former DeMatha basketball star and current head coach of men's basketball at University of Notre Dame.

"Mike had been in the America East Conference as a coach at the University of Delaware and he told me it was a tough job in Vermont," says Mr. Lonergan. "But he said I'd win there, so I'm glad I listened to him. We had a great six years."

Mr. Lonergan arguably found his coaching niche at Vermont, where he was named the America East Coach of the Year in 2007 and 2011. Under his leadership, the Vermont Catamounts won three America East regular season championships, appeared in three America East Championship games and took home the title in 2010. He left Vermont with the best record in its conference, an NCAA Tournament and two National Invitation Tournament appearances. Mr. Lonergan also served as director of the Vermont Basketball Camp, holding two sold-out sessions each summer.

"We had to almost completely rebuild the program, but the players we had did a great job and I felt we had one of the strongest mid-major programs in the East Coast," he recalls. "I was very happy there and I didn't think I'd ever leave there unless it was a really good situation, where I could come back home to a school with strong academics."

And that was GW.

Mr. Lonergan's first game in the newly renovated Charles E. Smith Center is a few months away, but in his short time on campus, he's already working to boost GW spirit. Among the activities he's hosted include a staff-run basketball camp in late June, as well as alumni events and meetings with students and staff.

Getting Colonials fans to fill seats is a priority for Mr. Lonergan and his staff. The louder and bigger the crowd, the harder it is for opponents to win.

"We've got to get fans back to our games," he says. "That's something we need to change—to make the Smith Center one of the toughest places to play in the Atlantic 10 again."

Mr. Lonergan's fiery coaching style may also be a source of entertainment for fans this upcoming season.

"I really get into the games and try to motivate our players to play hard for the entire 40 minutes," he says. "I stress defense and rebounding, I believe those are two things that really win championships. But I do like to score points, and I like an up-tempo style of play. It's fun for the players but also exciting for the fans to watch."

Always keeping an eye out for new talent, Mr. Lonergan and his staff will be looking to add players to the roster who have "high basketball IQ" and a willingness to work hard in the classroom. Mr. Lonergan comes to GW with a 100 percent student-athlete graduation rate.

"We really hold our guys accountable on and off the court and I think once that becomes the culture of your program it becomes a little easier to sustain that academic success," he says. "I tell my players to make sure they use basketball and not let it use them, because I made a career out of it and hopefully some of the guys I coach here make a career out of it. But I at least want them to take advantage of the scholarship and get a very meaningful degree."

Mr. Lonergan also wants his players to continue GW's strong tradition of community service. His favorite charities include Special Olympics, Make-a-Wish Foundation, and Coaches vs. Cancer, which Mr. Lonergan got involved with after his mother's passing. On May 11, he was honored at Yankee Stadium along with nine other basketball coaches for his work with the organization.

Although it was six years ago, Mr. Lonergan vividly remembers the goose bumps that covered his arms when he stepped out of the locker room and onto the court for his first game as a Division I head coach. He thinks he'll feel the exact same way at GW.

"It's always tough when there's a coaching change, but I'm excited to coach these guys," he says. "I'll have even more friends and family here and a lot of my friends are buying season tickets so I think it'll be really exciting for me. I'm really looking forward to the season." **GW**

For more about men's basketball, including ticket information, visit gwsports.com.

BUILDING THE TEAM

The Colonial basketball family has grown considerably since Mr. Lonergan took over as head coach, with five new additions to the basketball staff: Associate Head Coach Hajj Turner, Assistant Coaches Pete Strickland and Kevin Sutton, Director of Basketball Operations Matt Lisiewski, and Assistant Director of Basketball Operations Maurice Joseph.

"I'm really excited about the staff we assembled," says Mr. Lonergan. "They have a lot of experience and have been successful coaching and recruiting quality student-athletes."

Mr. Lonergan's connections with his coaching staff go as far back as 30 years.

A native of Charlottesville, Va., Mr. Turner joined Mr. Lonergan at the University of Vermont in 2005, and was associate head coach of the Catamounts during the 2010-11 season. He first met Mr. Lonergan at the University of Maryland in 2004, where Mr. Turner worked as the assistant director and men's basketball coordinator of Maryland's academic support and career development unit.

"Hajj is one of the rising young stars in college coaching," says Mr. Lonergan. "He is one of the smartest people I have ever been around. He has learned the game from some of the greatest minds in coaching and I am thrilled to have him on our staff."

As a player and co-captain of men's basketball at the University of Louisville under renowned coaches Rick Pitino and Denny Crum, Mr. Turner was the second player in Louisville's history to pursue a master's degree while playing for the university.

Mr. Turner's sister, Mandisa Turner-Watkins, BS '99, is a former player for GW women's basketball.

Mr. Sutton brings 24 years of coaching experience to GW, including stints as an assistant coach at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va., where he played as an undergraduate, and Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va.

Mr. Sutton, who is from Falls Church, Va., was also head coach at three prominent high school basketball programs: Montrose Christian School in Rockville, Md.; Bishop McNamara High School in Forestville, Md., and Montverde Academy in Florida; and served as associate head coach and head junior varsity coach at his own high school, Flint Hill School in Oakton, Va.; Harker Preparatory School in Potomac, Md.; and St. John in Frederick, Md. In 1998, he was the associate head coach on the *USA Today* Super 25 National Championship team that was undefeated at 25-0.

"Kevin has a great reputation for developing players and for recruiting international players," says Mr. Lonergan, who met Mr. Sutton while he was coaching at St. John. "I think he's a great teacher of the game."

Mr. Strickland has 21 years of Division I coaching experience, including seven years as head coach at Coastal Carolina University, where he earned Big South Coach of the Year honors and had the second-most career victories in school history.

Mr. Strickland also served as assistant coach at University of Dayton, Virginia Military Institute, and Old Dominion, where he guided the Monarchs to three consecutive postseason tournaments, the Colonial Athletic Association Championship, and an NCAA Tournament berth in 1992.

"I've known Pete for 30 years since working with him at Morgan Wootten's camps," says Mr. Lonergan. "He's got a lot of experience in this conference and is very well connected and well liked, so he knows the tradition here and is happy to be back in this area."

Like Mr. Lonergan, Mr. Strickland also has taught at a number of basketball camps, including at GW, and has been the director of the Stu Vetter Basketball Camp, the Five Star Developmental Camp, and the Circle of Success Camp.

Mr. Strickland played at the University of Pittsburgh, where he ranks among the university's all-time leaders for single-game assists and was a three-year starter and two-year captain. Mr. Strickland played at local DeMatha Catholic High School in Hyattsville, Md., under Mr. Wootten, where as a senior in 1975, he helped lead the team to the D.C. City Championship and was named a first-team all-state performer.



(From top to bottom) Hajj Turner, Pete Strickland, Kevin Sutton, Matt Lisiewski, and Maurice Joseph