

JESUIT BASKETBALL SPOTLIGHT

Jesuit educational
mission takes
center court



by Melissa Collins Di Leonardo

Picture this: Two Jesuit college basketball teams play each other during the regular season, and during a timeout, the following announcement is heard over the loudspeaker:

“Tonight’s matchup is just one of more than 100 games this season between teams from the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities across the United States. Each of the 28 is dedicated to strong academics and teaching women and men to serve others and live a faith that does justice.”

During halftime, another announcement is made:

“Grounded in a 500-year tradition, Jesuit Catholic higher education creates bright futures for its more than 200,000 students in the United States. Alumni/ae at the game tonight are just some of the more than 1.7 million Jesuit graduates in America who are leaders locally, nationally, and internationally.”

Messages like these were not likely heard at Jesuit team match-ups years ago, but today they are part of the Jesuit Basketball Spotlight (JBS) initiative, a nationwide effort to capitalize on basketball games between Jesuit institutions and, through those games, bring greater positive awareness and exposure to Jesuit education and its shared mission. The initiative, developed by the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU), was launched during the 2008–09 basketball season. The second year of JBS is winding down as the 2009–10

basketball season comes to a close.

“The goal we had in mind for these first two seasons of JBS was to raise awareness about the initiative and to promote the idea that when Jesuit institutions play each other, they have a lot more in common than great basketball,” said Fr. Charles Currie, SJ, the president of AJCU. “They share a long history of and a strong commitment to academic excellence, social justice, leadership, and service.”

Over the 2009–2010 season, 104 basketball games were played between Jesuit institutions including 14 on neutral sites. Fifty-three of those games were between men’s teams, while women’s teams played 51 times.

Long time coming

For years, AJCU had been approached by alumni/ae from Jesuit institutions requesting that they put together a Jesuit basketball tournament of some kind. Several ideas were shared, but nothing materialized until the spring of 2008 when a small steering committee came together to get more serious about the effort.

The first discussions focused on making sure there were a good number of games being played between Jesuit schools. Much to the committee’s delight, they found when they looked at the 2008–09 calendar that close to 100 games between Jesuit institutions (men and women) were scheduled, leaving them with little work to do in arranging the match-ups. The committee strategized

on next steps and found that the best way of proceeding was to start out small and develop the initiative over time.

A web page on the AJCU web site was created offering a master schedule of the games played between Jesuit institutions, in addition to messaging for in-arena announcements, advance media notes, game program notes, and radio and TV drop-ins. The web page also provided a JBS professional logo package that would allow Jesuit institutions to download versions of the logo for scoreboard displays and other promotional placements.

“Many interested parties have sought ways to take better advantage of Jesuit basketball to create unified awareness, heighten media attention, and celebrate our common Jesuit mission,” said John Burnes, an alumnus of Saint Louis University who is the president at Burnes Creative and a member of the JBS steering committee. “The Jesuit Basketball Spotlight games have allowed Jesuit institutions to do this through targeted messaging; media, television, and radio announcements; and other marketing communications initiatives during game operations.”

The steering committee targeted four key groups that would help promote the JBS initiative and broaden its appeal: the AJCU athletic directors, sports information directors, and the marketing personnel on both the university side and the athletics side.

“We needed to generate interest in the initiative from these groups because

they were on the front lines, so to speak, and could spread the word about JBS with various audiences,” said Joe Lunardi, assistant vice president of marketing communications for Saint Joseph’s University, a member of the JBS Steering Committee. “The response to JBS has been very positive, and we are excited to embark on expanding the initiative in year three.”

A history to be celebrated

The history of Jesuit education is rich and deep. The founder of the Jesuits, St. Ignatius Loyola, discovered the best way he could “help souls” was through education. He founded the first Jesuit school for lay students in Messina, Italy in 1548. Since that time, 3,730 Jesuit educational institutions have sprouted up around the world, including the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States.

The almost 500-year tradition of Jesuit education is grounded in a commitment to academic excellence and the belief in *cura personalis*, care of the whole person—intellectually, spiritually, socially, and physically.

With this development of the person comes an awareness that using one’s God-given gifts and talents in service to others can be more fulfilling than personal success or prosperity. This discernment process provides individuals with confidence in their decisions and supports them in their commitment to serve and to lead.

Those involved in advancing the mission of Jesuit higher education have sought creative ways to raise awareness about this distinctive enterprise, which focuses on forming men and women for others. They have known that the exceptional characteristics of the Jesuit intellectual tradition appeal to the human need for truth and knowledge and that the attributes of Ignatian spirituality speak to the human need for compassion, open-mindedness, and respect. But for far too long, Jesuit education has been referred to as a ‘best-kept secret.’

The JBS initiative has presented Jesuit institutions with a new way to educate wider audiences about their mission.

Although Jesuit basketball has not been around for nearly as long as Jesuit schools, Jesuit basketball programs have developed an impressive history of their own. Since the early 20th century, Jesuit basketball programs have developed a reputation for being strong and dynamic and have earned the respect of coaches and players alike. Many of the programs, which have produced NBA hall of famers, NIT and NCAA champions, and legendary Jesuit-Jesuit matchups, have a rich fan base, consisting of current students, alumni/ae, and those who just appreciate good basketball.

Moving forward and building on success

Since its inception two years ago, the JBS has grown from an interesting concept to a dynamic project that continues to develop. In its pilot year, more than 250,000 in-arena spectators attended JBS games and heard the in-game messages. If radio and television audiences were included in that mix, that number would certainly be higher by hundreds of thousands more.



Fordham University forward Alexandria Zamora (left) and St. Louis University center Amanda Kemezys (right) exchange Jesuit Basketball Spotlight shirts before a match up.

There were other notable achievements including broad TV/cable coverage (ESPN, Fox Sports Network, CSTV, and CSN) and the more than 60 in-game announcements made over arena public address systems. Overall, 24 of the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities participated in the JBS. (While all schools feature men’s and women’s basketball teams, the non-participating schools had no scheduled matches between Jesuit opponents.)

Year two of the Spotlight brought a generous financial contribution to the project from an alumnus of Saint Joseph’s University. This allowed the steering committee to purchase logo decals to place on the courts for high-profile JBS games and provided the committee with the resources to hire a part-time sports information coordinator who produced weekly men’s and women’s game notes and developed a JBS Facebook page.

With all of these successful elements in place, the JBS is looking to expand in year three by incorporating more mission-focused activities into the programming. Ideas include in-game interviews with mission/ministry directors, halftime recognition for scholar-athletes and members of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC), pre-game collections on behalf of local needs (clothing/food), and the sharing of more stories that reflect the Jesuit tradition of academic excellence, student-centered education, and a faith that does justice.

“We have built a solid foundation for JBS in the last couple years, and we look forward to an expanded Jesuit Basketball Spotlight in 2010–2011,” said Currie. “This vibrant initiative is a great way to spread the good news of what is happening in Jesuit higher education today.” **G**

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For more information on the Jesuit Basketball Spotlight, visit

www.ajcunet.edu/jesuitbasketball