

Bill Sexton began to give indications of his future greatness as a dead-eye shot from the outside; and both players received recognition by being chosen on the Midwest All-Catholic Team, with Christopherson making the first team and Sexton the second. However, no matter how you cut it, it was an unsuccessful season in most respects, and Buster Hiller decided to resign. His place was taken by Bill Osborne, '48, former football, baseball, and basketball star.

Hiller went on to great heights as a basketball coach. After leaving St. John's, he returned to New Mexico where he coached in turn at a high school in Farmington, at St. Michael's in Santa Fe, his alma mater, and at Albuquerque Academy. After five years at Albuquerque, Hiller took a flier at the big time—becoming head coach at St. Francis University in Pennsylvania, which was seeking to become a name school in basketball. However, his family could not get used to the chill and dampness of the north, so he accepted an appointment to his present position as head basketball coach and physical education instructor at New Mexico Military Institute, Roswell, N.M.

He has been highly successful in high school ball. His present team handed him his 500th career victory in 1975, and by the spring of 1978, he had run his total to 550 won and 208 lost, for a won-lost ratio of 72.5 percent. He had been pointing toward that 500th victory, but says he is not going to stop now. He hopes to coach for another ten years, if possible, because he enjoys kids.

When leaving St. John's Hiller took something precious with him—a beautiful Sauk Rapids girl as his wife. He married Donna Varner, sister of Mrs. Claude Menzhuber, the wife of the proprietor of the El Paso Club, popular watering place of the Johnnies in the 1940's and '50's.

#### — 1953-1954 —

Bill Osborne, whose performance in all major sports at St. John's has been described in these pages, took over as freshman coach in football and head coach in basketball and baseball. He had had an excellent record as head coach at Central Catholic High School in Billings, Montana. As was described in the chapter on football, it was he who alerted Fr. Arno Gustin, O.S.B., then president of St. John's, to the capabilities of another Montana coach, John Gagliardi. Bill's success as coach in a large high school made him a natural to succeed Buster Hiller.

Osborne lived up to expectations in his first year and compiled an 11-12 record overall, and 8-8 for fifth place in the conference, the highest standing since Hiller's first year in 1948-49. Most encouraging was

the performance of Captain Bill Sexton, master of the one-handed jump shot, disdained by some coaches of the 1920's. Although only a junior, he had amassed a total of 969 points by the end of his third season. More spectacular was his 49 point production against Macal-ester in the final game of the season. This established a new conference record and insured his nomination as all-conference forward. The team also established a new St. John's record of 72.9 points per game.

Gustavus finally broke the Hamline strangle hold on first place with a 13-3 record, with Hamline and St. Thomas close behind.

#### — 1954-1955 —

Prospects for this season were bright. Only one first-string man, Bob Johnson, was missing from the previous year's line-up, and not only had Bill Sexton developed into a star of the proportions of Stan Wilfahrt of the 1945-49 period, but he also had a strong supporting cast in the persons of Jake Lynch, 6-4, and Fred Ethen, 6-5, at center, in addition to a strong back court in the persons of Dick Matchinsky (father of Richard, Jr., '76, and coach and teacher at Perham High School), Jack Stackpool (coach and teacher at Glenwood, whose son was named all-state quarterback in 1977), Bob Kleinschmidt, Jack Rowles, and Bill McMahon. He also received help from forwards Bob McBride and Tom Sande. Although long on experience, the Johnnies were somewhat short on height, and became shorter still when Kleinschmidt and Ethen dropped off the squad soon after the start of the season. Nevertheless, the team charged into its formidable 25-game schedule with enthusiasm, and came up with more wins than any other Johnnie team in history up to then—including the first win in sixteen years over Hamline. They didn't lose a game on the home court until they dropped the last two games to Augsburg and Gustavus.

The Johnnies won 14 out of 25 overall and 7 out of 16 in the conference to rank in sixth place. They had piled up a total of 1,858 points for the season against 1,827 for the opponents. High scorers were Sexton with 511, Matchinsky with 399, and Lynch with 280. Sexton finished his career in a blaze of broken records—most points in one game (49 in '54), most field goals in one game (19 in '55), most points in one season (511 in '55), best free-throw average in one season (.883 in '54), and highest average points per game in one season (21.7 in '54). He was a shoo-in for all-conference forward, the first Johnnie to achieve that honor twice. He also made the All-Catholic Midwest Team.

Gustavus won the title with a 15-1 record.



## — 1955-1956 —

For the first time in years, St. John's did not have a serious height problem; the starting line-up averaged 6-3. Three of the starting five—Jake Lynch, center, Dick Matchinsky and Jack Rowles, guards, also had had considerable experience. They were supported by freshmen Norb Kowalkowski (ex-Prep) and Jerry Grow at the forward slots. After a spotty season they ended up with an 11-14 record overall and 6-10 in the conference, to rank in seventh place.

Captain Matchinsky was second high scorer in the league and made the all-conference team. Gustavus won the title.

## — 1956-1957 —

St. John's looked like a contender in the early part of the season, then suffered heartbreaking losses to St. Mary's, St. Thomas, and Gustavus, and began to run out of steam. However, they broke even with 11-11 overall and 8-8 in the conference, which was good for a tie with St. Thomas for fourth place, the highest standing since Hiller's first year in 1948-49. The highlight of the season was a victory over perennial champion Hamline, the only Piper loss of the year—which, however, did not prevent them from taking the title.

Four Johnny starters averaged in double figures: Lynch, Matchinsky, Kowalkowski, and Grow. Joe Crotty, whose speed at halfback was responsible for many long gains on the gridiron, showed the same speed and shiftiness on the hard-court and made his contribution by helping to work the ball in to where the taller men could get a shot at the basket.

## — 1957-1958 —

This year the Johnnies hit bottom. They lost Jake Lynch through graduation and Jerry Grow through the death of his father, and the replacements—Pat Dolan and Dick Breen—lacked experience. The team failed to win a single game during the first half of the season and adopted the fast break in the second half in an effort to change their fortunes. This resulted in victories over Macalester and St. Mary's, but the final result was a 2-14 record in the conference for last place and 5-19 overall. The monopoly over first place by Hamline and Gustavus was finally cracked by University of Minnesota-Duluth (UMD).

## — 1958-1959 —

Veterans Norb Kowalkowski, Dick Breen, Joe Crotty, and Jake Muhvik were given a real shot in the arm this season by the spectacular point production of freshman Bernie Kukar. He poured in 392 points

and inspired Kowalkowski (with 348), Breen (378), and Muhvik (320) to go and do likewise.

This high-scoring quartet amassed a total of 1,749 points, an average of 72.8 points per game. However, the total for opponents was 1,995 for an average of 83.1. Part of the difference was due to the fact that St. John's was badly out-rebounded throughout the season.

The Johnny performance was, moreover, highly erratic. They lost by wide margins to teams which they had defeated earlier in the season, e.g., losing to Gustavus 71-101 after defeating the Gusties 90-89 a couple of weeks earlier. The explanation for these losses was evidently weak defense. The overall record was 8 wins out of 24, and 6-10 in the conference, good for seventh place. Duluth again took the title with a 15-1 record.

Bill Osborne decided to resign as coach and returned to Billings where he became a highly successful insurance sales representative. In 1978 he ran for the office of U.S. Senator from Montana. He was defeated in the primaries, but is expected to run again when opportunity arises.

## — 1959-1960 —

Upon the departure of Bill Osborne, Ed Hasbrouck, '50, returned to his alma mater to serve as head basketball and baseball coach, and as assistant to John Gagliardi in football. In the years since his graduation, he had had good records as coach at Albany, Wadena, and St. Mary's High School, New England, N.D., and it was thought that he was a likely prospect for the position of college coach.

His debut at St. John's was, however, inauspicious. The Jays lost their first 13 games and won only three after that, for an overall record of 3 out of 21 (3 out of 16 in the conference). The one bright spot in the season was the performance of sophomore Bernie Kukar, who caged 433 points and won the conference scoring championship with an average of 21.9 points per game. Hamline took the title with a 15-1 record.

## — 1960-1961 —

Despite the high scoring of Captain Bernie Kukar (406 points), Craig Muyres (351 points), Ken Roering (296), and Mel Kohorst (305), St. John's had another disastrous year, winning 7 out of 24 overall and 3 out of 16 in the conference. Roering and Muyres were building a reputation as a great passing combination in football and were highly instrumental in pulling out the thrilling victory over Prairie View College in 1963 for St. John's first national championship, as described in Chapter I, 1963, p. 57.



In basketball, however, the Johnnies held sole possession of the cellar, while Duluth took the title with a 15-1 record.

— 1961-1962 —

Coach Hasbrouck's third year as coach showed a glimmer of improvement. Craig Muyres, a natural athlete, was coming on strong and even out-scored his teammate Bernie Kukar, the former averaging 18.3 points per game and the latter slipping to 13.1. It was apparent that Bernie was receiving extra attention from the defensive members of the opponents' teams. The Jays' defensive play improved somewhat as a result of Mel Kohorst's strong rebounding. They won 8 out of 24 overall and 4 out of 16 in the conference. This performance lifted them just one notch above the cellar, which was monopolized by Macalester. Bright spots in a dreary season were an 80-64 victory over Gustavus in the final game, and the election of Craig Muyres to the all-conference team. Duluth won the championship for the second time in a row.

— 1962-1963 —

This season was almost a carbon copy of the preceding one. Lack of height and inexperience were partial explanations for the failure of the club to climb higher in the scoring column.

The mediocre team performance was in strong contrast to the play of Craig Muyres, who broke all previous scoring records by pouring in 538 points from his guard position. His 195 field goals and an average of 24.5 points per game also established new school records. He also led the conference in scoring and was elected to the all-MIAC team for the second consecutive year.

Captain Mel Kohorst led his teammates in rebounding for the third time and helped to strengthen St. John's defensive game. However, despite these brilliant individual performances, St. John's ended up 7-15 overall and 4-12 in the conference, good for seventh place. Augsburg won the title.

— 1963-1964 —

St. John's started this basketball season with several members of the team who either played in or attended the Camellia Bowl football game against Prairie View College in Sacramento—particularly Craig Muyres and Hardy Reyerson, who starred in that game. Although the Johnnies won the Red River Classic Holiday basketball tournament held in Moorhead, they finished with a 10-13 rating overall and 4-12 in the conference, to rank just one notch above the cellar-dwelling Tommies. The title again went to Augsburg.

Stand-outs for the season were Joe Mucha, John Christopherson, and Tom Durenberger, son of George Durenberger.

At the end of the season, Ed Hasbrouck resigned to go into the insurance business, first in Albany, Minn., and then in Austin, Texas.

— 1964-1965 —

Ed Hasbrouck's successor was Jim Smith, a product of that basketball capital of the Midwest, Marquette University. Smith had starred as a prep at St. Edward's High School in his native Elgin, Ill., and was a member of the strong basketball squad at Marquette from 1952 to 1956, playing under Coach Tex Winters for one year and Jack Nagle for three years. He stayed on as a graduate student assistant coach to Nagle for one year and then for one season as full-time assistant under Coach Eddie Hickey (a member of the Basketball Hall of Fame). His experience included playing and coaching in both the NCAA and the NIT play-offs.

Smith didn't turn things around for St. John's in his first year. The team ended up with a 9-15 rating overall, and 6-10 in the conference, to tie for sixth place. However, he developed an exciting fast break and a strong defense which were enjoyed by the fans. The loss of Bob Ryan, former Prep, through injuries when the Jays had a record of 4-1, led to a losing streak of 11 games before they could make a comeback. By that time three freshmen were starters and ready to get the Johnnies moving upward in the following season.

Joe Mucha, forward, with an average of 15.9 points per game, Bob Ryan, guard, with 13.1, and Roger Hipwell, with 8.4 points, were high scorers for the season. Augsburg won the title for the third time in a row.

— 1965-1966 —

The Johnnies really began to roll this season. With Joe Mucha raising his average points per game from 15.9 to 23.3, Tom Melancon, former Cretin star, developing fast and coming up with 12.4, and freshman Paul Bernabei, a graduate of St. Bede's Academy in Illinois, giving a foretaste of his future performance with 11.4, the team established an 11-13 rating overall and 10-6 for third place in the conference, their highest ranking since Hiller's second year, 1948-49.

Others who contributed to this resurgence were Bob Ryan and Greg Motl, guards, and Bud Foster and Bob Thibedeau, forwards. Joe Mucha's highest average per game for the season (23.3), his highest number of points in a single game (34 against Augsburg). His grabbing of the greatest number of rebounds in a single game (also



against Augsburg) insured his election to the all-conference first team. He was also chosen to the first All-American Catholic Team. Bernabei received honorable mention.

This year St. John's played several large colleges outside its region as in previous years—Western Illinois, Ball State, and Loyola of Chicago—and suffered defeats which made the overall standing seem less impressive. Smith chalked all this up to experience, which paid off in future years.

— 1966-1967 —

Despite the loss of Most Valuable Player Joe Mucha, the Johnnies continued to improve. They posted a 14-10 record overall, and 11-5 in the conference, to finish in second place. They finished the season with a real story-book victory over St. Thomas in the final game (84-76), ending a Tommie 30-game winning streak. This was the highest ranking ever reached by the Johnnies up to that time. The record of 14-10 is the more remarkable when it is remembered that the team played the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (95-102), Detroit University (74-95), and Otterbein (53-68). Smith in three years had moved his team from seventh place to third and now to second place. But there was still room at the top.

Tom Melancon, forward, replaced Joe Mucha as high-point man, with 20.0 points per game overall and 20.8 in the conference. Paul Bernabei, guard, 6-1 sophomore from Dalzell, Ill., came on strong with a 13.2 and 14.1 points per game average, in addition to his alert floor play. Close behind him was Bud Foster, 6-5 forward. Jim Holmes, 6-4, who also held the high-jump record at SJU with 6 feet, 8½ inches, was top rebounder for the Johnnies, snaring 20 caroms in the Duluth game. Others who lent strong support to this best performance in history were Bob Ryan, Joe Weber, and Greg Motl.

Tom Melancon was unanimous choice for all-conference. The title this year went to St. Thomas.

— 1967-1968 —

St. John's dropped a notch in conference standings this year, but was a contender right up to the end, finishing the season with a 94-82 victory over traditional rival St. Thomas. The Johnnie standing in the conference was 10-6 and a tie for second place with Macalester and St. Mary's. Overall, the record was 15-10. But again non-conference opponents included such big-name teams as DePaul, Detroit, and Loyola.

Bernabei, Melancon, Foster, and Weber averaged in double figures. Bernabei had the highest number of field goals per game (12 against St. Mary's), and the highest number of points in a game (31 against the same opponent). He was accordingly a shoo-in for a position on the all-conference team.

The championship was taken by Gustavus with an 11-5 record.

— 1968-1969 —

Smith didn't let up in his crusade for the championship. The team had made steady improvement from third place in the conference in 1965-66 to second place and a tie for second in the next two seasons. The only way to go now was up. He took the championship with a 12-4 record in the conference and 20-9 overall (again including some big-name teams).

St. John's defeated Winona State in the District 13 NAIA playoffs, the final game of the best-of-three being a breathtaking 66-61 overtime win.

The team then went on to the NAIA National Tournament in Kansas City and lost a last-second heart-breaker to Henderson, of Arkansas, 78-76. This game was vividly described ten years later by Gary Larson, sports editor for the St. Cloud *Daily Times*:

St. John's had held the lead most of the way against Henderson and led by six points with three minutes to play. But Henderson sank seven free-throws in the final two minutes and pulled even at 76-76, with 27 seconds remaining. Following a time-out, St. John's guard Paul Bernabei dribbled off 15 seconds before tossing a pass to Tim Muller, 6-7 center. Muller drove for the basket but had the ball tipped away from him. Henderson called time out with three seconds left.

"They had to go almost the length of the floor, so I tried to impress on our kids that the one thing we didn't want was for them to get the ball behind us," said Smith. Then it happened.

Six-foot-eight Henderson center, Ted Davis, threw the pass-in like Joe Namath would throw a football and hit Warren Harshaw in perfect stride ten feet from the basket... behind the Johnnie defense. Harshaw, who was in the game for only that single play, took a pair of steps and lifted in a lay-up at the buzzer to give Henderson the victory.