

For years past the authorities of St. John's were contemplating the erection of a spacious gymnasium in which they recognized an indispensable adjunct to a first class educational institution, one which they thought doubly necessary in our severe northern climate. Various causes, however, combined to make the erection of a suitable gymnasium impracticable for the time being (*Record*, November, 1901, p. 301).

With the opening of the twentieth century, however, it was decided to put off the matter no longer. . . . St. John's is to be congratulated for the fact that it now possesses a gymnasium that is not only a beautiful piece of architecture, but also the finest gymnasium in the entire Northwest" ("The New Gymnasium," *Record*, November, 1901, p. 304).

The interior of the gymnasium was not completed in 1901, however. In his chronicle history of St. John's University for this year, Fr. Alexius Hoffmann, O.S.B., wrote: "When the rugged season set in, the new gymnasium, although not finished in the interior, was opened up for use." Lacking were the physical culture fittings and equipment and, as we discover later, a wooden floor that was planned but finally installed only in October, 1902. Nevertheless, the students, nothing daunted, played indoor baseball and basketball on the dirt floor, despite the dust and inconvenience. As for the future of basketball, they made use of the opportunity to practice and organize a squad for inter-collegiate competition during the next academic year.

The high hopes for basketball and pride in the gymnasium were by no means unjustified. There were very few college gymnasiums in Minnesota in 1903. Carleton, St. Olaf and Hamline, for example, made use of basement playrooms with low ceilings and oddly shaped dimensions for basketball—some long and narrow, some almost square, and almost all of them too small. Gustavus Adolphus had what the students called "the old barn" for gymnastic purposes, "small, inadequate and unsightly" (Conrad Peterson: *A History of Eighty Years, 1862-1942*, p. 90). It was inevitable that St. John's gymnasium would eventually be outmoded by newer structures such as Carleton's Hill-Sayers gymnasium and swimming pool (1909), and Hamline's new gymnasium and pool (1910). The St. Olaf gymnasium was not built until 1919, despite a student's complaint in 1914 "that the little gymnasium in the basement of Ytterboe Hall was an embarrassment; 'the other

colleges of the Northwest are refusing to compete with St. Olaf in basketball' " (Joseph M. Shaw: *History of St. Olaf College 1874-1974*). But for the meantime, from 1902-1909 St. John's could rightly claim to have "the finest gymnasium in the Northwest."

— 1902-1903 —

With the completion of the gymnasium floor in October, 1902, interest in basketball redoubled, and at the end of the football season the Athletic Association scheduled two games, one with Sauk Centre High School (which St. John's lost 17-25), and a second with St. Cloud High School (also lost, 15-16). Nevertheless, despite the losses, the future of basketball looked bright. The basics of the game had been mastered and, most important, the experimental games had brought out the presence on campus of four accomplished players, Peter Tierney, James Mienes, Frank W. Hughes, and Frank Tewes, on whom to build for the following year.

— 1903-1904 —

The hopes of 1903 were realized in the team of 1904. Games were scheduled with two high schools, Sauk Centre and Melrose, and arrangements were made for a home and home game series with St. Cloud Normal. The Johnnies played inspired basketball and piled up a total of 176 points against only 50 points by the opposition. Scores of 68-15 against Sauk Centre and 65-13 against Melrose indicated that the team was in need of stronger competition. Two victories over St. Cloud Normal School, 20-11 and 21-11, were even more encouraging.

Stars for the season were again Peter Tierney, James Mienes, and manager (coach) Frank Tewes. Frank W. Hughes was a fine forward.

— 1904-1905 —

The St. John's Athletic Association first began to experience difficulties in drawing up a good schedule of games in 1904-05, a problem that plagued the intercollegiate program until 1914, when, in desperation, St. John's entered the Minnesota-Dakota Athletic Conference. The coaches of the high schools were reluctant to play the college after their catastrophic defeats of 1904. To complicate the situation, St. Thomas College and the University of Minnesota failed to reply to St. John's letter of invitation.

The schedule, when completed, called for only three outside games. And yet, although only three games were played, the season was a resounding success. The team overwhelmed the St. Cloud Normals in the first game 42-5, then defeated North Dakota Agricultural College,

Fargo, 43-29. The second game with the Normal School proved to be somewhat different. Probably flushed with victory and overconfident, the players boarded the train for St. Cloud in high spirits. But instead of a pushover, as they expected, they met a cornered tiger in a small basement gymnasium and barely escaped a loss by winning 19-17.

Captain Peter Tierney was the star performer in 1905. Physical Culture Instructor Professor Comeau was nominal coach, though he knew practically nothing about basketball as a game. It is probable that Tierney did most of the coaching.

— 1905-1906 —

The 1906 season opened with the ominous announcement that the basketball team would be competing with the most formidable schedule ever attempted by any team representing St. John's. It turned out to be a four-game schedule, however, and at first did not seem to present all the problems the pre-season forecasts anticipated. After an initial victory over the North Dakota Agricultural College by a score of 24-13, in a return trip to Fargo St. John's dropped two games by scores of 33-43 and 22-29. Highlight of the season was a 52-20 victory over Mechanic Arts High School of St. Paul, one of the Twin Cities powerhouses of that year.

Outstanding players were Captain Tierney and a freshman by the name of Matthias Locnikar, later known as Fr. Florian Locnikar, O.S.B. The latter was one of the outstanding athletes of this period, together with James Mienes and Peter Tierney. For the next two years he starred both in basketball and baseball and became one of the legendary heroes of St. John's first decade in intercollegiate competition. In later years he was very successful as the developer of basketball among the Indian young men on the Red Lake reservation in northern Minnesota.

— 1906-1907 —

The 1907 basketball team enjoyed a successful season—a record of three wins in a schedule of four games. After an unexpected defeat on the St. Thomas floor of 22-16, St. John's in a return game crushed the Tommies by a score of 40-21. In the meantime St. John's defeated two other teams, both weak opponents, the St. Paul Amateur Athletic Club 61-9 and the University of Minnesota Freshmen 59-11. Actually, there was nothing unusual about these scores beyond the fact that they are to be expected when a strong team is pitted against one that is unusually weak. The 1907 Johnnies were a cocky lot, however. After having clobbered the Minnesota freshmen, the *Record* reporter de-

clared that they were capable of matching their skills with those of the University of Minnesota Varsity, but that unfortunately it was too late to ask them for a game, and since there were no other teams in the state worthwhile playing, they were claiming the intercollegiate title of the state: "It being practically impossible to arrange a game with the State University first team, and there being no other team in the state worthy of our steel, the championship was unquestionably ours when the season was declared closed" (*Record*, Vol. 20, p. 211). Stars for 1907 were John Knaeble, '07, Fred Thielen, '07, and Martin Unser, '07.

The aftermath of this bit of bravado was indeed surprising. To anyone familiar with sports and championships, the claim of a championship on the basis of four games, one of which was a defeat by the only bona fide college team played, borders on the absurd. The only plausible excuse for the claim is the fact that at that time rules regulating inter-college competition were extremely loose:

Colleges competed with teams from academies, seminaries, and the YMCA...as well as with squads from institutions of higher rank. Claims and titles, as a consequence, were frequently misty, mythical, and eminently controversial in supportive evidence" (Merrill Jarchow, *Private Liberal Arts Colleges in Minnesota*, p. 52).

Dr. Jarchow added that the organization of Minnesota colleges into permanent conferences with set schedules, eligibility rules and other controls, was a post-World War I phenomenon—namely, the organization of the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (our MIAC) in 1920. Note: The MIAC requirement for a championship in any sport is that it be *awarded*, not merely claimed; that it be awarded on a percentage basis; and so in order "to be eligible for a state championship in football a team must have played at least four conference games; in basketball at least eight conference games with four colleges, and four of the games must be played on foreign courts; in baseball at least six conference games with at least three colleges" (MIAC "Code of Rules," 1936).

— 1907-1908 —

The stated goal of the 1908 team was to retain "the Intercollegiate Championship." Although the 1907 claim to a title was at best controversial, the record of nine victories in a ten-game schedule and a total number of 494 points scored against 224 by the opposition, ranks the 1908 team among the strongest of St. John's early athletic history. On the team roster were the names of several alumni-athletes such as

Matthias Locnikar, Ray Kraus and Raymond Smith (star quarterback of Coach Brennan's football team of the same year), all of whom would have been candidates for the St. John's Hall of Fame, had there been such an establishment in 1908. The *Record* boasted that the team was in a class by itself and second to none in the Northwest ("Annual Report of the A.A.," 1908, p. 5). It was a closely knit team and doubtless merited the praise of being the most successful and formidable in the history of the Athletic Association (*ibid.*). Especially commended was Locnikar, who was both captain and coach, besides maintaining his position as one of the highest scorers.

The St. John's Athletic Association claimed a double championship in 1908, the Northwest Championship and the Intercollegiate. (The *Record* never identified the Northwest title beyond simply claiming it.) As for the Intercollegiate title, St. Thomas also claimed it! Apparently the newspapers favored the St. John's claim, for the *Annual Report* quotes passages from the St. Cloud and St. Paul papers to the effect that St. John's had the better record. Following is an example taken from the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, April 5, 1908:

St. John's basketball team has finished a very successful season, having passed thru a schedule of ten games with but one defeat. St. Thomas, by winning 7 out of 12 games and defeating St. John's in the return game, claims the intercollegiate championship. St. John's makes the same claim, on the strength of having won 9 out of 10 games, and defeating two teams which have handed St. Thomas a defeat. Further comments as to the better claim is needless, as the above facts speak for themselves.

— 1908-1909 —

The 1909 basketball schedule and scores are as follows:

	SJU	Opponent
U. of Minn. Ag College	88...	10
Dakota Business College	52...	11
Dakota Business College	33...	33 (tie game)
Fargo Agricultural College	30...	16

The championship fever that was so characteristic of the 1907 and 1908 basketball seasons was never so evident as it was in 1909. The team manager for 1909 began by feeding the newspapers of St. Cloud, St. Paul and Minneapolis with optimistic forecasts for the new basketball season. Typical of them is the following for December 19, 1908, in the Minneapolis *Journal*:

The defenders of the Cardinal and Blue have all the earmarks of winners. Last season St. John's had the best team in its history, winning nine of ten games played with the best quintets of the state and the Northwest. With all but two of last year's regulars back, the basketball tossers of 1909 will be strong factors in the intercollegiate race.

The news story concluded with the statement that "Manager John Seibel has been flooded with challenges during the past month" by colleges in Fargo, North Dakota, St. Paul, Minneapolis, St. Cloud and Illinois. "Probably," he noted, "all would be taken on, including return games."

For some reason, however, only five games were secured, three with North Dakota teams, one with Little Falls High School and one with the U. of Minnesota Agricultural College. As a result of not being able to schedule any of the Minnesota colleges, not even St. Thomas, the team had to give up hopes of the Minnesota intercollegiate championship. It would have to settle with a try for the Northwest title. In an expansive moment the manager of the team challenged the world through the *Record*: "We not only want again the Northwest championship, but we must have it, and we will" (*Record*, January, 1909, p. 53).

The team had a great season, won four games, tied one, and piled up 278 points to 86 by the opponents. As will be seen in the introductory schedule above, the opposition must have been extraordinarily weak, for high scores of seventy-five and eighty-eight points, according to early 1900 techniques, would have required unusual skill if the opposition was strong. Stars of the year were Captain Ray Kraus, '10, Ray Kappel, '10, Alfred Steichen, '09, and John Jershe, later well known in the Minnesota Iron Range as Monsignor Jershe. Incidentally, he was an extraordinarily generous contributor to the J-Club until his death in 1973.

Reports of the 1909 basketball games are lavish in praise of the team for its skill. The *Record* called it "the best team in St. John's history." The Fargo *Daily* for 1909 speaks of the team as "a strong aggregation and fast as the wind." It is true that Kappel and Jershe were particularly fast men in track as well as in basketball.

As for the Northwest Championship, Manager Seibel found himself confronted with the problem of claiming the title, despite his meager five-game schedule. In order to compensate both for the weak schedule and the small number of games, he apparently sought to place the blame on the teams he had hoped to schedule, charging them with

not daring to play St. John's and side-stepping the challenge of a superior team. In a packet of clippings made by the archivist of St. John's, Fr. Francis Mersmann, O.S.B., from Twin City and St. Cloud papers, are records of news articles challenging all teams and sundry others to meet St. John's on the basketball floor—that is, if they dared to dispute the Northwest title.

The St. Cloud *Times*, February 27, 1909, writes as follows: "While having the best quint that ever represented St. John's, basketball has been a disappointment, not from a playing standpoint but because neighboring quints seem to be shy about giving St. John's a game." Defies were issued to practically all the Twin City papers, challenging any team of class that aspired to the Northwest championship. "The Collegeville quint wishes to reiterate its defy to any team out for the Northwest championship, and is willing to meet any other five here or on a neutral floor who consider themselves in St. John's class" (Minneapolis *Journal*, February 28, 1909). Sometime later, the *Record* (March, 1909, p. 158) reported: "Thus far our tossers of the inflated sphere have suffered no defeat, so we may justly claim the Northwest championship. A defy to play any five claiming the title was published in the Twin City papers. No response resulted, so who can honestly and justly dispute our claim?"

The defy evidently aroused at least one reader to a response, implying that the St. John's opposition had been particularly unimpressive: "In a certain newspaper," the *Record* reports, "a writer smartly asked: 'St. John's claims the Northwest championship. Whom have they beaten?'—Our curt reply: 'We have played and defeated every team in the Northwest that had the grit and nerve to play us. Satisfied?' " The barb may have struck home, however, for this was the last claim to a championship we encountered in later years.

— 1909-1910 —

The spirit that prevailed over the athletic scene at St. John's at the beginning of the 1910 basketball season was almost a complete reversal from that of 1909. The strident claims of largely fictitious championships were silenced. It was as if the heads of the athletic staff had suddenly decided to follow a more modest and better balanced publicity policy. Another change we notice is that for the first time in the history of St. John's basketball the schedule had become distinctly intercollegiate.

St. Thomas was again scheduled, as was Luther College of Iowa. Scheduled also was Hamline. Hamline had just completed its fine new gymnasium that enabled the Piper athletic department to emerge from

the dungeon of a college basement. In fact, basketball first came to full maturity in the Minnesota private colleges with the construction of the Sayles-Hill gymnasium on the Carleton College campus.

The St. John's team for 1910 was one of the best in St. John's early athletic history. Holdovers from 1909 were such stars as Captain Ray Kraus, Ray Kappel and John Jershe to carry on St. John's quest for excellence in athletics. The team won five games of a seven-game schedule. It defeated Hamline 44-13; the University of Minnesota freshmen 51-27; Luther College 25-24; St. Thomas 44-13; St. Cloud A.A. 39-16. Ironically, the only losses sustained by St. John's were to the St. Joseph Athletic Club of Minneapolis, an amateur parish club made up of former St. John's basketball stars—Fred Thielen, '07; John Knaeble, '07; and Oscar and Peter Faber, '07.

It would be an injustice to members of the first team to single out any individual star. This was probably the most closely knit team in St. John's early history. It is best to name as stars of 1910 Ray Kraus, Ray Kappel, John Jershe, Frank First and Joseph Kain.

— 1910-1911 —

There is little to say about the 1911 basketball team beyond the fact that it was coached by Physical Culture Instructor Edward Flynn in his first experience as director of activities other than gymnastics, his specialty. It is probable that he was assisted by Ray Kappel, a three-year veteran in basketball. Only two games were scheduled, unfortunately, both with the College of St. Thomas. St. John's won the first game on the home floor by a score of 33-20. The second game with St. Thomas was played on the Hamline floor, for St. Thomas as yet had no gymnasium of its own. It was won by St. John's in a "sudden death" overtime period, 24-22.

Stars for this year were Captain Ray Kappel and Roy O'Connell.

— 1911-1912 —

When the 1912 basketball season opened, interest in the game was at a low ebb because of the small number of games scheduled in the previous year. Interest revived suddenly, however, when the new moderator of athletics, Fr. Benedict Schmit, O.S.B., took things into his own hands and came up with a schedule of eight games, five of them authentic intercollegiate contests: the University of Minnesota Agricultural College, the University of North Dakota, Hamline University (two games) and St. Olaf College. There were also three games with amateur Twin Cities teams, the St. Paul YMCA and the St. Joseph Athletic Club (two games).