



GAME ON

As the culture of Canisius College athletics changes, the result is a consistently competitive, high-quality intercollegiate athletics program.

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Pictured (above) are student-athletes from the 2007-2008 season:

Rishawn J. Johnson '11, Brett Poissant '10, Kevin P. Mahoney '09, Laura L. Buetow '07, MBA '08, Tom D. Hensel '08 and Mallory J. Aldred '09.



At times, it seemed as if the losses wouldn't stop coming.

There were 33 in 2000, 28 in 2001, 38 in both 2002 and 2003, a whopping 43 in 2004 and then 38 more in 2005. In all, the Canisius College men's baseball team suffered 218 defeats in six years, which is 80 percent of all the games it played.

Enter **Michael D. McRae**, the 2003 Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC) Coach of the Year. In 2004, Canisius recruited McRae from Niagara University to rebuild the school's baseball fortunes.

Armed with assistant coaches and more athletic scholarship money, McRae went right to work. He doubled the Griffs' win total to 18 in 2006 and increased it to 20 in 2007. This year, McRae led the team to set a school record with 41 wins and 13 losses. That success resulted in the MAAC regular-season title (a first for the team since 1994) and earned the program's first-ever post-season victory. There's more.

"Our Canisius team led the nation in road victories. We had the ninth best winning percentage in the country. And, we were one of only four schools nationwide with 13 or fewer losses," states McRae who,

not surprisingly, earned the title of the 2008 MAAC Coach of the Year. "We finished on an extremely high note."

The baseball team was not alone in 2008.

Men's lacrosse won the regular-season MAAC title for the second time in three years and advanced to the NCAA Tournament for the first time in program history. Women's lacrosse earned its second post-season berth in three years; the only two post-season appearances in that program's history. And the Golden Griffin softball team advanced to the NCAA Tournament for the 10th time since 1994 (and the fourth time in five years). With 39 victories, the team set a program record and won an NCAA Tournament game for the first time since 2000.

"The culture of athletics at Canisius is changing," says Canisius College Director of Athletics **William J. Maher '89**. "This spring marked a significant step toward our goal that every coach and student-athlete should expect to win every competition they enter. That only develops through hard work and self-confidence."

The seeds of this new culture were sown in 2002 when Canisius made the strategic, albeit very difficult, decision to concentrate the college's resources in a smaller number of varsity sports teams in an effort to develop a consistently competitive, higher-quality intercollegiate athletics program. Prior to that, Canisius regularly added intercollegiate sports without fully providing the resources necessary to field a truly competitive team. Part-time coaches were the rule and athletic scholarships were scant for programs other than the flagship sports such as men's and women's basketball.

The 2002 realignment of the program was not a cost-cutting move. It was a classic example of management guru Jim Collins' observation that truly great enterprises begin to find the path to greatness when they confront the brutal facts of their realities. Brutal facts, such as the baseball team's 38 losses in the 2002 season, convinced Canisius that it could not maintain competitive, let alone great, programs in 23 intercollegiate sports. The Athletics Department had to choose the sports that had the best chance to thrive. Sixteen of them made the cut.

Among the sports retained were those that gave the college the best chance of success. Men's hockey was a natural. There were only 60 Division I hockey programs in the country in 2002-2003 (today there are 58) and the college's location on the Canadian border presented a natural recruiting advantage. Lacrosse was another natural. It had been big in Central New York and the Rochester area, and was becoming increasingly popular in Western New York.

The decision came with four iron-clad promises from Canisius President **Rev. Vincent M. Cooke, S.J.** All budgets from discontinued sports would be reallocated to the remaining sports. Those reallocated funds plus additional amounts would be used to hire full-time coaches for as many sports as possible. A total of \$1 million would be added to the department's athletic grant-in-aid budget over four years. And, the development of state-of-the-art athletic facilities would remain a priority in the capital budget process.

The 2008 spring sports season represented a breakthrough moment for Cooke's game plan. The sports pages of *The Buffalo News* included more than 10 major feature stories on the Canisius sports teams. The teams' successes generated excitement not only on campus but throughout Upstate New York. In fact, more than 300 Canisius alumni, family and friends cheered on the men's lacrosse team as it took on the eventual national champion, Syracuse Orangemen, in the first round of the NCAA tournament.

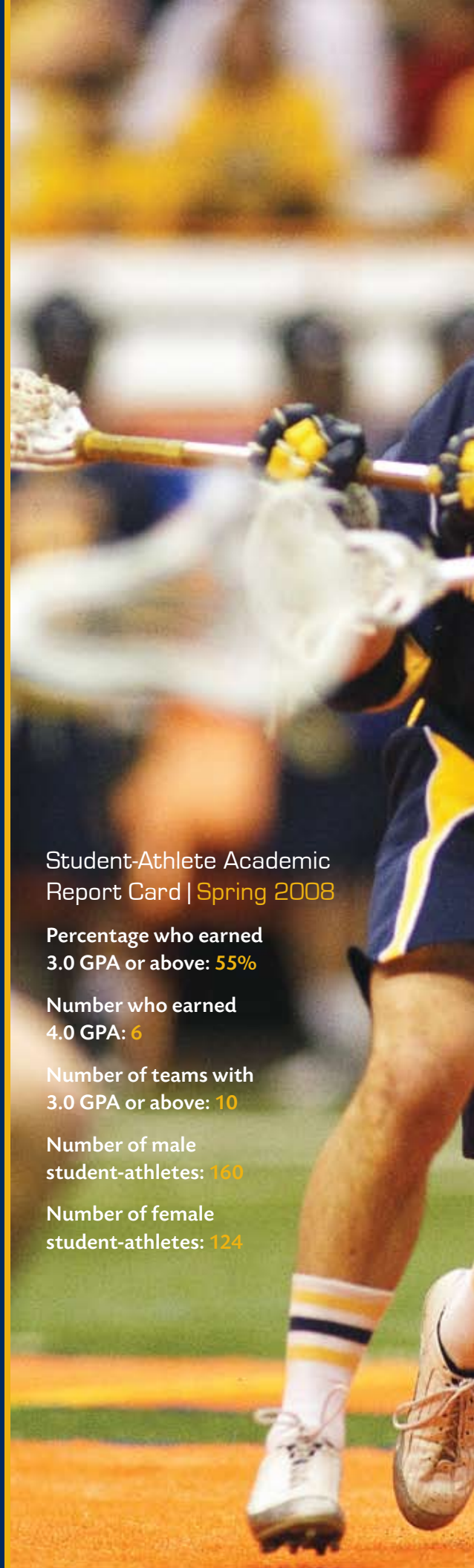
"The competitiveness of the Canisius programs has been building for some time and it all just coincidentally crested this spring, as reflected in the number of programs that qualified for MAAC Championships," says MAAC Commissioner Richard J. Ensor, Esq. "It is reflective of the leadership that Father Cooke and Bill Maher bring to the school and focus on athletics."

Rachelle A. Held '03, MEd '05 watched with pride. The former Golden Griffin women's lacrosse player returned to Canisius in March as director of compliance in the Athletics Department. "The mentality for some student-athletes used to be, 'We're just Canisius,'" says Held, who previously worked in the administrative offices of the MAAC and Northeast Conference. "But now that more and more student-athletes are successful and compete on the national level, they all want to be part of the action."

Father Cooke's commitment to athletics made three vital ingredients possible: coaches, scholarship aid and facilities.

The Coaches

Softball coach **Michael R. Rapp'l '77, MS '80** has seen it all and done it all at the Koessler Athletic Center (KAC). The only head coach of the softball program since its inception in 1980, Rapp'l's team has amassed 11 MAAC regular season championships, 10 MAAC Tournament titles and appeared in nine NCAA Division I Softball Tournaments. The Canisius softball program is the finest in the MAAC and one of the top programs in the Northeast.



Student-Athlete Academic Report Card | Spring 2008

Percentage who earned 3.0 GPA or above: **55%**

Number who earned 4.0 GPA: **6**

Number of teams with 3.0 GPA or above: **10**

Number of male student-athletes: **160**

Number of female student-athletes: **124**



Matthew Hajek '08 was a two-time captain for the men's lacrosse team. During his four-year career, the Golden Griffins won two regular-season lacrosse titles and made their first trip to the NCAA Tournament.

Things weren't always so good though. Before Rapp'l's promotion to full-time coach four years ago, he also held various additional positions in the Athletics Department. Rapp'l worked in compliance and athletic facilities. He provided academic support to student-athletes when issues with their academics arose. He even doubled as the women's basketball coach. Rapp'l worked 14-hour days but he didn't mind. "It allowed me to be available to the softball players, who need access to their coach at various points throughout the day," he says.

But the realignment of the Athletics Department changed all that for Rapp'l and other Canisius coaches. The college went from two full-time head coaches at the start of 2000 to 12 full-time head coaches at the start of the 2004-2005 season. Coaches can now direct their student-athletes to full-time staff members in academics, compliance, and strength and conditioning.

"The influx of support systems has been really positive and is a big help," says Rapp'l. "It gives us more time to concentrate on making the programs the best we can."

"Even the little things add up," adds **Randy G. Mearns '92, MS '02**. As he enters his 11th season as head coach of the men's lacrosse team, Mearns appreciates the college's increased commitment to athletics. Whether it's the new athletic trainer dedicated to his sport or something as simple as a bus contract, Mearns says "It increases the professionalism of our Athletics Department and our programs, which serves as a great sell for recruitment."

Recruiting the Best Student-Athletes

During the 1990s, Canisius gave full-rides to all of its men and women basketball players. With little money left over for the other student-athletes, part-time coaches searched for Division I quality athletes who also qualified for merit-based aid, which would make a Canisius education affordable to them. The problem was those athletes had lots of other options.

"We recognized that to grow the program, we needed to sharpen our focus on how we recruit and develop our student-athletes," says Maher. "Now, most of our strategic initiatives are directed at those two things."

The results are evident.

During the 2007-2008 athletics season, seven student-athletes at Canisius earned All-America honors – the most in school history. Another student-athlete received the first Academic All-American honor at the college, since 2001. (See page 18)

In all, Canisius won 84 post-season awards in 2007-2008. That's nearly double the 46 honors earned in 2006-2007 and almost four times the six-year average of 23 awards. Additionally impressive are the 14 Player of the Year or Rookie of the Year awards that Canisius student-athletes took home in the past two years. In the previous six years, Canisius won a total of 13 such awards.

Success on the field is equally matched by success in the classroom. The cumulative grade point average (GPA) for Canisius student-athletes is 3.033. Fifty-five percent of Canisius student-athletes boast a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or better. That's 20 percent higher than the general student population at the college. Six student-athletes earned a perfect 4.0 average. (See page 16)

A Place to Play

In 1970, Canisius opened the Koessler Athletic Center to serve as a practice facility and a general physical education building. Back then, athletics consisted of a handful of sports, most of which were played outside. The men's basketball team played at Buffalo Memorial Auditorium.

But a lot has changed in intercollegiate athletics and physical education in the past 38 years. Title IX requirements turned a virtually non-existent women's athletic program at Canisius into one that now sports seven teams: cross country, basketball, lacrosse, soccer, softball, swimming and diving, and synchronized swimming. Team practices moved indoors during inclement weather. The HSBC Arena replaced

Student-Athlete All-America Honors

Nicole R. Cardinale '10
Synchronized Swimming

Shane S. Davis '10
Baseball

Adam D. Jones '11
Men's Lacrosse

Kevin Mailloux '09
Baseball

Yulia Shepeleva '11
Synchronized Swimming

Natalia G. Tarasova '10
Synchronized Swimming

Laurie A. Wakelam '11
Synchronized Swimming

Academic All-American

Katie L. Miranto '08
Softball



the Aud, and proved to be too big and too expensive for a new era of Canisius basketball. The college's residential population exploded and fueled even greater demand for recreational athletic spaces.

To address these changes, Canisius built the Demske Sports Complex in 1988, which serves as an all-weather surface for outdoor sports. Construction of the Patrick P. Lee Student Athletic Center followed 10 years later. Originally designed as a place for general student recreational use, varsity sports now share the space for off-season practices. In 2003, a generous gift from Canisius College Board of Trustee member **Chester Stranczek HON '01** and his wife, Diane, made it possible for Canisius to renovate the Koessler Athletic Center. The 1970s maple bleachers were replaced and 1,100 chair-back seats were added to bring the seating capacity to 2,176 for Griffis basketball home games. The college also refinished the playing surface, added a new sound system and scoreboard, removed the drop ceiling, installed new air handling equipment, and generally spruced the place up with banners and the ubiquitous Golden Griffin logo.

Now, the rest of the KAC is in the midst of a \$2.1 million, four-phase renovation. The first phase included a new Center for Athletic Training. The state-of-the-art facility is used for game and practice preparation, and is fully equipped for acute and long-term injury rehabilitation. It doubles as a teaching space for the college's successful Athletic Training Program. The center also includes offices for coaches and separate locker rooms for the women's teams.

The men's and women's basketball teams will open the doors to new-

and-improved locker rooms for the upcoming season. The locker rooms are now located on the first floor, adjacent to the gym. They include large lockers, bright lighting and spacious shower rooms, as well as wireless Internet connectivity and study areas. Connected to both locker rooms are new state-of-the-art film rooms, which feature the most modern audio-visual equipment, theater-style seating and drop down screens.

"I never brought a recruit to our locker rooms because the old space was cramped, dark and lacked adequate ventilation," says Men's Basketball Head Coach **Thomas P. Parrotta**. "This new space speaks to the excellence of our operation and that goes a long way when coaches try to recruit the best student-athletes." Parrotta notes, "We also plan to put our opposing teams in the old basement locker room for a competitive advantage!"

The final phase of the KAC project will create new coaches' offices and renovate the men's general, staff and athletic team locker rooms.

Outside, the Demske Sports Complex received a \$1.6 million facelift this summer. It now boasts A-Turf, a new multi-purpose, all-weather synthetic playing surface and new scoreboards.

"When it comes to athletic facilities, it's like an arms race out there and Canisius is winning," says **Terrence E. Zeh**, head coach of the women's basketball team. "Our new facilities put us above and beyond the other schools in our conference and even some of those schools in the larger conferences."



Cameron P. Norton '09, with the number five jersey, gets cheered by her softball teammates after she hit the game-winning home run against Syracuse.

The Bottom Line

The last three words of the Athletics Department's mission statement say it all: EXPECT TO WIN!

During the spring season, that's exactly what happened.

The MAAC's Commissioner's Cup measures the top athletic programs in the conference through a point system. From 2002-2007, Canisius never finished higher than ninth in the Commissioner's Cup race. This year, however, Canisius finished in sixth place – just a half-point out of fifth.

"It's a validation of the results we expected when we set this course" says Maher. "And we will continue to do that in all of our sports. Simply stated, our goal is to compete for conference championships."

But the local rivalries matter, too. The Little Three and fellow MAAC rival Niagara still brings out the best in Canisius athletes. In 2006, Maher and his Niagara counterpart agreed on a head-to-head competition. Canisius easily won this year's Battle of the Bridge (as in Grand Island Bridge) Canal Cup competition with 21 of a possible 34 points.

The Future

Competing for MAAC championships certainly includes men's basketball. Even though the team suffered a very difficult 6-25 season, Tom Parrotta sees better days ahead. "We had the sixth youngest team in all of Division I last season but they never gave up on me," he says.

Both Parrotta and Maher know that the Canisius basketball team is in

the spotlight. So in addition to higher finishes in the Commissioner's Cup race, the plan for the future includes a basketball team that competes regularly for a spot in the NCAA Tournament – the highlight for all of intercollegiate athletics.

That level of competition brings big returns for a school. "Certainly the successes of the basketball programs at our fellow Jesuit schools such as Gonzaga, Xavier and St. Joe's have helped to put them on the map," says Maher. "We'd like to think that we can put Canisius on the map with the basketball program, as well."

And what about more facilities? Maher admits that on his wish list are an on-campus arena for basketball and ice hockey, and a field house for all-season practices.

"We're talking about a long-range plan," he says. "But if we've learned anything over the past few years, it's that we need to plan for success."

And that's precisely why Maher keeps his wish list in his back pocket. ■



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