

# AQ's winning coach moves to Kearney after contract dispute

By Richard A. Kiley

Referring to his coaching situation at Aquinas as "tenuous at best," Mike Ruff, the young, colorful coach who directed the Little Irish to an unprecedented Section 5 basketball final this season, has opted to leave Aquinas and take over the varsity basketball program at Bishop Kearney High School.

Ruff's decision appears to be the end result of a deeply rooted conflict which began last November, when he left his other Aquinas

## A view from the sideline

position — teaching in the school's business department — for a similar teaching job at Fairport High School.

The situation came to a head last Monday when the fourth-year coach sat down with school officials to discuss his coaching future at Aquinas.

He was offered a one-year contract to stay on as head coach of the program he recently revitalized. Yet Ruff terms the offer a mere formality, saying it is a direct result of "alumni pressure" stemming from his recent success. He declined the offer, and instead, inherited Kearney's starving program which has mustered just seven wins in its last 35 games.

"There wasn't a meeting of the minds," Ruff said, referring to the March 17 meeting. "I asked them (Aquinas officials) last December 1 if they would renew my contract, and they finally approached me Monday with a one-year contract."

Ruff said he didn't hold any animosity toward Aquinas and that he regretted

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**Mike Ruff**

"leaving the parents and players who were very supportive of me." The 28-year-old business teacher, however, did express disappointment in school officials and asserted that they had used a double standard in applying their policy regarding coaches who do not teach in the school's academic departments.

"I understood when they weren't very happy when I left teaching there," Ruff said. "But the varsity soccer, hockey and swimming coaches all teach outside the school, and can coach for as long as they want," he continued. "and it's been public knowledge that my coaching situation at Aquinas was tenuous at best, so it was for my benefit that I left."

"I don't want to come off as a mudslinger, but that policy is somewhat discriminatory." In response to Ruff's claim that Aquinas administrators had dealt with him unfairly, Dennis Sadler, athletic director at Aquinas, said the school "prefers to have someone inside the school coaching a sport; however it is not an iron-clad rule."

Sadler added that all coaches, like teachers, are on a "year-to-year" basis at Aquinas.

Father Stephen R. Martin, principal of Aquinas, said there were no problems "until Mike accepted the job at Fairport" but that Ruff's leaving the Aquinas faculty had nothing to do with his coaching situation.

"Mike felt the administration had not treated him well after he broke his teaching contract at Aquinas in November," Father Martin said. "We offered him a one-year contract to coach, but I think he decided previously he would move to Bishop Kearney."

Father Martin added that "teaching and coaching contracts are yearly at Aquinas" and that "contracts are not signed until June."



The conflict taints what was a spectacular year for Little Irish basketball. As Father Martin said in reflecting on Ruff's leaving, "There's no way the administration can come out of this without a black eye." In a situation such as this, he added, somewhat ruefully, "You've got to blame somebody."

Ruff is in a tough situation as he leaves Aquinas. He knew the school took a chance in hiring him four years ago when he was just 24, making him the youngest coach in Section 5. He had attained plenty of experience as a player at Fairport High School and LeMoyné College, but had no coaching experience.

But experience doesn't always turn a program around. Take for example Joe Gigliotti, the former Nazareth College coach, who accrued only seven wins in two years at Bishop Kearney before his recent retirement from the school's program.

It's obvious that Ruff had enough of policy and looked elsewhere. His love for

coaching did not include the added pressure of a year-to-year situation.

Ruff deserved more than he got from Aquinas last week. He turned the program into a winner there, and it was hardly an overnight success. The Little Irish languished in mediocrity in Ruff's first three seasons, before finally catching fire this year. Ruff, who had been most valuable player of Fairport's 1975 Class AAA championship team, was brilliant in guiding the Little Irish to wins over former champions Greece Arcadia, East and Webster in tightly contested games.

Winning close games is often a sign of a good team and great coaches. Ruff's squad's most impressive win came against previously undefeated East, a game in which Ruff's coaching prowess played a major role. He called three crucial timeouts in the last quarter against the Orientals when he felt the game slipping away from the Little Irish.

"I accomplished all my goals at Aquinas," Ruff reflected. "They have seven varsity boys coming back next year. Personally, I'm looking for a new challenge."

Forfeiting the young coach's keen intuition from the bench is Aquinas' loss, but may turn out to be the Fighting Kings' salvation.

And Ruff has already begun to work for next season.

"I'm going to start the first Bishop Kearney camp, and take the team to a five-star basketball program at Syracuse University this summer," Ruff said enthusiastically. "I'm also going to get them in the Greece Summer League. I want to find out who is willing to pay the price."

Ruff wants to emulate the program he built at Aquinas and is taking on his new endeavor with an open mind.

"I know the program has been way down the past two seasons," Ruff said. "But last



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Aquinas Principal**

season is all forgotten, there are no pre-prejudices. I don't think Kearney's seasons have been indicative of the players they have there. It's not a death bed."

The new Bishop Kearney varsity basketball mentor is more than happy with the reception he has received from both the administration and students.

"There's no pressure at all here because they know its going to take time to turn the program around. Brother Oxx (Brother Jeffrey Oxx, athletic director at Bishop Kearney) was instrumental in getting me settled there and the players were my biggest fans."

Brother Oxx said several BK fans had suggested checking into the possibility of landing Ruff for next season.

"Things had to settle at Aquinas before the situation was definite," the first-year athletic director said. Referring to Ruff's jump to Bishop Kearney, Brother Oxx said, "Obviously Mike is a very good coach and a welcome addition to our program."

"We were looking for someone who could teach our kids, and if he happens to win a game or two, that's nice too," Brother Oxx said. "We've never had and never will have a program based solely on winning here," Brother Oxx said.

When asked about Ruff's situation at Aquinas, Brother Oxx replied, "I know he

was under a lot of pressure there, but he won so they can't complain about that." He added that strict enforcement of the "coach-on-faculty" policy would "put a little hold on what they (Aquinas) are going to be able to there."

Brother John J. Johnson, principal of Bishop Kearney was cautiously optimistic in regard to Ruff's hiring.

"I'm very enthused just by his own enthusiasm," Brother Johnson said. "He wants to build a program here and he looks at it as a challenge. That's what we need at this point."

The first-year principal echoed the sentiments of Aquinas administration when asked about a coach needing to be on the faculty of the same school.

"It's always preferable to have someone coach and teach in the same building, but I would not exclude anyone for that reason," Brother Johnson said. "If qualified coaches assure me that they will abide by the philosophy of the school, I am satisfied."

Now that the rhetoric has subsided, Ruff can settle down and start to rebuild the Fighting Knight basketball program. Judging from his recent experience, the odds are with him now.

What a difference four years make.

## Corning North school gets extension

By Richard A. Kiley

The Corning Catholic North school board and the St. Vincent DePaul parish council voted to continue with "the present situation" instead of merging with Corning Catholic South until a "more flushed out plan" is presented, according to Father Robert C. MacNamara, pastor of St. Vincent DePaul Parish.

The decision comes after an ad-hoc committee recommended that Corning's two Catholic schools and school boards merge next fall.

"The issue has created enough interest and support to wait until a more flushed out plan is presented," Father MacNamara said. "We found out there is a great value in continuing the Corning North school."

Father MacNamara added that within the next six months, the Corning North school board will have to derive a "more vigorous plan" which will need to state specific goals in regard to registration and finances.

Father MacNamara cited the results of a survey among local residents as an important factor in the decision.

"The survey brought out the real feelings and concerns among the people," Father MacNamara said. "It (the survey) was a very helpful and instrumental tool in getting people to express their concerns and interests on the northside."

He added that the decision "gives the school board a challenge to do something to

evaluations will need to be made to see if their suggestions are accurate."

The long-range planning committee which proposed the merger was appointed last May by both the Corning North and Corning South school boards. One of the major concerns of the committee was the severe drain on the St. Vincent DePaul Parish in keeping the northside school functioning.

"There has to be a realignment of finances," Father MacNamara said, in regard to the parish's financial burden. The pastor added that parents, "school people" and fundraisers would also aid in lessening the drain of money from the parish.

Presently, 89 kindergarten through fifth graders attend the Corning North school at St. Vincent DePaul Parish.

Corning South currently serves 200 kindergarten through eighth grade from St. Mary's and St. Patrick's parishes. St. Vincent DePaul's junior high students also attend Corning South.

## Red Cross CPR Class

There will be a CPR course on Saturday, April 12, at Monroe Community College, with classes available at 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. The four-hour Save-A-Heart course teaches one-rescuer CPR, mouth-to-mouth breathing, and first aid procedures for choking. The fee is \$5. To register, call (716)461-9800, ext. 222 or 326. Participants must be at least 13 years old.