

## SPORTS

# Why Catholic Colleges Excel at Basketball

By MARC TRACY MARCH 30, 2018

SAN ANTONIO — Long before a 98-year-old nun became the biggest star of the 2018 N.C.A.A. men’s basketball tournament, Immaculata, a small Catholic college outside Philadelphia, won the first three de facto national women’s basketball championships.

The Mighty Macs’ titles in the early 1970s, Bill Russell’s breakout success at the University of San Francisco in the 1950s and the presence of Villanova and Loyola-Chicago at this weekend’s Final Four are just three data points among many that prove an undeniable fact: In college basketball, Catholic schools have long punched well above their weight. The reasons stretch back a century — and, some would argue, to the New Testament itself.

“It is a real thing,” said Julie E. Byrne, a professor of religion at Hofstra University who studies American Catholicism.

As the Final Four coincides with Easter weekend, this phenomenon is as real as ever. Half the No. 1 seeds in this tournament were Catholic teams, as were eight of the 64 teams that made the bracket. Loyola is named for St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, and has Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt as its chaplain and unofficial scout. Villanova is associated with the Augustinian Order. Both are still playing.

On Saturday, Loyola, a No. 11 seed, will play third-seeded Michigan, before Villanova, the 2016 champion, faces a fellow top seed, Kansas.

Excelling in big-time college basketball sits easily at mission-oriented institutions. Sports are not only these universities' front porch, but also the faith's emissary.

Villanova's president, the Rev. Peter M. Donohue, hosts an opening Mass for athletes every year, where he reminds them they are ambassadors for the university's mission. "To have our charism move on," he said, using a dogma-tinged Greek word for spirit, "the banner needs to be carried."

The history of basketball excellence at Catholic colleges stretches back as long as the tournament itself. In its early decades, Holy Cross, La Salle, San Francisco and Loyola racked up titles; Marquette's golden age was in the late 1960s and '70s; the 1985 Final Four included three Catholic schools (St. John's, Georgetown and Villanova); and Gonzaga has had an extraordinary run of 20 consecutive tournament berths, including in last year's championship game.

Catholic hoops excellence is all the more stark when one looks at college sports' broader landscape: Of the 65 members of the five football power conferences, only two are Catholic institutions — Boston College and Notre Dame.

Theological explanations are tempting.

"Of course," joked the Rev. James Martin, the author of "The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything," "St. Ignatius of Loyola is praying for all these schools. Even Villanova."

But there is more than just something in the holy water. Several characteristics of Catholicism in America, both sociological and spiritual, have helped determine this affinity; the Catholic Church's decision not to abandon the urban poor in America in the second half of the 20th century, when so many other institutions did, was particularly significant.

Much of Catholic education's historic commitment to basketball derives from demographics.

Several decades ago, many American Catholics were working-class urbanites, clustered in some of the same cities — New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, New Orleans — in which these schools rose up.

“Many of our schools were founded to serve immigrants and the working class — Catholics unable to get into other schools,” Martin said.

In basketball, with its inexpensive overhead, compact field of play and small number of participants, they found a sport that suited them. (The same was true of working-class Jews, for whom basketball also possesses a striking similarity with their religion — a prayer service and a regulation basketball game both require 10 people.)

Many of these same Catholic basketball powers field lower-profile football teams, when they do at all (Loyola discontinued its varsity program in 1930), because of the expense of a roster close to 80 people.

“Basketball was the sport they picked because it was so cheap,” Byrne, the Hofstra professor, said. “They could do it in incredibly limited space with incredibly limited equipment.”

Over time, the schools became a magnet for black players, including luminaries such as Bill Russell (University of San Francisco) and the championship Loyola-Chicago team of 1963, which broke an unspoken rule by starting four black players.

Black athletes, Catholic or not, often landed at these colleges partly because they frequently played basketball for the local chapter of the Catholic Youth Organization, which was originally founded as a kind of urban, Catholic parallel to the predominantly Protestant Y.M.C.A.s. The C.Y.O.s set many black players on the path toward Catholic colleges.

“As more and more ethnic Catholics moved out of cities but parishes and schools stayed put, black kids were admitted regardless of religious affiliation beginning in the ’60s,” James T. Fisher, an American Studies professor at Fordham, said in an email. “Then the church turned demographic fact into theological virtue by embracing urban advocacy and racial justice.”

It also made competitive sense. Much as a New Yorker, Frank McGuire, won the 1957 title at the University of North Carolina by taking several first- and second-generation Irish- and Jewish-Americans from the New York metropolitan area down to Chapel Hill, another coach from New York, Al McGuire (no relation), used his personality — his charisma? — to recruit black players to Marquette, in Milwaukee, in the 1960s and '70s, when many state schools still had unwritten quotas.

“He sold kids and families on the fact that: ‘Hey, I’m a white Irish Catholic. I didn’t grow up in the neighborhood, but I grew up next door to it,’ ” Fisher said.

There is nothing in Catholic dogma that specifically elucidates the virtues of basketball. Yet several scholars pointed to elements of American Catholicism that helped persuade schools to embrace sports.

Jesuit philosophy — embedded at so many top basketball schools, such as Gonzaga, Xavier, Creighton and Georgetown — extends to all aspects of life. It preaches *cura personalis*, or “care for the person” — in not only the intellectual and spiritual sense, but the physical one, too.

Catholicism in America taught that all aspects of life could be sacred, Byrne said, maybe even basketball.

“It’s not that sports were particularly holy, but you could see it as a holy thing to do. It could have the potential to give glory to God,” said Byrne, referencing the Jesuit phrase “*ad majorem Dei gloriam*,” or “for the greater glory of God.”

For St. Joseph’s Coach Phil Martelli, these teachings comport with the sport that he called the “greatest societal experiment.”

“In basketball, it doesn’t matter if you’re black or white, rich or poor, city or suburbs,” said Martelli, whose wife, Judy Marra Martelli, played on those three Immaculata championship teams. “And in the Catholic faith, you shouldn’t be measured by those things — your W-2 or what you drive. You should be measured by your character.”

***Correction: March 30, 2018***

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misspelled the surname of a man posing with Bill Russell of the University of San Francisco. He is the Rev. Ralph Tichenor, not Tichnor.

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