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On Coaching Go-Round, It's Hop On, and Hold On

By [GEORGE VECSEY](#)
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St. John's wants to be a player. [Boston College](#) wants to be a player. Everybody wants to be a player.



Elizabeth Dalziel/Associated Press

Anne Donovan is taking over as the women's basketball coach at Seton Hall.

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The carousel of coaches is spinning once again, sending some coaches tumbling to the floor while esteemed colleagues jockey for the shiniest, most lucrative pony.

St. John's on Tuesday named Steve Lavin its new men's basketball coach, and it is expected that the Red Storm will hire an impressive cadre of associates in an attempt to revive the very faint sound of the calliope that used to toot so merrily for that team. Boston College is also going for the upgrade, dismissing Al Skinner after sticking him in a killer conference.

On Wednesday, [Seton Hall](#) will present Kevin Willard and Anne Donovan as the new coaches of its men's and women's teams. Willard left Iona to compete against the [football-enriched powers](#) of the Big East. Donovan will bring her credentials and charisma to compete with [Geno Auriemma](#) at Connecticut and [C. Vivian Stringer](#) at Rutgers. Welcome to the Big East, folks.

Many other coaches will move around in the wake of the shuffles. One thing you never hear is universities musing about switching to a smaller conference. This is most apparent at St. John's, with its grand tradition including 26 [N.C.A.A.](#) appearances but none since 2002.

"Move down? Never!" vowed Joe DiBenedetto, a graduate of St. John's and its law school, a season ticket-holder since 1962 who was in Kentucky for the Final Four in 1985.

"No one expects to be in the Sweet 16 every year,"

DiBenedetto said. "Or even make the N.C.A.A. every year.

"But we can compete. We are close now."

St. John's is close after Norm Roberts's six seasons, after an ice age of poor conduct and

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Helping a troubled colleague

wretched teams. In 2005, [Roberts was asked](#) by New York magazine why the university did not downsize to, say, the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference.

"The MAAC?" he replied testily. "That will never happen. We're talking about [St. John's University](#). No disrespect, but I didn't come here to play in the MAAC. Great players didn't create this legacy so we should play in the MAAC."

Very few programs have fallen as far as St. John's, which is why the university scurried to several candidates before [hiring Lavin](#), who has not coached since being at [U.C.L.A.](#) in 2003. No retreat. Too many people remember the old days.

"I grew up listening to St. John's games on the radio and that's the only place I ever wanted to play," [Gus Alfieri said Tuesday](#). Alfieri played for Joe Lapchick in the late 1950's and was a successful high school coach for 19 years. In 2006, he wrote a book about [his mentor](#): "Lapchick: The Life of a Legendary Player and Coach in the Glory Days of Basketball."

Alfieri thinks St. John's, with the [good senior class](#) Roberts recruited, will do well next season. He cannot see his program ever dropping down. He said it would be a disgrace.

"Besides, there is no such thing as a midmajor any more," he said, referring to Butler's advance to the Final Four.

St. John's is investing a great deal of money in Lavin and his team, which is expected to include the assistants Dave Leitao, formerly a head coach at Virginia, and Barry Rohrssen, currently the head coach at Manhattan.

The potential expense of more than \$12 million for six years can be justified this way: St. John's sells only half the 4,000 seats at modest Carnesecca Arena and often sells no more than 4,000 tickets at Madison Square Garden.

Quick math: sell 10,000 more tickets for each of eight home games at, say, \$40 a ticket, and that is a \$3.2 million increase, justifying this new cadre.

St. John's does not have television income from football the way some of its Big East brethren do. Boston College, with income from its Division I football program, won 247 times and lost 165 times in Skinner's 13 seasons. Not good enough, B.C. decided after Skinner had battled [Duke](#), North Carolina and Maryland in the Atlantic Coast Conference, with its brutal travel because the nearest rival was in College Park, Md.

So now the carousel starts. [Cornell](#) will be delighted it reached the Round of 16 last week, thereby making Coach Steve Donahue a national celebrity. He will be in the pool for the B.C. job, along with [Tommy Amaker](#) a few miles away at Harvard.

Just in the Northeast: the Siena job is open because Fran McCaffery went to Iowa and now it looks as if the Manhattan job will also be open. I am surprised nobody has gone after Mike Rice of Robert Morris, a personable Fordham graduate and a Philly guy, who nearly beat Villanova in the first round.

Holy Cross fired Sean Kearney after one season with a 9-22 record, which could bring back Ralph Willard, who is, correct, the father of Kevin. And in other regions, the much-traveled Tim Floyd was hired at Texas at El Paso. Got all this?

If Skinner, who previously coached nine years at Rhode Island, has not had enough of this nutty business, he could come home to Long Island and coach Hofstra, which just lost [Tom Pecora](#) to Fordham (which is spending [scads of money](#) to try to upgrade within the Atlantic 10 Conference).

After all those trips at Boston College, Skinner would feel right at home at Hofstra: 8 of its 11 Colonial Conference opponents are from Baltimore and south. But somebody will take the job on a carousel where no university ever backs down.

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