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Dick Bennett on Gary Grzesk

St. Norbert College

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A collegiate basketball legend weighs in on his former player’s coaching achievements

Gary Grzesk (Athletics)

“Gresh”). The Green Knights climbed to as high as No. 9 in the Division III national rankings this season and have qualified for the NCAA Division III Tournament, along the way capturing their first Midwest Conference regular season championship in eight years.

Most coaches can trace their philosophies to at least one important coach in their past, and for Grzesk that person is Dick Bennett. Grzesk played for Bennett at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay from 1992-96, earning the team’s Defensive Player of the Year award all four of his seasons.

Bennett went on to coach at the University of Wisconsin, where he guided the Badgers to a Final Four appearance, and at Washington State before retiring. The legendary coach isn’t surprised to see his former star pupil succeeding in the coaching profession, according to Mike Dauplaise ’84. Dauplaise interviewed Bennett while preparing an article for the print issue of St. Norbert College Magazine (Spring 2010) on the building success of the Green Knight men’s basketball program.

What qualities about Gary Grzesk make him a successful coach?

Intrinsically, Gary is one of the most poised individuals I’ve ever coached. He’s very calm on the outside, but also very calm on the inside. He’s got a great presence of mind that is such an asset in any business, but especially in the business of coaching. He just doesn’t rattle. I recognize it when I see it,
but I never possessed it. I saw it in him as a player and I have seen it in his coaching. I knew whatever he did that he was going be successful. He has tremendous coaching potential.

Grzesk was not a heavily recruited player coming out of high school. What led you to believe he could play at the Division I level?
Gary was tailor-made for our system. His high school coach kept telling me: "I've got a kid for you who you'll love. He will not be heavily recruited because his offensive talents don't stand out, but he's a great defender and a great person, and has all the intangibles in the world."

How did that translate into a player who could help your team win?
We could be very specific in our recruiting, and Gary filled a very specific role. He was a point guard and did the bulk of the ball handling. He wasn't spectacular, just sound. My senses tell me that's the way his teams play today.

Grzesk's collegiate playing highlight came in the first round of the 1994 NCAA Tournament, when his defensive efforts helped shut down University of California and current NBA star Jason Kidd on the way to a stunning UWGB victory. How was he able to accomplish that?
That one he can take to his grave. That was so very special. Gary was so flexible defensively that I could play him on anybody. He was playing against arguably the greatest point guard in college basketball at that time in Jason Kidd, and the next year he guarded [future NBA star and 6-foot-10] Vitaly Potapenko of Wright State in the conference tournament.

How has that type of focus helped him succeed at St. Norbert?
Gary's very special. Aside from what is obvious about him, there's also the fact that he's a good person and a good fit there [at St. Norbert], and he knows basketball.