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Sports



One of Bob MacKinnon's coaching stops was with the Buffalo Braves in 1977. He also served as the NBA team's GM. Buffalo News file photo

Bob MacKinnon, a Canisius coaching legend, dies at 87

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Bob MacKinnon, a central figure in Buffalo sports for more than 70 years, died Tuesday after a long illness at Elderwood Village, an assisted living facility in Williamsville. He was 87.

Elected to the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame in 1995, MacKinnon is best known for his years as head men's basketball coach at Canisius College (1959-1972). However, his career in athletics was many faceted. Raised in the Black Rock section of Buffalo, he was an All-High selection in baseball, basketball and football, playing on championship teams in all three sports at McKinley High. At Canisius he was a four-year standout in basketball at a time when the sport was enjoying its golden era and college doubleheaders filled Memorial Auditorium.

On the court he was known as a fierce competitor and a rugged defender as the Golden Griffins took on the best teams in the country as they passed through Buffalo on their way to dates in Madison Square Garden.

He was a talented enough third baseman for the Canisius baseball team that he earned a professional contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers. He played two seasons in the minor leagues before returning to Buffalo. He also tried out for the Syracuse Nationals of the National Basketball Association.

MacKinnon was elected to the first class of inductees to the Canisius Sports Hall of Fame in 1963.

MacKinnon began his coaching career at Canisius High, where his teams had a 36-2 record over two seasons and won the Manhattan Cup in 1951 and 1952. He moved on to Canisius College as freshman

basketball coach under Joe Niland, head baseball coach and intramural director. In 1959, he succeeded Joe Curran as head basketball coach of the Griffs. His most successful team went 19-7 and reached the championship game of the National Invitation Tournament at Madison Square Garden in New York in 1963. His teams won 142 games over 13 seasons, second most in Canisius history.

MacKinnon was let go as coach and athletics director at Canisius in 1972, but soon was hired as an assistant coach and scout by the NBA Buffalo Braves. After three seasons working with the late Jack Ramsay, he moved on to the American Basketball Association as coach of the Spirits of St. Louis. He led team to an upset over Julius Erving and the defending ABA champion New York Nets in the 1975 playoffs before losing to the eventual champion Kentucky Colonels.

After that season, MacKinnon returned to the Braves to succeed Eddie Donovan as general manager in 1976. He served briefly as interim head coach of the Braves in 1977. After the Braves left Buffalo in 1978, MacKinnon coached and scouted in the NBA. Twice he served as head coach of the New Jersey Nets (1980-81 and 1987-88) and finished out his NBA career as a consultant to the Nets.

At Canisius College, MacKinnon coached men who went on to careers in politics, law and business. One of his captains at Canisius was Tony Masiello, who served two terms as mayor of Buffalo. Another was prominent attorney Terrence Connors.

“He was a great mentor and a friend,” Masiello said Tuesday. “He was a coach and a father figure, somebody who has been part of my life for 50 years. As much as I respected him as coach, I respected him even more as a man. He not only prepared us for basketball, he prepared us for the journey of adulthood.”

“The lessons he taught us went far beyond basketball,” said Connors, a founding partner in the law firm Connors & Vilardo. “He prepared us for life. He made us men.”

Away from his teams, MacKinnon was devoted to his family. His idea of a good time was glass of Canadian beer and a cigar sitting poolside surrounded by his family on a summer evening at his Williamsville home.

MacKinnon came from a family of successful individuals. His late brother, Thomas, was Erie County Republican chairman and was Erie County Parks and Recreation director. Late brother Don was a rugged center and linebacker at Canisius and went on to a career as a chemical engineer. Younger brother Jim played basketball at Canisius College and later coached in Western New York high school basketball before a career in insurance.

After he retired, MacKinnon lived for a time in Fort Myers, Fla., where he was a special assignment scout for NBA teams, covering college and pro games in the Southeast. He eventually moved back to Williamsville, to be near family.

MacKinnon married Norma Marie Fell in 1955. They raised four daughters and a son, Bob Jr., who followed his dad into coaching. He is the coach of the Los Angeles D-Fenders in the NBA Development League. Daughter Kim retired last year as girls basketball coach at South Park High School.

Besides his wife, he is survived by brother James (Patricia), and sister Patricia (Ernest) Sandor, son Robert Jr. (Suzanne), daughters Kim MacKinnon, Nancy (Robert) O'Connell, Lisa (Thomas) Vanderloo. He was predeceased by daughter Pamela.

Calling hours will be 2-8 p.m. on Thursday at Perna Dengler Roberts Funeral Home, 1671 Maple Road, Williamsville. A funeral Mass will be Friday at 10:30 a.m. at St. Gregory the Great Catholic Church in Williamsville. Burial will be in Mount Olivet Cemetery, Town of Tonawanda.

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