

Connecticut Jewish Ledger

AN INDEPENDENT WEEKLY NEWSPAPER SINCE 1929 • WWW.JEWISHLEDGER.COM

Vol. 76 No. 13 ©2004 \$1.00/ Friday, March 26, 2004 / 4 Nissan 5764

MAR 26, 2004 NEW HAVEN - The word success is synonymous with Yale University. While the Ivy League school's many prominent graduates conjure up thoughts of greatness, Yale's basketball program had been the antithesis of its illustrious stature.

But that was before Matt Minoff, Justin Simon and Paul Vitelli stepped onto the basketball court in 2001. This year, Yale opened the season on national television in the preseason National Invitation Tournament (NIT), and stunned the entire nation when they led number one ranked Connecticut by three points at halftime. Yale fell by 10, but the game epitomized the remarkable ascent of a basketball program that was once defined by its failures.

Just five years earlier, they set a school record for futility with a 4-22 record. Yale had not made it to postseason play in 40 years, and in their 107-year history had never won a postseason game. It took Minoff, Simon and Vitelli two years to help eradicate a century of futility.

"The good thing about it is they hadn't understood what transpired in the past and hadn't dealt with 40 years of losing," said James Jones, the 2002 Basketball America and College Insider Coach of the Year. "They had a tremendous role in changing the culture of the basketball program. No one else believed in them. They just came in with the attitude that they wanted to win."

Their air of confidence translated onto the basketball court. In 2002, the Bulldogs emerged as a bona-fide contender in the Ivy League, becoming the feel-good story of the college basketball season with their best start since 1989. The Eli's took the Ivy League by storm when they knocked off perennial champions Princeton and Penn on consecutive nights in the midst of a seven-game winning streak.

"Before that there was a so-so attitude about the team," recalls Justin Simon. "It really created excitement around campus. It was a great feeling. Now, campus is abuzz whenever we play."

For the first time in recent memory, the entire Yale campus was captivated by the Bulldogs' travails. "It's tough when you have a losing tradition," describes Minoff. "My freshman year, no one even knew who the basketball players were. Once you start winning, everyone jumps on the bandwagon. It makes the games that much more enjoyable when you are going out in front of a big crowd. You feed off the crowd; it really makes a difference. There is a real sense of pride to know that we were the ones who started that."

An 11-3 record in the Ivy League garnered them a share of their first Ivy League crown since 1963, and marked the first time in 15 years that anyone other than Princeton or Penn earned a share of the title. With wins against Rhode Island, Penn State and Clemson en route to a 20-10 record, the Bulldogs earned a birth in the NIT. "We didn't feel the pressure, like anything was at stake," adds Minoff, who twice earned the Richard Derby Award for academic and athletic excellence. "We had nothing to lose. We were

a very young team at the time. I'm not sure we knew the impact of the games. It was great for the tradition of the programs; it was new and exciting."

Still searching for that elusive win in their first postseason game since 1963, Yale faced Rutgers, a team making their second NIT appearance in four years whose home record of 15-1 record included wins against Top 25 teams Miami and Connecticut. Still unfazed, Yale pulled off another miracle for their first-ever postseason win, as the Eli's shocked the Scarlet Knights 67-65.

"It's a great accomplishment that we are all very proud of. In a few years, they'll have accomplished so much that the win against Rutgers will pale in comparison," explains Simon. "Our biggest impact was changing the culture of the basketball program."

Minoff, Vitelli and Simon's impact upon the basketball program, while momentous, has a far more profound significance.

When the Jewish population was deemed too great in the early 1920s, Yale instituted a formal quota system that ensured that no more than 10 percent of the student body was Jewish. This lasted until 1960. Today, one quarter of the Yale population is Jewish, and the Bulldogs have five Jewish players, the most in the country.

"It is pretty rare to have that many Jewish players on one team. It's great knowing I have a common background with a lot of the guys," says freshman Sam Kaplan, who joined guard Josh Greenberg, who is also Jewish, on the Elis this season. "It's pretty impressive knowing that there was a quota so many years ago and [that now] they've had an impact on the Yale basketball program. I think it opens up the doors for future Jewish athletes that come to Yale."

Simon, winner of the Jules D. Mazor Award for Jewish High School athlete of the year; Vitelli, a 2002 Jewish Sports Review All-American, and Minoff, a Gold Medal winner on the 2001 Maccabi USA Team, have etched their names alongside other Jewish figures, who have had a compelling influence upon Yale's storied history.

"There aren't many Jewish players in general. We feel a real sense of pride from that standpoint," said Minoff.

"It would be a big honor to mention our team in the same breath as [Yale graduates] Joe Leiberman and Alan Dershowitz. I guess it speaks very highly of Jewish people that we were able to transcend the past, and that there are three Jewish players that are part of bringing this program to the forefront."

Joshua Casper is a freelance sports writer in Long Island.