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Could Sutter's dream to coach Bona come true?

By Vinny Pezzimenti

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Most of you have probably never seen his name before. Even if you have, you wouldn't know who Rich Sutter is, what he does, or what makes him tick.

His name hasn't appeared in headlines, like the so many that already have — like the so many that St. Bonaventure has sought out to fill its vacant men's basketball coaching position.

Sutter might not be given the opportunity to turn down Bona, like so many others have. He might not be given the chance to use Bona as leverage to enhance the current state of his contract, like others have.

And even if Sutter was given that opportunity, you can bet the house and everything in it that he wouldn't follow in those footsteps.

In a lot of ways, perhaps in every way, coaching the Bonnies is Sutter's dream job, a fantasy he can only play out in his mind.

For now, Sutter is the successful head coach at Division III Westfield State College in Massachusetts. He has owned this vision of St. Bonaventure for quite some time now. It was instilled in him by his grammar school hoops coach years ago.

The coach's name was Danny Monahagn, a Bona graduate. Growing up in the Bronx, he was Sutter's mentor.

Sutter deeply admired Monahagn. So much so that when Digger Phelps left Fordham to become Notre Dame's coach in 1971, the young Sutter told his Monahagn that the Irish should've hired him instead.

"His reply to me, I still can still remember it to this day when I was 12 years old, was, 'Screw Notre Dame. I'm a Bonaventure man,'" Sutter recalled Friday afternoon during a phone conversation. "In the Bronx, when Notre Dame is right next to the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost ... to hear that, I'd come to love a place (St. Bonaventure) I'd never even seen."

It wasn't soon after that Monahagn's life began crashing down. The coach had a brain aneurysm.

With the outlook looking more bleak from one day to the next and with the increasing number of black outs Monahagn was encountering, Sutter was often by his side, lending a hand and an ear.

“When he spoke to me,” Sutter said, “he spoke to me about always trying to make the most out of myself. Don’t settle for the guys who went to the drugs. Don’t hang out with all the guys who were doing all the gang banging in the Bronx. He said, ‘Take this (basket)ball and try to make something of yourself with it. And don’t ever do anything that you don’t try and be great at.’”

“That’s what I learned from Danny Monahagn,” Sutter said. “Do everything full speed, because sometimes you get 28 years and sometimes you get 88 years.”

Monahagn died at age 28. Sutter was 16.

These days, Sutter still lives and works in Monahagn’s spirit. It was a Monahagn’s dream to return to St. Bonaventure to coach its basketball team. Sutter has made it his.

“I love that school like no other,” he said. “It means everything in the world to me. Every step I would take as its basketball coach would come from the perspective of somebody who has the deepest love and affection for the university.”

Sutter sent a letter and a program rebuilding plan to Bona president Sister Margaret Carney and athletic director Steve Watson last month after Anthony Solomon was fired following a four-year stint that produced a 24-88 mark.

He hadn’t been contacted by the school until Friday, when Watson called him. Though Sutter would seem to be a long shot to fill the Bona post, he keeps his fingers crossed. There’s a reason his friends call him ‘The Miracle of St. Bonaventure.’

Sutter’s dream probably should’ve ended early. At 19 he was a JV coach at New York City’s All Hallows High School and went to school only part time at Manhattan College. Life at home was difficult. Money was low.

“Things looked bad for me and my family at that time,” he said.

Then one day the phone rang. It was former Connecticut assistant Jim O’Brien, whom Sutter had become close to during summer camps at UConn. Sutter would bring future NBA player and All Hallows product Olden Polynice to those camps.

O’Brien had just been named coach at St. Bonaventure. He offered Sutter a scholarship and an administrative assistant position on his staff.

Sutter graduated in four years in 1984, and embarked on what has turned out to be a prosperous coaching career. He looks back at his time at St. Bonaventure as the turning point in his life.

“I believe St. Bonaventure has the power to enable people to transform their human spirit,” Sutter said. “It creates a framework for you to direct your life in a different way.

“Prior to coming to St. Bonaventure, I was a Bronx Bomber,” he added. “I was hanging out on the streets of New York. My life could’ve headed in a lot of different directions had I not been

exposed to St. Bonaventure. I'm forever thankful to that community for helping me redirect my life and make something positive of it."

Sutter made a name for himself as an assistant at Colgate from 1991-97. There, he recruited future NBA player Adonal Foyle, who led the school to three Patriot League championships and two NCAA tournament appearances.

Nine years ago, Sutter inherited a Westfield State program with plenty of rebuilding ahead, similar to what Bona is faced with now.

During Sutter's first team meeting, just five players showed up. Hired in May, he didn't have enough time to recruit players to fill the roster.

"I went into the first year with 10 guys I took out of the lunch room," he remembered. "I had a \$200 budget, I had a 200 occupancy gym, and I had about 200 coaches hang up on me in the first year I went out to start recruiting."

From that, Sutter has led Westfield to five straight winning seasons, oversaw the program's first conference title in 22 years and has been named league coach of the year twice.

In the letter to Sister Carney, he promised the Bonnies would be the "hardest working team in America" under his guidance.

"People come to the game, especially the members of a community like Olean, and they like to be able to see something of themselves in their team," Sutter said. "The Olean community is a hard-working, blue-collar community. I think the thing I've learned along the way is to try and keep that dichotomy or the split between your team and its fan base to a minimum. Meaning recruit the type of guys who fit in with the type of school it is, with the type of fan base they have, with the type of reputation the school has."

Sutter encountered more tragedy last fall. Freshman Rick Martin, the recruit that was supposed to lead Westfield to the mountain top, died in Sutter's arms on Oct. 16, having never played a college game. A heart attack took Martin's life.

"Like Danny," Sutter said again, "sometimes you get 28 years and sometimes you get 88 years."

Which leads him back to St. Bonaventure, and the dream.

"I don't want any other Division I job except the St. Bonaventure one," Sutter said. "I'm not in the market looking to get myself in a Division I spot. The St. Bonaventure job is a special job to me. It's a dream job."