

PRINCES *of the* PALESTRA

Win a national championship?
That was ‘crazy talk’ to the 1990 Yellowjackets.
Until their attention to detail paid off.

By Jim Mandelaro

The impossible dream was casually mentioned after a preseason practice in 1989.

“You know,” then Yellowjacket basketball coach Mike Neer ’88W (MS) told his wide-eyed band of 14 young men, “national champions get rings made for them.”

The players nearly laughed.

“We were so naive,” says Chris Fite ’92, the sophomore center from Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and the team’s leading scorer. The team’s annual early season test, the Chuck Resler Invitational at the Palestra, would be enough of a challenge.

“We weren’t sure if we could win the Chuck Resler tournament, let alone a national championship,” Fite says. “To be thinking that going into the season was crazy talk.”

As junior guard Greg Krohner ’91 told reporters at the time: “I thought I’d be on the moon before I got a ring.”

On St. Patrick’s Day, 1990, Krohner and Co. were over the moon with joy. A Rochester team built on defense and grit edged DePauw University of Indiana 43–42 in Springfield, Ohio, to win what remains the program’s only NCAA Division III title.

WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS! Mark Foley ’93 and members of the men’s basketball team celebrated with fans after winning the Division III national championship in 1990, the first national title for the program.



The impossible dream had come true.

That milestone season remains the program’s signature achievement, putting Rochester on the map among Division III perennial contenders. It’s something that resonates strongly with student-athletes looking for more out of college athletics than just playing time.

Luke Flockerzi, the Yellowjackets’ head coach for the past six seasons, says the 1990 national title is a touchstone for the program.

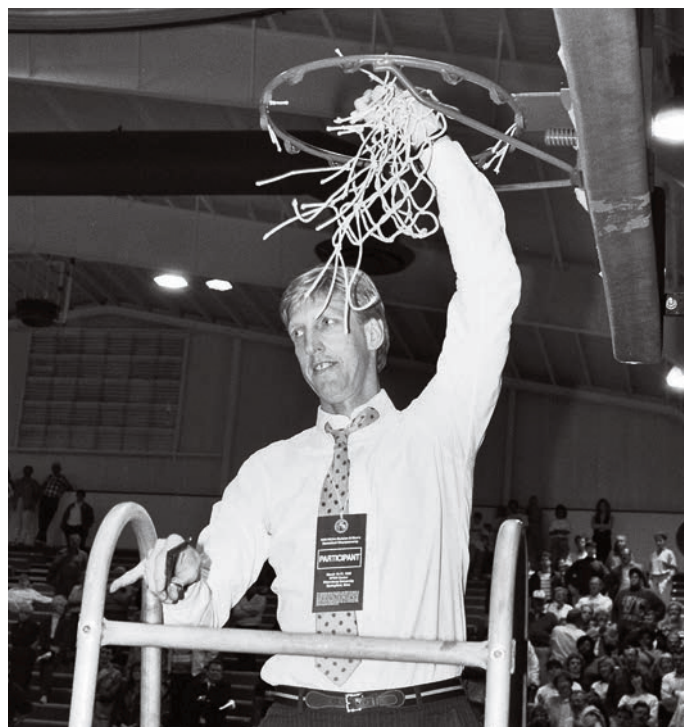
“Being able to point to 10 Sweet-16 appearances, four Final Fours, and a national championship gives validity to our program and motivates our team,” Flockerzi says. “Each player wants to have those experiences for himself.”

More than a quarter-century later, the special character of the 1989–90 season continues to offer many team members important lessons in teamwork, camaraderie, and friendship.

“Besides the birth of my children, winning the national championship with my amazing teammates has been the most memorable experience of my life,” says former guard Lou Palkovics ’91, a longtime history teacher and high school basketball coach in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

“We just loved playing together,” says starting guard Chris Johnson ’90, a Seattle-based technology consultant for Microsoft. “No one ever complained about





NET VICTORY: Chris Johnson '90 (left) drives against defenders from DePauw University on the way to the Yellowjackets' national championship victory, sparking a celebration for then coach Mike Neer (right) and other members of the Yellowjacket team.

not getting the ball, not getting shots or not getting help on defense.”

Going into the 1989–90 season, Rochester had not been in national contention for close to a decade. The Yellowjackets were coming off a 17–10 finish the year before. Four starters had graduated and only two seniors remained. But there was instant chemistry.

“We had different personalities and skill sets,” says John Kelly '92, a reserve guard and a former federal prosecutor now in private practice in Washington, D.C. “But our coaches molded us into a close-knit group of friends.”

The Yellowjackets continued to win, even after losing point guard Jimmy Jordan '93 to a knee injury in the sixth game. It was point-guard-by-committee after that.

They didn't realize how good they were.

“We got to be friendly with teams in our league because we'd eat with them after games,” says Michael Coleman '92, a sophomore forward then and now a vice president of a national insurance company. “So many of them would say, ‘You guys don't get it. Nobody can get a shot off against you!’”

The Yellowjackets were No. 1 in the country in field-goal percentage defense.

“Nobody shot 50 percent against us in a game,” Neer says. “Nobody.”

Rochester finished the season 21–5, then reeled off six wins in the NCAA tournament. That included a 62–57 second-round upset of Buffalo State, the fourth-ranked team in the nation but one that Rochester had beaten in a preseason scrimmage.

“This could be our destiny,” Adam Petrosky '91 remembers thinking.

It was. The Yellowjackets won the lowest-scoring Division III final in history. Defense ruled, again.

They would knock on the championship door the next two years, losing a 1991 quarterfinal (in overtime) and the '92 final. There also would be appearances in the 2002 Final Four and 2005 national championship.

Neer retired in 2010 after 34 seasons and 563 wins. One year later, he took over at Hobart College in Geneva, New York, and went 66–20 in three seasons before retiring again.

The 1989–90 Yellowjackets left with rings, wristwatches—and life lessons.

“Coach Neer always stressed ‘attention to detail,’” Coleman says. “It drove us nuts, and we'd imitate him behind his back: ‘Attention to detail! Attention to detail!’”

Coleman now cringes when he hears himself say that phrase to his daughters, employees, and the girls basketball teams he coaches.

“I disliked it so much when Coach Neer said it,” he says. “But it inspires me. It made me who I am today.”

Petrosky—who once called himself the “most irresponsible person on the team in terms of being on time”—found a different inspiration. He's now a high school basketball coach, college counselor, and athletic director at an all-boys school in Pittsburgh.

Petrosky's father was a constant at his son's games, at home or on the road. He died in 2000, and the younger Petrosky sometimes watches the championship game just to see his dad celebrating on the court. “It's one of the few video clips I have of him,” he says.

After his father died, Petrosky moved from Northern California to Pittsburgh to care for his ailing mother. The 1990 championship kept his spirits from sinking.

“During a period when I did not feel that great, the accomplishments reminded me that I was a national champion,” he says. “Something only a relatively small group of people in this entire world can say.”

During last October's Meliora Weekend, 10 members of that team reunited for a 25th anniversary dinner hosted by Neer. When the players walked into the restaurant, they saw the same blue banner that had hung for years in the Palestra. The one with all their names listed in white.

Only now it served as a tablecloth over a long wooden table.

Fite laughs at the memory—and the irony.

“Attention to detail,” he says. 

Jim Mandelaro writes about student affairs for University Communications.

Personal Definition Michael Coleman '92

The tears were flowing for Michael Coleman.

It was March 1992, and the Rochester men's basketball team had lost to Calvin College of Michigan in the NCAA Division III tournament championship.

Never mind that Rochester had won the national title two years earlier during Coleman's sophomore year. This was his final collegiate game, and he was inconsolable.

"It was the most heart-wrenching thing that had happened to me," the 6-foot-7 forward says. "It felt worse than winning felt good."

Today, Coleman rarely thinks about that '92 loss. He swears he can't remember the names of some teammates. But ask him about the 1990 champions, and he's a walking encyclopedia.

"It has completely changed in time," he says. "I don't dwell on '92. I only think about how we won a national championship, and how close we were. We were brothers."

Coleman lives outside of Endicott, New York, with his wife, Kristie, and five daughters. As vice president of IOA Northeast, he represents construction companies and owners who purchase insurance and surety bonds for large projects

throughout the United States. He also coaches AAU basketball.

"I'm not just a sports coach but a life coach," he says. "I've made plenty of mistakes in my life. I believe it's how quickly you get up off the floor and hustle back on defense that defines the person you are."

Coleman says the 1989-90 Yellowjackets hit it off immediately.

"Eleven of us lived on a top (dormitory) floor," says the Hornell, New York, native, who roomed with star center Chris Fite. "We played cards—harmless games of spades and pitch. We partied together, went to concerts together, and even studied together. UR wasn't a walk in the park for any of us."

Coleman graduated in 1992 with a degree in public health.

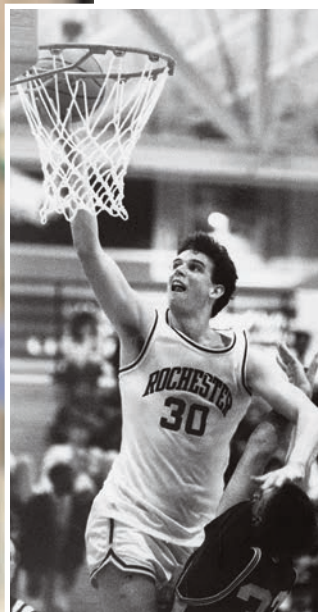
He planned to play professionally in Ireland, but the day before he was set to leave, the coach called and told him they were keeping another player instead. Coleman worked at Strong Memorial Hospital and took classes toward his master's degree. He then worked for a small law firm in Rochester before moving into his current field in 2001.

His greatest takeaway from 1990 was the lifelong friendships he made.

"Yeah, we played basketball," he says. "But more than that, we grew into adults together. And we created a memory of a lifetime that binds us together forever."

The Palestra was their home court, but the Yellowjackets called it "the palace." After all, they went 16-1 at home that year.

"We will never forget being the princes of our palace in 1990," Coleman says.



BASKETBALL BROTHERS: "Yeah, we played basketball, but more than that, we grew into adults," says Coleman, who was a sophomore when the Yellowjackets won the national championship and played on two teams that reached the quarter- and the semifinals. "We created a memory that binds us together forever."

Team Center Chris Fite '92

It was 1988, and Chris Fite was adamant. The senior basketball star from Latrobe, Pennsylvania, would visit Rochester, but he would play at a Division I school.

That was a slam dunk.

"I was set on it," the 6-foot-8 center says. "I wanted to play at the highest level and couldn't be told differently. My high school coach told me I should at least visit Rochester. I said 'I will, but I'm still going D1.'"

Fite visited the River Campus and fell in love. "I connected with the players, and the campus blew me away. From then on, Rochester was at the top of my list."

The lanky kid with the soft touch chose Rochester over Division I schools Richmond, Lehigh, and Navy. In his sophomore year, he powered the Yellowjackets to a Division III national championship. He led the Yellowjackets in scoring (18.6 per game), rebounding (8.9), assists (87), and blocked shots (42) and was named Outstanding Player of the NCAA Division III tournament.

"I remember thinking, 'How could this tall, skinny kid really be as good as everyone said?'" says former teammate Matt Parrinello '93, who's now a managing partner of the Parrinello Law Firm in Rochester. "I quickly found out how good he really was."

Fite led Rochester back to the national championship game his senior year, but the Yellowjackets lost to Calvin College of Michigan. He was runner-up for NCAA Division III Player of the Year honors that year and remains the Yellowjackets' all-time scorer (2,066) and shot blocker (179).

After graduating in 1992 with a degree in integrated sciences, Fite played professional basketball for 11 years in England, Australia, Germany, and Belgium. His wife, Susan, is a native of Liverpool, England, and they have a four-year-old daughter named Grace.

Fite's mother was a teacher, and he expected to follow that path. "I thought I'd play professionally for a year or two before I got a real job," he says with a laugh.

He has a real job now as men's basketball coach at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, an NCAA Division II program. He took over the Raiders in 2010 after working as an assistant coach at Saint Vincent of Pennsylvania, Rochester, and Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

During seven seasons at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, he helped the team compile a 149-65 record and reach the NCAA tournament five straight seasons. Late in his third season at Shippensburg (2015-16), the Raiders were 19-8, tying the program's record for third-most wins in a season.

Fite remains in contact with several Rochester teammates and is proud of their legacy.

"By the time we left," he says, "recruits were coming to Rochester to win national championships. It wasn't that way when guys like Mike Coleman and I got there."



POWERFUL PROGRAM: Now the head coach at Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania, Fite originally set his sights on playing for a Division I program in college, but after visiting campus and meeting members of the Yellowjacket team, he pivoted: "From then on, Rochester was at the top of my list."



Court Presence John Kelly '92

John Kelly was destined for greatness on the court: in 1988, the point guard helped McQuaid Jesuit in Rochester win a state high school basketball championship. Two years later, he was part of a Yellowjacket squad that captured the NCAA Division III national title.

His career record over five high school and college seasons was 125-18—a phenomenal .874 winning percentage. “I think it was in spite of me rather than because of me,” he says modestly.

For the past 20 years, Kelly has shined in another court. After a successful career as a federal prosecutor with the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C., he moved to the private sector seven years ago. In 2011, he was recruited to open, manage, and build the D.C. office of the Nashville-based law firm Bass, Berry & Sims, where he serves as managing partner and represents companies and executives in high-profile investigations and litigation with the Department of Justice and other enforcement agencies.

Kelly lives in Arlington, Virginia, with his wife, Sara, and their two daughters. “I think I’ve always realized how fortunate I’ve been,” he says.

His good luck took a break the summer before he enrolled at Rochester. While playing in an AAU basketball game, Kelly took a charge and felt his lower right leg snap. The injury was so devastating that his foot was torn from his ankle.

“I remember the doctor telling me, ‘There’s more to life than basketball,’” Kelly says. “He didn’t think I’d play again and said I might have a limp the rest of my life.”

Kelly underwent two surgeries, wore eight different casts, and was on crutches for six months. He spent his freshman season keeping statistics on the bench and working overtime in physical therapy.

He was given the green light his sophomore year and played in 18 games that championship season and 15 his junior year. He started all 31 games his senior season and averaged 8.9 points for a squad that lost the NCAA final.

After graduating in 1992, the political science major attended law school at the University at Buffalo, then spent a year working for a Rochester firm. He served as an assistant district attorney in his hometown from 1996-99, then joined the justice department as a federal prosecutor. Kelly was chief of staff and deputy director of the Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys, overseeing 94 offices nationwide.

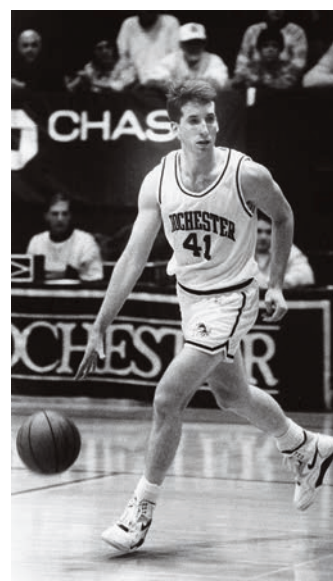
He left the justice department in 2008 to join a large international firm in Washington and moved to Bass, Berry & Sims four years ago.

Kelly attributes much of his success to what he learned as a Yellowjacket.

“There was so much preparation in practice,” he says. “We’d go over things again and again and again. But when I was in a game, I’d know what all four teammates were supposed to be doing.”

It’s the same in the court of law.

“You have to anticipate all the things that could go wrong during a trial,” he says. “Because something always does.”



FULL COURT: An off-season injury nearly derailed Kelly’s basketball career, but he was back on the court by his sophomore year. After graduation, he began a legal career that has included positions as a federal prosecutor and as an attorney in highly regarded private law firms in Washington, D.C.

High Expectations

Rodney Morrison '91, '92W (MS)

Rodney Morrison says the euphoria of winning a national college basketball championship is indescribable, even more than a quarter century later.

But his biggest reward at Rochester had nothing to do with a round ball and everything to do with a round diamond.

"My highlight was marrying the love of my life, my college girlfriend, Albania Almanzar '92," the Philadelphia native says. "I'm not sure she attended a single basketball game."

If true, Albania missed a great season. Morrison played in 16 games as a junior guard as Rochester won the 1990 NCAA Division III title. The 43-42 win over DePauw University of Indiana was Morrison's last collegiate game.

"My grades weren't where I wanted them to be, and I knew I wanted to go to graduate school," says Morrison, the first member of his family to attend college. He hit the books instead of the hardwood his senior year, then earned his master's degree from the Warner School of Education.

Today, he's associate provost for enrollment and retention at Stony Brook University on Long Island, New York. His job entails making sure Stony Brook recruits and retains excellent students. The position follows admissions jobs at Rochester, the University of Pennsylvania, Mount St. Mary College in Newburgh, New York, and Rutgers University—with a stint as vice president at the now defunct financial services firm Lehman Brothers mixed in.

Morrison credits his success to hard work, something he says was part of the daily routine during Rochester's championship season. "We battled and scrapped at practices," he says. "It was 'bring your lunch pail to practice and let's battle for two hours.'"

Morrison wasn't a starter but says that didn't matter to head coach Mike Neer.

"His expectations were the same," Morrison says. "He was tough, no nonsense. The bar was high for everybody, whether you played one minute or a lot of minutes."

Morrison was recruited by then Rochester assistant coach (and now highly successful Villanova head coach) Jay Wright out of Germantown Academy in Philadelphia.

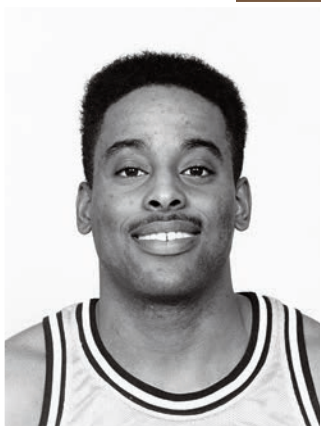
"He came to my school and said 'You should think about UR,'" Morrison says. "The next day I went to the guidance office and looked it up. I didn't even know where it was on the map."

He ended up attending the University with three classmates "and had a blast."

Most special of all, he met Albania. The two stayed together as she pursued her law degree from Brooklyn Law School and married in 1997. They live on Long Island with son Elijah and daughters Rachael and Zippy.

"Going to UR," Morrison says, "was the greatest thing to ever happen to me."

And not just because he cut down the net on March 17, 1990.



PROVOST POSITION: At Stony Brook University-SUNY, Morrison works to make sure that the Long Island college recruits and retains excellent students, part of a career in higher education that began at Rochester, where, he says, the program's emphasis on high expectations was a foundation for his approach to education.



Team Leader Erik Rausch '90, '97W (MS)

As a leader in college advancement for 25 years, Erik Rausch has been part of some great teams.

"Our campaigns have raised valuable dollars to help support research on everything from cancer to stem cells," says Rausch, a senior director of development at Stanford University's medical center. "The impact of our donors has been transformative."

Rausch's first great team was the 1989-90 Yellow-jacket basketball squad that won the NCAA Division III championship. "It was special then and it will always be special. It was the last game I ever played."

Rausch was a 6-foot-4 forward out of Long Island Lutheran High. He averaged 8.3 points and 5.3 rebounds that special season. "There were probably other UR teams with as good or better talent," he says. "We had talent and chemistry."

Being able to play at all was a minor miracle: the summer before he enrolled at Rochester, Rausch was clearing trees at a summer camp and swung an axe so forcefully that it caromed off the tree and imbedded itself in his left shin. He was rushed to a hospital and spent the summer in a cast. But he was ready when his freshman season began and became an integral part of the team.

Rausch played in 24 games his junior year—but started none.

"There was a point when he came to my office and said 'Coach, what can I do to earn more trust and get more time on the court?'" says former Yellowjackets coach Mike Neer. "Instead of saying 'I'm unhappy,' he

put a positive spin on it. I wanted to leave my desk and hug him."

Neer named Rausch the sole captain months before his senior season. "I never did it before and never did it since," Neer says. "I wanted to reward his composure, and I needed his leadership."

Rausch started all 32 games. He graduated in 1990 with dual degrees in history and political science and landed a job in the University's alumni development office. That's where he met Maura McGinnity '87, '96S (MBA), who had won an NCAA soccer title with the Yellowjackets.

"At some point, our colleagues started thinking we'd be a good match," Rausch says. "Little did they know we'd been dating for a few months already."

The two married in 1997, the year Erik took a development job at UC San Francisco. They live in Palo Alto, California, with their son, Aidan, and daughter, McKenna. Rausch moved to Stanford in 2004 and has led several major fundraising initiatives.

"The university is just a unique and exciting environment to work in," he says.

He may be 3,000 miles away, but part of Rausch always will be at Rochester. It's where he departed a national champion, where his career was launched, and where he met Maura (who also works in development at Stanford) and learned the skills that have made them successful today.

"In a way," Rausch said, "I feel like I've never left college."



DEVELOPMENT & DRIVE: Rausch was named as the team's sole captain before his senior year, an unusual move for the program at the time, but a recognition of his leadership as a player and his drive to help the Yellowjackets both on and off the court.