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A Tale of Two Seasons

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A TALE OF TWO SEASONS

In 2016, the bar was set high for CCNY hoops. In 2017, it's not about raising the bar, but simply finding the strength to grab it again.

By Fran Kilinski

The City College of New York's Men's Basketball team recorded a historic season just a year ago finishing at 17-10, their best record since the 1950-1951 season. Now a completely new coaching staff is at the helm, hopeful that the next winning drought won't last another 67 years.

About a year ago, Paul Dail's only job was raking leaves, cleaning floors, and emptying garbage cans at the City College of New York's Harlem campus as a custodian for the school. Cleaning up his alma mater wasn't an ideal career after having graduated from the school with a degree in psychology in 2014, but it was the quickest way to put some cash in his pocket right out of school.

Basketball was a big reason why Dail chose CCNY. He joined the team as a recruit in 2010 and eventually became a nationally recognized point guard, ranking sixth in the nation among college point guards in assists per game. But his hoops career came to a halt after graduation when he couldn't garner enough interest from professional scouts to be paid to play anywhere else.

"I was essentially just waiting for my next big break," Dail says. "I just had no idea what it was going to be." For the next three years, Dail would continue to work and save money from his custodial job, hoping he could meet someone to offer him a better opportunity.

At the start of the summer of 2017, he was caught off guard by a call from the college. "I don't work in the summers," Dail thought as he picked up the phone, expecting an administrative call of sorts about his current job.



By
Fran Kilinski

"We'd like to have you in for an interview."

It was Karina Jorge, the interim director of athletics at CCNY, asking Paul if he wanted to coach the Men's Basketball team.

"I was excited, and unaware they even needed to fill the spot," says Dail, who now had a chance to replace his former coach, Division I veteran Tom Green. Just a couple of weeks after his interview with the athletic department, Dail took a trip with his girlfriend of three years to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. About halfway through their trip, he received another call: he'd gotten the job as the new Head Coach. "Without a doubt, that made that vacation ten times better," he says.

Green, 68, says he's currently "taking a six month break" from coaching after leaving City College's program, but is itching to get back onto the sideline.

He recalls Dail as one of the hardest working players he'd ever coached at City College.

"I really hope he does well as a coach. Paul had a heart as big as a house," Green says. "We could put him on anyone from 5-foot-8 to 6-foot-11 and he would shut them down. The amount of work he put in is unbelievable."

Dail still maintains that same work ethic. When he accepted the part-time job as head coach, it meant he'd have to juggle his first coaching gig with his janitorial duties. Between two daily shifts, he spends just about all of his waking hours at the school. But the school's decision to make the position part-time isn't only a convenient way for Paul to rake in some extra cash. It's also the reason Green decided to step down after leading the team to their first winning season since 2003. And while he's proud of his pupil taking the job, Green is unabashedly critical of CCNY's financial decisions following his turnaround season.

"The fact that it went from a full time position to a part time, from my perspective, reaffirmed that they are not interested in having a successful program," Green says bluntly. "City College is definitely not committed to having a successful basketball program."

Dail's transition from player to coach felt seamless to him, something that happened in what felt like the blink of an eye.

"It was God's work, not mine," he says when asked what he felt led to his hiring. He was overjoyed to take the position despite its being a part-time gig, he says, and adds that while he and his former coach were in contact just weeks after Dail replaced him, it was only congratulatory, not explanatory. Green wasn't going to burst Dail's bubble with hard feelings about his decision to step down. But there was a lot more to the coaching change than just providence. There were some politics involved.

When Green was hired at CCNY back in 2011, his coaching resume spoke for itself. Green graduated from Syracuse in 1972, and after tireless

application letters to "every college basketball program East of the Mississippi," he found quick work in New Jersey as a part-time assistant coach at Drew University. After one season in Madison, he'd return to his alma mater to get his graduate degree and re-join his old team, this time as an assistant coach. His "graduate-assistant" tenure at Syracuse was also part-time, but Green's determination was aimed at making a living out of coaching.

"I got my Master's in two years, and fortunately for me, we had some success coaching-wise in those years," Green said, "so they made my job full time." By "some success," Green means a Final Four appearance in the same year he'd receive his Master's Degree in Education in 1975. The words "part-time" wouldn't be mentioned in the same sentence as Green for the next 40 years of his coaching career.

Eventually, Green parted ways with Syracuse and legendary Head Coach Jim Boeheim to take the head coaching job at Fairleigh Dickinson University, probably his proudest coaching tenure. Green spent 26 years at the Teaneck, New Jersey school and became the school's winningest coach. And when CCNY's hiring committee considered him for the job six years ago, they believed he'd be the guy to turn things around at their school, whose basketball team had only seen three winning seasons in the previous 33 years.

Green was dealt an extremely tough hand, unsure if he'd even have a team to compete in college play. He couldn't recruit anyone after joining the program in July of 2011, a month when college hopefuls have already found their homes. He actually borrowed athletes from the men's volleyball team to help fill his roster. But Green, despite the drastic change in talent of his players and the lack of scholarship money for recruiting at the Division III level, stayed persistent.

"I told the committee that hired me, 'you can't hold this first year against me. My year of judgment starts in the 2012-2013 season,' Green says. "I basically had a four year plan. After 2012, if we hadn't turned the corner in four years, I'd walk away."

The four year plan was his way of determining his own fate. Almost everyone who oversaw the decision to hire Green agreed that, because of the steep task Green was given in rebuilding this frayed basketball program, his position should be full-time.

Green coaching the CCNY Beavers and I in 2015. (Denis Gostev/NY Post)

Almost.

In conjunction with Jackee Meadow, CCNY's former Director of Athletics, the CUNY Research Foundation pitched in to fund Green's position as head basketball coach. If not for the foundation's help, the college would not have been able to make Green's job full-time. But Green says the decision to pay him more money than the average CUNY coach wasn't unanimous among CCNY administrators.

(Full disclosure: I am a former member of the CCNY teams that Green coached. I was recruited to the school in 2013 after spending my freshman year at Caldwell College, now dubbed Caldwell University. In my time at CCNY, it was my observation that the basketball team was not viewed as favorably as other sports teams by the athletic department. I inferred it from interacting with other athletes and coaches while I made use of the gym during non-practice hours. I was usually asked what I was doing there, as if I had no reason to sharpen my own skills, and even kicked out of the gym for no apparent reason. But to hear my former coach cite this as his affirmation solidified that sentiment.)

After a 13-13 season in 2015-2016, Green felt he had made progress from the 2-24 team he'd started with, and stayed on-board for a fifth year in the

2016-2017 season. But for all the progress he felt he had made, Green says the athletic department still had plans to demote the basketball coaching job to part-time as early as fall of 2016.

In October of 2016, as Green's season was beginning, Lisa S. Coico, the President of CCNY at the time, resigned amid investigations revealing her financial misconduct of CCNY's budget. That uproar, along with recent state budget cuts, hurt the school's ability to offer a wide range of classes to students. Green says that "school budget related" issues led administrators to zero in on his salary when it came time to reallocate money.

"They wanted to make the basketball program on the same par financially as all the other coaches," Green says. "From my perspective as a basketball guy in sports, it's college football and college basketball, and after that everything takes a back seat. That's a shame, but that's how it is. That's just the nature of sports in America."

But CCNY has never had a college football team. And CCNY's Track and Field team, which has indisputably dominated the CUNY conference for the past decade, still employs their coaches part-time. So Green didn't have much precedent to cite when arguing that the prominence of his sport made him more important – or more valuable-- than any of the college's other coaches.

It was this chain of events that caused Green, in the spring of 2017, to stop fielding phone calls from parents who were hoping to send their high school stars to a college championship contender. His team had just turned in their best record since 1951 at 17-10, and even though they came up one win short of a championship, City College had, as Green promised, turned things around for the better.

But Green had a hunch that by the time his 2016-2017 season was over, the athletics department would inevitably ask him if he'd continue coaching with a slashed budget. And when the job was officially downgraded, Green stepped away following the end of the spring 2017 semester. About a month later, Dail would get the nod. It was the end of a Green's four-year plan that

had actually become six, and a climactic reversal on the notion to revive CCNY basketball.

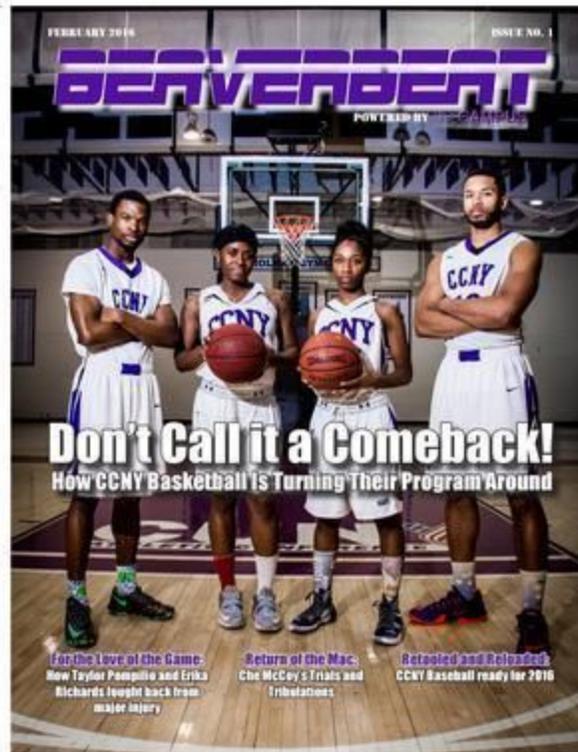


Photo by Jeff Weisinger/The Campus Magazine (2015)

The summer of 2017 was a summer of elation for Dail. His new job gave him more responsibility, and his work would start right after his Florida vacation. Dail figured other college coaches weren't vacationing like he was; instead, they were likely helping their recruits with the admission process into their respective schools. Immediately upon his return to New York, Dail had to re-prioritize his schedule. Suddenly, it wasn't going to the beach that mattered. It was figuring out how to recruit players to reconstruct the shell of CCNY's 2016 team that graduated four starters. It was calling other coaches to set up preseason scrimmages. And it was assembling a staff he could trust to help lead this team as a coach with virtually no experience.

Dail's first instincts told him to go to other ex-CCNY players with whom he'd formed relationships. Mohamed Camara, who graduated in 2015 and played

for the team in 2011, and Dave Solano, a member of the 2016 team who still attends classes at the school, were his first options. Like Dail, none of the assistant coach candidates had any experience, but Dail trusted that their accomplishments as players would translate into meaningful and insightful coaching.

Solano says Green, the coach who recruited him out of high school, had reached out to him in early June, before telling anyone else about his decision to step down. Out of respect for his former coach, Solano hadn't gone public with the information. Only weeks later, when Dail announced via Instagram that he'd be the new coach, did CCNY athletes realize Green was gone.

"He called me and told me everything," says Solano of Green. "I was shocked because we'd just accomplished so much, and just like that he's out. I think I knew about it before most people did, even Paul." But Solano was quick to jump on the opportunity to mentor his former teammates after he saw Dail's Instagram post.

"When I found out [Paul] had the job, I texted him at like, two in the morning like, 'Listen, I would love the opportunity to coach with you, to come back and help the team. I feel like we would work well together,'" says Solano. In 2012, when Solano was a freshman at CCNY in his first year of college basketball, it was Dail who befriended him and established a chemistry on the court between the two.

"I always felt like he was one of the best shooters in the country," Dail says of Solano, who hit a game-winning three pointer in the 2016 Semifinal round of the playoffs to send CCNY to the CUNYAC championship game. "One of the best I've ever met in my life, and a good friend of mine."

Solano is working as a volunteer in his first year as a coach, given that he can't take a salary from the school while he's still enrolled in classes. Still, he's fully invested in helping the team. "I was lucky enough to have him give me the job," Solano says, "and it's been nothing but a blessing. Now I can finally say I'm doing something that I love."

Dail speaks to his young team after a rough first practice.

For a staff who are by far the youngest in the conference, the challenges and tribulations of a 26-game season become more pressing every day. About a month before their November 10th exhibition game against Division I Rutgers University, Dail got a call from Rutgers head coach Steve Pikiell, who wanted to get an idea of what kind of defenses CCNY would throw at Rutgers. Dail responded: "To be honest with you, coach, I don't even know who's on my team yet."

Most of the preseason phone calls Dail made to schedule scrimmages caught other coaches by surprise. Dail was not the 68-year old man that New York college coaches had grown accustomed to hearing from for the past 6 years at CCNY.

**"It's one of the biggest challenges
I've ever faced in my life."**

Aside from a completely new-look team, what Dail, Camara and Solano face is a CUNY league they're familiar with as players, but unaccustomed to as coaches. They now have to compile the scouting reports and film that they were forced to study just hours before game time, and they're micromanaging everything from opponents' rosters to the health of their own players.

"It's definitely frustrating, because we have key players who are hurt right now," said Camara, the defensive specialist among the coaches. "To jump head first into the season without some of our veterans, it'll be tough not to lose patience."

Camara is referring to Dardan Lahu and Brendan Hauser, specifically, who played big minutes in the 2016-2017 championship run. Lahu dislocated his finger in the early weeks of practice. Hauser is missing the fall semester due to academic ineligibility.

The returning players from last year's team, who sound more optimistic than the coaches about the upcoming season, are expecting to have a little bit of fun with a coaching staff full of guys who are no more than 4 years older than them.

"My expectation with the new coaching staff is to have fun and subtract all the negativity that we've had in previous years and watch it translate into the future," says Sal Palozzollo, the senior forward who was named captain at the beginning of the season. "I want to be able to come back [after I graduate] and see future teams do what we're doing now, keeping that winning culture alive."

Subtracting the negatives, though, will be a hassle for the new captain presiding over a new team. Palozzollo, who joined the team in 2014, has seen the latter half of its evolution. But even in their historic previous season, the team got off to a less than impressive 3-6 start.

Palozzollo calls himself the "extra coach," handling the "dirty work" and making sure that the coaches' lessons during practice resonate with the players. More than once during early-season practices, he took it upon himself to halt shooting drills and other exercises to scold newcomers for not playing hard enough, or misinterpreting the footwork on a specific movement.

"Being a captain, there's a lot things you have to take from the coaches," Palozzollo said. "I'm no longer a player who's just there to fill another spot, or coming in just to get a few points. There's a lot of things that come into play, like communicating with your players and trying to keep them on the same page. It's hard, but, it's a great responsibility that's going to translate well on the court if I do my job right."

Only six players on this team--Palozzollo included--have any type of college basketball experience before this season. The rest are all walk-ons out of high school or CCNY students who've played recreationally in their free time.

The drastic change in the roster is not just due to the graduating seniors, but also because the window of time that the new coaches had to recruit players was small, and many high school standouts likely committed to other schools before Dail and his staff had their jobs. Even though Dail got his number called for the job in June, he, like Green before him, couldn't get players to commit to CCNY after Green's departure. Only James White, now the team's starting point guard, agreed to stay with CCNY through the coaching switch.

But the 2016 championship team had the Nat Holman Gymnasium in Harlem much more crowded with CCNY fans than in previous years. Returning players believe that the excitement they brought to the gym in late February and early March worked as a de facto recruiting tool, and was the reason for the high number of aspiring hoopsters at this year's tryouts in early October.

"I think the new guys coming in who see us returners coming off of a championship loss kind of look at us as role models, so we've got to step up and be the leaders of this team," says Hauser, a senior guard who transferred to CCNY last fall. "We started to change the culture at CCNY last season and we all want to see that continue."

That change in culture was a process 14 years in the making. Not only had the program grown more used to winning, but the 2016-2017 team was *hungry* for wins, something the program hadn't seen since its last championship in 2003. No longer did the team lose a lead in the second half of a game due to a chain of sloppy mistakes. It was as if they'd disciplined themselves in that regard, and didn't need the coaches to tell them what they'd done wrong.

But the 2017-2018 team lacks that maturity. Before building that level of chemistry, Dail and his staff have bigger, more fundamental obstacles to tackle.

"We can't worry about a championship now. We've now got to *teach* basketball before we can play it."

The word "championship" is too grandiose for Dail to even fathom in September. A team full of newcomers will need to break the habits of park-style, pick-up basketball before they can start to string together wins.

"We've got to start from the beginning, we've got to get back to teaching basic basketball," Dail said. "With the new players, we have the talent, but we don't have the IQ. So that's something we have to key in on right now. We've got to make them mesh with the players who are returning."

If there's anything comforting about what's been a rough 0-8 start to their season, it's that Dail isn't totally alone on this journey as a first time CUNY coach. The College of Staten Island, which bested CCNY's Beavers in the championship game just months ago, is also working with a new, young head coach, T.J. Tibbs, who also formerly played at his school. CSI's former coach, Tony Petosa, who has six CUNY championships under his belt, including last year's win, resigned after 27 years in the program, citing his reason for leaving as "fifty percent personal and fifty percent basketball," and a decision that was "six years in the making." In a press release issued by the college after his resignation, Petosa mentioned that he found himself doing "less and less teaching" and spending more time handling "frustrating" administrative issues, including, but not limited to, playing guidance counselor and situating his players into classes.

The two teams met again for a CUNY championship rematch on Saturday, December 9th, this time across the Verrazano bridge. But it was hardly as competitive as March's heated game. While both teams have undergone

complete personnel makeovers, the Dolphins had retained enough of their roster from last year to rout CCNY 83-47.

Tibbs, however, shared a moment with Dail before the game, when the two met--as their respective teams were warming up--to congratulate each other. These are two young men, likely some of the youngest in all of the NCAA, who got unexpected gigs coaching their alma maters' basketball teams. And although a fierce rivalry budded between the two teams just a season ago, Tibbs says now that it's a fresh slate; there aren't going to be any hard feelings between the two rookie coaches over last year's competition. In fact, he admires Dail as an opponent in a still-competitive CUNY league. Even after a blow-out win.

"Both of us are coming in and trying to do new things," Tibbs says. "I think we both know last year was last year. I know he wanted to win [Saturday's] game as much as I wanted to win that game. I wouldn't expect anything less of him being the competitor that he was as a player."

Tibbs, 29, graduated CSI in 2013, just as Dail completed his CCNY career in 2013. But Tibbs went straight for the coaching circuit upon graduating, first serving as director of basketball operations at the New Jersey Institute for Technology for a year before returning to the CUNY league in 2014 to become an assistant coach at Baruch. With coaching experience under his belt, his resume topples Dail's, but Tibbs understands what Dail is going through.

"In your first year as a head coach, it's really important that you have a lot of support," Tibbs says. "You can't have any success without support from your administration. I think Coach Dail is going to do a great job over there. They definitely did a fine job bringing him in."

It's now mid-December, and multi-game weeks are the norm for Dail. By the time 4 o'clock rolls around, he has already been working roughly eight hours

cleaning up. As he gets into basketball mode, he has little patience for silly mishaps at practice. The administrative support isn't quite there yet, with limits from CCNY's athletic department on the amount of time the team can practice within a given week. Still, he finds a way within his windows of time to motivate his team. Dail and his staff have a method for keeping the returning players uncomfortable: Telling the players flat-out, "your spot isn't safe."

While Dail has known a few of his players since before his coaching days, he strives to be a mentor preparing them for their next competition not just on the court, but in life.

"We've got a great group of kids," Dail says. "Sometimes they can be immature, sometimes they can lose focus, but we all have before. I'm here from early in the morning to 10 o'clock at night--and this a chance for me to teach these kids everything I learned at CCNY. I want to show them, 'It's not about where you are now, but where you *can be*.'"