



Era of Excellence

By Joe Fitzgerald (BA '94)



The air in the **Halifax Forum** crackled with electricity as Saint Mary's pushed deep into the defending national champions' zone. The Huskies dug relentlessly, each booming forecheck threatening to get them a shot on net. The frantic Varsity Reds from the University of New Brunswick swiped and chopped, knocking the puck awkwardly back to the point and a waiting SMU defenceman. Then it happened. In a dramatic twist of fate, the knuckleballing rubber disk hopped over the Husky defenceman's stick, and a charging Varsity Red was set free. The chasing defenceman had no choice but to haul down the UNB player on the breakaway, and a packed house stood stunned as the referee called a penalty shot. A V-Reds rookie then calmly skated in on goal and snapped a shot over the blocker of the SMU goalie to end the Huskies' season in double overtime.

Although heartbreaking, the thrilling end to the *AUS Men's Hockey Final* is a testament to the success of the Saint Mary's hockey program, which enjoyed a nationwide top five ranking for most of the season. In his eleventh season behind the Huskies bench, Head Coach **Trevor Steinburg** has guided the program into an era of excellence not seen since **Bob Boucher** coached the Huskies to five consecutive CIAU Championship appearances in the 1970s.

Steinburg came to Saint Mary's in 1997 after coaching the East Hants Penguins of the Maritime Junior A League to a championship and being named the league's Coach of the Year. Voted *AUS Coach of the Year* his first three seasons at SMU and CIS Coach of the Year in 1999 and 2000, Steinburg muscled the program 180 degrees from perennial AUS cellar dweller to a consummate powerhouse.

The former first round draft pick of the Quebec Nordiques drew on his professional

experience when setting the course for the hockey Huskies. "Because of injuries, I went from a first round draft choice and goal scorer to basically damaged goods," he says. "I was low on the depth chart and had to change my whole game. I ended up being a role player, fighting, whatever I had to do. I had to change how I looked at the game, how I looked at my life. I knew at that point that if you want something bad enough you can make alterations to your life. So when I got here I wouldn't listen to any excuses from the players. And of course, I was lucky to have some great guys at the same time."

Once the program bought into Steinburg's philosophy, he could focus on the unique responsibilities of a university hockey coach. "The overwhelming priority is helping the players," says Steinburg. "From recruiting and bringing kids in to creating opportunities for them, getting them into the community, making them feel like the program means something to them. Sometimes kids have problems at school and you have to help them and let them see there's light at the end of the tunnel."

This year, half the players are *Academic All-Canadians*, with third year commerce student **Brandon McBride** maintaining an incredible 4.3 grade point average.



During Steinburg's tenure, Saint Mary's has had two *Dr. Randy Gregg Award* winners, given to the CIS player who best combines athletic ability, academic achievement, and community involvement.

Now considered the *Dean of AUS Hockey Coaches*, Steinburg also coached **Team Canada** to a second place silver medal at the *World University Games* in Poland in 2001 and, in 2007, coached Team Canada to a Gold Medal in Italy. His broad stature helps immensely in the competitive recruiting game. "Each (junior) team has two overagers, or twenty-year old players that are often the captain or leader," says **Chris Larson**, director of development for the Huskies. "Those are the prime players that all the schools are chasing. Trevor (Steinburg) is in great standing with the coaches of the Ontario Hockey League from the days when he was a premier player there and has some great tentacles and linkages into the OHL."

In 2005, **Sebastian Savage**, a player with the *University of Moncton Blue Eagles*, was paralyzed during a game when he crashed into the boards. A fundraising initiative led by Steinburg was picked up by the players and the league, and they raised over \$20,000 for Savage's family. "These guys battle like pit bulls on the ice, but when something like that

happens to a fellow colleague, it transcends the battleground," says Larson. "There was a rally across the AUS that really showed their character."

Fourth year co-captain **Dan Rudisuela** exemplifies the current crop of Husky hockey players. A fourth year MBA student, Rudisuela came east from the OHL with two things on his mind. "School was always important to me," he says. "Even in my final year junior (in the OHL), I was taking courses at U of T, so the best route for me was getting the degree while playing hockey at the highest level possible. I looked out east because of the reputation of the AUS and, after speaking with Steiny and looking at the school, I decided Saint Mary's was the best fit for me academically and athletically."

Saint Mary's continues to attract great hockey players with character and a vision for their future. "Maybe subconsciously I look for guys like that because I'm afraid a player will fail out or maybe his heart's not in the right spot," says Steinburg. "I have to have that comfort zone that they want to be here, go to school, and better themselves. But if you get enough of those guys, they send the message to the room that 'hey, we're here for school and to do the right things.' And to have so many guys do so well off the ice is as good a feeling as winning games for sure." MW

Far left: The 2007-08 varsity men's hockey team

This page: Clockwise from far left: #17 Colin Power, #19 Scott Hotham and #29 Brandon Verge, #21 Kyle Doucet, and Head Coach, Trevor Steinburg

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