Belhaven’s Road to the Final Four

Belhaven College’s basketball team enjoyed a remarkable season in 2006. Led by Coach John Brady, the Tigers faced a challenging schedule and emerged victorious, securing the SEC Regular Season and West Division titles. They earned a #4 seed in the NCAA National Tournament, defeated #1-ranked Duke University, pulled off a thrilling overtime victory against the University of Texas, and advanced to the NCAA Final Four. The team concluded the season ranked #3 in the nation. 

As a freshman at Belhaven in 1973, John Brady likely never imagined what kind of basketball career he was going to have. He was a three-year starter for Belhaven, scoring more than 1,000 points and amassing 330 assists under legendary coach Charles Rugg. Brady was a two-time member of the All-Southern States Conference Team as a guard, and currently sits in the top five of numerous statistical categories at Belhaven. Brady was successful as a player and in the classroom as well.

“John was a fierce and scrappy competitor as I have ever seen,” said Coach Rugg. “He soaked in everything, both in class and on the court. There was no doubt Brady would be successful in his career of choice. He was determined, focused, driven, and talented, not only on the court, but in the classroom as well.”

It took very little time for Coach Rugg and his teammates at Belhaven to recognize Brady’s potential. Following a one-point loss at the beginning of his freshman season, Coach Rugg, who had a policy of not playing freshmen, was frustrated with his guard play.

“I was talking to my coaches out by the pool at the hotel and said, in a loud enough voice for the team to hear, how much I needed some guards,” Rugg remembered. “All of a sudden a voice pipes up, ‘You have at least one guard, coach.’ I was not too surprised to hear those words come from John.”

While his comment did not garner him playing time, it was clear how confident John was in his ability to get the job done. Over the course of the next three seasons, Brady hit most every clutch shot for Belhaven.

“He wanted the ball at the end of a game,” said Mark Windham, former assistant coach and Belhaven hall of fame member. “You could see it in his eyes that he knew he would make the shot if given the chance. He is arguably one of the best clutch shooters the school has ever had.”

Louisiana State University Men’s Basketball enjoyed arguably the program’s best season this past year. Led by Coach John Brady, the Tigers clawed their way through a grueling schedule, winning the Southeastern Conference Regular Season and West Division crowns, earning a #4 seed in the NCAA National Tournament, defeating top-seeded and #1-ranked Duke University in the Tournament, pulling out a thrilling overtime victory against the University of Texas to advance to the NCAA Final Four, and completing the season as the third-ranked team in the nation. All in a year’s work, right? For Coach Brady, the work began more than three decades ago and he will be the first to say, “There is more work to be done.”
Head coach Charlie Rugg accepts the 1976 MVP award from (left) Brady and (right) John Brady.

Before the Big Time:

Brady’s coaching philosophies of discipline and responsibility began a few years earlier, when the LSU basketball program hit with NCAA violations, it did not take long for the wins to come. In the 1999-2000 season, two years after inheriting a program that was at its lowest point in years, Brady led the Tigers to a 28-6 record, 12-4 in the SEC West. The Tigers were the top-ranked team in the conference, and not only went on to the NCAA National Tournament, but won two games before dropping a Sweet Sixteen match-up with the University of Wisconsin. That same year, Brady was named the SEC’s Coach of the Year and was the runner-up for National Coach of the Year. The Tigers would march back to post-season action three of the next five years.

From clutch to coach:

Using his God-given skills and abilities, Brady found his course for life mapped out in coaching the game of basketball.

After graduating from Belhaven in 1976, he went on to Mississippi State, where he was a Graduate Assistant Coach for the 1976-77 season. After serving as an assistant coach for the Bulldogs from 1982-1990, Brady received his first NCAA Head Coaching position at Samford University in 1991. In the six years he spent at Samford, Brady became the most successful coach in the school’s history, and led the program to back-to-back Trans Atlantic Athletic Conference (TAAC) West Division championships in 1996 and 1997.

With the successes at Samford, it came as no surprise when, on March 25, 1997, Brady was named the eighteenth Head Men’s Basketball Coach at LSU. Soon enough, Brady’s teams were not just getting a scare into opponents, they were beginning to win the big games.

Brady’s coaching philosophies of discipline and responsibility began to carry on here at LSU.

“As a team prepared to do battle with the nation’s best programs and to play for a national title, Coach Rugg was celebrating in his own unique way…fishing near the Gulf of Mexico. “My friend and I were out on the boat enjoying the fishing when we noticed another one of us had brought our cell phones, which is probably why it was so peaceful,” joked Coach Rugg. “When we got back to the cabin there was a note taped on the window for me to call my wife immediately. Needless to say, I rushed to the phone.”

Once he was assured there was nothing wrong, Coach Rugg’s wife, Janie, informed him that John called and wanted them both to fly with the team to Indianapolis and be a part of the experience.

“It was an appreciation, a thank you,” commented Brady. “It was a show of respect for Coach Rugg, for all I learned from him. I wanted him to be in the big time right next to us.”

“Janie and I were deeply moved that Coach Rugg would consider us to be a part of this with them,” said Rugg. “It was an experience I’ll never forget and always be appreciative of.”

On the plane, in meetings, at practices, and in the RCA Dome, Charles Rugg was with the LSU Tigers. Brady’s step of the way, and Janie were given their own team managers to look after any needs and were treated like Tiger royalty the entire time. “What a tall order to beat such a storied program like Duke,” acknowledged Brady.

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