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Sacred Heart

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chapter two

sacred heart

The Newcomer

Sixty miles south of Storrs, Connecticut, but well within the scope of the media spotlight that engulfs the UConn women's basketball team, sits one of the nation's newest Division I women's programs. Sacred Heart University, a small, independent, private Catholic school located in suburban Fairfield, made the quantum leap from Division II to Division I in 1999.

The Pioneers, as they are known, make no claims of supremacy, even within the confines of the Nutmeg State's narrow borders. Sacred Heart shares the state with UConn and five other Division I institutions—as well as the same tree-lined community on the shores of Long Island Sound with the more established Fairfield University.

“As I've said since we made the decision to go Division I, our goal is to become the second-best program in Connecticut,” said Ed Swanson, the enthusiastic 34-year-old coach of the Pioneers, meaning he'll concede the number-one spot to UConn but that all other programs are fair game.

From the outset, Sacred Heart's new opponents in the Northeast Conference discovered a Pioneer program they barely knew existed even

two years earlier was authentic. Swanson's squad, which featured four freshmen, a sophomore, two juniors, and two seniors, was far more talented and resilient than they had imagined. Picked to finish ninth in the NEC coaches' 1999–2000 preseason poll, Sacred Heart put an exclamation point on its debut as a Division I program with a surprising third-place finish. The Pioneers won 11 of 18 conference games and, overall, were a respectable 14–13.

“Our goal was to position ourselves to be competitive this year, not in three or four years,” Swanson said. “Our players had high expectations; they expected to win now. They didn't want to hear anything about growing pains. As the year went on, the team kept improving, we kept getting better.”

Founded as a commuter college in 1963, Sacred Heart reinvented itself during the final decade of the twentieth century. Seven residence halls were constructed and filled, dozens of new classrooms and laboratories were added, and new academic programs were introduced. Today, more than 70 percent of its 2,500 full-time undergraduates are residential.

To prepare for its transition into the major college ranks, Sacred Heart tested the waters during a two-year compliance cycle by scheduling 17 games against Division I women's teams. The Pioneers won seven of those contests, including four of five against future NEC opponents Long Island University, Fairleigh Dickinson, Central Connecticut, and Maryland-Baltimore County.

The opening of a new facility proved invaluable for recruiting. The university's \$17.5 million William H. Pitt Health & Recreation Center came on line in the fall of 1997, providing a first-rank venue—with a seating capacity of 2,200—for basketball, volleyball, and wrestling, as well as needed office space for an intercollegiate athletic program that had expanded, seemingly overnight, from eight to 33 varsity teams. Pioneer basketball now had a “Pitt” of its own.

Yes, the scene had been set with care. But to anyone who had watched Sacred Heart women's teams even several years earlier, the transforma-

tion from Division II also-ran into a contender in a Division I conference boggled the mind.

Coach Swanson

Growing up on the streets and playgrounds in the Black Rock section of Bridgeport, Connecticut, Ed Swanson began to entertain thoughts about coaching even during his years at Kolbe Cathedral, a diocesan high school located in the inner city. He was a skillful swing player for the Cougars, tough enough and resourceful enough at 6'2" to challenge a scholastic All-American, Warren Harding's 6'8" Charles Smith (later a star at Pittsburgh and in the National Basketball Association), and other area standouts. As team captain, his leadership capabilities were in evidence.

"All of the coaches I had pointed me in the direction of coaching," Swanson said. "Dave Blagys and Dave Hennessey at Kolbe, and Tom McDonald, my grammar school coach."

On the collegiate level, Ed played a year of Division III ball at Plymouth State, but became homesick and decided to transfer closer to home at Sacred Heart. "I'm a city guy, and I missed the streets of Bridgeport," he noted.

Swanson's arrival on the SHU campus couldn't have been better timed; the men's team assembled by coach Dave Bike would win the 1985-86 NCAA Division II national championship. But instead of joining the squad, he opted to take a part-time assistant coaching position at Kolbe Cathedral, his alma mater, while continuing his college studies. "Sacred Heart had super guards, Roger Younger and Travis Smith, and I wouldn't have played a lot anyway," Ed reasoned.

Immediately after obtaining a bachelor's degree in business, Swanson joined Bike's coaching staff, and that's where he was when the Sacred Heart women's head coach resigned abruptly in September of 1990. The position was Ed's if he wanted it, but with the stipulation that he remain

on the men's coaching staff. He would balance those dual responsibilities for the next three years.

"I was 24 years old and just happy to get a job as a head coach," recalled Swanson, who can afford to smile now. "We were tired of being a doormat and we were looking for respect. At that point"—he emits a small smile—"we didn't have many problems scheduling games."

Inheriting a Loser

The women's program that Swanson inherited had hit rock bottom. Talent was scarce, "crowds" could be tallied by head count on most evenings, and the team played its home games in an antiquated former high school gym known as the SHU Box (although the latter didn't seem to hamper the men's program). Underscoring its second-class status, the women's "media guide" consisted of two pages tucked away in the back of the men's book.

The Lady Pioneers were the undisputed doormat of the Division II New England Collegiate Conference. The program that Swanson was embracing had weathered 11 consecutive losing seasons and defeats by 40 and 50 points. One year even a single victory had been impossible to attain. "If we didn't have the worst women's program in New England, it was just a matter of semantics," remembered Rick Ferris, who worked as a statistician for both the Sacred Heart men's and women's teams during his undergraduate days.

Elizabeth "Bippy" Luckie, now the university's associate director of athletics and softball coach, led the women's team in scoring for two seasons during the mid-1980s, and she still holds the Sacred Heart single-game record with 42 points. But she was a softball player (an All-American shortstop with a line-drive bat) who dabbled in basketball, albeit well.

"In those years, just about everyone on the basketball team was a softball or a volleyball player," Luckie said. "Some of our teams were pretty bad. It wasn't until later, when the administration realized the impact

women's basketball was going to have, that we made Ed our first full-time coach. Obviously he's a great recruiter and has done an outstanding job."

Swanson's first team, in 1990–91, won eight games and lost 19, which, although modest, represented a discernible improvement over the previous year's 4–21 record. "I became so frustrated that I think I resigned twice that first season because I didn't see us improving," he later admitted. His second team fared slightly better, at 11–16. His third, bolstered by the arrival of five recruits including a pair of transfers from the neighboring University of Bridgeport, produced a 16–13 record—the school's first winning season since 1978–79. That year was distinguished by a victory in the conference playoffs and a berth in the ECAC tournament.

Sacred Heart was a beneficiary of UB's decision to discontinue its intercollegiate athletic program (a move it later rescinded) with the infusion of transfers Melissa Jones, a 5'10" senior forward with a feathery shooting touch, and a 5'3" sophomore guard named Sarah Solinsky. Jones led the 1992–93 Pioneers in scoring, but Solinsky, although valuable as a playmaker, would achieve far greater success as an All-American shortstop in softball. A case of history repeating itself.

The team's second game of the season, a rousing come-from-behind 75–67 overtime triumph over nationally ranked Stonehill in the New England Tip-Off Tournament at Lowell, Massachusetts, provided conclusive proof that Pioneers women's basketball had turned the corner. In just her second game wearing Sacred Heart red and white, Jones scored 31, but it was senior Kim Folia's off-balance three-pointer at the buzzer that erased the last vestige of a 19-point deficit and sent the game into overtime. Then Sacred Heart breezed past the stunned Chieftains.

A Stumbling Block

Just when it appeared that Swanson had the Pioneer program heading in the right direction, a bona fide contender to the Bentleys, the Stonehills,

and other Division II powers, there was a stumbling block. Sacred Heart made the decision to discontinue athletic scholarships. Instead, financial aid would be awarded based on need or academic prowess. Coaches grumbled. Some fans stayed away. Wondered more than one coach: "How the heck can we get blue-chippers when our opponents offer athletic scholarships?" How, indeed.

So, the blue-chippers went elsewhere, to the mid-level Division I programs and the Division II elite, and Swanson resigned himself to searching out the second tier of student-athletes. "It took a lot of hard work, but Ed was able to identify those need-based players," Luckie said. "Maybe they were a level lower, maybe they weren't blue-chippers, but they were pretty good. They kept us competitive."

Kim McCullion, who arrived on campus in 1992 from Nashua, New Hampshire, typified the Swanson recruit of the period. An angular 5'7", she was deemed too small (and too slow) to play power forward in Division I or for an upper-level Division II program, but she scrapped and she hustled and became an asset for four seasons.

"We wanted to prove those other teams wrong. We were playing just because we wanted to play," recalled McCullion, who returned to her alma mater last year as a graduate admissions counselor and an assistant on Swanson's staff. Prove them wrong she did. In her Sacred Heart debut, Kim merely pulled down 13 rebounds and scored 17 points to contribute to a victory over Merrimack.

As a senior tri-captain in 1995-96, McCullion became the catalyst in the program's first 20-victory season. In the span of one year, the Pioneers transformed themselves from conference also-rans into a 20-7 team capable of challenging—and defeating—the region's traditional Division II powers. They became a team that produced a 16-4 record within the New England Collegiate Conference, just one game behind champion Bridgeport and ahead of perennial contenders UMass-Lowell and Franklin Pierce.

"We understood team philosophy that year," McCullion said. "If you

looked at the conference standings, we didn't have the leading scorer or the top rebounder. But on a given night, anyone was capable of having a big game."

"The players came back and created good chemistry," said Swanson, trying to explain the turnaround. "Coaches don't create chemistry. Players do."

Coaches create good coaching, though. For directing a team devoid of scholarship players to 20 victories in a scholarship conference, Swanson was voted Coach of the Year by his peers, both in District I and in the NECC.

Recruiting Winners

Shrewd recruiting within the state helped. In 1994, Sacred Heart landed its first high-profile player, Chrissie Perkins, an all-state guard from Waterford High School. Perkins became an instant hit at the college level, the NECC Rookie of the Year and four times a conference all-star. An intense competitor, she established a school record with 146 career three-pointers and accumulated 1,308 points, still third on the Pioneers' all-time list.

Then Swanson journeyed north on Route 8 to Naugatuck, where in successive years he signed a pair of all-state players from Naugatuck High School: Jennifer Rimkus, a lightning-quick guard, and 6'2" Heather Yablonski, an intimidating presence who had earned the nickname "Shaq" from overmatched Naugatuck Valley League opponents. Together with Perkins, they would comprise the nucleus of the 1997-98 Sacred Heart squad that produced a glossy 19-7 record and a second-place finish (13-3) in the New England Collegiate Conference.

From a long-range standpoint, however, the eight games that mattered most that year were those against Division I teams. After opening the season with successive losses to Bucknell, Colgate, and Monmouth, the Pioneers achieved their first victory over a Division I institution with an 87-77 thumping of NEC member LIU in Brooklyn, New York. For the record, the date was November 25, 1997. Rimkus, now a junior, blitzed the

Blackbirds with 31 points—a figure unmatched by any Sacred Heart player in the last seven years.

Four nights later, the Pioneers upset Fairleigh Dickinson 78–58. Later in the year, they would dispatch Central Connecticut and Maryland-Baltimore County, and lose to St. Peter's of the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference. All in all, a 4–4 record on the road against Division I schools represented a promising start.

Yablonski, strong and quietly tenacious, quickly developed into a formidable post player. Most Division II centers lacked her height; few opponents on Division I teams would be a match for her power game. For three straight seasons, Heather ranked among the NECC leaders in rebounding and, on many nights, was capable of scoring 20 or more points against any caliber of competition. As a sophomore, she was selected to the NECC and ECAC all-star first teams, a feat unmatched by any Sacred Heart woman.

“When I was being recruited, I looked at both Division I and II schools,” Yablonski explained. “I wanted to go where I fit in best, and it turned out I got to play both. Coach Swanson told me he was recruiting players who would help us when we made the move to Division I.”

Equipped with the university's pending elevation to Division I as a selling point, and the restoration of athletic scholarships as bargaining power, Swanson continued to raise his sights in the recruiting vineyard. Heather Coonradt, a 6'0" forward from South Seneca High School in Interlaken, New York, and Abby Crotty, a 5'7" guard from Red Bank Catholic High School in Monmouth Beach, New Jersey, arrived in 1997. They were accompanied by Dawn Werner, a 5'8" transfer from Fairleigh Dickinson, where she had played for two seasons and made the NEC's All-Rookie Team.

“I was very excited about coming to Sacred Heart,” Dawn said. “I knew they were going Division I, and I liked the enthusiasm. I also knew the (Northeast) Conference was so close and tight, and that we would have a chance.”

Forced to sit out the 1997–98 season, Werner joined the squad the following fall along with another newcomer of note, Leslie Newhard, a 5'10" forward from Pennsylvania's Northampton High School. Leslie started slowly, then roared into high gear to lead Sacred Heart's final Division II squad to a 15–12 record, capped by highly satisfying wins over major college teams Hartford, Colgate, and Bucknell (the latter in overtime). Of the six defeats to Division I schools, three—Rhode Island, Harvard, and Lehigh—were by a scant three points. "A play here or there and we could have been 6–3 instead of 3–6 against Division I schools," observed Swanson.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the 1998–99 season was Newhard's rapid maturation. Consistency personified, she reached double figures in 20 of the final 24 games, topping the squad in scoring with a 14.1 average, in field goal percentage with 52.3, and in free throw percentage with 82.2. The latter eclipsed the Sacred Heart record. She also averaged 6.8 rebounds, just one-tenth of a point behind Yablonski's team-leading figure. "I knew Leslie would be a contributor, but I didn't think she'd do what she did so quickly," Swanson said.

Fittingly, it was Newhard who put the exclamation point on Sacred Heart's 25 seasons of women's basketball competition at the Division II level. With the score tied at 84–84 in the closing seconds of the finale against long-time rival Bridgeport, junior forward Katie Toole drove past a Purple Knight defender and lofted a soft pass to Leslie underneath the basket. The buzzer sounded as her shot dropped cleanly through the net in the Harvey Hubbell Gymnasium.

Moving Up

As Ed Swanson surveyed his roster at the start of preseason practice for Sacred Heart's debut season in Division I, he couldn't help but smile. For the first time in his career, the Pioneers' head coach had outrecreated a

slew of Division I schools. On the roster were six freshmen, most of whom had been sought after by Northeast Conference opponents and other prominent institutions of higher learning.

Hard work had reaped dividends. "I spent an incredible amount of time on the road last year. In July I was away so much I slept in my own bed maybe four times," Swanson said.

"This is the first time we had to outremit Division I schools. The recruiting pressures were real. But for us, the whole scene has changed now that Sacred Heart is a Division I name. Years back we had to convince kids this was the place for them. Now, kids are recruiting us. We've had luck with the last two classes, getting kids with a passion for the game."

Swanson's travels took him to the national AAU tournament in Kingston, Tennessee, where he rubbed shoulders with Tennessee's Pat Summitt and UConn's Geno Auriemma. He also watched AAU tournaments in several states, went to the Blue Star Camp at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, and crossed the border into Canada. Have scholarships, will travel.

When all was said and done, Swanson had attracted the finest class of recruits in the history of Sacred Heart women's basketball. "I struck gold with this class," he said. "The ceiling is high for these kids. I think they're hungry, and they want to get better. They listen."

From upstate New York, there was Brooke Rutnik, a hard-driving 6'0" forward from the Academy of Holy Names in Albany. Tara Brady, a 6'1" center who had been a high school rival of Leslie Newhard's, arrived from Wescosville, Pennsylvania. Brady's game was power. Averaging 19 points and 19 rebounds a game, she led Emmaus High School to the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference championship.

From New Hampshire came Ashley Durmer, a talented 5'7" point guard from Nashua High School who was chosen as the state's Player of the Year by the *Boston Globe*, and Meghan Farrell, a 5'9" swing guard from Manchester West High School.

Durmer was being recruited by Hofstra, Holy Cross, Fordham, and

other notables, and hadn't even placed Sacred Heart among her possibilities. She knew of its existence only in the context that two earlier Nashua High athletes had matriculated there—Jessica Bresnahan, the point guard who captained Sacred Heart's 1998–99 squad, and Kim McCullion.

“Kim had been an assistant coach at my high school, and she called me after she returned to Sacred Heart to coach. I never would have even thought of going there if she hadn't called me,” Durmer said. “Once I came to campus and met Coach Swanson, I saw how excited he was about going to Division I. I also liked the fact that I would be part of something from the beginning.”

New Jersey, which has become a major source of talent for Sacred Heart in recent years, also contributed two players to the mix: Tara Gizzi, a 5'11" forward from Hazlet who had starred at Red Bank Catholic, Abby Crotty's alma mater; and Brooke Kelly, a 5'10" forward from Medford who played at Shawnee High School. Kelly was said to be a diamond in the rough.

Unlike Durmer, Brooke Kelly could speak volumes about Sacred Heart University. Both of her parents, LouAnn and Jim, were graduates, and her dad had been a valuable forward on strong Pioneer teams in the early 1970s, setting records for shot-blocking that still stand. In fact, Brooke spent her first 10 years in Monroe, just several miles removed from the university's Fairfield campus, before the family moved to New Jersey.

“When we lived around here, we would come here to watch a few games, and I used to read his old clippings and think how awesome that was,” Brooke said.

Rather than live her father's life, Brooke had excluded Sacred Heart from her original list of colleges. But that was before Swanson was pointed in her direction by Wayne Stokes, a former SHU teammate of Jim Kelly's. At Stokes' urging, the Sacred Heart coach went to see her play in an AAU tournament at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia in the summer of 1998. “It's funny,” Swanson said, “but I had watched another kid play maybe 20 times in the recruiting period, and I saw Brooke Kelly play once.

"But from that point on, I knew she was the player I had to get. I trusted my instincts on it. I made some phone calls and got her to come up for a visit. She fell in love with the place."

The opening game in Sacred Heart's inaugural Division I season, against the University of Hartford, was made all the more auspicious by the identity of the opposing head coach. Jennifer Rizzotti, the spark plug behind UConn's 1994-95 national championship season and perhaps the best known female player reared in the state of Connecticut, was making her coaching debut with the Hawks.

Even with Rizzotti's presence on the Hartford sidelines, the Pioneers bolted to a 29-22 lead at halftime, but horrendous 25.8 percent shooting in the second half left Sacred Heart on the short end of a 57-54 score when it was over. Rutnik, the only freshman to crack the Sacred Heart starting lineup, and Rimkus scored 11 points apiece.

Three nights later, on November 23, the results were far more favorable. Playing its opening game of the season in the Pitt Center, Sacred Heart secured its first victory as a Division I entity with an 82-64 verdict over Lafayette of the Patriot League. Rutnik, although limited to 19 minutes playing time because of foul difficulties, led four Pioneers in double figures with 16 points. Newhard bounced back from a scoreless effort against Hartford with 15 points and a game-high 13 rebounds.

Apparently the Leopards never recovered from traffic delays on the Tappan Zee Bridge in New York and elsewhere that transformed their bus trip from Easton, Pennsylvania, into a six-hour marathon. They fell behind 13-2 in the opening four minutes and by 43-23 at halftime.

On the weekend after Thanksgiving, Sacred Heart found itself overmatched at the Harvard Invitational. In the opener, Ohio State, a mid-level team in the Big Ten, broke open a competitive game late in the first half and cruised to a 98-66 decision. The following day Harvard proved itself a less-than-congenial host by whipping the Pioneers 83-50.

Despite the lopsided final score, Swanson saw encouraging signs in the Pioneers' efforts against the Big Ten team. Sacred Heart shot 50 percent

Jennifer Rizzotti's success coaching the University of Hartford team wasn't enough to satisfy all of her basketball cravings. In the 2000–01 season, she would play a unique dual role.

Hey, she was the coach on the floor for four years at Connecticut, so the change was fairly natural to the Hartford bench.

Jennifer Rizzotti

Sometimes, Jennifer Rizzotti even sounded like the coach of the Huskies when the games were over.

Take, for instance, the 1996 Big East tournament semifinals in Storrs. UConn had just beaten Pittsburgh into submission, another dreadfully dull annihilation by a team that specialized in such endeavors.

What could the writers ask after the game that hadn't already been asked 2,100 times?

The *Hartford Courant's* Bruce Berlet, in an attempt to break the ice, decided to lob an easy one out there, for Rizzotti to presumably hit over the fence.

Instead she hit Berlet with, "Is that a statement or a question?" Talk about a future coach.

Fast forward four years to 1999–2000 when Rizzotti, who could run for and be elected Connecticut's governor, coaches with the same passion at the University of Hartford.

Season tickets increased. Fans showed up. So did the media, presumably to ask questions and (gulp) not make statements.

Then Rizzotti and the university ended speculation that she'd give up her coaching career to play in the WNBA when it was decided in early February she'd do both.

She'll play for the three-time WNBA champion Houston Comets and coach the Hartford Hawks. Is her plate too full? As Comets coach Van Chancellor said, "We only practice two hours a day, so she's got 22 hours to do other things."

Like recruit. Thankfully, she should have plenty of energy as the youngest coach (at age 25) in women's college basketball.

"I'm not ready to give up my playing career," Rizzotti said, "and they're not ready to let me give up coaching here."

Never before has this happened in the women's game. There are seven WNBA players who are college assistants and a few high school head coaches, but none take on this much responsibility.

"She loves challenges," said Hartford athletic director Pat Meiser-McKnett. "She's a wild woman."

Two days before the February news conference to announce Rizzotti's intentions, the Hawks won their 10th game, two more than they won in 1998-99 under Allison Jones. Rizzotti, basically, had the same players.

But here's the rub: How does she get better players? The primary time to recruit for college coaches comes in the summer at various Amateur Athletic Union games and the Nike camp. Rizzotti will be busy playing basketball.

The WNBA plays a 32-game regular season. Sure, it would be nice to walk into a recruit's house and say, "See No. 21 there diving into the third row for the loose ball? That's going to be your coach."

But how does one get into the recruit's house?

Enter assistant coaches Brian Mik and Mimi Walters. Meiser-McKnett said the school would likely hire a third assistant to help the Hawks open doors, in the hope that Rizzotti can close deals, and in the summer of 2000 they hired Rizzotti's husband, Bill Sullivan.

Although knowing Rizzotti's passion, it's a little amusing to picture her during a game next year turning to one of the assistants and saying, "Hey, you recruited them, not me."

Fortunately, Hartford plans to fill only two scholarships for next season, likely making Mik and Walters focus on juniors. The state of Connecticut has been known to produce a decent player or two (Rizzotti and Nykesha Sales to name two) so perhaps they won't have far to look.

"The hardest part will be not being around here during the summer when the (existing) players are here taking classes," Rizzotti said. "I don't know whether we can recruit nationally right now, and so I think the positives outweigh the negatives."

If coaching and playing at the same time sounds a bit strange, consider the path Rizzotti took to coaching and playing. Meiser-McKnett hired her on September 17. A year earlier, she had been gearing up for another season with the New England Blizzard of the now defunct American Basketball League.

Rizzotti was just where she had always been: playing in Hartford, adored by the fans. Her trademark kneepads may have been a better fit for the ABL officials the day she signed a new contract in April of 1998. They'd at least have made getting on their knees begging

her to stay a bit more comfortable. Rizzotti signed a three-year extension to stay with the Blizzard through the 2000–01 season. Terms of the contract weren't disclosed, but Rizzotti said she had been given "what we think is fair."

Rizzotti, then 24, decided to stay in the ABL one day after Dawn Staley, one of the league's most marketable players, jumped to the WNBA. Since Rizzotti led the Blizzard to the ABL playoffs, the league has lost Staley, the Long Beach franchise, and the best talent in the college class of 1998 to the WNBA.

"I don't know if I was ever on the brink of leaving," Rizzotti said. "When the season's over isn't a great time to make a rash decision. I took some time off. I needed that space. I wanted to weigh my options. I think every smart businessperson does that.

"I'm happy in New England, but from an economic standpoint, I had to see what's best for the future," she said. "The No. 1 factor was to be able to stay in Connecticut. Since high school, I've been playing in front of them for six years. I love our fans, I love our fan base. I didn't know if I wanted to start over."

Ironically, that's exactly what she did when she took over the Hartford program.

The America East has never been a national power in women's basketball. It's getting better, however. Maine beat Stanford in the 1998–99 NCAA Tournament, not long after current Boston College coach Cathy Inglesse had undefeated seasons at Vermont.

Could it be Hartford's turn now?

The university is located in West Hartford, in a rather tranquil setting, far enough away from the city. The campus is highlighted by an inordinate number of speed bumps—a decent enough metaphor to illustrate what Rizzotti and men's coach Paul Brazeau face in efforts to make Hartford an America East contender.

Pre-Rizzotti, the most recognizable face on campus was Vin Baker, the All-American who became an NBA All-Star with the Bucks and Sonics. Even Baker's teams didn't come close to winning the league championship.

Hartford has a first-rate facility in the SportsCenter, which is reached after about 10 speed bumps.

"Recruiting has more to do with me and how long I'm here," she said. "It has to do with being sold on the school, the facility...things like that. The key is to get them here (to visit) and when they do, I'll be here."

from the field and made 23 of 28 free throw attempts against the taller Buckeyes. "We can win a lot of games with that kind of shooting," he said. Conversely, the only positive aspect of the Harvard loss was Rutnik's 16 points.

Building Confidence

A return to the Pitt Center provided the right antidote. Another venerable Ivy League institution, Yale, was no match for the Pioneers and bowed by a 72-62 score. On this evening freshmen Brooke Kelly and Tara Brady made their first significant contributions, coming in off the bench to score 15 and 14 points, respectively. Kelly also pulled down 12 rebounds, four more than anyone on either side.

Two of Sacred Heart's final three contests of the twentieth century could be viewed as an exercise in futility. Georgetown of the Big East prevailed in a one-sided game at its McDonough Arena 82-54, and Bucknell utilized 25-for-30 marksmanship at the foul line to hold off the visitors 70-60. In the latter game, the Pioneers shot themselves in the foot by missing 13 of 24 foul shots.

In between, the Pitt Center provided the backdrop for one of the finest efforts by any Sacred Heart team. Virginia Commonwealth, which had routed the Pioneers by 28 points in the previous year, found itself battling for its life against the youthful Pioneers. At the end of regulation, the score was tied at 64. After the first overtime period, the teams were deadlocked at 74. In the end, the Colonial Athletic Conference school capitalized on its experience and 27 points from junior guard Liz Remus to return home with a hard-earned 87-84 triumph.

Kelly was magnificent off the bench, soaring for a personal high of 21 points—including a trio of three-pointers and all ten of SHU's points in the first overtime. "That game was a good confidence-booster," she said.

"It was one of the most fun games to play, but one of our most upsetting losses. Everyone gave everything they had."

Brady contributed 13 points against VCU in a reserve role. Among the starters, Newhard netted 18 points and Rutnik took down 13 rebounds during her 45 minutes on the court.

Sacred Heart's 2-6 won-lost record entering the new millennium might have created self-doubt in some teams. Losing breeds losing. Swanson, however, knew it was just a matter of time before the Pioneers, with four freshmen beginning to assert themselves, would jell. Another plus: Two important seniors who had yet to log a minute of playing time because of injuries, tri-captain Dawn Werner and Katie Toole, were now healthy.

They opened the Northeast Conference portion of the season on the road, or literally just up the road against Quinnipiac in Hamden, Connecticut. The Braves had struggled in their transition to Division I a year earlier, closing the books with a 9-18 record. With Werner contributing 10 points and nary a turnover in 26 minutes and Rutnik scoring a game-high 14, the Pioneers prevailed by the narrowest of margins, 56-55. On the down side, Brooke Kelly incurred a broken nose during the second half and would miss one game.

A cad might suggest that all of the Pioneers were among the missing two days later when they faced Central Connecticut in New Britain. On this afternoon, they became the gang that couldn't shoot straight—19-for-64 from the field, one for 23 from three-point range, six for 17 at the foul line. Central, which had shot just 23.8 percent (5-for-21) itself during the desultory first half that ended with the home team on top 17-15, heated up after intermission and won handily 61-45.

Monmouth, which had been picked to finish third in the NEC coaches' preseason poll, was up next in the Pitt Center. If the Pioneers were intimidated, there was little evidence. They spurred to an insurmountable 45-21 lead at halftime and coasted to a 79-63 win. Kelly, fitted

with a protective facemask, supplanted Rutnik in the starting lineup and contributed eight points in just 14 minutes.

Two days later, Leslie Newhard made the most of her 23 minutes on the court, generating a season-high 24 points en route to a 73-67 verdict over Fairleigh Dickinson. Kelly was continuing to demonstrate her prowess as a rebounder, pulling down a game-high 10. As Swanson would observe much later: "Brooke really has a nose for the ball. I have more confidence in her to get a rebound than anyone we've had since Karen Bell in my early years here."

A Woolworth Record

The emergence of the freshmen and Newhard's solid play were beginning to relegate the upperclassmen to lesser roles. Some accepted change, others did not.

Tri-captain Jennifer Rimkus, an all-NECC guard as a junior who had elected to redshirt the previous year so that she could play a full season of Division I basketball, was displeased with her diminishing playing time and left the squad after the Monmouth game. Toole, whose long-range marksmanship produced a 13.1 scoring average the previous season, never did become a factor. But Yablonski, twice an NECC all-star during the final two Division II seasons and a scorer of more than 1,000 points in a fine career, remained a productive force as the backup center to Tara Brady.

"I deserve to be coming off the bench because Tara has been playing better," Heather said. "I feel more comfortable coming off the bench anyway because I don't need to score all the points as in the past."

A 3-1 start in the conference offered promise, only to see the Pioneers go into a tailspin and lose their next three games. At home, they fell before Wagner 74-44. On a swing through Maryland, they lost to the NEC's

defending regular-season champion, Mount St. Mary's, by a 67–55 count and then bowed to Maryland-Baltimore County 64–52. To pinpoint the reason, Swanson needed to look no further than the cold, hard facts of the box scores. The team shot a collective 28.2 percent—and an even more dismal 15.9 percent in three-pointers—in those three contests.

In another time it was known as the Woolworth record. Five and ten. And that's precisely where Sacred Heart found itself as January was drawing to a close. Five wins, ten losses. "Frankly, I thought we'd have a few more wins at this stage," Swanson said. "What we lack is a go-to player. Somebody who can score the big basket or make the big defensive play."

When the coach surveyed his roster, he found an abundance of "super kids" and exemplary students. The team's cumulative grade point average was a commendable 3.1, and no fewer than seven players had made the Dean's List during the fall. "If I had a daughter, I'd want her to be like our players," Swanson said.

Still, if the Pioneers expected to crack the upper echelon in Division I, the coach knew they would need to acquire "a bit of a swagger. You see it in UConn, Tennessee, La Tech, and the other top teams. They all have it," he said. Teams with swagger don't produce Woolworth records in late January.

A Winning Streak

Swanson's decision to utilize a rotation of nine players finally began to pay dividends.

January ended with a sweep of Long Island University on the road, 76–64, and St. Francis of New York in the Pitt Center, 68–28, the latter coming on Alumni Day. Sacred Heart's defensive tenacity was shutting down opponents, as evidenced by the Terriers' 22.9 percent shooting in the latter game. Four nights later, the Pioneers limited Quinnipiac to just

10 points in the second half and 24.1 percent shooting overall en route to a 57–34 triumph. The winning streak had reached a modest three games.

Rematches with St. Francis and LIU produced similar results. The Terriers fell by a 77–53 score in Brooklyn Heights, New York, and the Blackbirds came up short in the Pitt Center, 70–51, as Brady sparked the Pioneers to their fifth straight victory with a personal high of 18 points.

“Sacred Heart plays the best defense in the conference,” said LIU coach Patty Delahanty. “They’re scrappy and they’re aggressive. He uses a lot of players, and they’re always fresh.”

For the first time since the second game of the season, the Pioneers’ record stood at .500, at 10–10, and they had moved into a third-place tie in the NEC with an 8–4 mark. Was Sacred Heart really that good?

Lehigh, the final nonconference opponent of the year, provided one answer. The Patriot League team took charge in the opening moments and constructed an 11-point lead. The Pioneers pulled within two on several occasions, only to have the visitors reassert themselves to establish a 59–52 advantage with slightly more than four minutes remaining. The winning streak appeared over.

Two freshmen and a senior had other, brighter thoughts. Ashley Durmer, who would finish with a game-high 14 points, connected on her third three-pointer of the night, Heather Yablonski scored from in close, and Brooke Kelly deposited a pair of free throws. The score was tied. With 38 seconds left on the clock, Kelly’s jumper from the left baseline put SHU in front, and then Yablonski capped the dramatic 11-point run with two foul shots of her own.

Not only did the Pioneers prevail, 64–61, but their sixth straight win tied the school record held by two earlier Swanson teams.

“I said to the coaches on the bench I feel like we’re down twenty, but I had some faith we could stop them,” said an emotionally drained Swanson. “At times our youth hurts us, but they’re learning and they’re improving. Ashley is a super player with a lot of confidence. She makes mistakes, but that’s because she’s a doer.”

Filling a Void

Remarkably, the Pioneers had won the last three games without Leslie Newhard. The sophomore forward, who was leading the team in scoring (9.9) and rebounding (6.8), had injured her left knee against Quinnipiac. She rejoined the squad for the two-game trip to Pennsylvania.

In a game Swanson thought his team would win, Sacred Heart came up short against Robert Morris, 58–55. End of winning streak. And now the Pioneers would face St. Francis of Loretto, the conference leader with a 10–2 record and winner of the NEC's 1999 postseason tournament.

Swanson's team put up the good fight, trailing by just 44–43 when Yablonski hit a jumper at the 7:46 mark in the second half. At that juncture, a pair of free throws by senior center Jess Zinobile ignited a 19–2 Red Flash run to settle matters. St. Francis prevailed, 65–49, as Zinobile put up 20 points and 12 rebounds—numbers indicative of her status as the NEC's premier player.

Newhard appeared to lack her customary mobility in both games played in her home state. An MRI several days later revealed an injury far more serious than originally thought: a torn anterior cruciate ligament that would require surgery. She was lost for the balance of the season.

"I was ready to cry twice in the (doctor's) office," Leslie said. "I had never missed a game, even in high school. To sit out now is torture." A touch of irony: Laura Newhard, her older sister who played at La Salle, had incurred the identical injury a year earlier.

Who would step forward to fill the void? The fab freshmen? The seniors? Coonrad? Well, yes.

Within the span of 48 hours, Sacred Heart played inspired basketball to win a pair of overtime games, each as exhausting as it was memorable, in the Pitt Center. And, more than anyone else, it was the soft-spoken senior guard, Dawn Werner, who provided the spark.

Against Maryland-Baltimore County on February 19, Dawn scored 15

of her career-high 18 points in the first half to help the Pioneers overcome a 16-4 deficit. Four straight times she launched arching three-pointers that found nothing but net. "She's streaky, but today she was shooting with a lot of confidence. She looked like Reggie Miller out there," Swanson would say later.

Heather Coonradt and Tara Brady assumed the scoring load in the second half (each would finish with 15 points), while Werner's two defensive plays down the stretch—a steal and a forced jump ball that gave SHU possession—helped maintain precarious Pioneer leads. Alas, the resourceful Retrievers closed within a single point to 55-54, and then Dawn was whistled for a flagrant foul by referee Larry Savo with 1.8 seconds left in regulation.

Werner would later question the validity of the call—"I feel we just collided"—but that was academic as UMBC's leading scorer, sophomore Jami Lange, stepped to the foul line with the game in the balance. The Pioneers breathed a collective sign of relief when her first attempt went awry, but Lange made the second free throw to force overtime.

Given a reprieve, Sacred Heart then reeled off seven straight points to grab a 63-57 advantage, with Werner connecting on three of four free throw attempts. The final was 69-61.

"UMBC is a talented team. Athlete for athlete, they might have it over us, but we play with a team concept. We have the balance you need to win," Dawn said.

Brooke Kelly contributed to that balance by pulling down a game-high 17 rebounds, the most by a Pioneer since the 1993-94 season. Recalled Newhard: "Brooke said, 'I'm dedicating my rebounding to you.' I told her 'You had enough today for the both of us.'"

Coonradt, who was now putting up Newhard-like numbers as her replacement at forward, also heralded the freshmen. "At one point, we had four out there and Abby (Crotty). We rose with them," she said.

There was little time to savor the team's most dramatic NEC victory of the season. Mount St. Mary's, second in the conference with a 12-3

record and its defending regular-season champion, was a Pitt Center visitor two days later.

This time, the Pioneers bolted to a 12-4 lead, with Werner and Coonradt each registering five points, including a three-pointer. Soon, SHU increased its advantage to 22-13.

Regrouping behind Megan Gardiner, the NEC's 1999 Player of the Year, the Mount roared back to pull into a 30-30 tie at halftime, and then forged ahead 44-38. Gardiner would finish with 24 points. Enter Werner. For the second straight game, the senior from Port Monmouth, New Jersey, put forth a career performance, this time producing 21 points and four more treys—the last of which gave the Pioneers their first lead of the second half, 48-47.

In the furiously contested second half, there were 13 lead changes and five ties. From the Sacred Heart viewpoint, the most important deadlock occurred with 54 seconds remaining when Werner's pass to Coonradt on the baseline led to a layup and a 71-71 score. The Mountaineers missed two layups in the closing seconds.

In the overtime, Sacred Heart led by as many as four points, but the Mount pulled abreast at 82-82 on Kia Williams' layup with seven seconds to play. Ultimately, the game's outcome would hinge on a play that took place one millisecond later: nearly 80 feet from the Sacred Heart basket, Werner was fouled by Mountaineer senior Lauren Menichini. The least consistent of the Pioneers at the foul line, Dawn missed her first attempt. Her second rolled around the rim and dropped through.

When Werner corralled Gardiner's missed jumper with one second left, that was the signal for all but one of the Pioneers to erupt. And Swanson? "I thought it was tied until I looked back at the scoreboard and saw we were ahead," smiled the SHU coach.

"We've come a long way, even after losing our leading scorer. The kids have really responded," he said. "We could have left here with people saying, 'They can play with the good teams but they can't beat them.' But to tell the truth, I haven't walked out of any gym and said we can't beat that team."

Retribution and Reward

In the final two games of the regular season, Sacred Heart had an opportunity to avenge earlier losses. As was the case during the year on the road, the Pioneers fell behind early (16-5) against Wagner, and although they rallied to take the lead in the second half, the Seahawks prevailed by a 76-66 score. Once again Wagner held a significant advantage in rebounds (49-32) and once again SHU was unable to contain the quickness of senior guard Nia Ryan, who tallied 24 points.

So, a winning season and a potential No. 3 seed in the Northeast Conference tournament were on the line in the home finale against Central Connecticut on February 26.

It was Senior Day, which meant that Swanson awarded starting assignments to Werner, Yablonski, Toole, cocaptain Dora Clark, and Rachael Vierling.

Later, Toole would explain her rationale for remaining connected to the squad, despite her almost nonexistent playing time. "The rest of the team makes it easier (to accept). Winning games like today makes it worthwhile," she said.

In contrast to the emotional pregame ceremony honoring the five seniors and their parents, the Pioneers came out surprisingly flat. In a start reminiscent of their January meeting in New Britain, neither side was able to find the range. Central led throughout virtually all of the first half save for a Werner three-pointer that put SHU in front 24-21. The Blue Devils countered with a pair of baskets in the final moment to lead 25-24 at intermission.

With the score tied at 38-38 in the second half, Heather Coonradt's three-pointer from the top of the key triggered the decisive 13-2 spurt that placed Sacred Heart securely in front, 51-40, with 99 seconds to play. During that run, Rutnik hit a three-pointer from the same spot, and Werner drilled in a trey from the left corner. Coonradt completed the

surge by converting a pair of free throws for her 19th and 20th points—a career high.

It may not have been artful, but the 55–49 outcome capped a season of indisputable proof that the Pioneers were a success in Year One of Division I. Swanson's all-for-one, one-for-all team concept had produced a 14–13 record (11–2 at home), a third-place finish in the conference, and a No. 3 seed in the NEC tournament.

No player ranked among the conference leaders in scoring or rebounding, but each took a turn in carrying the team.

“Ed's never had a superstar, but his teams have always been competitive,” said Sacred Heart's athletic director, Don Cook. “He understands that to be a winning team, you have to play together. They did that exceptionally well this year.”

“We don't have a prime-time player, but everyone takes their role and accents it,” said Coonrad. “As a team, we're close on and off the court. In years to come, it will be nice to think that this season was the foundation for so many good seasons to come.”

For the players who labored through the lackluster Division II seasons of the eighties and the gatherings of 50 to 100 who watched them in the SHU Box, the Pioneers' 1999–2000 season must have seemed surreal. If anyone had suggested back then that Sacred Heart would make a successful entry into Division I at the dawn of the next century, he or she would have been considered a wishful thinker. Or worse. In hindsight, “visionary” would have been the appropriate description.