

# **A Look Back at the 1991-92 National Championship Calvin Men's Basketball Team – by Sports Information Director Jeff Febus '92**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Nearly 20 years later, the memories of winning a national championship remain bright for the members of the 1991-92 Calvin men's basketball team. The 20-year anniversary will take place this March 21<sup>st</sup> and will mark the day that the Knights under the leadership of head coach Ed Douma captured the first national team championship in Calvin athletics history with a 62-49 victory over the University of Rochester (NY) in Springfield, Ohio. The victory over Rochester in the 1992 NCAA III Finals at Wittenberg University culminated an historic run that saw the Knights post an overall record of 31-1 including an unblemished 12-0 MIAA mark. The 31-win total remains the high-water mark in Calvin men's basketball history and also opened the door for eight more national team championships at Calvin with the men's basketball team adding another national title in 2000, the men's cross country team winning four titles (2000, 2003, 2004 & 2006), the women's cross country team winning two (1998 & 1999) and the women's volleyball team winning just recently in 2010.

## **BUILDING A CHAMPION**

The roots of Calvin's national championship run can be traced back to the 1989-90 season when the Knights broke through to reach the NCAA III Final Four for the first time before falling to DePauw in the national semifinals and finishing 28-3. The Final Four run marked the first time that a Calvin men's basketball team advanced beyond the second round of the NCAA III Tournament. Six members of the 1990 team would later be a part of Calvin's 1992 national championship squad. Calvin's 1990-91 team then finished 25-4 and reached the national quarterfinals before falling on a last-second shot to Otterbein College in a game played in Westerville, Ohio.

Mike LeFebre remembers both tournament runs well and how the disappointment of the season-ending games in 1990 and 1991 provided fuel for the 1991-92 season. "I remember how hard it was to lose to DePauw (1990) and Otterbein (1991), particularly for our seniors on those teams," said LeFebre in a recent interview. "We felt badly for them because we knew they would not get another chance to play in a Calvin uniform. Heading into my senior year, I know that really helped us focus on what we needed to do for the upcoming season."

## **DOWN UNDER**

Calvin's 1991-92 season actually begin with a two-week trip through Australia in late August where the Knights posted an 8-1 record against local club and pro teams. The level of competition varied but according to LeFebre the chemistry that was built was invaluable. "Not that we didn't have chemistry before that but I think when you make a trip like that all the way to Australia, you can't help but build more team chemistry and we did that," said LeFebre. "It also helped give us a bit of a jump-start on what some our team roles would be for the upcoming season. It was perfect timing."

## **NON-CONFERENCE SLATE**

Calvin opened its non-conference season with 12 straight victories, defeating Division II opponents such as Ferris State, Northern Kentucky and the University of Indiana at Pennsylvania. The Knights also defeated tradition-rich Division III opponents such as Ohio Wesleyan, Ohio Northern and Wabash. One of the most memorable moments of that non-conference stretch was an 81-78 overtime victory over Ferris State at the Calvin Fieldhouse that featured physical play inside and strong perimeter shooting. With seconds left to play, Ferris State held a 70-67 lead and had a chance to make it a four-possession game with another free throw but a lane violation by the Bulldogs wiped out the subsequent attempt, allowing Calvin sophomore guard Chris Knoester to rush the ball up the floor and find LeFebre in the left corner. LeFebre responded by swishing a game-tying triple at the buzzer to send the contest into overtime. In overtime, Calvin shooting guard Matt Rottman scored seven points including a pair of deep trifectas to allow the Knights to pull out an 81-78 victory. "When you win as many games as we did that year, sometimes you just need to have a little bit of luck," said Douma in an interview this past fall. "We caught a break with that lane violation and then we hit some big shots to win it. Our team was also able to play with just about anyone that year though. Our team could have played well against just about anyone in the GLIAC and maybe even won the GLIAC that year. I think we could have also competed favorably against some Division I teams." Calvin's only defeat that year came in a January 7 contest at North Park with the Knights falling to the Vikings 87-71. Calvin also learned right around that time that the team would be without the services of Rottman for the remainder of the year because of a bout with mononucleosis. "I remember thinking, 'Wow,' that's a big loss for our team," said LeFebre when recalling that Rottman would not play the rest of the year. "It forced everyone else on our team to step up."

## **CONFERENCE CAMPAIGN**

Calvin did just that, winning all 12 of its conference games including a pair of victories over top-10 ranked Hope. The first regular season meeting went into the books as an 81-69 Calvin triumph behind 26 points from Honderd. In mid-February, Calvin gained the number-one ranking in Division III and a few days later edged the eighth-ranked Flying Dutchmen 77-75 in the Holland Civic Center behind 22 points and six steals from Knoester who played the game using a pair of borrowed and beat up pair of shoes from teammate Ryan Stevens. "I didn't like my shoes so when Ryan Stevens got a new pair, I borrowed his old shoes," said a sheepish Knoester in a post-game press conference. "They are really comfortable."

## **ROSTER BREAKDOWN**

Even with the loss of Rottman shortly before the start of the conference season, the roster was filled with talented players. The starting five was headlined by 6-7 All-American center Steve Honderd who would claim the first of two successive MIAA MPV awards that year while going on to become Calvin's all-time leading scorer with 2,469 points. In 1993, Honderd was named the Division III Player of the Year and was later named the Division III Player of the Decade by Division III News. On one side of Honderd was 6-5 junior power forward Mark Lodewyk, a native of Surrey, British Columbia. A former volleyball standout, Lodewyk possessed tremendous athleticism with the ability to run the floor, slam the ball through the basket and guard nearly any type of player. On the other side was LeFebre, a 6-7 wing forward who transformed his game from a post player to a style where he faced the basket and tossed in silky jump shots from the baseline and from beyond the three-point arc. In 1991-92, LeFebre dropped in 73 three-pointers on 156 attempts for a 46.8 percent three-point clip. The backcourt was superb with 6-2 sophomore shooting guard Chris Knoester and 6-1 senior point guard Matt Harrison. Knoester was a slashing guard with the ability to pour in points in quick fashion. He would end his career with 1,756 career points in 1994 and later earn the MIAA's MVP award as a senior. Harrison meanwhile was the consummate floor general, collecting a Calvin single-season record 203 assists against just 68 turnovers. He could also score when needed, particularly in the NCAA III Tournament.

The bench also had high-quality players as senior B.J. Westra could play in the backcourt and at the forward spots while providing lockdown defense and crafty passing ability. Sophomore forward Ryan Stevens could do the same and would later earn a spot on the All-MIAA first team as a senior in 1994. Sophomore Steve Scholler was a solid back-up at the point guard while sophomore post Brad Capel could provide scoring off the bench. Junior guard Mark Hofman and sophomore forward Rob Orange also provided offensive punch off the bench while 6-9 junior center Mike Langeland pushed Honderd each and every day in practice while also appearing in 13 games. Freshmen Todd Dokter and Jon VanderHill meanwhile earned late-season call-ups from the Calvin junior varsity.

## **THE POST-SEASON**

After capturing the MIAA regular season title, Calvin's post-season journey began by hosting the first-ever MIAA Tournament semifinal and championship round. In the semifinals, Calvin defeated a hard-nosed Albion team 84-73 in the semis and then met Kalamazoo in the finals which had upset Hope the night before. Calvin made quick work of Kalamazoo, defeating the Hornets 97-54 behind a career-high 19 points from Harrison. With an automatic bid to the NCAA III Tournament and a first round tournament bye in its pocket, Calvin was forced to play a "waiting game" for its second round opponent. That opponent would be none other than rival Hope, setting up an epic third meeting between the two foes. Playing perhaps its best game of the season, Hope went toe-to-toe with the Knights in front of a standing room only crowd at the Calvin Fieldhouse but the Knights refused to be knocked down, winning 91-88 to advance to the Sweet 16 round of the NCAA III Tournament. LeFebre played the game of his life in the win, scoring a career-high 28 points on the strength of five three-pointers while providing timely defense on Hope's All-American center Wade Gugino.

The Sweet 16 Sectional tournament was then held on the snowy campus of Gustavus Adolphus in St Peter, Minnesota. Hundreds of loyal Calvin fans made the more than 500-mile trek to the land of 10,000 lakes. On the opening night of the sectional tournament, Calvin fought off a determined Gustavus Adolphus team along with a rabid home crowd to pull out a 69-68 win. Honderd had 26 points including a pair of free throws that gave Calvin the lead with 38 seconds left in regulation. The Knights then forced an off-balance jumper by Gustavus at the buzzer to claim the heart-stopping win. The following evening Calvin met an old nemesis – the Cardinals of Otterbein College which held a 3-0 record against Calvin in NCAA III Tournament play. For a stretch, it appeared that Otterbein's undefeated record against Calvin in NCAA III would continue but Westra came up with some key defensive plays late in the first half and in the second half, Knoester and LeFebre went wild from the field. Lodewyk punctuated the 88-67 Calvin win with a vicious alley-oop dunk off a sublime pass by Harrison, sending the Knights onto the NCAA III Final Four.

## **THE FINAL FOUR**

Like 1990, the NCAA III Final Four was on the campus of Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio. This time the

opponent was Jersey City State, a team that had made a living off of offensive rebounds and a swarming defense. Calvin's game plan was simple. "Coach Douma told us earlier in the week that we had to box out and not give Jersey City State any second chances," said LeFebre. "He felt that if we followed that strategy that we would win the game." Douma's strategy was indeed correct and then some as the Knights rolled to an 81-40 triumph with Honderd scoring 21, LeFebre 15 and Knoester 10. As a team, the Knights of Calvin outrebounded the Gothic Knights of Jersey City State 51-42.

The victory left only one opponent standing in the way and it was a formidable one – 1990 national champion Rochester University. In the first semifinal that weekend, Rochester defeated 1991 national champion Wisconsin-Platteville 61-48. Rochester had an All-American of its own in 6-8 senior center Chris Fite along with imposing 6-7 forward Michael Coleman and sharp-shooting guard Kyle Meeker. Calvin threw the first punch however, jumping out to a 17-6 lead punctuated by another alley-oop dunk from Harrison to Lodewyk. With just over a minute left in the first half however, Calvin suffered a blow as LeFebre caught an errant elbow from Fite while Rochester was breaking a Calvin full-court press. Fite's elbow sliced open a gash above LeFebre's eye. With Calvin leading 32-24 at halftime, Calvin fan Dr. Lew DeKryger was able to come into the lockerroom and stitch the nasty gash. With LeFebre still in the lockerroom, the second half began and minutes into the half, the Knights suffered another blow when Knoester crumpled to the floor with a sprained knee. As Knoester limped off the floor, LeFebre came back to the team bench, bringing a thunderous roar from the more than 2,000 Calvin fans in the stands. Aided by LeFebre's return, Calvin was able to maintain its lead. Rochester closed to within five at 49-44 with 4:25 to play but Harrison floated in a clutch pull-up jumper from the left baseline and Stevens followed with a strong drive to the basket to give Calvin some breathing room. With under 30 seconds to play and Calvin leading 58-49, Harrison was able to find Honderd for a fast-break layup. Seconds later the championship was sealed as Honderd grabbed a loose ball and lobbed a baseball pass to Lodewyk who whipped down another slam a fraction of a second before the final horn, sending a mob of Calvin fans spilling onto the floor in celebration.

"It's perfect, you couldn't write a better script," said Harrison to NBC affiliate WOOD-TV8 on the floor as the celebration took place. Harrison's performance in the championship finale was nearly perfect too as the native of St. Charles, Illinois, scored eight points, grabbed five rebounds and dished out nine assists against only two turnovers in 38 minutes of action. Honderd had a game-high 25 points and was named the Final Four MVP. LeFebre added 12 points and seven rebounds as all three players were named to the all-tournament team. "It's a great feeling to win a national championship but more importantly to do it as a team," said Honderd. "It's been in the back of our minds to do this since we were in the Final Four two years ago."

At a celebratory rally back on campus a week-and-a-half later inside the Calvin Fieldhouse, Douma talked about that team aspect. "In terms of basketball ability, I've never had a team that was this good," said Douma. "This team could play any style of ball. They were able to adjust so easily....But the key to this season was this was an unselfish team that not only liked each other but loved each other."

According to Douma, that feeling continues today. "Everyone on that team did their part, whether they were on the floor or whether they were on the bench," said Douma. "They all contributed and everyone considered each other equal. Even today that's the way they treat each other when they keep in touch or meet up with one another. That's pretty special."

In an editorial in the *Grand Rapids Press* shortly after Calvin's national championship run, editor Mike Lloyd wrote:

"These are heady days on the campus of Calvin College, and rightly so. The national basketball championship won by the Knights on Saturday will be an enormous point of pride for the school for many years to come. Formerly now, Calvin is champion of Division III of the National College Athletic Association. But for the players and the many thousands of Calvin fans and friends here and elsewhere, roman numerals and long titles don't matter nearly so much as the thrill of a great goal reached and the sweet memory of how it was done. A lifetime can provide finer moments, but not many."

Indeed.