

## ‘Bench Mob’ veterans keep Villanova loose, focused



Villanova's quintet of seniors includes, from left, Kevin Rafferty, Ryan Arcidiacono, Daniel Ochefu, Henry Lowe, and Patrick Farrell. Head coach Jay Wright praised all five as key contributors to the 'Cats' success. MATT SLOCUM — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RADNOR >> Long before “The Hawks’ Nest” at Monmouth gained national acclaim for their antics on the sideline there was the “Bench Mob” at Villanova.

Like their counterparts at Monmouth, Nick McMahon, Henry “Hank” Lowe and Patrick Farrell were the fun guys, walk-ons who hardly played, but had a vital role with the team that was coming off a 13-19 season, the most losses in program history.

Their job, back in 2013, was to keep everyone loose. McMahon was a junior at the time, while Lowe and Farrell were freshmen, and they did their jobs so well that they became fan favorites and had posters made up depicting their sideline routines.

The next year, though, their roles changed. Head coach Jay Wright wanted McMahon, Lowe and Farrell to become more serious about basketball and help Wright convince younger players such as Josh Hart, Kris Jenkins and Darryl Reynolds to buy into Wright's system.

After McMahon graduated in 2014, it was up to Lowe, Farrell and Malvern Prep grad Kevin Rafferty, who transferred to Villanova after one year at Tufts University, to carry on that tradition and help teach Phil Booth, Jalen Brunson, Mikal Bridges, Donte DiVincenzo and Tim Delaney the ways of Villanova basketball.

They accepted that role without the benefit of scholarships or fanfare.

“It’s special to be part of this team,” said Lowe, a 5-11 senior who was a 1,000-point scorer at the Dalton School in New York. “A phrase we say here is that everyone’s status is the same, but everybody’s role is different. And even though we don’t play 40 minutes a game, and do mostly off-the-court work, our coaches and the other players value that just as much and it makes it really special to be part of that.”

Wright made sure the rest of the world knew how important Lowe, Farrell and Rafferty are to the team after Villanova’s convincing 87-68 victory over Iowa in the second round of the NCAA Tournament Sunday afternoon at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn.

When he talked about the seniors, Wright made sure to include his trio of walk-ons in the conversation.

“We lost three great players last year (Darrun Hilliard, JayVaughn Pinkston and Dylan Ennis), but we brought back five great Villanova basketball players,” Wright said. “I have to admit, I didn’t know if they would have this great of an impact, but it’s obvious by the way that we approached these last two games that the five of those guys did it together.”

Their playing time, when they do get on the floor, may be calculated in one- or two-minute increments, but their influence goes far beyond that.

It is Lowe, Farrell and Rafferty who help Booth, Bridges and Reynolds stay sharp on the bench until it is their time to enter the game. Lowe, a 5-11 senior guard, is one of the most vocal players in practice. The only one louder is Jenkins.

“They have impacted all of our young guys, everybody below them, walk-ons and scholarship players,” Wright said.

And for that, they are equals and not just three guys who sit at the bench, wave towels and hope to get into the game in the last minute of a blowout.

“They’re an important part of this team,” Arcidiacono said. “The work they do behind the scenes is just as important to our success as the work we do on the court.”

That was evident last Friday when Farrell buried a 3-pointer from the left corner off a pass from Mikal Bridges with 39 seconds left to put the finishing touch on an 86-56 romp over UNC Asheville in the first round of the tournament. Villanova’s large contingent of fans roared its approval.

No one, though, cheered harder than the starters. They whooped it up as if Farrell had just hit a game-winning basket. Farrell is the first walk-on to score a basket in an NCAA Tournament game in the Jay Wright era. Jason Colenda hit two free throws in Villanova’s 89-69 victory over UCLA in 2009.

“We want them to score,” Wright said. “We just want it to happen in the right way so we were really psyched that he hit that, especially in New York. He’s a New York kid.

Farrell was happy, too, but not for the reason you think.

“It meant a lot to me because Henry made such a good play to get it in the paint,” said Farrell, who hails from Rockville Centre, New York. “We always talk about once we’re in the paint, jump stop and find the extra man and then Mikal, who’s a young guy on our team, wasn’t selfish.

He didn't take the shot even though he was a little open. He made the extra pass to someone who was wide open. So when somebody gives you a shot that wide open, it's nice to stick it for them."

And when you talk about the Class of 2016 being the most successful in program history in terms of wins, and league championships, you have to include Lowe, Farrell and Rafferty in the conversation just as much as Ryan Arcidiacono and Daniel Ochefu.

Lowe and Farrell have been there for all 113 wins, three consecutive Big East regular-season titles and the Big East Tournament championship last year. Rafferty has been part of the success for the last three seasons, the first of which he had to sit out under NCAA transfer rules. They're as much a part of Villanova's success as anyone.

"It's been an unbelievable experience," the 6-8 Rafferty said. "I'm just blessed to be around this program and be in it with the guys to my right (Lowe and Farrell), and also Daniel and Arch and be part of a great class. I came in and saw how hard everyone worked and that gets you to be a part of it, too, and elevates your work ethic. It's been really special."