



H E N N E P I N

H I S T O R Y

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DeLaSalle Basketball

—
Charlotte Van Cleve



DeLaSalle High School basketball team, 1923

Basketball and DeLaSalle High School

A shared history

by Sarah Johnson

Cagers. Basketeers. The Quint. No matter what you call them, basketball players have always found a home at DeLaSalle High School.

The history of basketball parallels that of DeLaSalle, founded on Nicollet Island in Minneapolis more than a century ago. James Naismith, an instructor at the YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts, founded the game in 1891, to provide “athletic distraction” for his rowdy class of young men. Basketball quickly spread across the country, so quickly that it was often hard to find coaches to teach the new sport to interested athletes.

About the same time, Archbishop John Ireland was pushing for a high school independent of parish affiliation in Minneapolis, to provide boys who had finished eighth grade a professional and religious education. Anthony Kelly, a recently deceased Minneapolis merchant, had directed that \$10,000 of his estate be used to open a school operated by Christian Brothers in the city. When the surrounding parishes raised an additional \$15,000, Ireland purchased land on Nicollet Island. Fifty boys joined three teaching Christian Brothers in the new school in October 1900.

Originally known as Hennepin Institute, the high school was renamed DeLaSalle in 1902 for St. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, born in the mid-17th century to wealthy parents in France. De La Salle earned a doctorate in theology and was ordained a priest in 1678. Moved by the plight of the poor, he renounced both his priesthood and his wealth and founded the Brothers of Christian Schools in 1680 as a community of consecrated laymen dedicated to educating men regardless of their ability to pay. De La Salle was declared a saint in 1900, the year the Minneapolis school opened. The pope named him the patron saint of educators in 1950. Today, the religious laymen commonly re-

ferred to as the Christian Brothers operate schools in 82 countries, serving more than a million students.¹

Brother Joel Thurian, DeLaSalle’s first athletic director in 1921, organized extra-curricular activities at the school.²

The “DeLaSalle Quint” beat St. Paul Academy’s basketball team 23–15 for its first victory, on December 10, 1921. The *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* reported: “The second half found the Catholics in their stride, and from then on they were complete masters of the situation. The initial victory and the large quad out for the first team make hopes jubilant for a successful season.”³

Through the 1920s, the school earned a statewide reputation for its superior education of young men and for the athletic prowess of “The Islanders” (new nickname for its basketball team). DeLaSalle participated in the Catholic tournament, which included teams from Wisconsin, South Dakota, and North Dakota. The school won five championships in six years, including back-to-back titles in 1927 (defeating Superior Cathedral 28–12) and 1928 (beating St. Cloud Cathedral 32–25).⁴

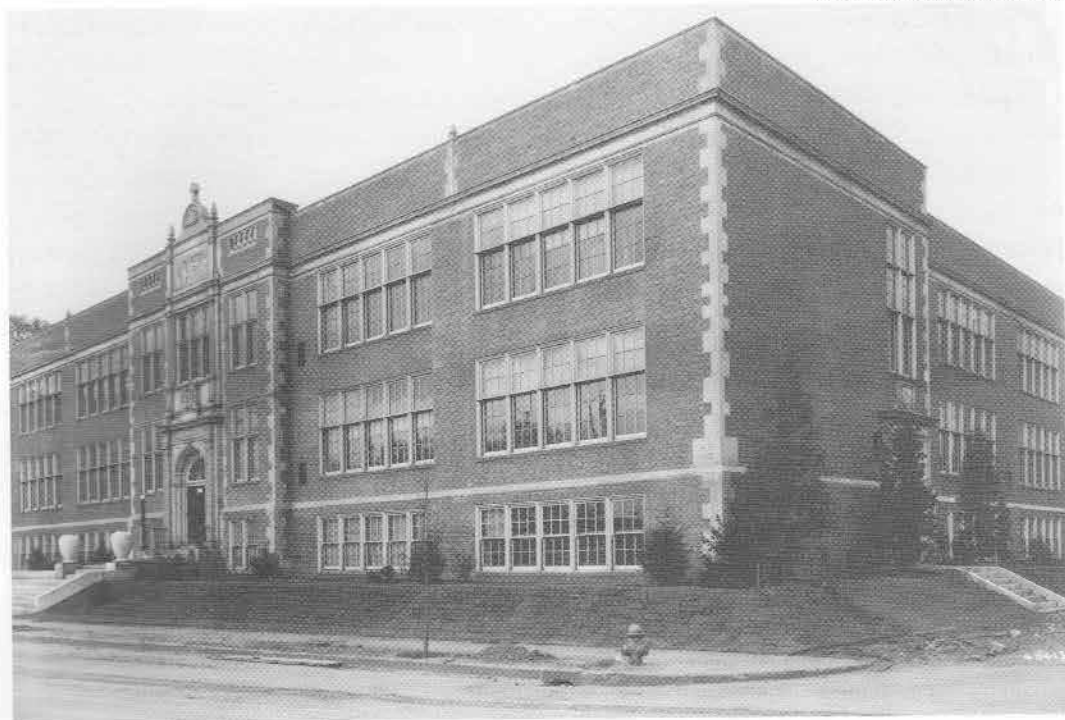
In basketball’s early days, its players were known as “cagers,” due to the rule stating that the first player to touch an out-of-bounds ball owned it. Players regularly went into the stands to fight for the ball, so officials decided to encircle the court with a steel cage. Eventually this rule was changed, and the cages were taken down, but the name stuck.

From 1924 to 1941, the Nicollet Island cagers participated in the National Catholic Interscholastic Tournament in Chicago. Hosted by Loyola University, the by-invitation-only tourney was open to 32 teams representing schools across the United States. In 1931, DeLaSalle won the championship, the only Minnesota school ever to do so. The basketball team lost only

Courtesy of Sarah Johnson



Statue of Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, who founded the Christian Brothers



DeLaSalle High School, facing West Island Avenue and the Mississippi River, in 1923

three games that season due to the intense dedication to fundamentals of head coach George Roberts and to center Ray Buffalo, an all-tournament selectee. The team's star guard, Gerald "Babe" Gearty, went on to join the FBI. He became known for chasing bank robbers including John Dillinger.

After beating Jasper, Indiana, on March 21 to claim the title, the DeLaSalle team returned by train to the cheering of more than 1,000 fans at the Great Northern Station. Minneapolis Mayor William Kunze feted the team at a four-course meal at the Minneapolis Athletic Club. Congratulations poured in from across the nation. Brother Justus from DeLaSalle Institute in Chicago wrote, "Congratulations to the National Champions of the United States. You deserved it! The only team that had a worse schedule than you was Spalding."⁵ That was the fifth consecutive year that a DeLaSalle team won the tournament—DeLaSalle High School for Boys in Joliet, Illinois, won in 1927 and 1928, and DeLaSalle Institute in Chicago won in 1929 and 1930.

While the state basketball tournament known today originated in 1913, Catholic high schools did not then participate, instead conducting a separate tournament from 1937 to 1970. In 1942, DeLaSalle welcomed John Kundla as its football, basketball, and baseball coach. Kundla, a member of the National Basketball Hall of Fame, went on to lead the Minneapolis Lakers to four NBA championships, coaching such hardwood legends as Elgin Baylor, George Mikan, and Vern Mikkelsen.

Kundla, 96, currently living at Catholic Eldercare in Northeast Minneapolis, remembers his days at DeLaSalle fondly: "I was hired as football, basketball, and baseball coach because they didn't have enough money to hire more than one coach. I loved coaching at DeLaSalle although the close games were hard to take. I remember when we lost to St. Thomas with five seconds to go . . . I almost drove the bus into the river after that one."

Kundla led DeLaSalle to its first Minnesota Catholic High School Association championship in 1944. The team beat

Cretin 32–28, holding the Raiders to no points in the third period. Cretin also missed 15 of 21 free throws in the championship game. One of Kundla's favorite memories is of the team being in Mankato for the Catholic school tournament. "I remember sitting in my hotel room next to the room of our two best players. At about 10 PM, I heard swearing like you've never heard before, coming from outside, below the window. When I stepped into the players' room next door, they saw me, immediately dropped to their knees, and started praying the rosary: 'Hail Mary, full of grace.' I looked outside, and they had been throwing water balloons at unsuspecting passersby."

Kundla was also a world history teacher and the coach of the intermural basketball team, which played under the same rules as the varsity. *The Islander* (DeLaSalle's student newspaper) noted: "Players will not be allowed to play in stocking feet

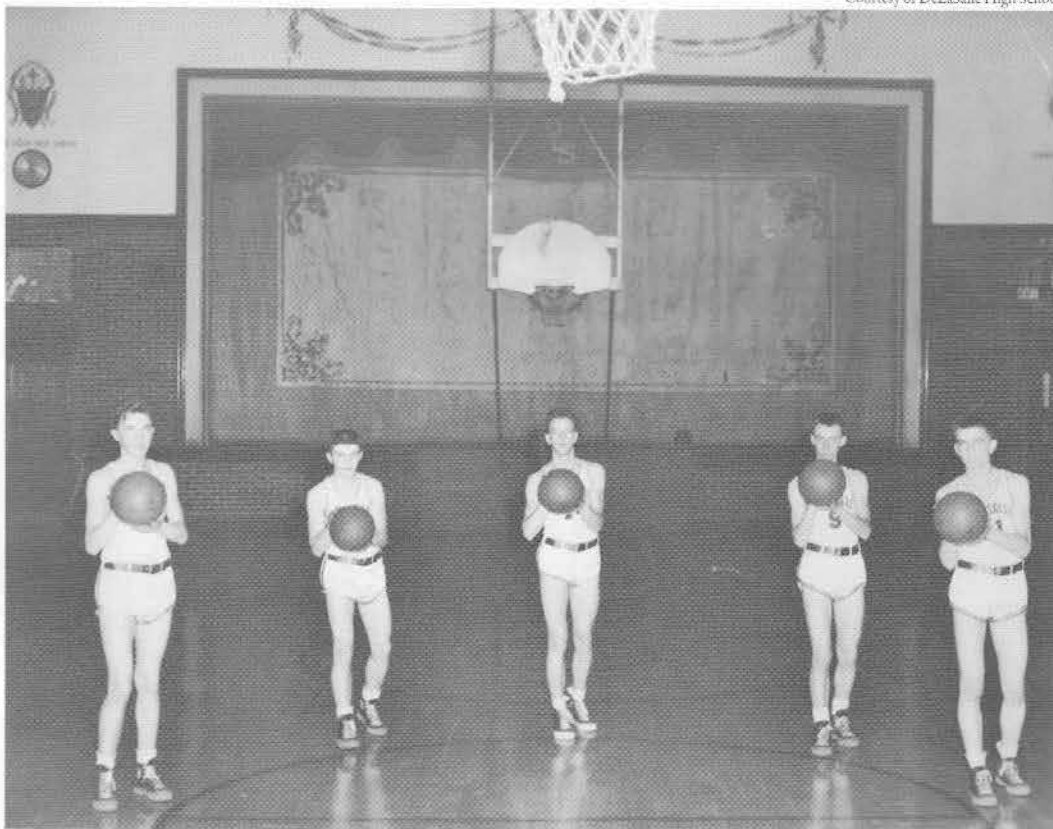
because it is making the floor too slippery for use by the varsity."⁶ Fresh off the 1944 championship, Kundla left DeLaSalle with a commission in the U.S. Navy. Students were sad to see the future Hall of Famer go: "It is with great reluctance that we bid farewell to our coach, but we feel consoled by the fact that once again Johnny Kundla will be at the helm of the winning team—the U.S. Navy."⁷

DeLaSalle won its second Catholic state championship in 1946 by beating Winona Cotter, and it dominated the tournament in the 1950s and '60s. Between 1951 and 1966, the Islanders played 10 title games and won 7, including 4 in a row from 1954 to 1957. From 1945 to 1969, the legendary Dick Reinhart coached DeLaSalle, amassing an overall record of 374 wins and 107 losses for a .773 winning percentage. In February 1945, the Islanders snapped the 39-game winning streak of two-time-defending state champion Patrick Henry



Above, Ted Boguchi played for DeLaSalle in 1933. Left, the 1948–49 team (l-r): John Blanchard (later a New York Yankees catcher), Wally Madden, Larry Baumten, Rory Gilligan, and Jim Faust

Courtesy of DeLaSalle High School



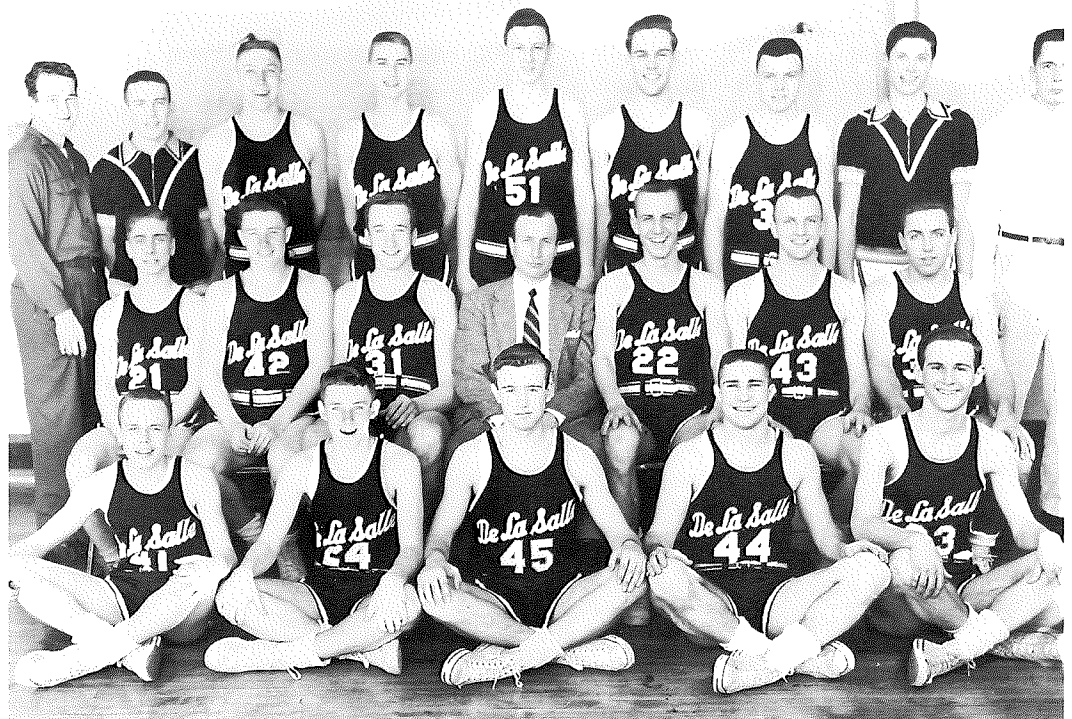


DeLaSalle jumped against Cretin in a 1955 game.

(53-43) before 10,000 fans at the University of Minnesota Field House just before a Minnesota-Iowa game. *The Islander*

reported the victory as “an event [that] positively shook the basketball world to its very foundation.”⁸

The 1954-55 DeLaSalle team



DeLaSalle beat Duluth Cathedral 34–25 to win the 1954 State Catholic high school tournament amid student chants of “We want Hopkins” (the defending public school champion). “Sure, we’d like to play Hopkins any time and any place,” Coach Reinhart told the *Minneapolis Tribune*. “I tried to schedule Hopkins earlier this season and last year too.”

After an unbeaten 1955 season, DeLaSalle was ranked the number-one Catholic high school basketball team in the country by *Catholic World*, a Chicago weekly covering Catholic high school sports on the national stage. Jack Getchman, a retired 1956 graduate and basketball player under Reinhart, remembers the athletes who represented the school in the 1950s: “We were aware of De’s tradition every time we stepped onto the court. We took pride in upholding that tradition and never thought we weren’t going to win.”

While some might think such a powerhouse would have fans hanging from the rafters, Getchman said the school’s gymnasium at the time (where the auditorium is now) wasn’t set up for crowds.

Overall, the DeLaSalle team achieved 13 Central Catholic Conference titles and an overall record of 374–107 in the 23 seasons following World War II.¹⁰ “Dick Reinhart isn’t in the High School Coaches Hall of Fame, but he should be,” says Getchman of his late coach. “He had this unique ability to inspire people and get the best out of every player. He was not only a great teacher, but [he] also had an instinctive quality—[of knowing] whether you were doing your job! I remember [that] when we won the championship in 1955, he said it was a once-in-a-lifetime team. Well, I thought he was a once-in-a-lifetime coach.”

Mike St. Aubin, a member of the 1962 team, said in 1975, “[Coach Reinhart] put the emphasis in the right place—he was a disciplinarian, which you have to have. He

told us when we won our trophies that ten years from now people will walk down the halls of DeLaSalle and see the trophies, and nobody will know who we were, but they’ll know that we played our best.”¹¹

From 1971 to 1974, DeLaSalle participated in the Minnesota Independent High School basketball tournament, which included private, Catholic, and independent schools such as Shattuck and Southwest Minnesota Christian. Joe Shrake, who played for Winona Cotter when it beat DeLaSalle in the Catholic school tournament in 1952, led the team to the championship game in 1972. But the Islanders lost to Fridley Grace (now Totino Grace) that year.

A seismic shift occurred on Nicollet Island in 1971, when young women were first admitted to its halls. After 70 years of being an all-boys school, DeLaSalle became coeducational at the start of the 1971–72 school year. Girls’ basketball was first offered during the 1972–73 academic year, with the first game, in late November, a loss to Holy Angels, 34–28. DeLaSalle fielded a team of nine girls, who played in the Don Bosco conference and finished the first season with a record of 4–6. Other opponents included all-girls schools such as St. Margaret’s and Regina.

Michelle (Witkowski) Kohn was one of the first members of the DeLaSalle girls’ basketball team. “We had these ill-fitting uniforms that were old, boys’ uniforms . . . I don’t even think they were basketball uniforms,” she says. “Our coach didn’t know much about basketball—I think it was seen as more of a novelty at first. We had to practice before school because the boys didn’t want to give up any precious gym time after school. So you had a lot of girls running up and down the court with curlers in their hair early in the morning. I was ecstatic when I heard about Title IX because I knew that would afford girls

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The first DeLaSalle girls' basketball team, 1972-73

so many more opportunities to get better equipment and obtain scholarships.”

Because of action taken in the Minnesota Legislature, nonpublic schools gained the right to apply for membership in the Minnesota State High School League beginning in 1973, thereby opening the previously all-public-school state tournaments. The DeLaSalle boys' team made it to the first all-inclusive tournament in 1975 but lost in the semifinals to Chisholm, the eventual Class A winner. “It is entirely fitting that DeLaSalle is the only Catholic team and non-public-school institution to participate in the first open state tournament,” wrote Dick Gordon in the *Minneapolis Star*.¹²

Percy Wade, who coached the Bloomington Kennedy girls' basketball team to

a 28-2 record and state championship in 2005, was a standout guard on the team. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* selected Wade as number 88 on its 2012 list of top 100 players in state tournament history.

From the time nonpublic schools entered the tournament in 1975 until 1994, there were two state tournament classes based on school enrollment—Class AA and Class A. DeLaSalle was in Class A, routinely matched against outstate schools in the playoffs and the state tournament. Winona Cotter was the first nonpublic school to win the championship under the new all-encompassing format in 1977, and the Islanders won their first Class A title in 1985, beating Winona Cotter 56-46.

The year 1987 saw another seismic shift in high school basketball as players

adapted to a new tool for scoring—the three-point shot. When asked what has changed since his Nicollet Island coaching days, John Kundla did not hesitate: “The three-point shot has changed the game tremendously. Some players don’t know when to take the shot and when to pass; they’re just concerned with getting their points.”

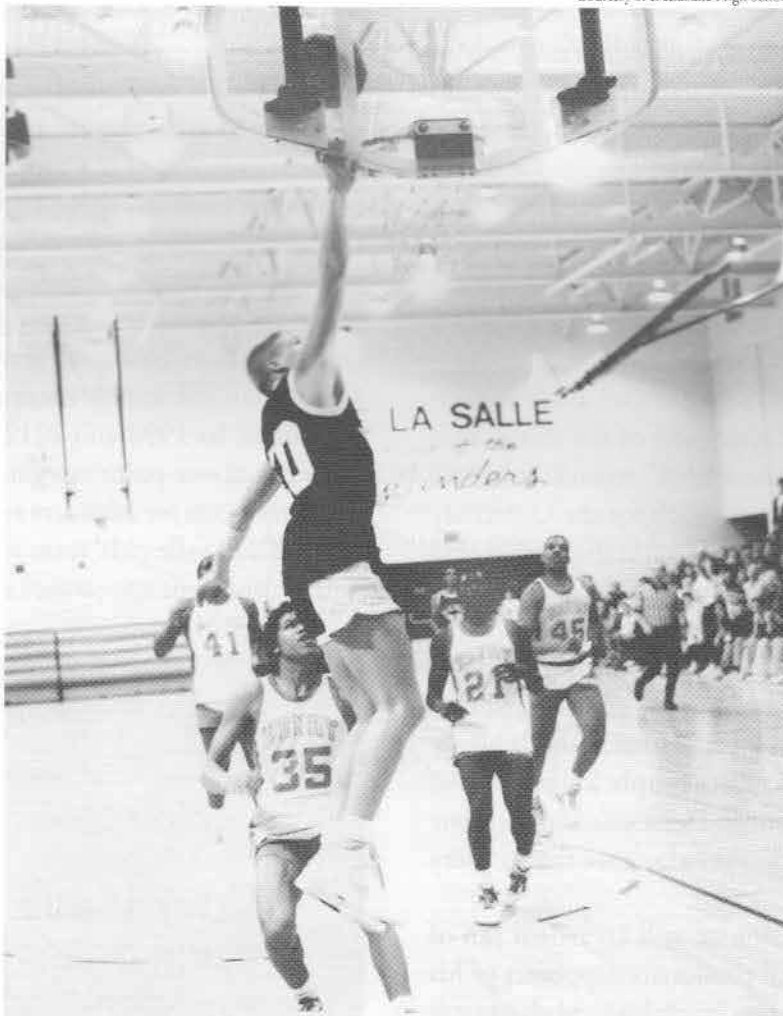
The year 1988 was especially memorable for the Islanders—the girls’ basketball team had the best season in its history with a 14–7 overall record including victories over Breck and Benilde-St. Margaret’s. “Girls today are so much more skilled in their approach to the game, and it’s undoubtedly played with better strategy,” says Kohn. “The coaches are way more

knowledgeable, and there is a world of opportunity available to female athletes.”

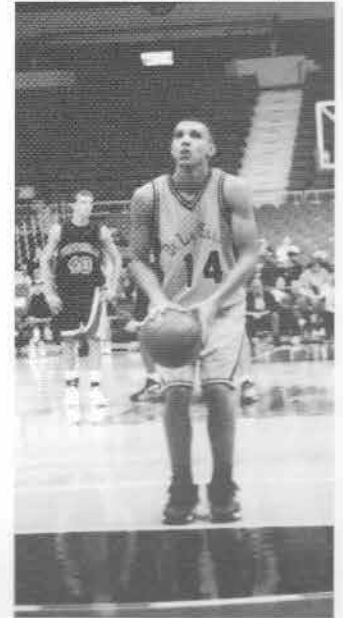
The boys had a memorable nonconference game in 1988, scoring more than 100 points against Minneapolis’s Patrick Henry, with a final score of 101–81. The Islanders sported a gaudy 26–1 overall record and won their second state title by beating Russell-Tyler-Ruthton 58–36. Guard Tom Conroy, who led the way, was awarded the coveted “Mr. Basketball” title given annually to the best high school player in the state.

After a two-year experiment with the “Sweet Sixteen” format in 1995 and 1996, the Minnesota State High School League implemented a four-class system for girls’ and boys’ basketball in 1997. First placed

Courtesy of DeLaSalle High School



Courtesy of DeLaSalle High School



Top: Ben Johnson playing at Target Center against Monticello, December 1997; left: Tom Conroy playing in 1988



DeLaSalle High School, facing DeLaSalle Drive and the Hennepin Avenue suspension bridge, in 2012

in Class AA, DeLaSalle celebrated by winning back-to-back state titles in 1998 and 1999 under head coach Dave Thorson, after losing in the championship in 1997. Ben Johnson, an Islander guard who went on to play for the Gophers, played in all three finals and was selected number 15 in the *Pioneer Press's* 2012 list of the top 100 in state tournament history.

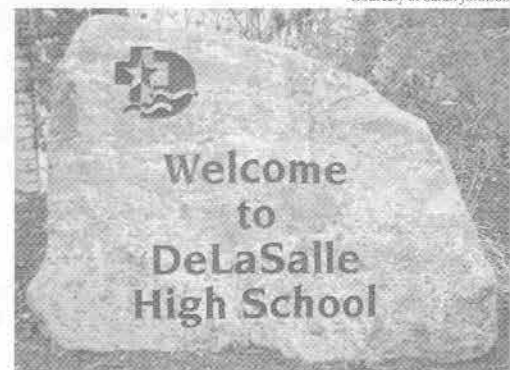
“The rich history of DeLaSalle basketball [is] definitely one of the things that drew me to the school,” remarks Johnson, now an assistant coach for the University of Nebraska men’s basketball team. He speaks fondly of the “DeLaSalle brotherhood” and of how alums frequently come back to speak about their playing days: “Coach Thorson always emphasized that the tradition built on this island is bigger than one person. People keep track of what’s going on at DeLaSalle and continue to come back—you don’t see that at every school.”

Jack Getchman, still an ardent fan of the game and passionate supporter of his alma mater, says he and several classmates

routinely meet on the island to catch football, basketball, or baseball games.

Six DeLaSalle players appear on the *Pioneer Press* list of the top 100 players, more than from any other school despite DeLaSalle’s participation in the state tournament only from 1975. Since the start of the all-encompassing tournament, the DeLaSalle boys’ basketball team has made 15 tournament appearances and won 6 state titles. Its 1998 and 2012 titles were the result of one-point margins, providing tense moments for Islanders rooters.

The DeLaSalle girls’ team made its first state tournament appearance in 2006 and



went on to become a powerhouse in its own right. After second-place finishes in 2007 and 2008, the team won its first state championship in 2011 under head coach Faith Johnson-Patterson, crushing Hill-Murray 63–43. Both the boys' and the girls' teams won state titles in 2012, the fourth such occurrence since the start of the girls' tournament in 1975. The

girls finished the season beating Richfield 65–45, and the boys beat Minneapolis Washburn 57–56 in the championship game. That was the first time two schools from Minneapolis faced off in a state basketball championship game.

The DeLaSalle cagers continue to make Nicollet Island the place to be for all things basketball when winter rolls around.

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