

Hoop Heaven

What happens when an insular religious school suddenly becomes a high school basketball powerhouse?

by E. James Beale

OF GOD AND ROUND BALL



Michael T. Regan

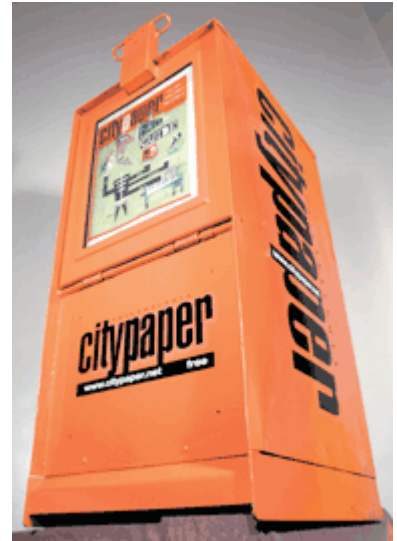
ON THE RISE: Larry Loughery (center) goes up for a shot, guarded by Samme Givens (left).

For years, Kevin Givens held the unofficial title, “Best Basketball Player in the History of the Academy of the New Church (ANC).” Though he played at ANC for just one season, Givens dominated the high school’s program, scoring at a record pace and leading the team to the now-defunct Pennsylvania/New Jersey crown.

Of course, for years, calling someone the best basketball player at ANC was kind of like calling Atlantic City the best gambling town in Jersey: True, but not really the most impressive claim to fame. ANC is a private school located in Bryn Athyn, a small religious community 15 miles outside of Philadelphia. Most students come from families that belong to the local New Church, and until recently, nearly everyone lived within a five-mile radius of the school. It was not a basketball community.

Between 2001 and 2002, the ANC Lions managed just a single win in the Quaker-based Friends School League (FSL). In fact, in the 20-plus-year history of the FSL, the Lions won just one title, which their own athletic director starts to explain by saying, “I don’t want to say it was a fluke, but ...”

Recently, though, fortunes began to change at ANC. In the 2004-05 season, the Lions won 15 games, and went undefeated in their league; they went on to win three of the next four league championships and the last two state prep school championships. This year they finished second in the region and 22nd in the country, beating the No. 1 team in the nation along the way. Just six years after a no-win season, ANC has an entire starting lineup of Division 1 college basketball prospects.



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The man responsible for this turnaround, the head coach of the new ANC, is none other than Kevin Givens. Now 47, Givens has the imposing build of a tough forward, but a friendly demeanor. He beams when he talks about his time at ANC, to which he transferred for his senior year, in the fall of 1979. Givens had been living in Wynnefield, failing in school and “gang-warring,” he says. In the summer of ’79 he was playing in a local league game when Andrew Davis, then ANC’s coach, spotted him. Givens enrolled that fall, and credits the move with saving his life.

After college, Givens played basketball abroad, then returned to Philly to work as a housing cop. When his two sons reached kindergarten age, he enrolled them in the Bryn Athyn Church School — the elementary that feeds into ANC — so they could have the advantages he’d had. Around the same time, he returned to ANC as coach.

On the court, both Samme (’08) and Shannon (’09) were their father’s sons. As 8- and 9-year-olds they starred in a division for 11- and 12-year-olds, bringing home the first of what would become a steady stream of basketball trophies.

Their addition alone would have helped turn around any program, but the Givens family did ANC one better: When the boys entered high school, they brought much of their nationally ranked Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) rec-league team with them.

Kenny Ross, a junior point guard who transferred to ANC from the Hun School, has been playing with the Givens boys since fourth grade. Larry Loughery and Clay Penecale, who both transferred from the Catholic league for their senior seasons, have played with them since around the sixth grade.

ANC's success this year was a testament both to the boys' talent and to their cohesion as a group — asked about their individual games, the players all praise the team. Still, truth be told, it is Samme, a prolific 6-foot-5-inch forward, who embodies ANC. He's senior captain, team leader and the school's all-time leading scorer and rebounder.

He's also not a child of a New Church parent. In fact, none of the five players in the Lions' starting lineup come from families directly affiliated with ANC's Church. This puts them in a distinct minority. Of ANC's 230-plus students, about 200 are children of New Church members (per church rules, the students themselves cannot be officially initiated until they reach 19).

For the Bryn Athyn community, which prides itself on taking care of its own, and, indeed, built ANC in large part to educate its children, the new, prominent role being played by outsiders has been a bit of a shock. The collective response, in the words of coach Givens, has been "very entertaining."

Bryn Athyn, Pa., is the worldwide hub of the New Church — also known as the General Church of the New Jerusalem, or Swedenborgianism — a religion that bases its philosophies both on the Bible and on the writings of an 18th-century Swedish scientist and theologian named Emanuel Swedenborg. Church members believe that Swedenborg was able to obtain a direct connection to the spiritual world, and is adamant that it is not a sect of Christianity, it's the New Church. For years, ANC's sprawling campus has existed to serve this community and educate its youth in these teachings.

While everyone from R. Scott Daum, the principal of the boys' school, to Samme and Shannon will testify that ANC does not force Swedenborgianism on its students, the school is open about the fact that it teaches what it thinks is right — that is, its religion. Daum says outright that if a prospective student were happy with another church, ANC would discourage him from attending.

Practically, this means that Bryn Athyn has remained a homogeneous place. In 1979, when coach Givens entered ANC, he was the school's first black student; there were a few that followed him, but when Samme graduates in May, nearly 20 years later, he will be the first black student ever to go K through 12 within the Bryn Athyn school system.

It also means that the town is used to maintaining a low profile. This ANC team has brought Bryn Athyn publicity like it's never before experienced: Suddenly, people who have never heard of Emanuel Swedenborg are fawning over Larry Loughery.

One might think that not everyone in insular Bryn Athyn would approve. But while Shawn Synnestvedt, ANC's athletic director, acknowledges that "anytime you have change that goes on in any kind of long-standing organization there are going to be people who have concerns about it," there seems to be very little uproar over practicing Catholics like Loughery, Penecale and

Ross becoming part of ANC's public face.

If the packed stands are any indication, the New Church community is perfectly willing to put its insularity aside to watch the Lions mix and match their apparently unending offensive styles. A few years ago, Lions' games were scarcely attended, if at all. Now, to hear coach Givens describe it, "If you go to an ANC basketball game, you'll see people from our community ages 2 to 3 up to 75 or 80."

Coach Givens, who was always more touched by the community at ANC than by the religion, believes this acceptance is a conscious effort on the part of church members to "open their doors and admissions to people outside of their community." And while 85 percent of ANC students are still children of New Church members, and the school has a long way to go before being integrated in any meaningful sense, it's true that number was 95 percent 10 years ago.

But there are other possible interpretations of the phenomenon. One somewhat cynical possibility is that ANC hopes to use the outside ballplayers to boost its dwindling numbers: New Church members, Daum says regretfully, are simply having fewer children, and indeed, religious retention has ceased to be a given for any American faith. According to a study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 44 percent of Americans say that they're no longer tied to the religion of their childhood. ANC does not profit monetarily off its basketball team, but when you picked up this article to read about hoops, you did find out about Emanuel Swedenborg.

Another possibility is that Bryn Athyn is using basketball to fill a spiritual hole — that, with its religion on the wane, ANC was in need of a new means of binding together its community. Perhaps coach Givens, in return for what ANC gave him, provided that means: a basketball culture that even the church pastor calls "truly special."

Whether basketball facilitates further change at ANC or not, the new ANC reality isn't going away soon: Next year, coach Givens has at least four freshmen he expects to contribute to the basketball team coming into the school, none of whom are New Church students.

They'll have a lot to live up to, and not just because Shannon and Kenny have no plans to give up their state title. At the end of an interview, I asked the coach and his son if they had anything important to add. At first they said they didn't. But as I stood up to leave, Samme stretched out and said — as much to the world as to me, "Add this: I worked hard to become it, and I'm the best player ANC has ever seen." His father, long the man who owned that title, shrugged and looked at me without argument.

Sometimes change is good.

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