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Holding Court

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Photos courtesy of Erik Schelkun

Before he took the job as president of the University of Dayton in July of 2002 — back when you could still call him a Philly guy through and through — Dan Curran said he already knew plenty about Flyers basketball, everything from its tradition and its standing in the community to just how tough it was to get a close-to-the-court seat in UD Arena.

"To have a prime seat at the Arena is like gold," he said. "People don't want to give them up."

And with a bit of a laugh, he then recounted a story from when he was negotiating his initial five-year deal with the school.

"As we were putting together my contract, I was talking with Dan Sadlier and when he asked what I wanted, I said, 'I want four tickets for life to the men's and women's basketball games.'

"Dan smiled and we went on with what was an enjoyable conversation. But when they brought the contract back, I looked at it and said, 'Wait, where's the clause about the tickets?'

"He said, 'I thought you were kidding.'

"I said, 'No, I'm serious.'

"And that's when he grinned and said, 'Well, in that case, I'm only gonna give you two...You have to stay 10 years to get four.'"

Well, Curran's now been here nine and last year the university extended his contract through June of 2015.

And while he's certainly proven himself as a dynamic leader of the school — during his tenure UD has earned recognition as a top-tier national research university, has doubled the size of its campus and has seen enrollment set records and become more diverse — he's also shown himself to be a true basketball fan.

I spoke to him by phone the other day from the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, where he was waiting to board a flight to Honolulu. He was making a quick trip to Chaminade University — the Marianist school where he's on the board — at the end of what's been almost a month on the road doing fund raising.

The afternoon we talked, the Flyers were playing in Charlotte in a few hours and he was trying to figure out if he was somehow going to be able to watch the game — or at least get updates — via his computer.

"Tonight I'm going to be on a plane so I'm not sure," he said. "But one way or another I try not to miss any of the games. As I've been on the road, I've watched two of our games with alumni groups — one in Hilton Head, one in Tampa."

In Hilton Head he said he spent a couple of hours with Libby Blackburn, the widow of legendary Flyers coach Tom Blackburn:

"She told me stories about going to the Garden (Madison Square Garden) for games and how she and the coach would go out to dinner with the writers. She said, 'I may have been the first PR person for the University of Dayton.'"

As he recounted the story you could sense his delight and it was obvious he appreciates UD's past, while at the same time much of his effort is spent guiding the school toward the future.

And Flyers basketball plays a part in that.

"The thing from Dayton that is seen more on national TV than anything else in the city is the UD Arena floor," he said. "And if I wear a University of Dayton shirt — I don't care if I'm on the East Coast or the West — people know the Flyers."

"And if you look at the number of times we're on television this year that's deliberate. It's part of a strategic plan to position our university for the future.

"From generation to generation, Dayton Flyers basketball has carried the name of the university — the name of the entire city — forward. It was important then and it is now."

A FAN IN THE STANDS

Growing up in Philadelphia, Curran was caught up in the fervor of Big 5 basketball and talked about going to the Palestra to see double headers.

Although his father was a big Villanova fan, Curran said when he and his brother did their undergrad work at Saint Joseph's they converted their dad to the Hawks.

After receiving his masters degree at Temple and earning a Ph.D. from Delaware, Dr. Curran returned to Saint Joe's and spent 23 years in various administrative and faculty positions.

"During the mid-'80s I was the academic advisor to both the men's and women's basketball teams there," he said. "One year I was even listed as an assistant coach."

During that time, he became good friends with both Phil Martelli — now the Hawks head coach, but back then an assistant — and Jim Foster, who was the women's coach and now coaches the Ohio State women. Curran's wife Claire and Foster's wife Donna are also good friends

Before he became UD's first-ever lay president, Curran said he'd seen games at the Arena because he'd visited friends who teach at UD. Now he said he would go to UD games even if he weren't the school president — but because of the position, game nights come with responsibilities.

Before games and at halftime he's pressing flesh, making business connections — or as he put it "when the ball's not bouncing, I am bouncing around," — but by the opening tip he hopes to be settled into his seat at mid-court, seven rows up from the floor, and he tries to watch the game without distraction.

One pregame routine he relishes is trying to be in the hallway to acknowledge the team as it heads to the floor. And afterward he often stops by the dressing room to talk to players and coaches.

"I'm more casual at the women's games," he said. "There you're more apt to find me in the corner, wearing jeans and being a fan.

"But the time I can really relax is during the week when I stop by practice. I know the etiquette. I don't bother Brian (Gregory) or the players, but I'll sit with Bucky (Bockhorn) and we'll talk and I'll see what we're doing. I really enjoy that."

SUPPORT OF GREGORY

Just as he hears plenty of praise about the Flyers athletes and the program, he's heard some of the griping by some fans who think the team has not performed well enough this year.

"Everyone wants us to be in the NCAA Tournament, but the reality of it is we're in a tough situation," he said. "There are something like 4 to 8 at-large spots for mid-major teams. Certainly everyone has high expectations and it's rough when you lose games. People get frustrated."

While he understands that, he doesn't like it when people target the players or Gregory:

"I think Brian is doing a doing a great job. No one wants to be in the Tournament any more than he does — he's such a competitive person. And it makes me laugh when I hear people say he's not an X and O guy. Look at his big wins in the Arena — Pitt, for example — or last year's run through the NIT.

"There is always going to be debate, but fans need to look at everything: The quality of the kids Brian brings in, the way they represent the university, graduation rates. And they do perform.

"Brian is averaging 20 wins a season, he's building the program and that's what we want. That's why basketball gets the resources it does. We want it to be successful...and so like everything, we're also always looking at what need to do next."

Curran talked about everything from the Arena's new video boards to a Men's Fitness article he said called UD Arena "the No. 1 place to see a game."

And with Curran, Flyers games have become a family affair. His youngest son, Aidan, is a UD student and does some video work at the games. His oldest boy, Sean, goes to Dartmouth, where Curran said, "he almost exclusively wears Dayton stuff."

His wife, Claire M. Renzetti — who was the former chair of the sociology department at Saint Joseph's, then taught sociology at UD and remains a prolific author (several of the books done with her husband) — took a job last summer at the University of Kentucky, where, along with teaching sociology, she was named to an endowed chair of Studies on Violence Against Women.

She spends the weekdays down there and returns to Dayton — and UD games — on the weekends.

"When I'm down there and (UK fans) bring up basketball I remind them the last time we played, we beat them," Curran said with a laugh. "And if it's a Louisville fan, I can say, 'We beat you the last three times we played you.'"

Conversations like that show that he has earned his stripes among the Flyer Faithful.

And that explains something else:

He now has six tickets to every UD game.

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