Early History of Xavier Men's Basketball

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Earliest History of Xavier Basket Ball

It’s origins until we were 1-0 vs UC

William Wester ‘87
This project and how it started

• Saw upcoming plans for “100 years of Xavier basketball”
• I looked at the early records in a MBB media guide
  • One game in 1919-20? • Games vs YMCAs? • Just one game date?
  • Other partial years? • FC = Fenwick club? • U Dayton did not exist in 1919-20?
  • Coaches Harry Gilligan and Joe Meyer?
• Thorough examination of the Xavier archives and over 800 Newspaper clippings as well as study of various historical writings and academic theses later ...

It’s how I spent my COVID Summer Vacation
1891

Memorial Hall: five stories at 7th and Sycamore and a separation between the Academic (high school) and College Departments

Invention of basketball. Well told story of James Naismith with 18 students and a peach basket. Much deeper story here.

By 1895, the first 5 on 5 college basketball game (Chicago v Iowa)
Origins of college basketball at Xavier

1912-13
Athenaeum 1913-04-01 p75

BASKET BALL.

In the beginning of the season, a College Basket Ball Team was organized but no games were played. The small size of the gymnasium proved to be too great a handicap, and later several of the best players were barred by study conditions. However, an admirable Junior Team was developed, and if the youngsters now in the High School only keep on, St. Xavier will in a few years possess a college five worthy to wear the colors of the Blue and White.

“small size of the gymnasium proved to be too great a handicap ... a College Basket Ball Team was organized but no games were played.”

1913-14
Athenaeum 1914-04-01 p63

BASKET BALL NOTES.

With the advent of Spring, basket ball makes its exit from the arena of college athletics to make way for the out-door attractions. No more shall the shrill note of the referee's whistle and the cheering of the supporters of the St. Xavier five he heard in the College gym.

The wearers of the blue and white fought like heroes for the honor of the College. Although they lost about half of the games played, still, when we consider that all the teams they met were much heavier and more experienced, we have every reason to be proud of the St. Xavier Basket Ball Team of '13 and '14. With the development which a year will bring, we have great hopes for next season.

References to teams being heavier and more experienced suggest this summary is about the high school team as junior teams were classified by average weight.

1914-15
Cincinnati Commercial Tribune 1914-12-27 p10

Currently, earliest record of an external game with the St. Xavier All-Collegians

Cincinnati Commercial Tribune 1915-03-11 p7

Currently, earliest record of the college team playing (vs the high school team)
1915-16 COLLEGE BASKET BALL TEAM

KATTUS
ROUDEBUS (Coach)  A. FREY  CLOUD  CONWAY  BRADY
R. KELLY  SEBASTIANI  KLEIN  (Captain)  J. FREY  J. KELLY

BASKETBALL
The College Team.

First in History.
For the first time in the history of the college we have a college basketball team. With a wealth of players to pick from, players, too, good enough to win positions on the best gym teams around the city, it was decided to ignore the obstacles in the way and launch forth. And we did.

Retrospect.
No one can deny that our first season in College Basketball was a successful one. The difficulties met at the outset would have been enough to discourage all concerned, had there not been a resolute determination to surmount them all. Our first three games were defeats, but once we started winning, six victories were offset by but one defeat. The few faithful rooters who followed the game were recompensed by seeing the team grow steadily in ability and in confidence, and in view of the work done during the latter part of the season could say in all truth, "We have a team."

The Coach.
Too much credit cannot be given to Coach Roudebush for the success of the team. Despite the necessarily few practices at irregular times and places he developed a team and a team-work that gave the ordinary frequenters of local gymnasiums a new idea of basketball.

Overall record: 6-4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Opponent</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-Dec</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>21-35</td>
<td>DeSales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-Jan</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>18-33</td>
<td>Austin Ideals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-Jan</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>34-49</td>
<td>St. George</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28-Jan</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>25-18</td>
<td>St. Aloysius Gym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-Jan</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>37-33</td>
<td>Holy Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-Feb</td>
<td>Friar Floor</td>
<td>32-15</td>
<td>St. Francis College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-Feb</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>45-28</td>
<td>Norwood AC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-Feb</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>28-40</td>
<td>Holy Cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-Feb</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>34-21</td>
<td>Covington AC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>62-28</td>
<td>St. John’s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Coach George Milton Roudebush
Currently, earliest known Xavier basketball coach

Grew up in Newtonsville OH (12 mi E of Milford)
Star four-sport athlete at Denison University ’15
Often cited as the first to perfect the “forward pass” a year before famed Knute Rockne of Notre Dame

Played with Jim Thorpe of the Canton Bulldogs when he was at Xavier. Plays were mailed to him to study when he took the train up for games

Also played minor league baseball for the Carolinas
Served in the infantry in WWI

Received a law degree and practiced law for 73 yrs in Cleveland OH

Jan 25 1894 - Feb 29 1992 (age 98)
The schedule included six college teams with currently, the first known Xavier inter-collegiate match vs Moore’s Hill (to become the Univ. of Evansville).

14-Dec Away St. John’s
22-Dec Away Holy Cross
6-Jan Away L 26-30 St. Austin
9-Jan Away L 17-32 St. George
18-Jan Away L 15-35 Moore’s Hill
20-Jan L 19-39 Earlham
25-Jan W 35-3 Cincinnati Dentals
26-Jan W 32-22 Moore’s Hill
5-Feb W 40-21 Georgetown
15-Feb W 40-33 Wilmington
The Great War and Spanish flu pandemic

The S.A.T.C. students quarantined before Oct 1918, utilized cloth masks to cover the nose and mouth (familiar?).

With Armistice in Nov 1918, S.A.T.C disbanded but the 240 who were never deployed were encouraged to finish school

The S.A.T.C. group added to the athletes and loyal alums

Records are sparse for the 1917-18:
A key highlight was that there was extensive remodeling and a new St. Xavier gym was finally worthy of hosting games

Similarly, few records exist for 1918-19:
St. Xavier joined a nine-team local league w/12 game schedule

See: "When Our Boys Go Over There – Xavier and WWI": www.exhibit.xavier.edu/presentations/12/
Traditional first “season” – 1919-20

St. Xavier College moves to Avondale
Hinkle and Edgecliff (Alumni) Halls
Athletics Council now headed by
alumni rather than being student run

Newspaper records show at least four games:
Jan 23 Home W 55-26 Covington KC
Feb 14 Home L 22-26 St John’s (Toledo)
Feb 20 Home L 18-24 St Mary’s (Dayton)
Mar 5 Away L 14-21 St Mary’s (Dayton)

Xavier basketball players during 1919-20

William J “Bill” “Slim” Bechtold ’23 - Insurance
John A Bien – GE Jet Plant Inspector / Realty broker
James J. “Yabe” “Yabby” Cushing ’23 (S.A.T.C) – Realty Firm
J Bernard Grause Jr ’22 – Cincinnati Soliciter’s office
William I “Irv” “Red” Hart ’23 – lawyer (war crime trials)
Michael A Hellenthal (law ‘22) – attorney Western & Southern life
John A. “Noppy” Noppenberger (S.A.T.C) (Commerce) –
(Coach and Xavier Ass’t Athletic Director / Notre Dame + Spalding + Peoria coach)
George J “Shorty” Normile ’20 - public service, a founder of Cincy Knothole baseball
Leo E. Oberschmidt ‘18 (S.A.T.C) (law ’21) – VP Trust Officer First National Bank

Dayton Daily News 18 Feb 1920 p11
First game filled in an open date.
St Mary Saints v St Xavier Saints

Cincinnati Commercial Tribune 21 Feb 1920 p7
Tough break as team captain Irv Hart “had an attack of the grip” (flu)
Coach Harry Gilligan ‘12

Harry Gilligan was an active alum. He wrote letters from France in WWI. He served on the Athletics Council, lead fund raising efforts, was President of the Alumni Assoc. Served on the President’s Council. Awarded an honorary degree in 1963.

Currently the strongest references to Gilligan being the coach of the 1919-20 team.
Coach Joseph A “Chief” Meyer

• Cincinnati native
• St Xavier High School grad
• Notre Dame captain of basketball/baseball teams
• Short stint playing professional baseball.
• Registered architect (important later!)
• Xavier football coach, basketball coach, baseball coach, and athletics administrator 1920-1937
• Coached at UC 1938-1944 (WWII)
• Worked in real estate, President of the Cincinnati Recreation Commission, and as a building inspector

Meyer Policy

“For when the One Great Scorer Comes to write against your name, He writes—not that you won or lost —But how you played the game.”

1924 Xaverian Yearbook
derived from poem: Grantland Rice, 1908, “Alumnus Football”
Ohio Athletic Conference

- Third oldest collegiate conference from 1902
- 10 current NCAA Div III members / ~30 historical
  - Case Tech, Kenyon, Oberlin, Ohio State, Ohio Wesleyan, Western Reserve, Denison, Heidelberg, Wooster, Wittenberg, Cincinnati, Ohio, Miami, Mount Union, Akron, Baldwin Wallace, Ohio Northern, Hiram, Otterbein, Xavier, Muskingum, Marietta, Capital, Ashland, John Carroll, Kent State, Toledo, Bowling Green State, Wilmington, Wooster

- Uniform playing rules derived from the Western Conference (Big 10), amateurism and allowable expenses, eligibility, sportsmanship, practice periods, officials, and the very limited/no recruiting

- Despite the breadth of issues, the conference was mostly passive, and schools were to take care of their own house and have faculty representatives resolve issues between schools

- Scheduling meetings took place but schools could schedule whomever the wished

- Newspapers covered the conference, but no conference champion was conferred at this time

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ohio_Athletic_Conference
Teams of the early 1920s

- Xavier OAC membership began in 1921
- Helped move to a collegiate schedule
  - Reports of difficulty getting opponents
  - Not described, but no games vs UC and Xavier did not join splinter Buckeye AA

Documented games, conference record and home court:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Record</th>
<th>Conf. Record</th>
<th>Home Court</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920-21</td>
<td>3-7</td>
<td>(1-4)</td>
<td>Memorial Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-22</td>
<td>9-9</td>
<td>(1-3)</td>
<td>Memorial Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922-23</td>
<td>14-5</td>
<td>(7-3)</td>
<td>Memorial Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923-24</td>
<td>12-4</td>
<td>(7-1)</td>
<td>Fenwick Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924-25</td>
<td>6-7</td>
<td>(2-2)</td>
<td>L.B. Harrison Gym</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Meyer as yet has not much of a line on the material, but expects Yabby Cushing, Jim Hart and Lou Eberts to help out quite a bit in forming the team.

The Saints have games here with Mt. Union, Ohio U and Heidelberg, and one at Alliance with Mt. Union. Meyer also expects to get games with Miami and other Ohio schools.

Mike Hellenthal
Cincinnati Post 23 Jan 1922 p11

Player “personalities” and continued alumni involvement

Yabby Cushing
In Yabby Cushing the Xavier College team has a forward who comes as near being a demon basketball as can be found in all Ohio. Cushing, tho not very large, is possessed of almost unlimited stamina that enables him to go at top speed all the time. He also is a remarkable shot, a good passer and full of the spirit that makes winning athletes. He’ll make his next local appearance Monday night when Xavier plays Wilmington College at Xavier Hall.

Irv Hart
Cincinnati Post 2 Mar 1923 p20
Cincinnati Post 18 Feb 1922 p8
Bricks and Mortar Period

- Avondale Athletic Club club house
  - Classrooms to Library Building to Recreation Hall
  - “Union House” (1928) or the “Red Building”
- Alumni Science Hall (dedicated Nov 1920)
  - Classrooms and science laboratories
- Hinkle Administration Building (Nov 1920)
  - Jesuit living quarters, dining, chapel
- Corcoran Field (former Avon Field)
  - Concrete bleachers seat 5000 for 1922 season
- Elet Hall (dormitory) (Sept 1924)
  - great importance to re-establish Xavier as a college beyond local Cincinnati
- Library Building (1926)
  - Chapel for St. Xavier College and Bellarmine parish
  - Lodge Reading Room after Mary Lodge
  - To become the Schmidt Library Building
- Plans to realize a gymnasium, to enhance Corcoran, and construct a Biology Building
From Saints to Musketeers

• Track student interest in athletics through the Xavierian News etc.
• Issues are discussed including
  • Athletics for all students or select few
  • Fan support and sportsmanship
  • Who can wear the “X” varsity letter
• Xavierian News ran a contest to rename athletics teams in the Spring of 1925 but there was no satisfactory winner
• Over the summer, former faculty and current board member, Rev Francis J Finn S.J. suggested Musketeers – a name adopted beginning with the Oct 3 1925 football game vs Transylvania
The First *Musketeer* Teams

1925-26  10-8  (1-3), L.B. Harrison Gym

**Basketball Results—1926**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Opponent</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Circleville A.C.</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>C. G. A. C.</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Wilmington College</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Centre College</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Transylvania College</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>“Y” Wildcats</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>L. B. Harrison</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>C. G. A. C.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>University of Louisville</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>L. B. Harrison</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Muskingum College</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Otterbein College</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Transylvania College</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Wilmington College</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Heidelberg College</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Ohio Northern U.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>“Y” Wildcats</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Centre College</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Won: 24; Lost: 10.

A season of mixed results, Win some, lose some. Star center Bob King was out for the season with a broken leg (football). Joe Kelly G was injured and out the last three games.

Jan 20 vs “Y” Wildcats – Xavier “brought out the best passing game ... froze the ball for 9 minutes”

Feb 5 Opening of athletic relations vs Louisville was a victory! 38-18

Jack “Jakie” Wiener G was captain and only senior
The First *Musketeer* Teams

1926-27  11-3  (0-0), Cincinnati Club Gym

Basket-ball Scores

| W | St. Xavier... 25 | Loyola. . . . . 21 |
| L | St. Xavier... 27 | Y. M. C. A. . . 43 |
| W | St. Xavier... 54 | St. Louis. . . . 31 |
| W | St. Xavier... 39 | St. Louis. . . .  5 |
| W | St. Xavier... 29 | Y. M. C. A. . . 25 |
| W | St. Xavier... 29 | Wilmington. . . 21 |
| W | St. Xavier... 56 | Wilmington. . . 41 |
| L | St. Xavier... 13 | Loyola. . . . . 17 |
| W | St. Xavier... 22 | St. Viators. . . 17 |
| W | St. Xavier... 48 | Marshall. . . . 22 |
| W | St. Xavier... 35 | Davis-Elkins. . 28 |
| W | St. Xavier... 63 | Transylvania. . 30 |

A season with only one collegiate defeat ... the return game vs Loyola. In the first game vs Loyola, Captain Joe Kelly hit a game winning shot. Notable victories include a 39-5 romp after an all-day trip to St. Louis. The Musketeers were victorious 35-28 over 15-1 Davis-Elkins (WV).
Coach Joe Meyer, who studied architecture, drove the inclusion of a removable three-layer floor system – unique at the time. Permanent seating for 5000 plus ability to add seats. Running track, multiple locker rooms, support for other sports including intramurals.

All home games were at the new field house.
The team started with 8 straight wins: Centre, St Louis, Cedarville, Alumni, Loyola, Marshall x2, @St Viator. The loss was @Loyola. Then there was the dedication game.
The Dedication Game

The odds were against St. Xavier College even with 9000+ fans packed into the new field house. UC finished as champions of the Buckeye Athletic Assoc. Their main concern was Xavier’s speed. Bands from both schools played and a short pregame dedication ceremony started things off.

The game started in UC’s favor, up 6-1 early on. Xavier kept fighting and kept it close. Score at the half 14-11 in favor of UC. Five minutes into the second half, UC matched its largest lead 20-15. Coach Meyer had a plan – he had scouted UC and realized the large floor of the field house gave an advantage as UC did not play man-to-man defense. On more than one occasion, a Xavier player slipped in underneath to score the easy bunny. With the score, 25-23 in favor of Xavier, Chip Cain took a pass wide open to extend the lead 27-23. Two UC free throws made the score 27-25. Finally, another “sneak” and captain Andy McGrath made the easy one. Final: 29-25.
Final Thoughts

• Amazing 14 year period 1914-15 through 1927-28 for Xavier basketball
  • From student-run athletics with teams playing local church and gym teams
  • To being 8-1 vs a regional collegiate schedule with a premier field house
• During this time, St. Xavier College itself transformed
  • From a downtown campus shared with the high school and study focused on classics
  • To a new campus in Avondale with room to continue to grow with relevance to society
• Athletics and basketball evolved
  • Strict role of amateurism
  • Unified rules as collegiate athletics emerged
• The country likewise progressed
  • Despite the Great War and a global pandemic
  • Cities, businesses, new freedoms and a new lifestyle for many people
  • An expanded role for the United States in the world
• As today, success has required the entirety of dedicated players, coaches, university leaders, student body, and loyal alumni and friends of Xavier