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Joseph Sunderman

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Thomas Kennealy

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- Thomas Kennealy: 00:04 Good morning. My name is Father Tom Kennealy, and I'm the archivist at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. Today is Friday, December 15, 2017. I'm presently in the McDonald Memorial Library on the Xavier campus. With me is Joe Sunderman who, along with Byron Larkin, serves as the radio voices of Xavier's intercollegiate men's basketball team.
- Thomas Kennealy: 00:32 Joe has graciously agreed to be interviewed this morning for the Xavier Archives Collection of Oral Histories. Our topic, naturally enough, will be men's intercollegiate basketball at Xavier. First of all, let me give you some background on Joe Sunderman. Joe graduated from Xavier in May 1979 with two degrees, a bachelor of science in business administration, with a major in marketing, and a master of business administration.
- Thomas Kennealy: 01:03 During his years at Xavier, he played center on the Xavier basketball team. He was inducted into Xavier's Athletic Hall of Fame. Since the 1998-1999 season, Joe and Byron Larkin have served as the radio voices of Xavier's men's basketball on WLW. First of all, Joe, welcome and thank you for your willingness to share your memories of Xavier basketball with us today. Let me begin, if I can, at the beginning. Where were you born and where were you raised?
- Joe Sunderman: 01:35 Cincinnati, Ohio, raised in Westwood.

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Thomas Kennealy: 01:38 So the west side.

Joe Sunderman: 01:39 The west side.

Thomas Kennealy: 01:39 A good west sider.

Joe Sunderman: 01:40 Still live on the west side.

Thomas Kennealy: 01:41 Good for you. That's where the cultural side of Cincinnati is. Since I'm from the west side also.

Joe Sunderman: 01:46 I like to hear that. [both laugh]

Thomas Kennealy: 01:49 So west side, and where did you go to grade school?

Joe Sunderman: 01:51 I went to Lady of Lourdes grades one through four, and then I went to St. Catherine's.

Thomas Kennealy: 01:56 St. Catherine's.

Joe Sunderman: 01:56 Right, ultimately to La Salle High School.

Thomas Kennealy: 01:58 Oh yes. When did you start playing basketball then?

Joe Sunderman: 02:01 Well, at Lady of Lourdes in the second grade. I was tall, and I went out for the basketball team and was fortunate enough to make it, and used to practice at Midway Grade School, which they have since torn down on the west side.

Thomas Kennealy: 02:12 Oh yes.

Joe Sunderman: 02:13 I have vivid memories of being picked up to go to those practices and enjoyed it very much from the start.

Thomas Kennealy: 02:17 Good. So your career got off to a very early start.

Joe Sunderman: 02:21 Yeah, my dad liked basketball. We had a basketball in the backyard. I remember the day he actually put some lights on the exterior to light up the basket so we could shoot baskets at night. It wasn't a very big court, but it was a lot of fun and spent a lot of time out there.

Thomas Kennealy: 02:35 With your dad.

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Joe Sunderman: 02:35 Oh yeah.

Thomas Kennealy: 02:36 Very good. And at La Salle, how did your team do? I presume you played there four years?

Joe Sunderman: 02:42 I played there for the four years, freshman, sophomore, two years of varsity. Our junior and senior year, we did win our league both years, and we were coached by Bill Cady who was a great player here at Xavier University.

Thomas Kennealy: 02:53 Oh yes, Xavier great. That's right, that's a good player. What league were you in at that time La Salle?

Joe Sunderman: 02:58 The GCL.

Thomas Kennealy: 02:59 GCL, okay, and you won the championship...

Joe Sunderman: 03:02 We won the league both years.

Thomas Kennealy: 03:03 Good. So La Salle had a good team.

Joe Sunderman: 03:05 We had a good team.

Thomas Kennealy: 03:06 Yeah, at that point, then you were recruited by Xavier, Xavier University.

Joe Sunderman: 03:12 Yes.

Thomas Kennealy: 03:13 Who did the recruiting? Who recruited you?

Joe Sunderman: 03:15 Tay Baker and the assistant coach, Tim Meyer.

Thomas Kennealy: 03:18 Oh Tim Meyer, yes.

Joe Sunderman: 03:19 Spent a lot of time with the phone calls and visits and so forth. I was fortunate. I had numerous visits and so forth, but it really came down between Miami University and Xavier University. Ultimately, chose to play for the Musketeers. As far as why I made that decision, really I think it came down to a great city. My parents could watch me play. Of course, the value of the Jesuit education weighed heavily on that.

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- Thomas Kennealy: 03:50 That's right. Of course, at La Salle you would have had a good foundation too. Not necessarily Jesuit, but Catholic values there.
- Joe Sunderman: 03:59 You know, it's interesting that you would mention that because, when you make the move from high school into college, obviously you have some concerns, but after I was here for about a month, I had that same reflection. I was very happy that I'd gone to La Salle High School. They did a nice job preparing me.
- Thomas Kennealy: 04:13 You felt right at home, good.
- Joe Sunderman: 04:14 Yes, yes.
- Thomas Kennealy: 04:14 You entered Xavier in 1973.
- Joe Sunderman: 04:17 That's 1974.
- Thomas Kennealy: 04:20 1974, the following 1974. So you were recruited by Xavier. You came here and how did your college career go, wins, losses?
- Joe Sunderman: 04:32 We were about 500. The first year I think the team, when I was a freshman, may have won nine or ten games. My sophomore year, we were over 500. I remember that night when we beat Duquesne and were actually walking off the floor, the people that were in Schmidt got up and were on their feet, gave us a little standing ovation. I kind of wondered why that might have been. Well then I was told later that's the first time in 12 years Xavier actually accomplished a winning season. I think the record might have been 14 to 12. It wasn't spectacular, but it was at least a winning season.
- Thomas Kennealy: 05:00 It was a winning season. Now you played your entire career in the old venerable Schmidt Field House.
- Joe Sunderman: 05:06 Practiced there and played there.
- Thomas Kennealy: 05:08 Most of our games anyway.
- Joe Sunderman: 05:09 Most of them. We would play Marquette, Notre Dame and Purdue. The bigger teams would insist, if they could, that we play at the Cincinnati Gardens.

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Actually, we would play Marquette at Schmidt until Al McGuire retired. Then Hank Raymonds, who was then the coach at Marquette, would allow the game to be played at the Gardens. Generally, most of the games were at Schmidt.

Thomas Kennealy: 05:28 That was home to the Musketeers for about 55 years.

Joe Sunderman: 05:32 Right, that was built in 1928?

Thomas Kennealy: 05:32 Well, it was dedicated in March 1928, and we beat UC by four points, four or five points. So, 55 years we played there. What was it like playing in Schmidt? Your recollections.

Joe Sunderman: 05:50 It was a neat building, especially if you could fill it in. You remember all the doors on both sides.

Thomas Kennealy: 05:54 Yes, I'm trying.

Joe Sunderman: 05:54 I think the capacity was around 5,500 when they just jam people in there. When you did, it was pretty much a wonderful place to play because you had the crowd right on top of you, you had the walkway at one end where people would stand above and look down into the floor. I remember the band and the smell of the popcorn, and the environment. It was definitely a throwback. It was a different type of place to play because it was old. It was built in 1928. It was a magnificent arena at that time.

Thomas Kennealy: 06:21 I think probably one of the largest in the state when it went up at that time.

Joe Sunderman: 06:24 It was. It was considered state of the art and very well done, but as time went on of course that became less and less the fact. It was a good place to play, although I remember our locker rooms were way down on the bottom floor, so at half time you'd go down literally three or four floors. Then, when half time talk was over, you had to climb those steps way back up to the floor again.

Thomas Kennealy: 06:46 Yes, but it certainly was a pretty friendly place at Xavier. According to my records, they won 326 games and lost only about 129.

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- Joe Sunderman: 06:58 One of the things I remember about it is how close the students were to the sidelines. People were right on top of the floor, which made it a neat place to play, and I'm sure a really good place to watch a basketball game. There certainly was not one bad seat in that house. If you were in the building, you were right on top of the action.
- Thomas Kennealy: 07:13 That's how you were, no doubt. Now Tay Baker, he was coach. Jim McCafferty, I think was maybe athletic director during your years here.
- Joe Sunderman: 07:23 Yes, that's right.
- Thomas Kennealy: 07:23 What was Tay Baker like?
- Joe Sunderman: 07:24 I like Tay Baker. He's a man of integrity, really good defensive coach, kind of quiet at times. I thought he did a great job taking a program that, previous to his arrival, maybe had won three games the previous year.
- Thomas Kennealy: 07:39 That's correct.
- Joe Sunderman: 07:39 It was his job to kind of resurrect the program and he worked on a very, very low budget, recruited a lot of kids from the Cincinnati area, really didn't have the resources to reach far and wide together in the recruits. What I liked that Tay Baker and Jim McCafferty did, when I was being recruited, they said, "Joe, we think we'll have you in a league after your sophomore year."
- Joe Sunderman: 08:03 When Tay Baker was actually being recruited to be the coach here, the thought was he would also be in a league, and Jim McCafferty and Tay Baker felt that Xavier needed to get into a basketball league and no longer be an independent to really be able to upgrade the program and compete. I give Jim Baker...or Tay Baker and Jim McCafferty a lot of credit for having the vision and realizing the need for the league for the Musketeers, which they ultimately started that process and became a reality in 1979 and 1980.

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- Thomas Kennealy: 08:38 Yeah, going back just a little before your time to the 1950s, just to talk about that a little bit. That was a pretty good era for Xavier basketball.
- Joe Sunderman: 08:46 It was a great era, yes.
- Thomas Kennealy: 08:47 Sometimes overlooked.
- Joe Sunderman: 08:48 Yes.
- Thomas Kennealy: 08:49 If I'm not incorrect, Xavier went to the NIT three years in a row, and I think won it, in about 1958 or so.
- Joe Sunderman: 08:57 In 1958, they won the NIT.
- Thomas Kennealy: 08:58 They won NIT.
- Joe Sunderman: 08:59 Which I think is very important to point out. That was the tournament at the time. That was more prestigious than the NCAA tournament. So, when Xavier won the NIT, I feel they won the National Championship. That was the tournament to win in that era.
- Thomas Kennealy: 09:12 How did that come about? Why would that have been true? Because it was an invitational tournament rather than-
- Joe Sunderman: 09:19 You know, I'm not sure I know the NCAA, in order to enter that, you had to win your league at the time. Then there were just a very few additional teams added that were asked to play by invitation. I just think times changed and, in that era, the NIT had more...was played New York.
- Thomas Kennealy: 09:34 And more prestige.
- Joe Sunderman: 09:35 Yeah, more prestige, yes.
- Thomas Kennealy: 09:35 I think that's what I remember too. It was very-
- Joe Sunderman: 09:39 That was like winning the National Championship.
- Thomas Kennealy: 09:40 Exactly.
- Joe Sunderman: 09:40 It's interesting to me. I think that created a thread of tradition, a thread of expectations, and that was part

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of the movement as to when Xavier decided to pour money back into the basketball program and get into the league, and make the basketball program great.

- Thomas Kennealy: 09:55 Who was coach in 1958 when we...was that McCafferty?
- Joe Sunderman: 09:59 Jim McCafferty was coach.
- Thomas Kennealy: 10:00 Jim McCafferty, okay.
- Joe Sunderman: 10:01 And John Ruberg was the assistant.
- Thomas Kennealy: 10:02 Oh yes. Ruberg went on to be head coach for a few years as well.
- Joe Sunderman: 10:07 That's right.
- Thomas Kennealy: 10:07 So those were great men. In the 1960s, moving to the 1960s, there are some really notable players from that era. Kind of hard to pick out since there were a number of good ones, but certainly one in particular that comes to mind is Steve Thomas because of all the records he set.
- Joe Sunderman: 10:25 Now, I used to go to games as a young kid and I'm sure I've watched him play. I don't have a distinct memory. I remember going to Schmidt Field House and the environment and all that, but it's interesting to me when I talk to old Xavier fans that watched him play. Their eyes light up when they talk about Steve Thomas. I know he averaged 30 points a game, the highest points per game ever.
- Thomas Kennealy: 10:45 That's incredible, isn't it?
- Joe Sunderman: 10:47 It is, yeah.
- Thomas Kennealy: 10:47 30 points a game for an entire season.
- Joe Sunderman: 10:49 They said his game-
- Thomas Kennealy: 10:50 30 points for a season, yes.
- Joe Sunderman: 10:51 Yeah, per game, per season. They said his game was a little bit different. He would shoot off maybe the

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incorrect foot or off of one foot, or run down a floor, and could do some spectacular things. He must have been highly entertaining, as well as very, very skilled. Great player.

- Thomas Kennealy: 11:07 There were some other great players in that period too. Bob Quick.
- Joe Sunderman: 11:11 Luther Rackley, both played in the NBA, played for the Musketeers in the late 1960s.
- Thomas Kennealy: 11:15 Incidentally, I think Luther Rackley left us quite recently. I think he died last month.
- Joe Sunderman: 11:18 In November, yeah.
- Thomas Kennealy: 11:20 Yes.
- Joe Sunderman: 11:20 I got to meet him one time, really enjoyed meeting him. Wish I'd got to know him better.
- Thomas Kennealy: 11:23 Was he a big man center?
- Joe Sunderman: 11:25 Yes, great rebounder, good scorer, good athlete, yeah.
- Thomas Kennealy: 11:30 After your beginning, around maybe the early 1980s, Xavier made a real effort to go big time basketball. How did that come about as you remember it, and maybe who were some of the people involved in that? I know Father Bob Mulligan certainly played a role. He was president at that time.
- Joe Sunderman: 11:52 Well Bill Daily was part of the search committee and really put a lot of work into compiling questions. I think he had a list of 100 questions he was going to ask for candidates to coach. Bob Staak caught his eye. They ultimately hired Bob Staak. So Bill Daily, he had the vision, which I kind of appreciate because, even when I came to Xavier, when you look at the whole University, it's a great city, it's a great education. You had schools in similar like Villanova and Marquette. So many similarities in my opinion, why couldn't Xavier pursue that path?

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- Joe Sunderman: 12:29 Bill Daily had that vision, and he had the will to say this can be done, and he pushed for that. But the biggest thing still is they got into the league with Oklahoma City, Chicago.
- Thomas Kennealy: 12:43 Yeah, the Midwestern City Conference, yes.
- Joe Sunderman: 12:45 Yeah. The real advantage there is Xavier played teams that could compete with, but the prize of winning that league was an invitation to the NCAA tournament.
- Thomas Kennealy: 12:56 Oh, automatically?
- Joe Sunderman: 12:57 Automatically.
- Thomas Kennealy: 12:57 Okay.
- Joe Sunderman: 12:58 So that is something that Bob Staak achieved for only the second time in Xavier's history. You might have to help me with the date. It was 1983 or 1984.
- Thomas Kennealy: 13:06 Yeah.
- Joe Sunderman: 13:07 That was huge. In fact, I remember the first time Xavier won that league at Schmidt Field House, it was broadcasting the ballgame. I think it was Dwight Hollins was sitting up on the basket. They were playing a Lionel Richie song, and that arena was electric. You could just feel the excitement. Xavier basketball was capturing the imagination of the city at that time. When you watch a team that wins, it's fun.
- Thomas Kennealy: 13:30 That's right.
- Joe Sunderman: 13:30 And it becomes fun to go to the games, and it's a snowball that rolls down the hill and gets bigger and bigger. Quite frankly, it's been going that way ever since.
- Thomas Kennealy: 13:38 Yeah, they joined the conference I think in 1979, Midwestern.
- Joe Sunderman: 13:41 1979 and 1980 was the first year.
- Thomas Kennealy: 13:43 They belonged to Atlantic 10.

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Joe Sunderman: 13:44 Right.

Thomas Kennealy: 13:44 About 1995 and then of course-

Joe Sunderman: 13:46 Right, and I'll give Jeff Fogelson credit for that because Xavier actually started to dominate the Midwestern Cities Conference on a pretty regular basis. The Atlantic 10 was calling Xavier saying, "hey think about joining." Xavier made the move, and it was a step up that time in competition from a league standpoint. Again, it helped recruiting again in the profile of the program.

Thomas Kennealy: 14:12 That's right.

Joe Sunderman: 14:12 It was just a nice step up. As I look back on the Xavier program all these years, small steps, but many small steps.

Thomas Kennealy: 14:21 Moving in the right direction.

Joe Sunderman: 14:22 Yes.

Thomas Kennealy: 14:23 Yes. So you mentioned, or we've talked about the conferences and how important those were. I think another important move, and that's stepping up as you talked about, was moving to the Gardens.

Joe Sunderman: 14:35 It was 1983, right?

Thomas Kennealy: 14:37 Yes, actually January of 1984.

Joe Sunderman: 14:39 Oh, you have all the good numbers. That's good.

Thomas Kennealy: 14:40 In the middle of the season for whatever reason.

Joe Sunderman: 14:43 You know what, that was a big move. The owner of the Gardens, was it Jerry Robinson I think?

Thomas Kennealy: 14:47 It was, yes.

Joe Sunderman: 14:48 Xavier had made the move and people loved to go to the Gardens. It had a certain feel about it. Most of the arena would be dark, and they had the lights that were hanging down from the ceiling on long strings. So the floor would be lit up. The rest of the arena

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would be dark. They were starting to average more and more people, but you could walk up and get a ticket, wasn't expensive. You could buy a beer at the game and enjoy the game, and the fans were into it. Then it turned to be a really comfortable home court for the Musketeers and it was the right place at the right time.

- Joe Sunderman: 15:19 It was a great move from Schmidt to the Gardens, and I still talk to people today now that, in a sense, reminisce about the days at the Gardens because they had so much fun there. It was just a wonderful move. It was perfect for the Atlantic 10 and Xavier had good teams. I remember there was one night there, NIT. It was 1984, I believe, when Xavier played Ohio State, and that was a magical night.
- Thomas Kennealy: 15:43 Oh yes, I was there that night, yes.
- Joe Sunderman: 15:44 I don't mean to jump-
- Thomas Kennealy: 15:45 That was a great game.
- Joe Sunderman: 15:46 That was a great game, but it also had a huge impact on the Xavier program. There was a young man in the audience that time named Byron Larkin that was watching that game. He said that was one of the reasons that he ultimately chose to come to play for Xavier because Ohio State losing to Xavier in the Gardens with a huge crowd on TV and the whole bit, it just was a lot of good there in that building.
- Thomas Kennealy: 16:10 If I remember correctly, Xavier then went on to win several months later against Nebraska, also in the Gardens.
- Joe Sunderman: 16:17 That's right.
- Thomas Kennealy: 16:18 Then I don't know what happened after that. Do we lose to Notre Dame or Michigan?
- Joe Sunderman: 16:24 We went to play at Michigan and lost a tough game at Michigan.

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- Thomas Kennealy: 16:27 Yes, that's right, but that was an important series. That really, I think, worked up the fan base very much.
- Joe Sunderman: 16:35 Well I know I came home from broadcasting the basketball game that night and there was a sign on my door, "Congratulations X, Way to go X" from one of my neighbors that was not necessarily a Xavier basketball fan, but again it was starting to catch...
- Thomas Kennealy: 16:48 Catch on.
- Joe Sunderman: 16:48 ...the imagination of the city a little bit. Fan base was slowly gathering and the momentum was continuing to build.
- Thomas Kennealy: 16:54 What did Bob Staak do? You talked about hiring Bob Staak. I think that occurred in about 1979.
- Joe Sunderman: 17:00 Bob Staak demanded things. In fact, he came into his office at Xavier that Tay Baker used to use. He was in there for one day. He said, this is no office for a college basketball coach, because Xavier at the time had dropped football a few years earlier. The resources had literally dried up. Bob Staak said, "If I'm going to coach here, you're moving me out of this office." So they moved him to the O'Connor Center.
- Joe Sunderman: 17:25 Just as he demanded there what he needed in his office, seems like a small thing, but he had the ability to demand from his players what he wanted. He laid out a clear path. He had never relented, and was a terrific coach and a very, very good recruiter. He was one of those types of coaches that, while you're playing for him...this is my impression, he could demand a lot out of you in practice, yell at you, scream at you. When you're done, he hugs you and tells you how great you are, and you ultimately love that coach. You'll play hard for him. His players played hard for him, and he was just a very good coach.
- Thomas Kennealy: 18:01 Of course, his successor Pete Gillen.
- Joe Sunderman: 18:04 Pete Gillen. You know what's interesting in all these coaches, the whole thread, every one of them are

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extremely competitive. They all just really hate to lose, and it comes out in different ways. Pete Gillen, in my opinion, was a wonderful coach, especially when it came to coaching power forwards and big men. I used to watch his practices and he would take the big guys, he'd take them down personally to one side of the floor, and he would throw the ball like Tyrone Hill, Derrick Strong. They would do the same three moves over and over again. He would perfect them. Here's where you put your arms, here's where you put your elbows, and here's where you put your feet. He was very exacting, and you could just watch those players start to catch on and really become very, very good basketball players under his guidance.

- Thomas Kennealy: 18:49 Yeah see, he was immensely popular with the fans.
- Joe Sunderman: 18:53 He was. He had a great sense of humor.
- Thomas Kennealy: 18:54 He had a great sense of humor and was a lot of fun.
- Joe Sunderman: 18:56 Yeah.
- Thomas Kennealy: 18:57 Really fired up the imagination of people.
- Joe Sunderman: 18:59 Very personable. I see him when I'm broadcasting games for Xavier, even this year, last year, if he happens to be doing a radio or TV broadcast, which he does a lot of now, he makes sure he stops by and say, "Hey Joe, how you doing?" Spend a few moments with you. That's just how he is. He related very well to people, and everybody loved Pete Gillen.
- Thomas Kennealy: 19:17 Everybody loved him, and he was certainly...he certainly pushed for an arena on campus, as I remember. He didn't get it in his time, but he certainly worked to help us to get an arena on campus.
- Joe Sunderman: 19:29 As great as the Gardens...and his coaches realized this because they're recruiting players and they're hearing the feedback from the players while they're recruiting against whoever it might be in the Midwest. There's a lot of great schools. I'm sure they hear what might be lacking in some recruits minds, or the coaches are wishing if we only had an on campus arena, I could recruit at a higher level.

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- Thomas Kennealy: 19:51 Sure.
- Joe Sunderman: 19:51 Which is true.
- Thomas Kennealy: 19:53 After him of course was Skip Prosser. He came in and had some wonderful seasons here at Xavier.
- Joe Sunderman: 20:02 Skip Prosser could relate to just about everybody. I remember he came in. One of his first talks that he gave was at a book lovers club.
- Thomas Kennealy: 20:11 Oh yes, to the ladies.
- Joe Sunderman: 20:11 He came in...to the ladies.
- Thomas Kennealy: 20:12 That's right.
- Joe Sunderman: 20:12 He was an old English teacher and he was quoting Keats and Shakespeare, and just had them in the palm of their hand and was telling stories about his days as an athlete, as a little kid playing on the baseball field. He was just terrific. That's the first time I had heard Skip talk, and I left that room thinking Xavier has found themselves a gem, because you liked him, but he had also the ability, as did Bob Staak, to demand from his players.
- Joe Sunderman: 20:41 His practices were hard the entire year. He was like let's go, we're going to put the gas pedal all the way down and we're going to go as hard as we can through the entire year. The one thing I used to like to do is to go to his practices, and I made sure I would get there early because he would gather his players around at times before practice and tell them a story or a tale that had a very definite meaning at the end. He was always teaching. I think, if you describe Skip Prosser, of course he was a high school teacher and a coach, but I say he was a teacher even before he was a coach. That's what he was about trying to make everyone better in life. Even as a broadcaster or whatever, he'd kind of challenge in a good way. He was an exceptionally good man and cared very much about everyone around him.

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- Thomas Kennealy: 21:28 Then, during that period, you and Byron are working back together as the radio voices of Xavier. You've been doing it now for about what, 20 years?
- Joe Sunderman: 21:37 I've been doing it, broadcasting 20 years with Byron Larkin. I've been involved in Xavier's Broadcast for about 37, 38 years I guess.
- Thomas Kennealy: 21:44 Oh okay, going back to-
- Joe Sunderman: 21:44 I used to do...Well I started in 1980, 1981.
- Thomas Kennealy: 21:49 Okay.
- Joe Sunderman: 21:50 I was doing the color commentating then, working with a fella named Bill Surell. Then I actually worked with Andy MacWilliams for a long time.
- Thomas Kennealy: 21:59 He's a very excellent broadcaster.
- Joe Sunderman: 22:01 He actually maneuvered to get Xavier on 700 WLW and also a TV contract with Channel 19. I actually had a try out to do the TV, and Andy said I'll take Joe to do the TV broadcast. So I got to know Andy very well. That leads me to how I'm broadcasting with Byron Larkin. Andy was a legendary and a great broadcaster, but he had voice problems. He ultimately lost the ability to sit court side and broadcast a game. We actually switched roles during one of the seasons. He said, "Hey, I can't do the play by play, Joe. You have to do the play by play." He started going to color commentating, which required less and less talking, and ultimately got to the point where he couldn't continue on in his career. Then that's how I teamed up with Byron Larkin, the all time leading scorer for Xavier.
- Thomas Kennealy: 22:47 Yes, and a great team. Ask a question for you. How do you prepare for a game? When you're doing, say, tomorrows game against Eastern Tennessee, what are your preparations?
- Joe Sunderman: 22:58 Well, I usually take...I allot about three hours is what I'll feel that I'll need. The first thing I do is I make an index card that'll list the opponents numbers and names, and I'll take that with me in my car. I'll put it in

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my pocket and I'll keep that with me, and I'll just slowly start studying the names, but I make a large sheet that's about 18 inches long with...I use big markers and I write their names in there nice and large so I can see them with their numbers, and I have a space for notes. I'll make notations about their players and our players and prepare that way, and read game notes. Both teams supply with a set of game notes. That's about 35 pages long that has-

Thomas Kennealy: 23:35

Oh boy.

Joe Sunderman: 23:35

You know, you learn to read them quickly. You learn to skip over things you don't need, but I love sports, so I enjoy the reading. It's not a problem. It's something I look forward to.

Thomas Kennealy: 23:46

Good, and do a very good job.

Joe Sunderman: 23:47

I appreciate that, thank you.

Thomas Kennealy: 23:48

Of course, during that period too, the move to Cintas. Building the Cintas and moving into Cintas. What impact did that have?

Joe Sunderman: 23:56

Huge, unbelievably huge. Father Hoff and Mr. Kohlhepp had the vision, gathered the resources, marshaled the forces and built a beautiful arena. I think the timing of building the Cintas Center...this is my opinion, was perfect. If it had been built five years earlier, they may have built a different style of arena, more of a square type of multipurpose building.

Thomas Kennealy: 24:20

Oh, interesting.

Joe Sunderman: 24:20

But when that arena was built, there was a trend to build a just...to make it a nice arena for basketball, nice and tight, a nice circular type of deal. It's a beautiful arena, plus they put a lot of multi purpose rooms in that building that were utilized by the public year round, which I think is actually crucial to being part of the community. But having that building on campus where it's located solidifies Xavier's basketball, in my opinion, for years to come. It makes it a very attractive job for a coach.

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- Joe Sunderman: 24:52 Think about this if you're a Xavier player. You live in a dorm, you walk 150 yards to an auxiliary gym that's open 24 hours where you can practice your craft, practice your game. You walk to the arena. Again, you're on national TV, 200, 150 yards from where you live. Now it's time to go to school on Monday. You walk the other direction about 300, 400 yards and you're in class. This set up that I've seen at Xavier University, there's none better in the country. I know I might be a little bias towards Xavier basketball, but if you look at it, you have a beautiful arena, you're on national TV, you're playing wonderful competition, and now the Big East. It's just a really good set up.
- Thomas Kennealy: 25:28 Moving to the Big East too was another step forward, no doubt about it.
- Joe Sunderman: 25:33 I personally thought that would be a significant step, but I don't think I realized how significant that step.
- Thomas Kennealy: 25:40 Okay.
- Joe Sunderman: 25:40 The recruiting has enabled our coaches to knock on doors, sit and talk with recruits that may have given them some time in the past, but really not listened intently with the possibility of becoming a Xavier Musketeer. Plus the national exposure, and I'm a big proponent of the fact that Xavier basketball can be a billboard for the University, and also attracting really great students from the East Coast and wherever we play. It helped the University as a whole. I think that is very, very important, and I think that's been one of the accomplishments for the basketball program.
- Thomas Kennealy: 26:16 Yeah, and being in the Big East.
- Joe Sunderman: 26:17 The Big East is-
- Thomas Kennealy: 26:18 And of course the TV coverage too.
- Joe Sunderman: 26:20 Every game is on TV now.
- Thomas Kennealy: 26:21 That's right.
- Joe Sunderman: 26:22 I know I'm the radio guy, but every game is on TV. It's just amazing to me. Back when I played in the 1970s,

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we might get two, three, four games on a year. Of course, it was different back then. It was only a game of the week. I'd wait as a kid for the game of the week on Saturday, but that has all changed with all the ESPN. Certainly Fox has been a big part of the Big East. You can watch all you want around the entire country.

Thomas Kennealy: 26:47

Once we moved into Cintas, Thad Matta came as coach, replacing Skip Prosser.

Joe Sunderman: 26:56

Right, he was here for three years.

Thomas Kennealy: 26:58

Three years, and I think was the one that took us to the first...time...First time we went to the Elite Eight.

Joe Sunderman: 27:03

Well, in 2004.

Thomas Kennealy: 27:05

That was his work, yeah. What was he like? What as a coach?

Joe Sunderman: 27:08

I really liked him. I thought he was great with the strategy. I thought he was clever and that he might hold something back during the season that he newly may want to use against the team later on. In fact, that particular team was struggling, and it was early February they beat Cincinnati. Lionel Chalmers hit about a 17 foot jump shot from the right side of the lane. Xavier had rallied, and that was a huge shot, not only for that game, but I think for Xavier basketball. That particular team then went on a winning streak that took them right into the Atlantic 10 tournament up in Dayton, Ohio.

Joe Sunderman: 27:46

They had to play the number one team in the country then.

Thomas Kennealy: 27:48

St. Joseph, that's right.

Joe Sunderman: 27:49

St. Joseph, and Xavier ended up winning that game, I don't know, 20 points or whatever. They win it by 22 at half time.

Thomas Kennealy: 27:56

Took on the first top team in the country, and won by a huge margin.

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- Joe Sunderman: 28:00 They were winning by 35 points in the second half.
- Thomas Kennealy: 28:02 Yes.
- Joe Sunderman: 28:03 Pardon me. They had actually used some offense in that game that he hadn't used the entire year. I actually asked him. I said, "well why didn't you use it earlier?" He said, "Well, I knew we would need this at a certain point, so I was kind of saving it." I think he caught them off guard, and they just pounded them. They needed to win those games to make the NCAA tournament because they had struggled up until that UC game, so the record wasn't just spectacular. So they needed to keep winning. As a matter of fact, they had to win a couple more games to win the A-10 tournament that was being played in Dayton, Ohio. They won those two games and made it to the tournament. So then they ultimately made it to Elite Eight where they lost to Duke in Atlanta in 2000.
- Thomas Kennealy: 28:47 That was a very close game.
- Joe Sunderman: 28:48 That was a 66-63, and I can remember seeing some of that game as you bring it up again. So close to going to the Final Four that that was a really, really good ball club. He had some breaks in that game that went against us, which even for me to think about bothers me to this day. But that was a great run. In fact, it was known as the run for Xavier.
- Thomas Kennealy: 29:11 Then unfortunately, Matta had some health problems in recent years. Now he's out of coaching all together.
- Joe Sunderman: 29:18 He's had some back problems, I think, which restricted his ability to work the sidelines and probably recruit a little bit. But as far as my memories have found, Matta, he did a great job here at Xavier.
- Thomas Kennealy: 29:26 Exactly, no doubt.
- Joe Sunderman: 29:27 Recruited very well. It's interesting too, as you watch the progression of coaches. As you lose a coach and gain a coach, sometimes the newer coaches, they don't feel the restrictions. Maybe the previous coaches might have felt while they were laboring, coaching at maybe the Gardens, or coaching at

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Schmidt. When Thad came here, he's in the Cintas. It's like I can recruit anybody to play in his building. So everybody kept raising the bar a little bit I think.

Thomas Kennealy: 29:57

Let's talk about his successor, Sean Miller. Sean came in '04, succeeding Matta. What was he like?

Joe Sunderman: 30:05

He was a bulldog. Again, a really, really competitive, very good recruiter. His deal was to play hard. He wanted his players to play hard and that was constantly drummed into the players. He just wouldn't accept losing. He's very, very competitive, and I'll say that of all the coaches, but that's the trait you need to have.

Thomas Kennealy: 30:25

Particularly of him.

Joe Sunderman: 30:26

Losing has to aggravate you. He was also a great point guard when he played for Pittsburgh in college. He saw the game, in a sense, from that position. He had a good grasp of it and was able to communicate that to his players. Again, very demanding, but his players loved to play for him. That just seems to be the combination of great coaches that you can demand from your players, you can correct them so to speak when they need to be. But when the day's done, they know that that coach is in their corner.

Thomas Kennealy: 31:01

And that they've made them better players.

Joe Sunderman: 31:02

Absolutely.

Thomas Kennealy: 31:03

They made them better players and got the team to work-

Joe Sunderman: 31:06

As a player, you want to be told what will make you better.

Thomas Kennealy: 31:08

Sure.

Joe Sunderman: 31:08

Your goal was to ... Nobody walks on the floor looking to lose. Nobody walks onto the floor not trying to play hard, especially at the collegiate level. You're looking for a coach or someone that can drive you to be your best.

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- Thomas Kennealy: 31:19 Sure, and that brings us down to the incumbent, Chris Mack, present coach. I guess soon to be the winningest coach. I don't think he is at the moment, but he's-
- Joe Sunderman: 31:28 His numbers right now, he's not yet.
- Thomas Kennealy: 31:31 Not quite, but very close.
- Joe Sunderman: 31:32 It's on the horizon.
- Thomas Kennealy: 31:34 Yeah.
- Joe Sunderman: 31:34 If you look at what he has done in terms of wins, NCAA tournament wins, his numbers back up, you can make the argument he's the greatest coach in Xavier's history just based upon-
- Thomas Kennealy: 31:49 Record.
- Joe Sunderman: 31:50 ... record. What I like about Chris' teams is they may start out at one location, and they are going to get better. It's been that way every year he's been here. He's in his ninth season, and it's really enjoyable to watch, because I watch a lot of basketball so you can kind of pick up the small steps that an individual player's starting to make in a step the team may make as a unit. His advancement in terms of his teams every single year, in my opinion, have always been they're better in February than they were in January, and they're better in March than they were-
- Thomas Kennealy: 32:27 Which is important because that's when you play the tournament.
- Joe Sunderman: 32:30 That's exactly right.
- Thomas Kennealy: 32:30 Yeah. Looking at some of the Xavier players, just to talk about the four whose numbers have been retired. Beginning with your good friend Byron Larkin. I think his was the first number to be retired.
- Joe Sunderman: 32:45 Well, Byron, I used to do the color commentating when Andy Mack was calling the games, and I'd laugh. He'd say, what do you think we ought to do? I say, well I think we need to get the ball to Byron

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Larkin. It made me sound like I really...I was right just about every time. He was a tremendous scorer, great player, really had a good aggressiveness for the game. He understood how the referees might be calling the game or to drive in and create contact and know the whistle was going to go to his favor. Great athlete, just a very confident player, fun to watch, good teammate. I know he shot over 50% during his career from the field, so I always tease him, "Hey, you really probably should have shot the ball a little more and lowered it a little bit because you were so efficient." That might have helped the team even more, but also, he had over 300 assists when he'd play.

- Thomas Kennealy: 33:33 Oh nice.
- Joe Sunderman: 33:33 So he was also a very good passer, just a very, very, very good basketball player.
- Thomas Kennealy: 33:39 Certainly the highest scorer in Xavier history too.
- Joe Sunderman: 33:40 Highest scorer in Xavier history, yeah.
- Thomas Kennealy: 33:42 That's right.
- Joe Sunderman: 33:42 You can count on Byron every night for 20 points.
- Thomas Kennealy: 33:44 Oh yes.
- Joe Sunderman: 33:45 Doesn't matter who you play.
- Thomas Kennealy: 33:46 Yeah, that's good. Of course, Tyrone Hill, his number's also been retired.
- Joe Sunderman: 33:51 What a great rebounder. Cincinnati from Withrow High School.
- Thomas Kennealy: 33:54 That's right.
- Joe Sunderman: 33:57 Came into play here at Xavier and, as a freshman, they might toss the ball into post a few times. He'd drop it a few times, but he worked at his game, was well coached by Coach Gillen. The entire room was such a great rebounder and scorer. He had a great will too. I think he felt the purpose. He knew what he

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wanted to achieve to play in the NBA, became an NBA All-Star.

Thomas Kennealy: 34:17

He did, that's right. Up in Cleveland?

Joe Sunderman: 34:20

Yeah. He was a big part of Xavier basketball and just a force.

Thomas Kennealy: 34:23

I don't know whether it's true or not that prior to coming to Xavier he had not played a lot of basketball. Got to it rather late in his high school career. I don't know if that's true or not.

Joe Sunderman: 34:34

You know I'm not so sure either, but I think I had heard that. Actually, when you think and look back onto his game, some of the things that he worked on would give you that indication that he hadn't played a whole lot growing up, but he sure caught up in a hurry.

Thomas Kennealy: 34:47

Oh, he sure caught up a great, great player. No doubt about it. Brian Grant, I think his number has been retired.

Joe Sunderman: 34:54

It has been. Another great individual and a terrific player. He's one of those guys you see play for about five minutes. You watch him run up and down the floor, jump above the rim for a few rebounds, and you pretty much instantly know that he's going to be a great player. I actually played with his high school coach, a fella named Tim Chadwell, that called Xavier and said I have this great player up here at my high school that I'm coaching. No one's really talking to him. Come up and take a look.

Joe Sunderman: 35:23

Brian Grant was under the radar and Xavier went up, spotted the talent, offered him a scholarship and, right after that, people started to realize what a great talent he was, but Xavier got there first. Xavier was just coming off of year 1990, and the whole thing came together, and Xavier was able to bring Brian Grant in. I remember meeting Brian Grant after his senior year in high school when he was still in high school.

Joe Sunderman: 35:48

I actually met him on the way back from the A-10 tournament being played in Dayton, Ohio. I think I met

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him at a restaurant somewhere and I went over and said, "Hey Brian, I'm Joe Sunderman. I broadcast the games for Xavier Radio. I'm thrilled you're coming to Xavier." His eyes lit up. He said, "I am so happy to be going to Xavier, and I'm just thrilled I was offered a college scholarship." You could just see how thrilled he was to have that opportunity. Boy, did he ever seize it. He was a great player for the Musketeers.

- Thomas Kennealy: 36:14 I bet, and a great pro career.
- Joe Sunderman: 36:16 Yes.
- Thomas Kennealy: 36:16 A long pro career as I remember.
- Joe Sunderman: 36:18 Yep, sure.
- Thomas Kennealy: 36:19 He played with a number of teams.
- Joe Sunderman: 36:20 Yep.
- Thomas Kennealy: 36:21 Yes. He was a great player, but we certainly couldn't pass over David West without talking about him.
- Joe Sunderman: 36:27 A player of the year when he was here.
- Thomas Kennealy: 36:29 That's right.
- Joe Sunderman: 36:31 I remember he was at the banquet, but he was thinking of going to the NBA one year early.
- Thomas Kennealy: 36:34 That's right.
- Joe Sunderman: 36:35 After his junior year. Actually, the coaches didn't even know, I don't believe, at the time. David was struggling and made the decision, either that day or the day before, that he was going to stay at Xavier for his senior year. I remember the emotion when he got up at the end of the season banquet and made the announcement, I'm going to stay at Xavier one more year. Boy, that made everybody extremely happy and it worked out well for David. He's had a tremendous career, still playing in the NBA. Just in the last year, won an NBA Championship.
- Thomas Kennealy: 37:02 And won his ring.

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- Joe Sunderman: 37:03 He got his ring.
- Joe Sunderman: 37:04 But you know, beyond that, what a great player. But he's another great representative of University, a terrific individual, does a lot of good in the communities that he's involved in, and comes back and will talk to the Xavier players once in a while. Those guys that we've just mentioned there, everyone of them make you proud of the Xavier uniform.
- Thomas Kennealy: 37:23 They really do, yes. And I knew David West personally because he was also a good student, quite a good student. I would see him with Sister Rosanne Fleming quite often. They would be chatting. He was a perfect gentleman.
- Joe Sunderman: 37:36 I'm glad you brought up Sister Rose Ann Fleming's name because she got involved when Pete Gillen was a coach here, and everyone's heard the story about she was the one to help the basketball players go about their studies. She was at that for about a week and went in to Pete Gillen and finally said, "I need the authority to bench your players. If they're not going to class, I want to be able to make the call."
- Joe Sunderman: 37:57 He thought about it, wasn't sure he wanted to agree to that, but he did. I actually rank that as one of the best decisions, and for Xavier basketball also because Xavier has graduated 105 straight players who have been seniors. I give her all the credit for that. She set a tone, a tradition in the classroom for our players, that when you come here to play basketball, you're expected to get your degree, and you're coming to Xavier because you expect yourself to get a degree. It's all part of the success of this program, and she deserves a ton of credit. Of course, she's in the Hall of Fame, as she should be.
- Thomas Kennealy: 38:32 Yes, as she should be. That's really true. She's really a remarkable person. And...as far as the athletes were concerned, their studies came first. She really insisted on that.
- Joe Sunderman: 38:44 She made a lot of road trips.
- Thomas Kennealy: 38:45 She really did, that's right.

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- Joe Sunderman: 38:46 She instituted study halls.
- Thomas Kennealy: 38:48 Study halls while on the road and so forth, yes.
- Joe Sunderman: 38:51 Still intact.
- Thomas Kennealy: 38:51 She's a great, great, great lady. Yeah, no doubt about it. Xavier's had a pretty good run. You stop to think about it. We've gone to the sweet 16 eight times since somewhere around 1999. We've gone to the Elite Eight three times now. What accounts for this success, Joe? The coaches? The players? The Gardens? The Cintas center?
- Joe Sunderman: 39:16 All of it.
- Thomas Kennealy: 39:17 All the above.
- Joe Sunderman: 39:18 All the effort going back from the 1950s, every step, even when they were maintaining it in the 1960s, and then the University decided to get serious and pump some money to the Basketball program. The formation of the league of the great coaches. It's really remarkable that now Xavier has hit on a one good coach after another.
- Thomas Kennealy: 39:35 That's truly amazing to me.
- Joe Sunderman: 39:36 Even some of the players that were found under the radar, when you go back and you find a Tyrone Hill that wasn't maybe heavily recruited. Aaron Williams, who played 15 years in the NBA, was not heavily recruited, was a great player, played with Brian Grant. I could go on naming player after player and I apologize for anybody that I don't, but I mean it's just-
- Thomas Kennealy: 39:54 Then we're going to miss some people.
- Joe Sunderman: 39:56 But it's just been a steady step by step improvement, year after year. It's been a desire of the administration above and beyond anything else. You have to have the support of the entire university from the very top down.
- Thomas Kennealy: 40:12 Top down, that's right.

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- Joe Sunderman: 40:12 Through the entire University, they support it, the Xavier basketball program. So it's a community effort that's resulted in a wonderful building. Every game this year has been sold out. They're selling standing room tickets to most of the games now. It's an unbelievable story.
- Thomas Kennealy: 40:26 As you look back over your career here and your broadcasting, is there a game or two that stands out or a moment that stands out for you, maybe in the tournaments, maybe something-
- Joe Sunderman: 40:38 Well back then we were independent, so we look forward to the holiday tournaments, and we did have my senior year. We played in the ... I think it was called the Tennessee Classic or Invitational at the University of Tennessee. We played Southern Cal one night and played Tennessee the next night. Southern Cal was ranked, I believe, eleventh in the country. Somewhere around there we ended up beating Southern Cal, and the next night we beat Tennessee.
- Joe Sunderman: 41:01 So I have a watch at home that says University of Tennessee on it that I treasure. So those two nights were the nights that I remember the most.
- Thomas Kennealy: 41:10 Most, yes.
- Joe Sunderman: 41:10 They were a lot of fun.
- Thomas Kennealy: 41:12 Through these years, college basketball has changed a lot. Could you maybe single out the areas where you think the most significant changes have occurred, say since the 1950s?
- Joe Sunderman: 41:23 The three point shot, the arc. In fact, if we go over there today, I don't think it's all that far away. Every school has auxiliary gyms now and they have these machines where you go in and set it under the basket and you shoot. It'll gather the ball for you and throw it back to you. You can really, really practice different and get more shots up. Technology has played a part in how they train you in the weight room, what to eat. They can analyze your shot. So the three point shot is becoming a bigger part of the game.

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- Joe Sunderman: 41:54 I think every year, even as we speak today, if you shoot 33%, that's as good as shooting 50% from two point range. You might as well take a chance and shoot a three if you notice the big men are shooting a higher percentage too because they're shooting dunks and layups. They're not shooting that 14, 15 foot jump shot anymore because the value of that attempted two point shot, when you can move out another four feet and try for three, that has been lost.
- Thomas Kennealy: 42:18 Oh yes.
- Joe Sunderman: 42:18 That mid range jumper has kind of gone away a little bit.
- Thomas Kennealy: 42:20 Is disappearing, yeah.
- Joe Sunderman: 42:22 And you'll notice a lot of teams will start three guards now to work the perimeter a little bit. I wouldn't mind seeing them move that arc back a little bit to the NBA range and kind of make it a little more difficult, make it maybe a little bit more of a gamble when you attempt that shot, but that has created a different game. It also creates excitement because, even if you're up by 12 points, that's just four trips down the floor if somebody goes four for four and suddenly, a game you thought you were looking pretty good in, now you're worried about again. So it keeps it exciting.
- Thomas Kennealy: 42:52 Yeah. Certainly the three point and the conditioning too, the players. That has changed.
- Joe Sunderman: 42:57 Well, you know Chris Mack is a good example of that. His practices are not excessively long, but they are choreographed to the point that, once those players hit the floor, they are always moving and running for the most part, and they're well conditioned and they can test that, and they have year around weight training conditioning, which was something certainly in the 1970s you didn't have unless you have to do it on your own, and you were kind of hit or miss or guess. This is all planned out.
- Joe Sunderman: 43:25 If you're a player today, you have a real chance to maximize your talent if you're willing to put the work

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in. It's expected here at Xavier that you do put the work in.

Thomas Kennealy: 43:34

That you do, yeah. Do you foresee any further changes in the rules and the approach?

Joe Sunderman: 43:41

Not really. They always tweak it a little bit with the officials of where you can take a charge and various things, but I think the game is pretty spectacular the way it is. I wouldn't mind trying to move that three point line out, like I mentioned. Other than that-

Thomas Kennealy: 43:53

Mentioned before.

Joe Sunderman: 43:54

...I don't really have anything at the top of my mind that I would see changing or even wish to change.

Thomas Kennealy: 43:59

Wish to change, yeah. Finally, any other comments about your career, your work here, either as a player or as announcer? Anything you'd like to add?

Joe Sunderman: 44:10

Just how fortunate I was that I did choose Xavier. You learn a lot of lessons while you're playing. The road can be bumpy at times, but if you persevere and you come away with an awful lot of valuable lessons. But the fact that I started to go to Xavier games back in the 1960s with my uncle and with my dad, then had the ability to play here, and then to broadcast here since 1980, 1981, what a great treat.

Thomas Kennealy: 44:34

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Joe Sunderman: 44:35

Nothing but overall enjoyment for the whole scenario, and to get to know all those great coaches. I got to know Don Ruberg back in the day. He was a great man.

Thomas Kennealy: 44:44

A great man, yes he was.

Joe Sunderman: 44:45

And Jim McCafferty and right on through the entire list. How lucky can you be?

Thomas Kennealy: 44:51

Well glad you feel that way about it, yes. Well this concludes our interview and I want to thank you Joe for joining us this morning and for this very interesting

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and very informative interview. I hope you've enjoyed it as much as we have.

Joe Sunderman: 45:05 I have, thank you very much. Appreciate it.

Thomas Kennealy: 45:05 Thank you much and God bless.

End of interview

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