Welcome to the opening tip of CENTAUR SEASONS, a "memory blog" of my years playing basketball for Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales. I plan to post three days a week — stories of the school's beginnings, conversations with teammates, of my freshman and sophomore years — starting today, September 24.

Beginning November 30 I will post in blog form entries from the diary I wrote during my junior season of 1972-1973, forty years ago. Once that Centaur Season ends, I will continue to post — of my senior year, more teammate conversations — through the NCAA Final Four in early April.

Today I attempt to explain why we Centaurs went to Allentown College in the first place, and why we played basketball for a brand-new school that seemingly had so little to offer.

Enjoy! And come back for more!

These days, to get to DeSales University, you need first to get to the intersection of 309 and 378 in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley. Head east on 378 to the first traffic light, then turn right onto Preston Road. In a minute or two a brick gate on either side will welcome you to De Sales University. On your right: Joseph J. Billera Hall and the John Compardo Recreation Center.

Drive to the perpendicular, to Landis Mill Road. Directly in front stands a sign with an arrow pointing left to perhaps a dozen campus locations, another pointing right to a second dozen up Landis Mill and left onto Station Avenue. Behind that sign sits the campus itself, a goodly collection of brick buildings, across the valley and up the hills, in all its greensward glory.

It was not always thus.

When I arrived at Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales, there were five brick buildings, total. We got to the place by whipping a right off 309 — easy to miss — onto Station Avenue. Over an ancient stone bridge, over railroad tracks, through Center Valley to Landis Mill, where a small sign identified Billera Hall as that low-
slung thing off to the left. The school proper was still a half mile away, over the hill and around a winding Station Ave.

What you could see were cornfields, plenty of cornfields. Any indication that a brand-new, Catholic liberal arts college was somewhere in the vicinity demanded an act of complete faith.

Wait.

When I got there in, September 1970, Allentown College of St. Francis De Sales was already five years old. I would be in the sixth graduating class. I played on Centaur teams No. 4 through 7.

We need to go back to the school’s first class, the class of 1969, the Original Centaurs. Whatever faith I brought to or found in the valley — that the school could prevail, the basketball team succeed — I learned in passed-down-stories from that first class of 156 guys who pushed open the doors on September 22, 1965, the school’s two building so new they squeaked. (Just days before, the Oblate faculty had doubled as carpet installers.)

You want faith? Listen to an Original Centaur.

“Here’s the story I always tell,” says Jim Van Horn. Jim played schoolboy ball at Catasaqua High in eastern Pennsylvania, making it to a state quarterfinals. Teammate and friend Larry Miller went on to the University of North Carolina and a seven-year ABA career. Meanwhile, Jim in effect was recruited by UNC coach Dean Smith to play for a coaching friend of the hoops legend, at a small college also in the Tar Heel State.

Once at college, however, Jim blew out his knee before Thanksgiving. While the school was prepared to honor his scholarship, Jim decide to head home and start over. Thus in the spring of 1965 did he visit this new Catholic college in eastern Pennsylvania over the hill from the 309-378 crossroad, alleged to be opening come September.
“We were in the Brown Farm House with Fr. Paul, the admissions director, looking out into the valley where the school was going to be,” Jim remembers. “I think Wills Hall [the priests’ residence] was built and the academic building was being built. That was it.” The rest was holes in the grounds or nothing at all.

“Brown Farm House has a bay window and we’re looking out and Fr. Paul is saying, Here is where they’re going to build this building, and this one over here and this one and this one.”

That farmhouse still stands. Look out that window today and you’ll see a gleaming glass-walled university center ... ... a science center ... ... a library. Up the far hill rises yet another new facility, still being built, grandest of them all. But back then everything was covered in cornfields or still unearthed.

“I looked at him,” says Jim. Remember, he says, he was just a few months removed from an established, quality basketball program at a school that was maybe one hundred years old.

“And then Fr. Paul said, ‘Believe ...’
And I said, ‘Okay!’ ”

As did the rest of us when arrived in the valley. Standing in for the fact that there was no school was our belief that there actually was – we could see it; it mattered little if no one else could — and by believing in it we could make it come to be.

“Allentown College defied logic,” Jim says now, looking back then. He speaks with authority. Jim played some on the first collegiate Centaur team, in 1968-69, and five years later, during my senior year, he returned as an assistant coach. His influence on me was and is profound.

“As adults today, thinking in a mature, logical way, you’d NEVER go there!,” Jim says, almost laughing at the thought. “If someone said to you: ‘Here’s a start-up school with just a couple of buildings and it’s not accredited yet and it’s all male and there’s only going to be 156 people in the place?”

No way, Jose – which might have been what we said in 1965.

“I still believe this to this day: It doesn’t matter where you go to school. It’s the people you were involved with, it’s the experience that’s going to last in your mind. It’s not going to matter if you went to Penn or Princeton. And I think that’s the way I looked at it even when I was there. They were starting a program and there was always talk of where it was going. There was pride in that.”

Like Father Paul asked: “Believe ...”
Like Jim answered: “Okay!”

On September 24th, 2012 at 6:22 pm, John O’Connell said:
Steve,
Can’t wait to continue reading. Thanks for doing this. I know it will be a great read. I had forgotten about JVH being a student there but do remember his coaching. Great job on getting this going.
Regards,
John O’Connell

On September 24th, 2012 at 6:40 pm, Nick Nardo said:
Good stuff Steve,
Was not aware of JVH storied past. Knew about the injury, but not the rest. Anticipating your next sequel.
Nick

On September 24th, 2012 at 11:44 pm, Jay Farmerie said:
Great work Steve!!! I remember Jake and Jim Van Horne and I like you respected both of these men. Looking back at it I still wonder why I went there. But I do not regret it. I tell people we have some of the best and most successful people I know that graduated from old AC. Maybe it was that we all believed!!!!

On September 25th, 2012 at 2:13 pm, Turtle said:
Awesome start to your series Steve. Keep the stories coming and don’t stop. And please put the heads back on those young b-ballers under your name tag. They’ll never look that good again.

On September 27th, 2012 at 1:20 pm, Ed (EJ) Brookes said:
Steve – Great start. – Ed