



Iona Men's Basketball Makes MAAC History With Rickey McGill

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UPDATED 6:03 PM ET MAR. 12, 2019 | PUBLISHED 5:16 PM ET MAR. 12, 2019

"There's your guy, Rickey McGill," the ESPN announcers said as Rickey McGill stood up on the side of the Iona Gaels' bench Monday night, pumping up the crowd with seconds left to play in the MAAC men's basketball tournament championship game.

But four years ago, Spring Valley native McGill *wasn't* your guy. And he certainly wasn't the guy for Head Coach Tim Cluess, who had something of an exit interview with McGill his freshman year.

"The conversation was pretty blunt," Cluess said. "He wasn't working hard enough as a freshman for my standards and at the end of year it's like, 'If you're not gonna pick up your work ethic, find a new school!'"

The MAAC Men's Basketball Coach of the Year said he told McGill he was going to bring in players better than him, and he'd never get the chance to play. That was all the motivation he needed.

"Everybody knows this -- I [didn't] play as much [freshman year]," McGill said. "I just had to come back the next year,

the following year and work my tail off, and that's what I did. Now I'm here."

"He came to me and he goes, 'Coach, I'm not going anywhere. I'm gonna work a lot harder,' " Cluess said.

Working a lot harder not only earned the senior a spot as a starter, but the third-most minutes in the league overall this season, MVP honors on Monday night and a spot in the MAAC record books as the first-ever player from the conference to head to the NCAA tournament four years in a row.



"[I'm] so, so proud of him, his effort on a daily basis. He plays so, so hard and you see him out there giving it his all," Cluess said. "When I really think ... he became a leader of these guys late this year. I almost had a heart attack when I looked around and Rickey's telling guys what to do and where to be."

But McGill said he's just a piece of the puzzle, crediting his teammates, Cluess and the rest of the coaching staff for also putting in the work.

"We came so far," McGill said. "What [were] we? 2-9, 0-9, something like that? But it just shows, he told us just keeping going hard, we're gonna get to where we wanna be."

And Cluess said, it might just be a game to some, but he believes there's more purpose to his playbook.

"Now it's easier to say, 'I remember when at Iona, I worked really hard, things worked out so, maybe if I do this in the job market, with my family,' whatever it is, they're going to try to attain in life ... that they can have success afterwards, and that's why I'm really happy for them," Cluess said.

The Gaels now wait to find out their first opponent in the NCAA tournament. The selection starts Sunday, March 17 at 6 p.m.

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