

Bob Cousy, Holy Cross forward, second from right, intercepts a pass during an NCAA college basketball game Feb. 19, 1949, in New Haven, Conn. (AP/File)

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The Dons. The Hoyas. The Zags. Rollie Massimino and his cigars. Lou Carnesecca and his outlandish sweaters. Sister Jean — a devoted fan and mentor of Loyola Chicago players even after she turned 100.

The list could go on endlessly. Talented teams, colorful coaches, unforgettable characters -- adding up to the remarkable history of Catholic college basketball over the past 100 years.

The Catholic hoops legacy will be on full display in a few weeks in an especially fitting location and matchup.

Catholic powerhouses Notre Dame and Villanova will compete in the 2026 season opener Nov. 1 at Rome's Palazzo dello Sport, six miles from the Vatican headquarters of Pope Leo XIV, the first American-born pope, a sports fan, and a Villanova graduate. There's been no word from the Vatican on whether Leo might attend the Eternal City Tip-Off, though it's considered unlikely as he continues recovering from lung cancer surgery.

The doubleheader between the Notre Dame and Villanova men's and women's teams has cast a new spotlight on the deep roots of basketball in Catholic schools in America, dating to the early days of the sport.

After James Naismith invented the sport in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1891, YMCAs and colleges played key roles in the early expansion. Many of those schools were Catholic institutions in urban areas; basketball — requiring only an indoor court and a handful of players — was an ideal sport for them.

By 1927, before the era of season-ending tournaments, the potential of Catholic college hoops became clear — Notre Dame's 19-1 team was named national champion by the Helms Athletic Foundation. It repeated that feat in 1936.

The NCAA men's tournament started in 1939, officially crowning a national champion. Since then, Catholic schools have won 10 titles — including three by Villanova.



Georgetown head coach John Thompson, left, embraces most valuable player Patrick Ewing, after Georgetown defeated Houston 84-75 in Seattle on April 2, 1984. (AP/File)

Holy Cross, in Worcester, Massachusetts, was the first of these champions, defeating Oklahoma in the 1947 final. NBA legend Bob Cousy was a reserve freshman on that Crusaders team.

La Salle was next, defeating Bradley in the 1954 final. Led on the court by future Hall of Famer Tom Gola, the Explorers were one of America's dominant teams from 1952 through 1956.

Catholic schools broke the sport's color barrier

The next Catholic champion was the University of San Francisco. Its titles in 1955 and 1956 highlighted the pivotal role played by Catholic colleges in ending pervasive racial segregation of the sport.

The Dons' 1955 team — led by future Hall of Famers Bill Russell and K.C. Jones — was the first NCCA champion with three Black starters. Its record over the two championship seasons: 57-1.

Further barrier-breaking came when Loyola Chicago's Ramblers started four Black players in the 1963 NCAA championship game en route to an upset overtime victory over two-time defending champion Cincinnati.

One more major barrier remained to be broken. In 1984, John Thompson became the first Black head coach to win an NCAA basketball championship, leading Georgetown to victory in the 12th of his 27 seasons with the Hoyas.

Unlike many of his players, Thompson was a practicing Catholic — attending a Catholic high school in Washington, D.C., before starring as a 6-10 center at Dominican-affiliated Providence College and then serving as Bill Russell's backup for two seasons with the Boston Celtics.

His early years at Georgetown were sometimes tense as he recruited mostly Black players to the predominantly white Jesuit university. Faculty and students rallied around him after a bedsheet with racist words was hung inside the gym before a game in 1975.

Historic teams, led by iconic coaches

Thompson is remembered for draping a white towel over his right shoulder during each game — a tribute to his mother. He's one of numerous coaches at Catholic colleges who gained iconic status during lengthy careers.



Loyola University basketball player Tom Welch shakes hands with Sr. Jean Dolores Schmidt, the team's official chaplain, before attending practice on Monday, Jan. 23, 2023, in Chicago. (AP/Jessie Wardarski)

Rollie Massimino coached for 19 seasons at Villanova. His epic moment came at Thompson's expense in 1985, when the Wildcats engineered one of the NCCA tournament's biggest upsets by beating defending champion Georgetown 66-64 in the final. A No. 8 seed, that 'Nova team remains the lowest seed ever to win the title.

Amid 80th birthday celebrations in 2014, Massimino said he never watched a full replay of the title game. "I'm afraid we're still going to lose," he said. His funeral in 2017 was on its suburban Philadelphia campus at St. Thomas of Villanova Church.

In 2001, another practicing Catholic — Jay Wright — took over as Villanova's head coach, sticking around for 21 seasons, including NCAA championships in 2016 and

2018. Three players from those teams helped the New York Knicks win the NBA title earlier this year.

In terms of longevity among coaches of Catholic men's teams, Ray Meyer ranks first — 42 years at DePaul, with a 724-354 record. From 1942 to 1946, Meyer's teams featured George Mikan, widely considered the sport's first superstar.

Another long-serving coach was Lou Carnesecca, who reached post-season play in all of his 24 seasons at St. John's. He was beloved for his cheerful personality, garish sweaters and devotion to his Catholic faith.

Al McGuire, head coach at Marquette from 1964 to 1977, won an NCAA title in his last season there before transitioning to a successful broadcasting career. He took pride in being brash, mingling expletives with prayer in his pre-game pep talks.

In 1970, McGuire got a call from a priest in the Marquette president's office, disagreeing with the coach's decision to skip the NCAA tournament and play instead in the NIT.

"I told him, 'Father, I don't hear confession and you don't coach this team,' " McGuire recalled. "Twenty minutes later, the priest called back and said, 'You're right.' " Marquette proceeded to win the NIT.

Not all the great coaches at Catholic colleges have been Catholic. Mark Few, head coach at Gonzaga since 1999, is the son of a Presbyterian minister. He has coached the Zags to 27 consecutive NCAA tournament appearances, including two Final Fours.

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The supporting cast

In general, over the decades, these Catholic teams have not explicitly depicted their ambitions in religious terms — but they often have embraced spiritual support that's close at hand.

Jesuit Fr. William Kelly, who taught in Marquette's theology department, was the basketball team's chaplain for 31 years. Vincentian Fr. Richard Rock has been chaplain of the St. John's team since 2013, exhorting the players with pre-game

prayers and encouraging them to engage in community service.

The most famous chaplain, however, was a nun, not a priest — Sr. Jean Dolores Schmidt of Loyola Chicago.

Born in San Francisco in 1919, Sister Jean grew up in a staunch Catholic family, and as a young woman joined the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She taught at Catholic schools and coached girls' basketball before arriving at Mundelein College, on the Chicago lakefront, in the 1960s. The school affiliated with Loyola in 1991, and Sister Jean was hired to help students with the transition.

In 1994, she was asked to help student basketball players boost their grades. and soon was named chaplain of the men's team — a role she held until September 2025, shortly before her death at age 106.

Sister Jean gained folk hero status in 2018 as the Ramblers, a lowly 11th seed, reached the NCAA Final Four.

She was featured by newspapers and TV stations nationwide. Her likeness appeared on socks and bobbleheads. Her NCAA news conference had as many journalists as NFL stars draw at the Super Bowl.

What does it take to have your prayers heard, she was asked. "God always hears," she replied. "But maybe He thinks it's better for us to do the 'L' instead of the 'W,' and we have to accept that."

What lies ahead?

John Gasaway, author of a history of Catholic college hoops titled *Miracles on the Hardwood*, says the colleges without big-time football programs — basically all except Notre Dame and Boston College — may face challenges in the new era of pay-for-players.

He also notes no Catholic school has advanced to the men's Final Four over the past four seasons.

"But that will change immediately if the Zags or whoever else breaks through," he said. "That activates something in our collective memory."

Short term, Gasaway is excited about the Eternal City Tip-Off.

"It's a great matchup — two venerable brands in Catholic education," he said. "Whatever involvement the pope wants to have — even if it's just posing with the teams — it will be such a thrill for them."