

Bill Saller

Fun-loving pillar helped Stokes lead St. Francis

By CORY GIGER

Bill Saller loved doing two things during his playing days at St. Francis College in the 1950s.

First and foremost, he knew how to have fun.

"Bill was always a prankster in the locker room," former teammate Jack O'Malley said. "He was always into something."

Second, Saller enjoyed banging with the big guys down low and hauling in rebounds.

"I got my points mostly on rebounding," said Saller, who ranks 16th on St. Francis' career boards list with 653.

A standout basketball and baseball player at Altoona Catholic (now Bishop Guilfoyle), Saller graduated high school in 1952 and took his talents to Loretto. While there, he played an integral role during the heyday of St. Francis basketball.

Saller's accomplishments have earned him a spot in the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame.

"I'm excited and proud of it," Saller said of the honor. "I was always pleased with the enrollees we've had in the past, and I just feel so good to be part of those ladies and gentlemen that are in the Hall."

Saller, playing alongside Maurice Stokes, helped the Frankies compile a 53-16 record during his sophomore and junior seasons. The team went to the National Invitation Tournament in Madison Square Garden both years, reaching the quarterfinals in 1954 and the semifinals in '55.

"When we played in the NIT, we were big favorites because everybody rooted for the underdog," Saller said. "It was very exciting, the atmosphere in the Garden of 19,000-plus fans."

Stokes got all the glory and recognition off that

St. Francis team, but then, few people in basketball history could have taken the spotlight from him. The Frankie legend and later NBA Rookie of the Year won the NIT's MVP award in 1955 despite his team finishing fourth.

"The show that Maurice put on in the Garden was unbelievable," Saller said of his good friend.

"It was a different world playing with Maurice. I learned quite a bit from him. He taught me a lot of the tricks. He was a student of the game and also very well trained in basketball when he came to St. Francis."

Saller and most of Stokes' former teammates have spent a lot of time talking about the late hoops star over the years. But while Stokes was wowing crowds with his abilities, teammates like Saller also did their parts to help the squad succeed.

"When you play under the shadow of Stokes, people don't remember you," Father Vincent Negherbon from St. Francis said. "But (Saller) was a good player, a good student. There was a lot of interest in him."

Saller was recruited by the late Skip Hughes, who built St. Francis' program. A Hollidaysburg native, Hughes was inducted with the Hall of Fame's first class in 1987.

"He worked us hard and that's the type of team we were," Saller said.

"We had to be in great condition to play for him, and we were."

Saller also played baseball at St. Francis, but it was the hardwood where he stood out. Saller averaged 8.0 points and 7.3 rebounds in 90 career games for the Frankies. He had a breakout junior campaign, scoring 12.2 points per game during Stokes' final season.

"It was just as competitive as it is today," Saller



Bill was a complement to the great Maurice Stokes during the mid-1950s — St. Francis' best era of basketball.



Bill, (second row, far right) did his part to help Stokes (front row, third from left) take the Frankies to NIT prominence.

said of his college basketball era. "Everybody's a little stronger and faster than we were, but I think the toughness of the game was the same."

When he wasn't on the court, Saller did his best to keep everyone around him laughing.

"I know he was sort of a little devil," Negherbon said. "He was always involved in things."

Saller said there were about 365 students, and just 13 females, on St. Francis' small campus back then. Having fun kept things interesting.

"We just had so much fun and pulled so many different tricks on everybody," Saller said.

That, more than the basketball skills, is what O'Malley remembers most about his former teammate.

"When I think of Billy Saller, I remember he had a good sense of humor and knew how to tease guys," O'Malley, now a priest in Pittsburgh, said.

"He always had these inside jokes on different players, and he'd like to surprise them with locker room antics and teasing them. He kept the spirits light."

Saller majored in accounting and graduated from St. Francis in 1956. He spent two years in the Army, getting stationed in Germany, before coming back to the United States and putting his college education to use.

He worked at a U.S.

Steel training program in Gary, Ind., then moved to Connecticut and later Illinois. He's spent the past 35 years in New Jersey, where he works as a recycling superintendent for Somerset County.

Saller, 69, and his wife, Wanda, have three children: son Michael and daughters Michele and Susanne. The entire family will be present at the Hall of Fame ceremonies.

Saller remains a fan of college basketball, though he did say, "in today's game there's more emphasis on dunking than there is on shooting."

Saller also holds special memories of St. Francis, where he helped the program reach unprecedented heights.

"I think about it a lot of times," Saller said of his alma mater. "It was a very enjoyable time."



Saller bio

Sport: Basketball.

Hometown: Altoona.

College: St. Francis.

Hall of Fame achievement:

Starter on pair of St. Francis teams that advanced to the NIT quarterfinals.

Current residence:

Bridgewater, N.J.

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