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Recruiting Process Is Over For Heary

FREDONIA – For the first time in months, Mike Heary of Fredonia Central School can finally concentrate on his top two priorities. Basketball and school.

“You really don’t understand unless you’re going through the recruiting process what it’s like to pick your college,” said Heary, who signed a national letter-of-intent Tuesday to attend the Naval Academy. “Once you’ve done that, then the rest of the year just falls into place for you really nice. For me, individually, that’s happening.” And that’s only fair.

If anyone deserves to have things “fall into place,” it’s Heary, arguably Western New York’s top high school basketball player this year. For the last 11 months, the senior guard has been riding an emotional roller coaster that has taken him from the highest highs to the lowest lows and back again.

First, there was the death of his father, Tom, last January, followed only weeks later by the passing of his maternal grandparents. Faced with such loss, Heary remained strong, both for his mother, Rita, and his Hillbilly teammates. He went on to earn Post-Journal Player of the Year honors for the second straight year, was selected first-team All-Western New York and was chosen for the Empire State Games and the State Fair Games.

But that, according to those who know him best, wasn’t surprising. Challenge him, they say, and he’ll rise to the occasion every time. Navy provides just that challenge.

“From the start of the recruiting process, I didn’t really know if I wanted to go to Navy...but after visiting it and after seeing what it’s like to be an athlete at the academy, it makes a big difference,” Heary said. In fact he was so impressed by his visit to Annapolis that he had his mind made up by the time he got on the plane for his return home.

“I knew I still had to have my medical exam and I had to get passed from the admissions board, so I knew I couldn’t get too excited, but I knew right away (Navy was the choice).”

With Heary an early signee, he figures to be a key figure as Navy coach Don DeVoe tries to rebuild the Midshipmen to the level they reached in the mid-1980’s. “The program is on the move,” Heary said. “They haven’t had an awful lot of success as of late, but it was only a few years ago that everyone talked about David Robinson. And in the mid-80’s, they were the team.”

Heary expects to be a shooting guard next year and also expects to see a fair amount of playing time. “I feel I can come in right away and make an impact, whether it’s starting or the first or second guy off the bench,” Heary said.

But, refreshingly, the 6-foot-5 ½ “guard-forward didn’t choose Navy because of what it can do for his basketball career. He selected it for what it can do for him after his basketball career is over, advice he’d like to share with others. “Make a decision for your college, don’t make it thinking you’re going to play in the NBA or play overseas...If I play well there and it can be done, Navy will find a way for me to be able to do that. But, if not, I know that after college, I’m set for life.”

Yes, life is good for Heary today, but as always, he has a firm grasp on where he came from and who helped make him what he is today. “Right now, I feel like I’m on the top of the world as far as what I’ve done basketball-wise and academically to get into the academy,” Heary said. “But, at the same time, there are a lot of people that are physically not here that I wish could be here. But I know that they’re listening to everything I’m saying. I just believe that.

“My dad always wanted me to go to a school that he could have a lot of pride in and could walk around and say, ‘My son is going here,’ and be happy about it. And I think that was a big factor, too. At the Naval Academy, you can go anywhere and say, ‘I play basketball at the Naval Academy’, and people are going to know.” Several minutes later - the interview over - Heary got up from his seat in the Fredonia High School library and headed for the door with his friends to their next class. “Back to reality.” Heary said.

Something tells me he’s got a firm grip on that.