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Heary Takes Command Of Midshipmen Fredonia Grad Scores Big As A Freshman

ANNAPOLIS, Md. - Walk into Michael Heary's bedroom at his Annapolis home and you swear you're entering a basketball shrine.

Dozens of trophies sit side-by-side on a dresser. Plaques and more trophies fill bookcases on two walls. His retired Fredonia Central School jersey - No. 24 - is framed and hangs on another wall.

The rewards of hard work and god-given talent are everywhere.

But as impressive as all the hardware is, it's a piece of paper, apparently torn out of a magazine and held together with tape, that draws a visitor's attention the most.

It was given to Henry by Michelle Heary, the youngest of three sisters, and it reads: "when you do it better, you get to be the leader."

Lighting Up The Cadets

The Army-Navy game is already 8.5 minutes old and the score is tied, 12-12, when midshipmen coach Don DeVoe summons Heary, a 6-foot-5 freshman, off the bench.

"He's my John Havlicek," DeVoe would say later.

Heary - or is that "Hondo"? - wastes little time in making his presence felt. In the course of the next 7 1/2 minutes, Navy's sixth man scores nine points on 4 of 6 shooting from the field, grabs an offensive rebound and dishes out an assist.

"I feel a little more comfortable coming off the bench," the Fredonia native would admit later.

When he takes himself out of the game at the 4:55 mark because of fatigue, Navy leads 25-22. Alumni Hall, filled to the rafters with a Patriot League and building record 6,370 fans, is rocking.

But, Heary, one of the youngest players on the floor at age 18, is just getting warmed up.

In the second half, he torches the Cadets for 22 points, including 11 straight during a 2 1/2 minute span. For good measure, he hits four straight free throws in the

final 42 seconds to preserve the win giving the Midshipmen a cherished win against their fiercest rival.

For the afternoon, Heary scored 31 points, the third most for a freshman in Navy history. He shot 10 of 19 from the field and 8 of 8 from the foul line, grabbed four rebounds and dished out five assists in just 24 minutes.

"Mike had a special game," DeVoe said.

Impressive Numbers

Through Wednesday, Heary is leading the Midshipmen (3-3, 10-7) in scoring pumping in 13.9 points a game, despite averaging just under 20 minutes per contest. He has scored in double figures 10 of the last 11 games, averaging 18.1 points during that span.

But it's at the free throw line where Heary is not just the best on his team, but also the best in the nation. After his 5 for 5 effort on Wednesday at Fordham, Heary has connected on 65 of 70 attempts (.929). He was shooting .923 (60 of 65) from the line, tied for first in the country with two others, on Jan. 24 with the NCAA rankings were released and is the only freshman in the top 15. In fact, a freshman has led the nation in the free throw shooting only twice in NCAA history. Steve Alford of Indiana did it in 1984 (.913) and Jim Barton of Dartmouth did it in 1986 (.942).

In addition, Heary has been named the Patriot League Rookie of the Week four times and was selected the Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference Rookie of the Week once.

Other freshmen who have won the ECAC award, as of Jan. 15, include Georgetown's Allen Iverson and Colgate's Adonal Foyle.

Heary's 237 points through Wednesday is the 10th-most by a Navy freshman. He would have to average 13 points a game the rest of the year to break Kevin Sinnett's record for the most points by a Navy freshman.

"I'm playing much better than I thought I would, without a doubt," Heary said.

DeVoe Hits Jackpot

The road to Annapolis and the U. S. Naval Academy was a circuitous one for Heary, who always dreamed of playing collegiately at a Division I power. But despite a banner junior season and eye-popping performances at summer camp, the phone didn't exactly ring off the hook at his Fredonia home during the fall of his senior year in high school.

Canisus and Davidson were the front-runners. DeVoe had paid a home visit, and Army also was interested. But other Division I offers were just not there.

The general feeling was that since Heary's late father, Tom, had played basketball at Canisius in the 1960's, combined with the fact that his brother-in-law, Mike McDonald, is an assistant coach at the Buffalo school, it wasn't worth the financial risk to try and recruit him.

"The book on Michael Heary was that you can recruit him all you want, but he's going to go to Canisius," DeVoe said. "That's the truth. Coaches look at players and immediately you say, 'Can I get this guy? And Mike, to most people, didn't appear to be recruitable."

In the end, however, DeVoe hit the jackpot.

When Heary, a three-time *Post Journal* Player of the Year and the 20th highest scorer in New York State history, took his visit to the campus in the fall of 1993, he fell in love with it. By November, he had committed to the academy, allowing him to concentrate on his senior season in Fredonia.

"I'm not concerned about playing in the NBA or professionally," Heary said. "That's a long shot. But when I'm done with this, I've got a great career in the Navy if I want it, and I can also leave the Navy if I want and have a nice career doing whatever."

Adapting To Military Life

Life at the Academy isn't easy. Days start at 5:30 a.m., and the lights don't go out until at least 10:30 p.m. Heary's course load last semester included calculus, chemistry, Naval science and Naval history. His grade-point average was a 2.4.

Heary, who is taking 18 credit hours this term, also has had to adapt to the rigors of a first-year plebe, which means he has to endure the hazing of upperclassmen and restrictions that come with military life.

From all indications, he has done so marvelously.

"He just seems to be putting it all together," DeVoe said. "He got off to a very fine start academically and really loves the academy, so he kind of gives us a complete package in a young player."

Heary has been helped by the proximity of his mother, Rita, who moved to Annapolis last summer. When he does have free time, he usually relaxes at her condominium, which overlooks the Chesapeake Bay.

Michelle Heary lives about an hour away in Washington, D.C. and joins her mom for every home game.

"(Freshmen) know what they're in for when they come here," DeVoe said. "We don't paint a picture of seashells and balloons. They know when they come here that they've got a lot of hats they have to wear."

A Young Leader

After his 31-point effort against Army, Heary quickly became a media favorite. Even at such a tender age, he has learned to say the right things.

And while he's quick to point out his teammates' contributions on and off the court, it's clear that Heary could very well be a leader on this team, which won the Patriot League championship last year.

In fact, as time was winding down in the second half and Army was forced to foul, Heary gathered his teammates together and implored them to "get the ball to me."

None of the four midshipmen flinched. It wasn't arrogance. It wasn't braggadocio. When you're shooting 92 percent from the foul line and you're the team's leading scorer, it's just common sense.

Several weeks ago on his weekly television show, DeVoe said that Heary "has a bona fide chance to be an All-American player here at Navy."

Asked about that statement after the Army game, DeVoe didn't back away from it one bit.

"I said it because I sincerely believe it," he said. "He has all the tools I'm looking for in a first year player in college. Most players have the ability to shoot the ball. (But) how many players can get their own shot? Mike has developed his skill right now where he can get his own shot. Plus, I'm just really impressed with his desire to play defense."

DeVoe wasn't through though.

"He has the strength that most freshman don't have. To me, he's the kind of player that just keeps getting better and better. I do believe he has a wonderful chance of getting national recognition here. He's got all the tools to be an All-American player. Obviously, a lot of things have to happen to our program to ever get that kind of recognition, but he's doing his job."

Heary admits that being snubbed by virtually all Division I. schools bothers him.

"It's definitely gets me going," he said.

But he's also using it as motivation.

"Maybe I'll try to be the best mid-major player," he said. "Dan Majerle (now of the Phoenix Suns) did it at Central Michigan. I thought if he can do it, maybe it'll be my goal. This is what I was dealt, so I'll just try being better than Dan Majerle (was)."

For the record, the last player from Navy to earn All-American recognition was

David Robinson in 1986 and 1987. Prior to that, one has to go all the way back to 1954 when John Clune was a second-team choice.

"A lot of things have to happen," Heary said. I'll work hard to do that, but there's so many outside factors, especially at this level."

Banners Inspire Awe

Hanging from the rafters of Alumni Hall are the retired numbers of Robinson (50), Vernon Butler (51) and Clune (4) and the Midshipman's Patriot League championship banner from last year.

They were put up just after Navy began practicing last fall.

"That's when it really hit me," Heary said.

"Wow"

Many basketball observers are saying the same about No. 24.

When you do things better, you get to be a leader.

Maybe Michelle Heary is on to something after all.

