

Mount St. Joseph follows seniors to third straight BCL title

By Paul McMullen

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CATONSVILLE - Phil Booth understands the importance of tradition.

The Mount St. Joseph senior will play college basketball at Villanova University, in Philadelphia, his father's hometown. Phil Booth the elder captained the very first Baltimore college to qualify for the NCAA tournament, Coppin State in 1990.

That appreciation of legacy and upholding a good name made the Gaels' third straight Baltimore Catholic League tournament the sweetest of all Feb. 24, when Mount St. Joseph held off Calvert Hall, 72-69, in an overtime championship game at UMBC.

"He's definitely on our Mount Rushmore," said Pat Clatchey, the veteran Mount St. Joseph coach who has sent players to places such as Notre Dame, Georgetown, the Final Four and the NBA.

The BCL Player of the Year, Booth scored a game-high 28 points and repeated as tournament MVP. The 6-foot-4 wing got a series of defenders in foul trouble, and when the Cardinals denied him the ball on the game's biggest possession, Jordan McNeil continued to step up.

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McNeil, whose clutch free throws with two-tenths of a second remaining in regulation forced the overtime, made a game-winning three-pointer with 14.8 seconds left off a fine assist from junior guard Pierre Johnson.

McNeil crammed eight of his 18 points into the game's final five minutes.

It was the sixth tournament crown in the last 12 seasons for Clatchey and the Gaels, who became the first team to win three straight BCL tournaments since Mark Karcher led St. Frances Academy to a sweep of the regular season and tournament titles from 1995-97.

"I know all about tradition," said Booth, a Howard County resident who attended Trinity School in Ellicott City before entering Mount St. Joseph.

This championship season revolved around Booth; McNeil, a 6-5 senior who is headed to Towson University; and point guard Jaylen Adams, who will go to Jacksonville (Fla.) University and play for coach Cliff Warren, who starred at Mount

St. Mary's University.

"Two years ago, we had one senior," Clatchey said. "This year ... Jordan picked us up against St. Maria Goretti Friday night (in the quarterfinals). Jaylen had a great year, he really matured, and Phil made some big plays down the stretch.

"You can't ask for a better high school game. That was hard-fought, and we didn't expect anything differently."

Calvert Hall (28-5) and Mount St. Joseph (30-4) won on the other's floor during the regular season, when they shared first place in the BCL with 11-3 records.

The Cardinals led 26-17 midway through the second quarter, but sophomore Daveyon Barnes gave the Gaels a much-needed lift, blocking a shot in transition that led to a three-point play by Adams in the midst of a 9-2 run.

After the break, the Gaels continued to improve their energy level and used a 9-0 run to take a 43-38 lead with 1:28 left in the third quarter. Sean Mayberry put Calvert Hall on top at 59-57 with 1:38 remaining, but Mount St. Joseph kept getting to the free throw line.

The Gaels never trailed in overtime, when the Cardinals forced a third tie in that session at 69 on a three-pointer by junior Drew Edwards with 48 seconds remaining. They had a chance to force a second overtime, but Nico Clareth's three at the buzzer was off the mark.

Edwards, who knows about tradition, as his father, Darryle, helped the Cardinals to BCL tournament titles in 1980 and '81, had 21 points. Junior center Evan Phoenix, voted the Most Improved Player in the league, continued his rise with 17 points, and Clareth had 13.

"I couldn't be more proud of our guys," Calvert Hall coach John Bauersfeld said.

Both teams will continue their seasons at the Alhambra Catholic Invitational Tournament in Frostburg March 13-15, hosted by Bishop Walsh of Cumberland.

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