

Coming . . .

Conti: 'They picked right guy'



Nick Conti, who made a name for himself at Bloomfield Hills Lahser, will head up the basketball program at Birmingham Brother Rice.

By M.B. Dillon Ward
staff writer

Newly appointed Birmingham Brother Rice basketball coach Nick Conti is sure "they picked the right guy for the job."

"Initially, my concern was just getting in to talk with (Rice principal) Brother Grimaldi," said the former Bloomfield Hills Lahser coach who replaces Bill Norton.

"I was confident that, given the opportunity, I could present myself and what I thought I could do as a teacher and coach so that I'd get the job."

One of the top coaches in the state with a 188-51 overall record, the 34-year-old Conti has worked as a varsity coach since he was 21.

In the past seven years, his Lahser teams won six Metro Suburban League championships and compiled an amazing 59-9 mark.

"The first couple of days have been hectic," Conti said of his new position, "and it's a very exciting feeling."

"But I leave Lahser with some sorrow because of the deep feelings my family and I have for the people we've come to know."

Having to fill Norton's shoes also concerns Conti. "Those shoes are very big," he said. "Bill Norton (who happens to be Conti's brother-in-law) was a very successful person, and there's no question in my mind that a great deal of Rice's athletic successes have a direct correlation to Bill as a basketball coach, teacher and athletic director."

"I won't try and be Bill, I'll just try my best to be me. I hope that'll be sufficient."

Conti said he's prepared for the transition period Rice players will undergo. "When you've built a relationship that is severed, there's going to be a void for a time," Conti said.

"But I think the players realize and understand that Bill wasn't walking out on them — it was an opportunity that he had to take advantage of. Life goes on."

Conti described the philosophy he hopes will bring success to Brother Rice.

"You have to have a capacity for work — to put in the hours necessary to get things done," he said. "Sometimes that involves 16-hour days."

"Also, you need the will and ability to prepare. It's one thing to put time in and another to put it in constructively."

"A third component is being organized," Conti added. "I learned more about that from Ted Guthard (former Lahser football coach and now an assistant at Michigan State University) than I ever have from anyone."

Going . . .

It's goodbye Rice, hello MSU

By M.B. Dillon Ward
staff writer

The Big Ten beckoned, and two weeks of mental tug-of-war began for prep-basketball-magnate Bill Norton.

The former Birmingham Brother Rice coach earned his stripes, compiling a laudable 273-106 ledger, 10 district crowns, five regional titles and the 1973-74 state championship during his 17 years with the Warriors.

For what seemed like forever, Norton agonized over his decision to accept a requiem at Rice and a job as assistant basketball coach at Michigan State University under head coach Jud Heathcote.

His farewell to Brother Rice, to say the least, has disrupted the Nortons' family life.

"I'm still operating from Birmingham — my home — while we house-hunt," said Norton, 42.

"With interests raises the way they are, we (wife Virginia, and children, Jessica, 9, and Nathan, 7) will probably rent in Lansing and rent out our house in Orchard Lake.

"People here (in Lansing) have been very warm toward us in terms of trying to find a house. And everyone is telling us how much we'll like it. Our home is on Pine Lake, so the biggest change for us will be no water."

"For a couple of weeks we gave this move lots of thought," he said, "and we shed a few tears. But when we made the decision as a family, we decided we're not going to look back and second-guess ourselves."

"It wasn't a question of leaving a situation that was negative. I've had other opportunities to go and have declined," said Norton. "I fully intended to stay at Brother Rice for another 17 years or so."

"Coaching at the college level was never a clearly defined goal. But I felt that this is a situation where I could go to a great university with a well-respected coach not too far from my family roots or my wife's family roots."

"I loved everything about Brother Rice and will cherish those memories for the rest of my life," the coach said. "I would like to be able to do both jobs."

NORTON EXPECTS his career change to be less of an adjustment than his family's re-location.

"Everyone feels I must have an ulterior motive (in accepting a job as an assistant coach after heading up a program). I really want to be a good assistant coach, do the best job I can for the MSU basketball program on a day-to-day basis, and recruit the best possible players the following year."

"I'm sure it'll occupy me so I won't have to worry too much about the long range. I'll let the chips fall where they may."

"I got into coaching 19½ years ago," said Norton, "because I like to work with young people. I like the idea of coaching against the best coaches with the best players."



Bill Norton accepted a job as Jud Heathcote's assistant at Michigan State University after building a winning tradition on the prep level at Brother Rice.

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pro bowler's diary

Red Poulin

'Back to try again'

(Editor's note: Red Poulin, a freelance writer from Rochester, will compete in the \$25,000 Stroh Light Classic II women's professional bowling tournament this week at Rochester's North Hill Lanes. There will be 18 rounds of pre-qualifying, three more rounds of match-play and finally the step-ladder championships tentatively set for 7 p.m. Thursday. The field will be reduced from more than 100 on Monday to only five for the finals. Poulin has offered to write two columns for the Observer & Eccentric newspapers, detailing her thoughts about competing with some of the country's top women bowlers. Today is her first installment. She will give her post-tournament thoughts next Monday.)

Well, it's tournament time again. All the women pros are back for the Stroh Light Classic II at Bill Srock's North Hill Lanes (Tenken and Rochester roads) in Rochester.

A few of us "guest professionals" will be back also. Being a "guest professional" means you don't have a pro card, and you don't tour.

For most of us, it is our only pro tournament of the year. This is my second year competing in this tournament. Last year I averaged 181 and didn't

make the first cut. Sometimes I think I will never learn.

Getting ready for these four days started a month ago.

Practicing six games a day, and gradually working up to 20 is just the beginning. Working on the game itself and becoming consistent with every stroke is the key.

Just when I thought I had my game down, my body started to rebel.

Pulled muscles and a sore thumb had to be conquered. Keeping the head down and arm straight. Bending the knee and following through. Hitting your mark. How do the pros make it look so easy?

Everything has to come together today, when that first ball is thrown.

THERE IS another aspect of the game that is even more frightening. It is bowling next to big stars like Betty Morris (bowler of the decade), Donna Adamak (two-time bowler of the year) and Pam Buckner (two-time winner at North Hill), just to name a few.

They bowl with a perfect mixture of grace and accuracy that makes the game look so easy and intimidating.

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Fio Rito takes Mile by neck

By Mike Scanlon
staff writer

FIO RITO, a massive, 6-year-old New York-bred who went off as the crowd's 4-to-5 favorite, won the 33rd running of the Michigan Mile Saturday by a scant neck after a thrilling stretch duel.

Now the winner of six consecutive races, Fio Rito finished the muddy duet in 1:50-1/5, nearly three seconds off the track record of 1:47-1/5.

Laddie Dancer, a 4-year-old bay gelding, was caught in the last furling after leading from the starting bell.

Fio Rito earned \$97,141 for Rochester, N.Y., owner Ray LeCesse, and returned \$360, \$3 and \$260 to winning ticket holders among the 11,369 on hand at Livonia's Detroit Race Course.

DRG officials boosted the track's added race payoff to \$150,000 this year and spiced the 10-race card with three other stakes races. They'd predicted a crowd of 12,000, but attendance only topped last year's disappointing 10,796 by some 600 patrons.

Combined wagering on the 10-race card reached \$1.67 million for the day, and exceeded \$250,000 on the running of the Mile race itself.

FIO RITO, which trainer Mike Ferraro says he hopes to retire to stud at year's end, continued a remarkable winning streak under jockey Leslie Hulet in eking out the narrow victory.

The horse has won 20 races — including the prestigious Whitney Stakes recently — finished second twice and run out of the money only one time in its last 23 rides under Hulet.

Even miracles don't satisfy everybody, though. Somebody in the winner's circle Saturday asked Hulet why he once finished out of the money. Hulet, sporting a broad grin and a wide garland of red carnations pinned to a white blanket, actually tried to explain it.

FERRARO FREIGHTED the horse west to Detroit instead of entering it in the more lucrative, \$250,000 stakes race run Saturday at New Jersey's Meadowlands.

"I didn't want to keep on running him against the best in the country," he explained. "But this race didn't turn out easy."

The Michigan Mile race is actually 1/4 miles long, and Fio Rito needed every extra yard Saturday.

Laddie Dancer, which paid \$5.80 to place and \$2.40 to show, took the lead out of the gate and held it with apparent ease until yards before the finish line. Four-year-old Summer Advocate paid \$5.60 to show.

Laddie Dancer led the field to quick paces of 22-2/5 seconds for the quarter mile and 46-1/5 for the half before slowing to 1:10 and six furlongs.

"I looked up at the Teletyne (the brand name of the clock which records elapsed time at four different points during the race) and saw 22 and 46 and I knew we were in good shape. But that other horse wasn't stopping," said Ferraro, adding that before the race he instructed Hulet to keep close to Laddie Dancer.

Hulet said he put the whip to Fio Rito nearly half a mile from the finish, but the 1,300-pound gray horse didn't draw even with Laddie Dancer until his second try — and that didn't come until the 1/16-mile pole or about 800 yards from the wire.

"WAS I WORRIED during the stretch?" asked owner LeCesse, a bowling alley proprietor and former building contractor.

"No, I wasn't worried. I was terrified," he continued while clutching his throat and gagging.

An unusually large horse, Fio Rito stands 17.2 hands — about 6-foot-5 at the withers (the shoulders), because I reach up and barely grab them," said jockey Hulet, about 5-4. "I had a friend in high school who was 6-5 and I could barely touch the top of his head."

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