

POOR SPORTS

By Nicolaus Mills

If you're a top high school basketball player and you live anywhere near New York City, you're sure to have St. John's University basketball program on your radar. St. John's has sent player after player to a pro career the National Basketball Association, and it has been a home for such legendary coaches as Joe Lapchick and Lou Carnesecca.

This year that history may not be enough for high school recruits. St. John's was not among the 68 men's teams that on March 17 were invited to the annual NCAA national basketball tournament. March Madness will not be coming to St. John's this year.

But the real problem at St. John's goes deeper than wins and losses. St. John's has emerged in 2024 as a university that isn't player friendly in tough times. It is now led by a coach who, after his team blew a half-time lead of 12 points against Seton Hall on February 18, told the media that his year at St. John's was ["the most unenjoyable experience of my lifetime."](#)

The coach, Rick Pitino, then went on to single out by name the players on his team who had let him down. If ever there was a coach guilty of throwing his team under the bus after a loss, it was Pitino

Pitino is a Hall of Fame coach, but he also brings with him a checkered past. He was dismissed from the University of Louisville when a member of his coaching staff was found to have recruited players [by arranging striptease dances and sex acts](#) for them. Pitino, who is known as a [control freak](#) when it comes to the teams he coaches, said he knew nothing of the recruiting violations.

This time Pitino did not plead innocence. The day after his attack on his team went viral, he [doubled down](#) on his remarks. "I was pointing out exactly," Pitino told an interviewer, "why we lost."

A few days later, with criticism on him mounting, Pitino [changed his tune](#), saying that he never should have spoken the way he did. "It's my bad. I am at fault," he told his players. To their credit, Pitino's players did not take revenge on their coach after his mea culpa. "We know how much he loves us and how much he cares about winning, so I don't think the guys took it too much to heart," [one of Pitino's top recruits told reporters](#).

Maybe the Pitino controversy is over? After his rant, St. John's went on a six-game winning streak, and in what might be called sports gaslighting, Pitino has acted as if he never turned on his own team. When St. John's did not get invited to the NCAA Tournament, Pitino defended his players. "If I could just give

the players a hug and make the pain go away, I would wave my magic wand and do that,” [Pitino said](#).

Still, I wonder. As a college English teacher, I don’t face the pressures Rick Pitino does, but what I do share with him is responsibility for the students in my care. I can imagine what would have happened on my campus if the students in my literature class had turned in a set of disappointing papers and I had publicly complained about them, singling out some by name.

I have no doubt that our college president, along with the dean of faculty, would have been on my case in a hurry. They would have asked why I had not prepared my class better and whether I thought berating individual students would make them care more about their work.

Nothing like this happened at St. John’s. There was no word from St. John’s university president, no word from a dean, no word from the athletic director after Pitino’s rant. Why? Did they fear Pitino would walk away from the [\\$20 million](#) contract St. John’s has given him to coach their basketball team for the next six years? Or do they think players in their teens and early twenties are equipped to fight back when confronted by a 71-year-old coach with the power to give out athletic scholarships?

The silence of St. John’s administrators is for me worse than the rant of Pitino. Do they think because St. John’s players went on a six-game winning streak after their coach berated them, he did the right thing? It’s one thing to have a coach be a bully and throw his weight around. It’s another to have the officials who represent a university at its high levels bow down to a coach—or worse still, duck for cover rather than speak out when they ought to be putting distance between themselves and a coach.

Those of us who teach in college, whether in a classroom or on a basketball court, are there to serve our students. It should never be the other way around.

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