



□ *Editor's note: See more on Creighton and UNL men's and women's basketball in the sports section this week.*

**By Jan Schultz**  
**The Imperial Republican**

College basketball is alive and well in Nebraska.

Creighton University in Omaha, which may have the College Player of the Year in senior Doug McDermott, is one of those teams.

An Imperial native has been up close and personal with the Bluejays the past seven seasons, but this year will be one to remember.

Ben McNair, a 1993 graduate of Chase County High School, is one of the university's four athletic trainers.

As primary trainer for men's basketball, he is with the team on the sidelines at all home games and on the road.

That included Saturday night when Creighton ended its regular season with a stellar performance from the team and senior standout McDermott.

Not only did the Jays win a one-sided 88-73 victory over Providence, but McDermott, scoring 45 points Saturday, passed the 3,000-point pinnacle, one of just eight Division 1 players to do so in the history of college basketball.

He is now seventh in all-time collegiate scoring with 3,011 regular season points.

The team left Tuesday for the Big East Conference Tournament, where they are ranked No. 2. They play in the semi-finals tonight (Thursday) at New York's Madison Square Garden at 5 p.m. MT. The tournament will be aired on Fox Sports Net 1.

Speaking a bit like a coach, McNair said he knows what this team is capable of.

"For a lot of teams, it's doing the little things; but we play so well together, both on offense and defense," he said.

"Ours is made to be a team defense. When we don't do that, that's when we lose."

Creighton moved to the Big East Conference this year from a weaker Missouri Valley. The move has proven a good one for Creighton, both in how they have fared against the competition (24-6, 14-4 Big East) and for the exposure it's bringing Creighton.

"We knew with this conference the guys would be bigger, but we are smarter," McNair smiled.

Plus, how do you possibly guard 6'8" McDermott, one of the country's best players? Throw in 6'7" senior Ethan Wragge and experienced sixth-year senior Grant Gibbs, 6'5", all who can shoot the three, and it's an explosive offense.

McNair said the notoriety when they travel has seen a big uptick this season.

Whether it's been in Washington D.C. or Cincinnati, people are always seeking out a picture

with McDermott and the team. And, McNair said he's never seen McDermott turn down an autograph request.

"The national prominence has been amazing," he said.

Creighton's fan base is also one of the country's best, McNair said.

By last Friday, Creighton fans had purchased 2,500 all-session tickets for this week's Big East Tourney, more than a lot of the league's other teams who are closer to New York, he noted.

Creighton, with a No. 14 national ranking this week, will be back home late Saturday after the tourney finals.

A big celebration in Omaha is planned the next day on Selection Sunday when Creighton will find out its region and seed for the NCAA Tournament.

McNair predicts Creighton can be a team to make some noise there.



### Profession proves good pick

McNair, who wasn't sure what he wanted to major in when entering Nebraska Wesleyan University in the fall of 1993, originally was thinking pre-med.

"I started that route, thinking about being a doctor," he said.

But while sitting in a biology lab his freshman year, he wasn't sure sitting through more labs and all the other science classes was for him. He'd always been intrigued by the workings of the human body, but wasn't so fond of the other sciences.

At that time, he didn't even know what an athletic trainer did.

He quickly found out, though, when injured during baseball tryouts. He sprained an ankle and was sent to the athletic trainer.

"I found out then I could mix the health/medicine field with athletics and I was sold," he said.

He graduated in 1997 with an exercise science major and an emphasis in athletic training.

He took the year off after graduation, during which he was married. A couple of jobs he was interested in required a graduate degree, so he applied for a graduate assistantship at two schools in Texas and Creighton.

While he wasn't sure about the Texas positions, he did interview at both. On his drive back, though, he got a call from Creighton.

One of two graduate assistantships opened, so he accepted.

After completing those two years, he was hired by Missouri Baptist University in St. Louis as a full-time athletic trainer, where he would spend the next six years.

Happy where he was and not looking to leave, McNair got a call from Creighton. They were changing positions around and a full-time athletic trainer position was open in Omaha.

"But, I wasn't looking to leave; we had started our family there and had good friends," he said.

St. Louis was a great place to live and his wife, Natalie, also had a job with Missouri Baptist as Asst. Director of Admissions, he added.

But, after some soul-searching, laying out the pros and cons, talking with his peers "and a lot of prayer," he accepted Creighton's offer.

It's been a whirlwind since.

McNair said moving to a bigger school required more travel and now, even more so, with Creighton's move to the Big East. And, with the new NCAA rules on practice time, "It's non-stop for basketball."

While he has also worked some with Creighton's cross country athletes, he foresees that changing next year, too, with administrative duties increasing.

When he works with an injured player, McNair said it involves a lot of scheduling around their schedules. However, he'll probably work with an injured player three to four times a day.

The team lost senior starter Grant Gibbs for about six weeks earlier this season with a knee injury, and freshman Isaiah Zierden also suffered a season-ending knee injury last month.

But, McNair said for the past two to three years, the Bluejays haven't had a starter or major player miss a game due to injury or illness.

"That's been a major reason for our success," he said.

McNair said it's great working with players that have different personalities and taking them from their lowest when injured through the healing process.

"That's what I like most about my job," he said.

"Basketball is their life. I hopefully can help take them back to where they were and help them through the whole process."

That means physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, he said.

McNair's 12-month contract does take him away from basketball for some other duties during the summer.

Creighton is the medical host for the College World Series in Omaha each June. That involves all of the coordination of physicians for the series, he said.

Teams bring their own trainers for the games, but sometimes specialists, dentists or pharmacists are needed. Their staff coordinates those contacts and are on-site for other duties at the field.

The trainers also are in charge at the high school basketball camps. Creighton offers four summer camps, to which Chase County has brought its boys' team several years.

### **McDermott, family are the 'real deal'**

When asked about McDermott and what he's like, McNair said he is one of the most pleasant guys to be around.

"He's not arrogant. He still says thank-you to me everyday after I tape his ankles," he said.

Even after a loss on the road, McDermott will still take the time to sign autographs for the opposing team's fans.

He credits McDermott's coach-father, Greg, as a big reason for that.

"He'll take the time to talk to anyone," he said of the coach.

Members of McNair's family from Imperial have made the trek to Omaha more than once this season to watch the nationally-ranked Jays.

At one game, Coach McDermott stopped to talk with Ben's niece Mallie, who had drawn pictures for all of the players and was handing them out. After talking with her about 10 minutes, the coach called his son over and both of them signed her drawing, McNair said.

Ben's dad, Pat of Imperial, also said this week that Greg and his wife, Theresa, the latter who has battled cancer, have been very supportive in Pat's wife, Linda, and her battle with the disease.

The McNairs' eight-year-old twin sons, Isaac and Joshua, are also big McDermott fans and of the whole team.

"Last year, they really started getting into basketball. This year, they are glued to the TV when Creighton's on, watch the scores" and the team rankings, he said.

The couple also has two daughters, 10-year-old Hannah, and Kyra, who is five.

**McNair a former wrestler**

Growing up one of four McNair brothers, Ben was among three of them who wrestled in high school instead of playing basketball.

“But I’ve always liked basketball, especially our family games,” he said.

Those games pitted the wrestlers (Ben, Jason and Sam) against the basketball players (Pat and Alex).

“Alex always says it was three against two, but we rotated in” so it was two vs. two, McNair said.

So which McNair team has the best record?

“I believe it’s about .500,” he said.

“No official stats were kept but that’s my recollection,” he smiled.