

# It's a hardwood life for America's Basketball Mom

[Erik Brady](#), USA TODAY Sports Published 1:25 a.m. ET Dec. 20, 2017



Maura MacDonald watches her husband Mike coach the Daemen College men's basketball team. (Photo: Timothy T. Ludwig, USA TODAY Sports)

AMHERST, N.Y. — To Maura MacDonald, America's Basketball Mom, sneaker squeaks are a symphony and used sweat socks but a sweet perfume.

She has four sons who play the game and a husband who coaches it. A master schedule on her refrigerator tracks the 136 games she's following in some form this season — in person or online or missing because she can't be in five places at once. And that's just the regular season. There'll be more games, God willing, come the madness of March.

For now, the madness of December will do. Friday night, she and her husband and sons plan to be together in one gym for one game for the only time this season — home court for the holidays. Next week her family's teeming teams will be off to New York, Atlanta, Colchester, Vt., and Albany, N.Y.

Her son Matt, 22, is a senior captain at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Her son Patrick, 21, is a senior captain at Maritime College in the Bronx. Her son Nick, 17, is a senior

captain at Canisius High School in Buffalo. Her son Mark, 11, plays on a travel team and on his sixth-grade team at St. Benedict School in the Buffalo suburb of Amherst. And her husband Mike is men's coach at Daemen College, also in Amherst, where the MacDonald family lives in a four-bedroom house with a well-used hoop out back.

"We're a basketball family," Maura understates.

It's a sentence as simple as a backdoor cut. Ah, but gaming out which games to attend, and how to get there, can be as complex as Michigan's motion offense.

John Beilein is men's coach at Michigan and a family friend of 25 years. "Maura holds down the fort," Beilein tells USA TODAY Sports. "She lives the ups and downs of all of their seasons."

The downs come when games go on without her. Last season her husband and sons all had games on the same Saturday — twice. So, like a doctor in triage, she simply decides where she's needed most. You'll often find her in the bleachers at one game while watching another on her phone, a multitasker for the digital age.

Maura arranges her life by tipoff. On January 12, a Friday, she's got three games at 7 p.m. plus Daemen at 8. She plans to attend Mark's sixth-grade game and then the second half of Nick's high school game, all while watching Penn on her phone; then it's off to catch the end of Daemen's game. The next morning she'll rise early for her drive to the Bronx to see Maritime at 1 p.m. and then on to Philly to see Penn at 7. She'll stay with her sister in New Jersey and be up early again on that Sunday to get home in time for Daemen's game at 3 p.m. plus Mark's travel team at 7.

All that is winter weather permitting. You never know in Buffalo.

Maura drives to out-of-town games mainly when Mike's team is playing at home. That way he can be with the younger boys when she is away, which means Maura and Mike rarely see games together. He's already made solo trips to Philly and the Bronx this season as well.

"People must think we're not really married," Maura says with a laugh.

Happily — praise the schedule gods — Maura and Mike can be together for four senior nights this season: Nick's at Canisius on Feb. 6, Patrick's at Maritime on Feb. 17, Daemen's on Feb. 18 and Matt's at Penn on Feb. 24.

Maura provides these dates without checking her fridge or her phone. Turns out she has much of that master list memorized. The familiar rhythms of practices and games have long formed the contours of her life. She was born into a basketball family before she married into one. And now she is the matriarch of her own.



Maura MacDonald keeps track of her family's basketball games by putting each of the schedules on their refrigerator. (Photo: Timothy T. Ludwig, USA TODAY Sports)

## Courting in courtship

Maura Heary met Mike MacDonald in 1991, when she took her brother Michael to basketball camp at Canisius College, where Mike was the assistant coach who checked them in at the registration desk.

"I thought he was cute," Maura says.

"We met in a gym," Mike says. "Of course."

Mike had his eye on Michael before Maura: Mike tried to recruit Michael to Canisius, where Michael and Maura's father, Tom Heary, played in the late 1950s. Alas, Michael chose Navy instead. But Mike did not miss on Maura. He put the court into courtship, getting tickets for her and her father for the Duke-Canisius game to be played in Buffalo several months later.

They went on their first date — drinks on the waterfront — a couple of weeks after they met. Their second date was dinner. Their third was Mass at St. John the Baptist in suburban Buffalo, where Mike knew he'd run into the parents of a potential recruit. It's no sin to satisfy your Sunday obligation and your recruiting jones at the same time. (Alas, Eric Eberz chose Villanova.)

“That’s when I got some idea what life with a basketball coach would be like,” Maura says.

She already knew about life in a basketball family. Maura and her sisters didn’t play, but their little brother had a hoop on the kitchen door. One time the ball rimmed out and landed in a pot of chili. Rita, their mother, wiped off the basketball and handed it back to Michael. She served the chili, seasoned by leather, and no one complained. Michael would go on to score 2,235 points at Fredonia High School, where their father was the principal.

Heary played on two NCAA tournament teams at Navy and then served as a Surface Warfare Officer on aircraft carriers. Now he is an analyst on Navy radio broadcasts. Last month he called Navy’s game at Penn’s Palestra. When Matt swished a three-pointer from the deep corner, Heary told his listeners that his nephew shoots just like him. After Penn’s win, the pair leaned against the scorers’ table and swapped stories with the familial ease of shared history.

“My broadcast partner asked how we learned to shoot in Buffalo when it’s always snowing,” Heary says. “Hey, you shovel the snow and scrape the ice. That’s what you do. It makes you tougher.”

The Palestra is a cathedral of college basketball. Maura fondly recalls the first time she saw a game there, on a winter night in late 1987. She took her father and remembers where they sat and how thrilled he was to be there. She only wishes he’d lived to see a grandson know the old barn as his homecourt.

They talked that night about Marty Marbach, then the new coach at Canisius. Maura mentioned Marbach’s wife had been a partner at the Philadelphia accounting firm where Maura was

working. She had no way to know then that Marbach would be a linchpin in her life.



Mike MacDonald, men's basketball coach at Daemen College, talks hoops with his youngest son Mark, who plays on a travel team and on his sixth-grade team at St. Benedict School in the Buffalo suburb of Amherst. (Photo: Timothy T. Ludwig, USA TODAY Sports)

### **From the Beilein coaching tree**

Jack and Pat MacDonald raised seven kids. The five boys played basketball at Ridgefield (Conn.) High School and three also played in college — Tommy at New Hampshire, Timmy at St. Michael's in Vermont and John at since-closed Dowling College on Long Island. (Tommy would go on to be one of the FBI agents who captured fugitive gangster Whitey Bulger in 2011.)

Mike didn't play at St. Bonaventure, 75 miles southwest of Buffalo, but he soaked up its storied hoops history and dreamed of coaching in college someday. His senior year he wrote letters to coaches at more than 200 Division I schools inquiring about possible openings as a graduate assistant. He got loads of thanks-but-no-thanks form letters — plus one handwritten note — so he accepted a grad assistant post at Division III Lynchburg (Va.) College, where the gig came with a bedroom off the gym.

He was there two months when he got a call from Marbach, who'd sent the note. Marbach's grad assistant had just left unexpectedly, so Mike shuffled off to Buffalo. And, a few years later, that's how he happened to be checking in campers on the day he met Maura.

Marbach had been an assistant on Villanova's 1985 national champions. The magic did not rub off. His Canisius teams were 49-94 in five seasons. When Marbach was let go, MacDonald and fellow assistants Dave Niland and Phil Seymore assumed they'd be gone too. But Beilein came from Division II Le Moyne College in Syracuse, where he'd had no assistants, and he kept all three. (Perhaps it helped that Niland is his first-cousin.)

"Retaining a whole staff is something that just doesn't happen," Beilein says. "But for me it was a great decision."

The Golden Griffins would play in one NCAA tournament and two NITs in Beilein's five seasons; Mike and Maura would marry and have two sons during that span. When Beilein left for the University of Richmond, MacDonald succeeded him. MacDonald's Griffs went 108-153 in nine seasons, during which his other two sons were born. Then he was hired at Division III Medaille College in Buffalo, where his teams were 148-73 in eight seasons. That led him to Daemen, where his teams were 59-29 in three seasons before this one. That's a win clip of roughly .670 at both places.

But the Daemen athletics director who hired him had more in mind than winning. She knew MacDonald as an honest coach and family man from the Beilein coaching tree. That mattered to Bridget Niland — Dave's sister and youngest of 42 first-cousins in Beilein's generation.

"I got criticized for hiring Mike, someone I knew," Bridget says. "But my uncle (the late Le Moyne athletics director Tom Niland) got criticism when he hired John. And how'd that turn out?"

That's still turning out well for Le Moyne, where Beilein's son Patrick is now coach.



Patrick MacDonald is a senior captain at Maritime College in the Bronx (Photo: Andre Rowe, Maritime Athletics)

### **Family of captains**

MacDonald is a rare case of a coach who has won 20 games in a season at Divisions I, II and III. Rarer still: He's coached at those three levels while always living in the same house. His teams have dinner there every season as he believes the best basketball teams are like families.

"I tell my players I am not successful as a coach unless we're invited to their weddings," Mike says. He and Maura go to as many as five each summer.

The family feel is real: MacDonald's sons have all been ball boys for his teams, including Mark this season. They've observed the game's joys and agonies up close and learned to lead through osmosis. Mike is proud his three older boys are captains.

Matt, a 6-5 guard, began his college career at Fairleigh Dickinson. His freshman year, he hit a storybook three that beat Rutgers. The next season he was named a captain, unusual for a sophomore. Then he transferred to Penn and sat out a year, per NCAA rules, before being named a Penn captain again in his junior and senior seasons.

“When Matt became available I thought he was the ideal guy for leadership off the court,” says coach Steve Donahue, who made Matt his first addition after coming to Penn. “Matt helped change the culture.”

Patrick, a 6-8 center, scored 1,096 points in his first three seasons at Maritime. He averaged 20.2 points per game last season and was named fourth-team preseason All-America by D3hoops.com. Patrick is on a ROTC scholarship and will commission as an active duty officer in the Navy in May as a Surface Warfare Officer — just like his Godfather, Uncle Michael.

“Pat was not very good in high school,” first-year Maritime coach Mike Berkun says. “Now he’s All-American. No way you could see that coming, except by his work ethic. Pat is an amazing story.”

Berkun is too: He played for MacDonald at Medaille and coached there with him for four years, then three more at Daemen. Now he’s coaching Patrick, who was a sixth grader hanging around Medaille practices when Berkun was a freshman 11 years ago. “I never could have imagined then that I’d be coaching that kid someday,” Berkun says.

Nick, a 6-3 guard, hit the clinching free throws in the local Catholic league championship game last March. Canisius High coach Kyle Husband says Nick sends a text to the team every morning as a reminder of the day’s duties.

“I don’t need an alarm clock,” Husband says. “Every day, 6:45 a.m., there’s Nick. Time to get up.”

Husband coached Matt and Patrick, too. He hopes to have Mark someday.

“They’re just a great basketball family,” he says. “They eat, sleep and breathe the game.”

Friday night the whole family plans to be at the Canisius gym to see Nick’s Crusaders play Cathedral Prep of Erie, Pa. Maura, keeper of the calendar, has that game circled on her fridge and imprinted on her heart. She knows next season’s master schedule will be lighter, what with two fewer sons in the mix. Life will be simpler, less hectic by half.

And she dreads it already.