

## One Call to Superman

**T**HE 1985–1986 SEASON was mediocre for La Salle University. The team, led by head coach Dave “Lefty” Ervin, posted a 14–14 record but failed to make the postseason for the second year in a row. Ervin reportedly felt the pressure from the La Salle community regarding his lack of success and resigned before he could be fired following the season. The departure was a mutual breakup, as the media reported that Ervin was battling an alcohol addiction. Ervin had compiled a 119–87 record over seven seasons at the helm. La Salle officials knew that the program needed to head in a different direction—which was pointing straight to South Philadelphia.

Just miles from La Salle’s campus, a young player named Lionel Simmons was turning heads with his quick ability to score baskets. Letters upon letters came pouring into the mailbox of his South Philadelphia home. Simmons had all the makings of a high-level recruit but made it known that he wanted to stay in his hometown of Philadelphia to further his education and play basketball. The only two schools he considered outside Philadelphia were Boston College and Old Dominion. Villanova and Temple were a bit late to get in on the recruiting process, so they were out of his favor. Simmons’s decision came down to Saint Joseph’s and La Salle.

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La Salle officials understood just how important it was to land a player like Simmons. They knew they could not lose a recruit of this caliber, especially in their own backyard. But to get him, they had to get plenty of other ducks in a row first.

Simmons's recruitment started with Bill Bradshaw. Bradshaw had graduated from Bishop Duffy High School, now known as Niagara Catholic, outside Niagara Falls, New York. In December 1962, Bradshaw's high school basketball coach had asked him whether anyone on the team would be interested in being a manager for the Niagara University versus La Salle game. Bradshaw and one of his teammates had volunteered—not knowing anything about La Salle at the time—just to get a little closer to the action. He had later met La Salle star Bill Raftery at the team's hotel and become hooked on the idea of being an Explorer.

Bradshaw had attended La Salle in 1965 as a walk-on for the baseball team, playing alongside multisport athletes Fran Dunphy and Joe Markmann. The second baseman's walk-on status had lasted a year before he received a baseball scholarship and started the last three years, being named captain during his senior year. Upon graduation from La Salle in 1969, Bradshaw had been drafted by the Texas Rangers and played two years within the minor league system of the Washington Senators before breaking his ankle twice in a span of two years. After his baseball career had ended, Bradshaw had moved into the sales business.

Bradshaw had moved back to New Jersey for a job when he received a call from Gene McDonnell, his old baseball coach at La Salle College. McDonnell disclosed to Bradshaw that La Salle was looking for a new athletic director. Bradshaw knew right away that he needed that job.

"I wanted it so badly," Bradshaw said. "It was my alma mater. I studied for it. I came in, and I was ready."

Bradshaw met with Don DiJulia, Saint Joseph's long-time athletic director, before he met with La Salle's board of directors. He wanted to prepare and to have an inside track on what committees like La Salle's were looking for.

"All you have to be as athletic director is be able to walk on water and please everybody all of the time. That's what I say typically," DiJulia said.

Bradshaw participated in an interview with fifteen to twenty board members and got the job, becoming La Salle's athletic director. He was the first piece of the Simmons recruiting puzzle.

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The next step was to find a head coach, preferably one who could establish a rapport with Simmons or who had a strong reputation in Philadelphia basketball. Despite much pushback, Bradshaw advocated for William “Speedy” Morris, who was currently coaching La Salle’s women’s basketball team. Morris was familiar with the Explorers’ basketball program and where it had been. He was especially familiar with Tom Gola and his legacy at 20th and Olney.

Morris’s admiration for Gola had started in 1956, when Morris was an eighth grader at St. John the Baptist in Manayunk, in the northwestern section of Philadelphia. As a member of his Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) basketball team, Morris, his teammates, and his head coaches had taken a trip down 3400 Civic Center Boulevard to Convention Hall to see Gola and the Philadelphia Warriors take on the Fort Wayne Pistons.

“I was a big-time Tom Gola guy,” Morris says.

He doesn’t recollect exactly how it happened, but at some point in the game, young Morris had touched Gola’s hand as he ran onto the court. For a thirteen-year-old basketball fan, making contact with one of his idols was life-changing and uplifting. A kid who had listened to the radio broadcasts of the 1954 and 1955 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Tournament championship games had gotten a brief chance to be close to his idol on the court.

“He became a hero that day,” Morris says.

After St. John the Baptist, Morris had attended Roman Catholic High School, where his love for basketball only increased. In 1967, he had become the head basketball coach at his alma mater, where he had remained until 1981; he had also run various area basketball camps in the late 1960s. He had moved on to Penn Charter to coach, until one day when he got a call asking whether he had any interest in coaching the women’s team at La Salle. Morris had no interest in coaching women, nor could he remember the last time he had watched any women’s basketball games, even dating back to his CYO playing days. But he had agreed to meet with the Athletic Department, and La Salle had sweetened the pot by offering tuition remission for his children. That had been the deal clincher for Morris and his family; he had been named the new women’s coach in 1984.

During Morris’s two seasons as head coach of the women’s team, his practices had sometimes featured brief appearances from Gola. Morris might spot Gola sitting in the stands of Hayman Hall, usually sporting his

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sweat suit from playing a pickup game on one of the other courts. Gola didn't approach Morris after practice, instead quietly walking out.

Morris's name came up in conversations about who should succeed Ervin as the coach of La Salle's men's team—but not in a positive way. Nobody on the alumni board wanted Morris as a coach, citing his lack of a college degree as the main point against him.

"I think there were some members of the faculty who maybe had some reservations concerning the fact that he didn't have a college degree. I don't think that was a major factor at that time," says Peter Filicetti, a former clinical psychology professor at La Salle for thirty-six years and the head of the athletic board.

Yet Morris had a rapport with Simmons's high school coach. In fact, Morris would bring him a pack of smokes when they met up during their days of high school coaching. Bradshaw saw this connection and knew that Morris might be the only coach who could bring Simmons to La Salle.

"There was opposition at that time by some committee members who thought we should have a more extensive search rather than simply moving Speedy from [the] women's position into the men's position," says Filicetti.

Bradshaw thought that the more time they spent debating whether Morris was qualified for the position, the smaller the chance that they could land him.

"He had an astute basketball mind. He could coach the game at any level," Bradshaw says.

The committee continued to balk at the idea of moving Morris, although Bradshaw knew in his heart that he was the perfect man for the job. Other conversations considered such candidates as La Salle alum and former Drexel coach Eddie Burke, but nothing was made official. Bradshaw knew that he was running out of time.

Bradshaw called the only person he knew who could move mountains: Tom Gola.

"I had one call . . . and it was to Superman," Bradshaw says. "I told Gola I was just afraid that the more we wait[ed], the less we [had] a chance to get him."

Gola asked what he could do to help. Bradshaw asked whether it would be possible for him to call Brother Patrick Ellis, the president of La Salle University. It couldn't hurt to have the president on your side, Bradshaw thought. Gola agreed and set up a face-to-face meeting with Brother Pat.

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“There is no doubt in my mind that meeting [that] Tom Gola had with Brother Patrick put us over the hump with Speedy,” Bradshaw says.

On March 7, 1985, the La Salle women were gearing up for the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC) championship game against St. Peter’s. If they won the game, they would clinch a spot in the NCAA Tournament. Prior to shoot around, a team manager for the Explorers told Morris that he had a phone call; Morris told the manager to take a message. The caller, Bradshaw, would not wait. Morris was confused as to what Bradshaw wanted but thought perhaps it would be a good-luck chat.

Instead, Bradshaw told Morris that Ervin was out as the men’s coach, and La Salle needed a new one. He asked Morris whether he wanted the job. Morris thought he would have to apply and interview for the position, but Bradshaw offered him the job on the spot, with the condition that he could not tell anybody.

“I was coaching the championship game, knowing I was going to be the new men’s coach,” Morris says. “I knew I was going to be the new men’s coach before the game started.”

Regardless, Morris’s Explorers won the MAAC Tournament and clinched their first NCAA berth since 1983 under head coach Kevin Gallagher. The victory was a little bittersweet for Morris, watching his women’s team celebrate after the win and knowing that he would be leaving after the next loss. La Salle lost to Villanova in the first round of the NCAA Tournament, and Morris’s focus shifted to the men’s team.

The second piece in the Simmons recruitment puzzle was in place. Now it was time to reel in the big fish.

As the new head coach, Morris made it his top mission to land Simmons. No matter what it would take, Simmons would be an Explorer the next season if Morris had anything to say about it.

“That was our number-one priority,” he says.

One of the final recruiting meetings took place at South Philadelphia High School with Simmons and his mother, Ruth; Mitch Snyder, the head basketball coach of South Philadelphia High School; and two of Morris’s bench coaches, including Dunphy.

Morris had the same pitch for many of his recruits: playing time was earned, not given, and nobody was guaranteed a spot on the team. One of Morris’s assistant coaches kicked him under the table during the meeting with Simmons, because everyone knew this caveat would not be true at all.

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Simmons was more talented than anyone La Salle had on the team at the time, and Morris's assistants thought the chances of landing Simmons would diminish if they told him that his playing time wasn't assured. Morris had one more thing to say to Simmons, the same thing Gola would soon tell him: "If you want to make a name for yourself in Philadelphia, you should go to a Big 5 school."

The decision of where to attend school was now entirely in Simmons's hands, yet one more person wanted to pitch the Explorer experience to him. Gola called Simmons to set up a meeting with the teenager to try to gauge his feelings. Simmons did not know much about Gola or who he was, other than his name and that he had played basketball.

Gola, Simmons, and Eddie Altieri, met at a restaurant in South Philly. Simmons was very nervous during the meeting; Altieri noted that he kept ordering Coca-Cola refills.

"I was still undecided, trying to decide between the local schools, and talking to Tom assured me that La Salle was the good choice," Simmons says.

At the dinner, Gola discussed how beneficial it would be for Simmons to go to La Salle. The two talked about the history of the program and the legacy of Philadelphia Big 5 basketball. Gola reiterated to Simmons that he would have a chance to build on his Philadelphia legacy that he had started in high school. Gola believed that Simmons would choose La Salle and have a big influence on the Philadelphia basketball community, similar to what Gola himself did in the 1950s.

"One of the main things he told me [about] was being popular and famous in your hometown. Staying home and doing well there carries a lot more weight [than] if you go out of town," Simmons says. "He made me a lot more comfortable making my decision."

That decision was to attend La Salle and play for Morris. The puzzle was complete.

Morris knew when he got Simmons that his newly minted team would be able to play with the best at the highest levels right away.

His Explorer team did just that in the 1987–1988 season, with Simmons leading the charge. He averaged 20.3 points and 9.8 rebounds per game as a freshman. The team went 20–13 for the season and made a strong charge in the National Invitation Tournament (NIT), eventually bowing out to Southern Mississippi in the finals at Madison Square Garden.

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The following season, Simmons was joined by the 1987 Public League Markward award winner, Doug Overton. The Dobbins Tech student had received offers from all over the country and even considered joining former teammates Eric “Hank” Gathers and Gregory “Bo” Kimble at the University of Southern California. Before Overton could make the decision to head west, Gathers and Kimble transferred to Loyola Marymount, and Overton decided to stay in Philly.

“I said I would rather pass the ball to Lionel twenty times than to pass the ball to Hank and Bo forty times,” Overton laughs.

Overton chose La Salle. He knew it was going to be a special season, knowing how well Lionel had performed in his freshman year and how Overton had been player of the year in 1987.

“I knew I was going to be playing with some great players, and then my senior year of high school, they [La Salle] made it to the NIT finals. So, obviously, I knew that it was going to be a special group, and it helped me make my decision to go there. It was exciting. I knew the legend of Speedy. I knew how great he was. He was a Philly legend,” he says.

Overton was off and running with Simmons, making waves in the NCAA during the 1987–1988 season. Finishing undefeated in the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC), La Salle won twenty-four games and was good enough to be a thirteenth seed in the NCAA Tournament before losing to Kansas State in South Bend, Indiana. Overton’s first year at La Salle was over, but he always believed that playing basketball in Philadelphia was meant to be. Playing alongside “L-Train” Simmons was an experience in itself.

“When you get there and play with somebody that good and that smart, it raises your level. It made me a better player. It made me focus more, concentrate more, think more, because he was such a high-level player. You wanted to raise your level and game to his. I think he made me better,” Overton says.

The 1988–1989 season was when La Salle’s basketball program really ramped up, with Simmons leading the way. The Explorers won twenty-six games that year, tying the record set back in 1955 when La Salle went 26–5 under Coach Ken Loeffler and Gola. Morris’s team in 1989 made it to the NCAA for the first time since 1983, as an eighth seed. The Explorers, an eighth seed in the tournament, lost to Louisiana Tech.

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Over the years, Gola would make appearances at practices and events to show his support for the program and its current players. Overton respected Gola's presence and said it didn't go unnoticed.

"I knew Lionel had a really good relationship with him. He was an important adviser for Lionel," Overton says. "It was awesome. That's what it is all about. Especially those two great players, and to see them get together like that, what he did with Lionel. I knew how much Lionel trusted him and relied on him. That's just awesome. You don't see that every day in sports."

Simmons's senior year was the 1989–1990 season, and the accolades were racking up. Morris and the Explorers went for a program-high season of 30–2, a record that still stands at 20th and Olney. La Salle went undefeated in the MAAC (16–0) and placed as a fourth seed in the NCAA Tournament, winning the first round against Southern Mississippi but losing to fifth-seeded Clemson in the second round, 79–75.

The 1989–1990 season was Simmons's last at La Salle. Simmons won the 1990 John R. Wooden Award and the Eastman Award (given by the National Association of Basketball Coaches) and was named the 1990 Player of the Year by the Associated Press (AP). To this day, he ranks third in NCAA history for scoring, behind Pete Maravich (Louisiana State University) and Freeman Williams (Portland State). For his 1987–1990 run, Simmons still holds the NCAA record for most consecutive games scoring in double figures, at 115. He is tied for third all-time in double-doubles with Derrick Coleman (Syracuse) and behind Tim Duncan (Wake Forest) and Ralph Sampson (Virginia).

Through all the trials and tribulations of picking La Salle; winning and losing a few NCAA Tournament games; and losing a dear friend in Gathers, who died at the age of twenty-three on March 4, 1990, after collapsing during a West Coast Conference tournament game, Simmons always had Gola's support when he needed it.

After graduating, Simmons needed a sports agent. He planned to enter the National Basketball Association (NBA) draft at the end of June 1990. Gola helped him select an agent and a money manager, letting him know that the agent worked for him and that Simmons could hire anyone he wanted. Simmons did not go through the normal agencies to find the right fit, as Gola helped ease that task.

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“It was kind of a turning point, where I didn’t go through the normal agencies of paying those guys money. He made me look into the business side of selecting an agent,” he says.

Simmons listened to the Hall of Famer. He was selected seventh overall by the Sacramento Kings in the 1990 NBA draft, a draft class featuring Derrick Coleman, Gary Payton, and even his local friend Bo Kimble. Scouts and writers described Simmons as an “all-around” player, the same mantra people had applied to Gola when he played in the league. Simmons moved out west to join the Kings, and his pro career was off and running. During this period, Gola’s teaching and mentoring was exactly what Simmons needed.

“Everything besides basketball, he was the guy I turned to,” he says. “Not only on the court but off the court, he was an influence.”

As contracts and the logistics of his new deal were flowing in, Simmons wanted to give back to his family, and he decided to look into purchasing a home for his mother, Ruth. With no prior experience in buying a home, Simmons contacted Gola for guidance. Gola helped pick out the right house and area for Ruth, as Simmons had no insight into where to look for a home. Gola showed Ruth how to handle the builders and walked her through the entire process. Gola helped Simmons with a lot of first experiences as he transitioned into a new luxurious life in the NBA. Gola’s post-college guidance was exactly what Simmons needed.

“There was a lot of information that I wasn’t aware of. I was greatly appreciative of getting it from him,” he says.

Simmons wanted to treat himself during his first year in the league, so he purchased a 1991 Mercedes 560 SEC with, of course, Gola’s help. The car was the first of its kind in 1991, and Simmons never saw the car until he came home that summer.

“Anything that was important, that was a first for me, that I needed some expertise in or I needed some guide or kind of guidance, he was always there. He was always the guy to walk me through the doors [of] bank loans and businesses,” Simmons says.