

NJIT's postseason run inspires memories of a friend lost on 9/11



NJIT head coach Jim Engles believes that Tim Finnerty, who died in the Sept. 11 attacks, would have been one of the first people to call him after the Highlanders upset Michigan. *(Duane Burlison/Getty Images)*

By [Steve Politi](#) | [NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#) March 27, 2015 at 7:30 PM

The conversation took place at a bar in Newark, just a few hours after the latest court-storming victory for the NJIT basketball team. Jim Engles has done his best to stay in the moment during his team's improbable season, but this time, he couldn't help but reflect on an old friend who wasn't there to enjoy the ride.

"You know who would be loving this?" Engles said to Tim Capstraw, his boss when he was an assistant coach at Wagner years ago. "Tim Finnerty."

Capstraw nodded. Finnerty would have enjoyed every minute of this NJIT team, because he loved basketball and he loved his friends. It wasn't hard to envision him sitting on a barstool with them, laughing about how the Highlanders — whose season was supposed to end in mid February — were somehow playing right to the brink of April.

Finnerty was an assistant coach with Engles at Wagner in the early '90s, making \$7,000 a year and chasing recruits in a beat-up Ford Escort. But when Engles resolved to keep climbing in the cutthroat coaching profession, Finnerty opted for a more stable life on Wall Street. He took a job at Cantor Fitzgerald but was never far removed from the sport that was his passion, **coaching grade-school kids in Glen Rock in his free time.**

"He wasn't going to get far away from basketball. He was always going to be involved on some level," Engles said. "He always struck me as one of those guys who would go work on Wall Street, make a ton of money, and then retire in 10 years and call me up and say, 'Hey can I come back and work for you guys?'"

He never had that chance. Finnerty was working on the 105th floor of Tower 1 of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. He called his father to say he was okay immediately after the jetliner crashed into the building. He was never heard from again.



Tim Finnerty would have loved this NJIT run. *Steve Politi | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com*

So yes, there have been a lot of thoughts swirling through Engles' mind during this NJIT season, which continues Saturday night at the Fleisher Athletic

Center in Newark when the Highlanders host Canisius in the CollegeInsider.com Tournament quarterfinals.

He thinks about the long road to get here, of course, because that journey is what makes NJIT such compelling story — and, outside of the NCAA Tournament, it's hard to find a better story in college basketball right now.

"A lot of people used to follow us because we were like a train wreck," Engles said. "They wanted to see what would happen next. Can they win a game? What are they going to lose by this time? I think people are genuinely following now because it's a good story. Even though we have a lot of hardships, we play the right way, we're fun to watch and we're fun to root for."

He thinks about the smiles plastered on the faces of NJIT alumni he sees, and said it reminds him of the way New York felt after the **Rangers** ended their long Stanley Cup drought. "Everyone in the city was smiling," he said, remembering that night in Manhattan ... a night that he shared with Tim Finnerty, of course.

He thinks about Finnerty, who he said was the friend who "connected a lot of people" — connections that have remained strong even 13 ½ years after the Sept. 11 attacks. They helped raise money to refurbish the basketball courts at Tamblyn Field in his hometown Rutherford in his honor, and they were there when his No. 30 was retired at his alma mater, Queen of Peace, in 2002.

Peter Finnerty, Tim's father, said he went unannounced to a game a few years ago when he heard that Engles had gotten the NJIT job. "Jimmy was there for us through 9/11 and with (Tim's widow) Theresa," Peter said. "I had to go down there and wish him well."

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Peter Finnerty, a lifelong Seton Hall fan, said he has followed NJIT's season closely, anxiously checking the scores from the CIT and wondering who the Highlanders would face next should they beat Canisius. He cheered like

everyone else when NJIT became a national story for **beating Michigan on its home court.**

"Oh my goodness, Tim would have been overjoyed," Peter Finnerty said.

Hundreds of miles away, on the night of the biggest victory of his coaching career, Engles said his thoughts were with his two late coaching mentors and his old friend.

"I thought of the people who would have been the first people that would have called me after that game," Engles said, "and (Finnerty) would have been out of his mind, crazy."

Engles knows that Tim Finnerty would have been calling him every day during this NJIT season, telling him how to run his offense or asking to drive the bus if it meant being around the team. He's gone, but during this improbable run for an easy-to-love basketball team, he's not forgotten.

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