

Sacchetti vs. Riva, two basketball legends talk about Varese vs. Cantù

Pubblicato: Sabato 9 Gennaio 2010



Already one hundred and twenty matches have been played, and another one, which is greatly anticipated, is drawing close. The never-ending story between the teams of Varese and Cantù will continue on Saturday 9 January, at the Palasport stadium in Masnago. Varesenews called **Romeo Sacchetti and Antonello Riva**, two great basketball players of the past, who made the history of Italian basketball, as well as that of this competition, to present this local derby. As luck would have it, the two great former players will face each other again, although in different roles. Romeo (“Meo”) Sacchetti is the coach of Sassari, the team leading the LegaDue basketball league, and Antonello Riva (“Nembo Kid”) is the General Manager of the Veroli team, which is in second place. Here is a classic, pre-derby, double interview.

Which of the numerous Varese-Cantù matches do you remember best?

Sacchetti: “The Pianella match, to qualify for the 1990 semi-final. We won match number 2 in Cucciago and we qualified for the final. Many people remember the match because it ended badly, with the crowd throwing coins, and the referees interrupted the match a few seconds from the end; but we played a great match.”

Riva: “There have been so many, and it’s hard to choose one. But I know the one which hurt me most; it was the final of the Cup Winners’ Cup, which we played at the old San Siro Palasport stadium in Milan; it was won by the then Emerson team. It was a special match, a very important one, and the Varese team won (90-88 after extra time, ed.).”

Who was the hardest opponent you faced?

Sacchetti: “Without a doubt it was Antonello Riva; as I used to play in defence, I would be up against the strongest opponent, and against Cantù, that was always him. The only thing I could do was to push him left to dribble, stop and throw; if he went right,

there was nothing I could do. It's often been said that I managed to stop him, but that just meant I kept him under 30 points ...”

Riva: “Meo, who was already my direct opponent when he played in Turin. You could count on a duel between Riva and Sacchetti during those years; they used to get him to mark me, because he combined physical size with good agility and great tactical intelligence. When I faced him, he always managed to get in my way.”

How would you define the Varese-Cantù derby?

Sacchetti: “It's one of those things that make sport great, because I always felt it was a match that meant much more than the result. This was true for Cantù, and it is even truer than for Milan, two small towns that play to be the best of the best.”

Riva: “It's a match that always means much more than how the championship goes. This is not so for the derby on Saturday, which is extremely important for both teams, but even if the result of the match wasn't so important, it would still have a special atmosphere. You can't deny it, there's a special atmosphere when you prepare for this match and then play it.”

Are you going to watch the match on Saturday?

Sacchetti: “I'm certainly not going to miss it. At 8 p.m. I'll be there, in front of the TV to support Varese. The team is in a disastrous situation with injuries, and I fully understand the coach Pillastrini in these situations, but in the match itself, they could win, and they need these two points.”

Riva: “Unfortunately I can't, because I'll be busy with the Veroli team in an important match in Reggio Emilia. If the match had been on Sunday, I would have come to Masnago. No text message updates during my match, but immediately after the siren, I'll check the result. It'll be the first thing I do when I get back to the changing room.”

Varese and Cantù: can one do without the other?

Sacchetti: “No, it's impossible. Years ago, someone suggested a merger, which was ridiculous. Varese and Cantù have to remain separate and continue to shine with their own lights in Italian basketball. Many people would like only to see the big cities, but these towns have an essential heritage.”

Riva: “Let's say that they're two teams that, as well as making Italian basketball history, have brought our basketball to the highest levels in Europe. This is why it would be great to see them both on the European stage again. Although it's difficult to think of future victories in championships, as was once the case, it would be amazing to see them back competing.”

Your duel continues in the LegaDue, and the first round went to Sacchetti: what was it like to be up against each other again?

Sacchetti: “Great, it went well considering the result, but I was playing at home, and that helped. I hope Saturday goes the same way for Varese.”

Riva: “Meo is doing a great job with Sassari; it's said that his teams have lot of freedom, but a winning play always gets great results. Sassari started very strong, and when we got close to them again, they floored us with a hail of baskets. We look forward to the return match, hoping that they'll decline, so that we can knock them off the top of the table.”

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