

It's touchy when the son also rises

by Brent Schrotenboer

Joey Meyer had just graduated from DePaul University in 1971 when he landed a pretty good job - freshman basketball coach at his alma mater. Within two years he was promoted to junior varsity coach, then assistant varsity coach.

FATHER-SON DUO - San Diego State University Aztecs assistant coach Mark Fisher (right), son of head coach Steve Fisher, reports to an associate athletic director. CNS photo by Sean M. Haffey. His boss the entire time? His father, legendary DePaul coach Ray Meyer.

When Ray Meyer stepped down in 1984, Joey, who had been a player and captain on one of his father's worst teams, took over as head coach. He was fired a decade later after a 3-23 season, prompting a Chicago critic to blast the hiring.

"Joey Meyer's resume says that he worked for his dad for 13 years and then he took over the company and ran it into the ground," the critic wrote.

Similar employment bequests have become fairly common in the coaching profession over the years, including the Suttons, the Bowdens and the Fishers. Recently, Texas Tech assistant basketball coach Pat Knight succeeded his father, Bob, as head coach.

Often these arrangements occur despite anti-nepotism policies designed to curb such staff-building by birthright, and to eliminate the appearance of favoritism and unfairness in hiring and personnel decisions.

"It is because of such suspicion and concern that nepotism policies exist and that organizations refer to them when promotion and hiring decisions involve relatives of present employees," said Dennis Laker, a nepotism expert at Widener University in Chester, Pa.

But that doesn't mean there aren't creative ways for schools to comply with anti-nepotism rules.

To give at least the appearance of fairness, schools usually require that the relative officially report to somebody else at the university for personnel issues. That way, the father technically isn't deciding if his son should get a promotion or raise.

Pat Knight reported to the Texas Tech athletic director instead of his father for performance evaluations in a special arrangement approved by the school's regents.

At San Diego State University, Mark Fisher reports to an associate athletic director in order to comply with the California State University's nepotism policy. Fisher, 29, previously had served as SDSU's director of basketball operations, also under the associate AD. When Fisher's candidacy for that job came up in 2002, then-Athletic Director Rick Bay wrote a letter to SDSU President Stephen Weber.

"Since his potential hiring could be viewed with a jaundiced eye as it relates to our nepotism rule, I want to make the following case," Bay wrote.

Bay then proposed classifying Mark Fisher as an "administrative assistant" who would report to an administrative official.

"Although this may seem a technical way of subverting the nepotism rule, I believe that the people involved here ... would honor the arrangement to the letter," Bay wrote.

Cal State University policy states that no employee shall "in any way participate in decisions" that may directly affect the employment status of an immediate family member.

After a job opened on his coaching staff last year, Steve Fisher said he interviewed more than a half-dozen candidates.

Neither Fisher wanted to talk about the issue, athletics spokesman Mike May said.

Other schools have gone so far as to bequeath the father's job to the son upon the father's retirement. That's what happened at Texas Tech, where Pat Knight had been designated as his father's successor in a 2005 contract. A similar setup was in place at Oklahoma State when assistant basketball coach Sean Sutton took over after father Eddie called it quits. In 2003, Dick Bennett was lured out of retirement to become basketball coach at Washington State, in part so that his son Tony could work for him and have a good chance to replace him when he left, as he did in 2006.

The fallout of such an arrangement usually lands somewhere between two extremes:

- The hiring of a son breeds suspicion among colleagues and is considered unfair to other candidates who didn't inherit the genes for the job. This is particularly the case in an age where minorities still struggle to make inroads for college coaching jobs.

- Or the son feels increased pressure and works harder to prove he belongs.

"We found that nepotism was related to greater work and supervisory satisfaction, greater commitment to the organization and higher levels of ... performance," said Laker, who conducted nepotism research by studying a large family-controlled bank in Latin America.

Laker attributed this effect to a culture that "puts pressure on relatives to do a good job to avoid embarrassment or loss of 'face' for their relatives."

At DePaul, the Meyers ruled the basketball program for 55 years. There was talk at times that Ray would leave DePaul if Joey weren't promised the job after him. After Joey got the job in 1984, he took DePaul to five straight NCAA Tournaments, but by 1997 he was forced out. Upset about his son's firing, Ray Meyer said he was cutting ties with the school.

A writer for the Chicago Tribune wrote that Joey's hiring "wasn't particularly fair to DePaul, and it wasn't particularly fair to Joey, either."

In private companies, it's less of an issue because owners can hire whomever they want. By contrast, taxpayers are subsidizing public institutions and expect the hiring process to be fair and inclusive, so the best candidate is hired with their money.

When it comes to nepotism, Floyd Keith, who pushes for better job opportunities for minorities in college sports, said he hopes schools enforce policies designed to promote fairness and inclusiveness.

"I have to lean on the policy of the school," said Keith, who is executive director of the Black Coaches and Administrators. "But ... there's a lot of ways to get around a little bit of everything."

Many coaches allowed to hire their sons have had long-term success at their programs and feel a certain ownership over it. So it's not uncommon for them to feel like bosses of their own private companies. Or to feel

as if their sons are specially qualified, which they may in fact be for obvious reasons.

"It will be a seamless transition for him," Steve Fisher said in a statement announcing his son's promotion. "He has been around basketball all his life and now he moves into on-court coaching and off-campus recruiting."

Knight, as might be expected, was a little more blunt about the arrangement at Texas Tech. He said the line of succession from father to son ensures his program isn't "turned over to somebody who has no idea what the hell they're doing."

FATHER-SON DUOS

Some notable coaching combos on the same staffs, past and present

College basketball:

DePaul - Ray and Joey Meyer

DePaul - Jerry and Scott Wainwright

Texas Tech - Bob and Pat Knight

Oklahoma State - Eddie and Sean Sutton

San Diego State - Steve and Mark Fisher

University of Alabama at Birmingham - Gene and Murray Bartow

Valparaiso - Homer and Scott Drew

Georgetown - John and Ronny Thompson

Washington State - Dick and Tony Bennett

Auburn - Jeff and Dave Lebo (Jeff, the son, is the head coach)

Drake - Tom and Keno Davis

Georgia - Jim Harrick Sr. and Jr.

College football:

USC - Pete and Brennan Carroll

UTEP - Mike, Eric and Aaron Price

Florida State - Bobby, Tommy and Jeff Bowden

South Carolina - Steve Spurrier Sr. and Jr.

Penn State - Joe and Jay Paterno

Notre Dame - Lou and Skip Holtz

Virginia - Al and Mike Groh

Georgia - Jim and Todd Donnan

Texas Tech - Spike and Rick Dykes

Arizona State - Dennis and Bryce Erickson

Baylor - Art and Kendal Briles

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