

Sports Unlimited: Wooden, Coach K would've had no chance today

by Mike Nadel

Entering his 13th season at UCLA, 50-year-old John Wooden never had won an NCAA tournament game. His last three teams had finished 16-10, 16-9 and 14-12, by far his worst stretch as a coach. His program seemed to be getting worse, not better.

Wizard of Westwood? Hardly. Had 1960 been 2007, one only can imagine how many Web sites would have been dedicated to getting the aging, out-of-touch loser fired.

In his eighth season as a college coach and third at Duke, Mike Krzyzewski went 11-17. It was his third losing record in a four-year stretch and capped a five-season span in which his teams had gone 61-75. His Duke record stood at 38-47 and his Blue Devils were ACC laughingstocks: 6-8 his first year, 4-10 his second, 3-11 his third.

Coach K? Try Coach Zero. Had 1983 been 2007, Duke would have paid whatever sum necessary to buy out Krzyzewski's contract so he could go screw up some other program.

Patience in college basketball is about as fashionable on today's campuses as goldfish-eating contests, war protests and Devo concerts.

Win now. Win big. Win NCAA tourney games. And fill the arena. Or else.

Big-time college basketball coaches are crazy just to be in that profession. I have shared my theory with many of them and not once have I been told I was wrong. Coaches deserve to get paid more than university presidents and top professors because they work harder and are under far more pressure to perform.

Bruce Weber's first three seasons at Illinois were outstanding and included a run to the 2005 NCAA title game. With his team winning "only" 23 games this year, however, many Illini Land denizens want somebody better. (Ron Guenther has stood by Weber - when the Illinois athletics director isn't giving in-game lineup advice or screaming at players, that is.)

While there is no vacancy in Champaign-Urbana - yet, anyway - there are plenty of high-profile openings around the country. Ever the meat market, the Final Four will be extra wild this weekend in Atlanta as coaches sell their wares and ADs look for the next hot commodity.

Kentucky will try to improve upon Tubby Smith. Stan Heath is job-hunting after Arkansas fired him despite consecutive NCAA appearances. Tommy Amaker was permanently benched by Michigan. Iowa gladly let Steve Alford go.

Though Kentucky appears to be the "best" opening, I'd argue it might be the worst. Any successful, well-paid coach who would leave a good situation for a place where only national titles are acceptable needs a lobotomy. Yes, I'm talking to you, Billy Donovan, Tom Crean, Billy Gillespie, Rick Barnes and Mark Few.

Why would Smith leave Kentucky for Minnesota? Why would Alford bolt Iowa for New Mexico? The answer: Why not? They still will make mountains of moolah while escaping ridiculous expectations.

Of course, smaller schools have their own outsized expectations these days. Having convinced themselves that each of their programs is but a savior coach away from being the next Gonzaga, honchos from Quinnipiac, Harvard, Marshall, Chicago State, Indiana State, St. Bonaventure, Missouri-Kansas City and Santa Clara also will be shopping at the Final Four marketplace.

For the big boys, Chris Lowery of Southern Illinois will be the Flavor of the Month in Atlanta.

As was the case with Dan Monson (Gonzaga '99) and Heath (Kent State '02), Lowery is on everybody's "hot list" of mid-major coaches ready for prime time. Then again, Monson (dumped by Minnesota in November) and Heath (bounced by Arkansas on Monday) discovered that coaching in prime time can be about as enjoyable as being married to Ron Artest.

I'm not saying Lowery should turn down Iowa or Michigan; the pay and prestige upgrades would be difficult to resist. Life, especially a college basketball coach's life, is all about embracing challenges, taking chances and making changes. I'm just saying Lowery might want to ask former boss Weber how much fun Bruce had in the Big Ten this year. He might want to chat with Smith about loyalty being a one-way street. And he might want to look up John Wooden and Mike Krzyzewski, who always are willing to share their wisdom with young coaches.

Go 14-12 at Iowa (as Wooden did at UCLA in 1960), and www.firestelowery.com will be up and running. Go 38-47 in three years at Michigan (as Coach K did at Duke in the early-'80s), and there will be no Year 4.

As long as Lowery knows those rules going in, he might as well pad his bank account - and check his sanity at the door.

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