First weeks on job will be urgent for UK's new coach

By Bob Watkins
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Rich Brooks begins the settle-in process at Nutter Center this week as the University of Kentucky’s new football coach. Wildcat fans hope offices across the hall will be buzzing soon too. Those belonging to assistant coaches.

With barely a month before the 2003 signing period begins, Brooks must hit the ground running looking to sign replacement candidates at linebacker, tight end, cornerback and safety. An influx of three to five junior college prospects won't be a surprise. Brooks will be fortunate if he finds one Aaron Boone.

Says here however, an indicator of how well Brooks' program impresses recruits and fans will be the coach's success locating and signing quarterback prospects. Jared Lorenzen will be a senior this year and backup Shane Boyd may give up football.

Things Kentucky fans can look for sooner rather than later ...

- A director for recruiting will be hired. Ideally for Wildcat fans, a young dynamo with a sunny disposition, unmarried and willing to work 107-hour weeks.

- Next, with a background in defense, Brooks will hire an offensive coordinator and make the new OC available to every media outlet in sight to spin how wide open Kentucky's offense is going to be. Sells tickets, impresses recruits who think about being on television.

- There will be an urgency to fill other staff spots with dispatch, but recruiting and defining the offense will be priority items for Brooks' first weeks.

- Next, the new head coach must do what his predecessor did, get out early and often. Meet people, speak at civic clubs from Lexington to Louisville, Pikeville to Ft. Thomas to Corbin to Paducah. Generally, Kentucky fans are disappointed at worst, skeptical at best in Mitch Barnhart's hiring an unemployed 61-year-old west coast man. In fact, some fans are disappointed Barnhart wasn't let go for botching the hire in the first place.

Brooks is on the hot seat to sell himself and his program and fast to re-assure fans the new man is not the second coming of John Ray,
the well-intentioned hire in 1969 who was good at bumper stickers and singing optimism then was gone in four years.

- Also, Brooks must press the flesh with the hierarchy of the Kentucky High School Football Coaches Association. Sunny side of botch

Now that the Mitch Barnhart Botch is in the rear-view mirror there is an upside to the latest soap-opera episode in UK football saga. Lots of administrators will be keeping an eye on other administrators. Safe to say, Dr. Lee Todd and board of trustees will monitor Barnhart's performance more closely. Rich Brooks too. Because of NCAA violations in his Oregon program 20 years ago, the coach will be scrutinized more carefully. The traditional honeymoon accorded new coaches by fans and media is history already. With Brooks, we go straight to: Show skeptics your best stuff.

Assuming Brooks was not hiding anything, but simply forgot to mention his brush with the (NCAA) law, if he had done his homework on his new gig, he would have known how sensitive the NCAA probation seismograph is under UK football is these days. The prevailing sentiment is: Brooks wanted a job, any job anywhere, which parallels the place Barnhart found himself in after Christmas (and Bill Parcells) -- "I gotta find a coach, any coach. Now."

Moving forward... For Rich Brooks? All new people, new job and $750,000 a year at 61-years-old. A scenario that reminds us: "America, 'and of opportunity. It's why I love this place!"

Yet, Brooks starts out behind the 8-ball. He must win over more than a usual number of skeptics disappointed with Barnhart's choice. This begins with the metro media herd whose lead dogs have already set the bar.

Now, the new coach must:

1. Show he can recruit. Beyond rival recruiters generally spreading skepticism about UK, Brooks must relate to and persuade 18-year-olds and their families that a 61-year-old fellow with a dream house three time zones away and whose favorite fishing holes are in Alaska, is committed to winning football at Kentucky over the long haul.

He'd better be Henry Clay-eloquent.

2. On the field? Brooks' reputation is -- hard worker. This is noble, but not new to Kentucky fans who've heard the same pitch since before Junction Boys. An ex-defensive coordinator had better have an imaginative offense in place by Aug. 30. His team had better win early too.

This means beat Louisville in the season opener at home. In Game 2, providing Barnhart can get this one right -- replace Florida Atlantic with a beatable opponent attractive enough to sell tickets. Next, Brooks' team must make a respectable showing against Alabama in Tuscaloosa, then beat Indiana in Bloomington.

3. Before any of these things happen, Brooks must hire an
energetic and creative coaching staff. Says here, Guy Morriss' foremost talent was gathering a good staff and allowing his men to coach.

Stay tuned and pay attention. Dr. Todd certainly will. **Lexington & Atlanta**

All this talk about Tubby Smith taking a new job come springtime.

From the "If" Dept. ... If Tubby left Kentucky for a job, say coaching the Atlanta Hawks, what would the trade-offs be?

In Lexington Tubby sets his jaw and tells his stars how things are going to be. In Atlanta his celebrity stars might skip practice, call in sick, tell him how things are going to be.

In Lexington Tubby tells his players to shut up and play hard. In Atlanta his players would yawn and say, "Chill out, man," then answer their cell phones.

In Lexington the stands are full and Internet message boards hum with pros, cons and critics. In Atlanta the stands are half full and message boards ... uh, mmm, what message boards? Who cares, there are a zillion games to go.

In Lexington the money is generous and demands on Tubby's time in off-season are non-stop. In Atlanta the money would be cosmic and the off-season would be an hour and 37 minutes.

In Lexington the president guarantees a contract roll-over. In Atlanta the general manager gives his coach a vote of confidence.

Yes, like Dick "Babble-head" Vitale tells anybody who will listen: Atlanta has a great job down there just waitin' for Tubby Smith.

Yeah, boy.

And so it goes.

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