December 2006

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2007/iss1/3

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McDermott Magic

Story: Ward Phillips
Photos: Aaron Thomas
There’s a new coach in town, and he’s bringing back hope to Hilton

Greg McDermott is a self-proclaimed perfectionist. Standing 6’8” he hovers above assistant coaches and is hardly ever below eye level with his players. When a play goes awry at practice, he throws his hands up, question in mind.
“How many times have we gone over that?”
Realizing his mistake, the player walks over without hesitation. Sensing the question is rhetorical, but answering anyway, he says, “I know. My bad, Coach.”
McDermott encouragingly puts his arm around him, but at the same time sternly stares down using his height to his full advantage.
“I don’t want your bad. I want execution,” he says. “Let’s go.”
And with that, the team responds. In fact, whenever he speaks, whether it's at the practice gym or on game day, everybody in the room is listening. He has that uncanny ability to take over a room by just walking in it. Even at practice, he makes his rounds, acknowledging everybody from the media to the team managers.

Born on a farm in Cascade, McDermott is a longtime Iowan. "But at a young age, I knew farming wasn't for me. It did, however, instill in me tremendous values that have stuck with me to this day," McDermott says.

He preaches discipline, respect, selflessness and integrity — the ingredients needed to build a winning program that everyone can be proud of both on and off the court. Last March, McDermott was the head coach at the University of Northern Iowa. His Panthers had received a bid to the NCAA Tournament. They drew perennial powerhouse Georgetown in the first round. McDermott was in the locker room with his prized recruiting class, which included player Eric Crawford, who later signed onto the ISU coaching staff.

Even after implementing a strong game plan and having the lead for much of the game, Northern Iowa fell just short in a gut-wrenching loss. Instead of having time to reflect on the season, McDermott found himself in the middle of a media frenzy. He was the top candidate for Iowa State, and it was hardly a secret. Three days after the loss to Georgetown, McDermott was addressing the ISU men's basketball team as their new head coach. He just turned 42 years old, and he holds one of the most talked-about coaching positions in the state of Iowa.

"It happened so fast. The first time I met with the team was right before the press conference to announce me being hired as the new head coach," McDermott says.

After a very disappointing 2005 campaign, the off-season turned tumultuous for the Cyclones. Recruiting and scheduling scandals gained national exposure. Head coach Wayne Morgan was promptly fired, and the search for the new head coach was in full effect. ISU Athletic Director Jamie Pollard wanted someone who was a proven leader and enjoyed consistent...
success. He wanted someone with a deep basketball pedigree, someone who could not only adequately represent the program, but would be the face of the program. He found what he was looking for in McDermott.

"For a while, Hilton lost its magic, but there is no doubt in my mind that McDermott will get it back quickly," Pollard says.

The team may not have been winning as much, but fan support — a luxury McDermott says he has never had when beginning a coaching job — was still there. At Northern Iowa, McDermott started off slow, but then had three consecutive NCAA Tournament berths. McDermott and his Panthers earned respect, and validation came when fan attendance increased and the team later received a national ranking.

"At all of the institutions I worked at before, I never inherited fan interest. But at Iowa State, getting people to the games is not a worry. The fans are truly passionate and care deeply about the Iowa State program. They are some of the best fans in all of college basketball. I really appreciate their input and their concerns. I appreciate their excitement and their loyalty to the program," he says.

Success is something McDermott has grown used to over the years, and he doesn't plan on changing this trend now. In high school, he earned all-state honors, while on the Cascade basketball team. As a result, he landed a scholarship to play at the University of Northern Iowa. There, he led the team in shooting percentage for three consecutive years, and by his senior year, he was an all-conference selection.

After playing overseas for a year in Wetzikon, Switzerland, McDermott decided to pursue coaching. He first worked as an assistant at the University of North Dakota. Then, at his first head coaching job, McDermott resurrected a Wayne State program and led them to four straight 20-win seasons.

After this stint, he traveled to North Dakota State for one year, where he enjoyed another winning season. Northern Iowa decided to take a chance and named a young, up-and-coming Greg McDermott as its head coach.

McDermott credits his success to surrounding himself with good people. When he came to Iowa State, he stuck with this formula.

Ron Smith worked with McDermott all five years at Northern Iowa, first as assistant coach and then as director of basketball operations, a position he retains at Iowa State. By spending so much time with him, Smith has grown keen to McDermott's style of coaching.

"He is low-key, but he knows what he wants, and he is going to get it out of his staff and his players. His actions are methodical, and his words are very thoughtful," Smith says. "But underneath it all, he has this burning desire to be the best, and he will do anything it takes to get there."

For now, getting to the top tier of the Big 12 will be very difficult. Five scholarship players left at Morgan's departure, and McDermott had to scrap together a competitive team for the 2006 season by digging in junior colleges for talent.

"It takes a while to build a program. It takes a year to learn the system we implement. On top of that, we lose a year of recruiting due to the coaching change, so automatically you start one step behind," he says.

By leaving his comfort zone in Cedar Falls, McDermott has had to face a major transition in every facet of his life.
Coaching against UC-Riverside, McDermott throws his hands up, pleading for his players to do the same on the defensive end.

While he proclaims that the people of Ames, the fans across the state, and the students of the university have welcomed him to the community, McDermott says he has received insight from an unlikely source, a former opponent who knew the job firsthand.

"I've talked to Coach [Larry] Eustachy several times since I accepted the job. He has given me some advice to what worked for him during his time at Iowa State. I've known Larry for a number of years, and the fact he went out of his way to help me out says a lot about him as a person," McDermott says.

Eustachy was the head basketball coach at Iowa State from 1998 to 2003 and was the AP National Coach of the Year after leading the Cyclones to the Elite 8 in the 2000 NCAA Tournament.

Although he knew the ISU program well, he was fired in 2003 after photos were found of him drinking and kissing female students at a college party in Columbia, Mo.

This, on top of the Wayne Morgan controversies, has brought a bad stigma to the men's head coaching position. However, it is not something that McDermott feels will be an issue under his direction.

"I don't think too much about what other people think and things I wasn't a part of. It's my goal to build a program that everyone can take pride in. If it is a program that I am proud of, our fans are going to embrace this as well," McDermott says.

"The image of our program is very, very important to me. The actions of our players and coaches on and off the playing floor are something we constantly emphasize. If we do things the right way and work as hard as we possibly can, then everything else will fall into place."

So far, things are starting to. McDermott has been working tirelessly to get the program to the status he desires. The proof lies in the progress already made and, unfortunately, the decline in his golf game.

"I was a 5-handicap when I got the job, now I am a 10," he says.

In making the move to Ames, McDermott's biggest concern was how well his family would adjust. He is a strong family man who is devoted to wife, Theresa, his two sons, Nick and Doug, and daughter, Sydney, who just started kindergarten.

"But the transition has gone unbelievably well. The people of Ames and Cyclone fans specifically have welcomed us with open arms," he says.

The family is growing increasingly used to seeing Dad on the ISU sidelines. McDermott admits that there are a few purple items left in their closets, but most have been replaced by Cyclone colors.

As for the rest of the ISU faithful, they are re-energized seeing McDermott lead the cardinal and gold. His home is now a coliseum instead of a dome, and his fans gather as Cyclone Alley instead of "Mac's Maniacs." The challenge is there, but so is Coach McDermott.

"Let's go."
Cy-zing up Coach McDermott

Head – He is a master at teaching the game of basketball. Also, he likes to purvey life-long lessons at the beginning of practice by having the team define words like “integrity.” He has a very disciplined approach to the game, and he has a knack for drawing up the perfect play at just the right time.

Heart – McDermott coached teams never give up. This is what fans have come to expect with him under the helm. His love for basketball and ability to create strong team chemistry are two huge reasons why he has enjoyed so much success coaching.

Ring – Signifies the love for his wife and devotion to his family. “He is a family first kind of guy. He doesn’t just talk it - he walks it. Both personally, and he wants the staff to do that as well,” Ron Smith, director of basketball operations, says.

Foot – The path to a Big 12 Championship is a big journey, but McDermott aims to get there, one step at a time.