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Building a Great Program

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Things were not looking good for the Furman basketball program after the 2012-13 season, and that appeared to be equally true for Bob Richey’s career. Richey had been an assistant coach for two seasons under Jeff Jackson, who had just resigned after posting his sixth losing season in seven years. So, as it had done for the better part of four decades, Furman once again was in search of a new head coach and a new beginning, which usually doesn’t bode well for the assistant coaches left behind.

But Richey didn’t see things the way many others did. While there was no arguing with the mounting losses, he was convinced the Furman program could easily move in a more positive direction. There was rising sophomore Stephen Croone, who Richey had recruited and who was the team’s second leading scorer and assist leader as a freshman. There were other solid players on the roster, too, as well as some promising high school recruits like Kris Acox, Devin Sibley and Daniel Fowler.

In other words, Richey didn’t see a team that had only won seven games the previous season. He saw a program that had a solid foundation and just needed a good push in the right direction.

That positive outlook must have affected the new head coach who was hired a few weeks later, because Niko Medved asked Richey to stay on the staff as his top assistant. And Richey’s vision of the future was realized over the next four years when the Paladins got better every season, winning...
nine, 11, 19 and then 23 games in 2016-17, as they became the Southern Conference Regular Season Champions for the first time in 26 years.

So, when Medved left Furman after last season to take on another rebuilding project at Drake University, who other than Bob Richey deserved the chance to keep the momentum going? Richey was named the Paladins’ new head coach in April, which was what the players made clear they wanted.

The importance of continuity wasn’t lost on Furman Athletics Director Mike Buddie. “What kind of message does it send if you don’t promote from within, when the staff has done everything you could have possibly asked?” he says. “They’re winning basketball games, they’re winning in the community, and they’re winning in the classroom.”

Looking back at the period after Jackson resigned and Medved took over, Richey says two things led to Furman’s current success: Croone didn’t transfer out of the program, and Acox, a 6-foot-6 recruit from Reykjavik, Iceland, honored his letter of intent.

“That’s a pretty rare thing to happen during a coaching change, to keep two players like that,” Richey says. “And let’s be honest. You take Stephen Croone and Kris Acox out of the equation, and you and I aren’t sitting here right now.”

Yes, it usually comes down to the players, and the Paladins have definitely increased their talent level over the last four years. Croone, a guard, was SoCon Player of the Year in 2015-16, and Sibley, a fellow guard, received the same honor last season as a junior. Acox was second team SoCon All-Conference, and guard Jordan Lyons was named to the All-Freshman team.

Four seniors—Sibley, Fowler, John Davis and Geoff Beans—return from last year’s team along with several other players who saw significant playing time. Matt Rafferty, a 6-foot-8 junior who missed most of last season with a back injury after earning All-Freshman honors, is healthy again. All in all, seven of Furman’s returning players have started games.

Richey says the Paladins have gotten deeper every season over the last four years, and this year’s team will be the deepest yet. “For the first time since I’ve been here, we’ll have 13 guys competing for minutes,” he says. “There will be some tough decisions about who to play, but that’s a good problem for a coach to have.”

Most coaches—and especially new coaches—tend to downplay their team’s chances in any given season, but Richey can’t help but be positive when he looks at his first team.

“We have four starters back, and we didn’t lose a perimeter player,” Richey says. “We have a big spot to fill with Acox having graduated, but I feel like we’ll be able to do it. This team is close, they get along with each other, and they put in the hard work you need to be successful. We want to set the bar high, and the team’s ultimate goal is to go to Asheville and win.”

That, of course, would mean the Paladins win the Southern Conference tour-

nament and qualify for the NCAA tournament for the first time since 1980.

Richey says there is a difference between having a great team and having a great program. Great teams come and go, but great programs carry on every year no matter who’s on the court.

“People thought we wouldn’t be as good when Croone graduated, and we were actually better,” he says. “And I’m sure they’ll think the same thing when we lose four seniors next year. But great programs can replace key players because the culture and the daily work habits allow other players to step in and take over. When it’s your time to play, you need to be ready. That’s what we’re working to accomplish here, to build a strong program.”

THE TOP GUY
Bob Richey now leads a staff he has served on for seven years.