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Carson proves you can go home again

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Carson proves you can go home again

WHEN JACKIE SMITH CARSON was introduced at a press conference this spring as the new women's basketball coach at Furman, it took all of two minutes to realize that patience and a long-suffering temperament might not rate high on Carson's list of virtues.

After a few remarks about how nice it was to be back on campus and see familiar faces, Carson got down to business. "I'm going to show you guys how it's supposed to be," she said, motioning toward a group of Lady Paladin players who were sitting near the back of the room. "We're going to get things going in the right direction."

For those who remember the resolute intensity Carson displayed on the court during her stellar career at Furman, it's no surprise that she would cut to the heart of the matter. And who could argue that she doesn't know how it's supposed to be done?

When she played from 1996 to 2000, Furman was a force in the Southern Conference, winning 44 league games and taking the regular season conference championship in 1997 and the tournament in 2000.

The 6-1 Carson had much to do with that success. She was first-team all-conference her sophomore, junior and senior seasons. She was the conference Player of the Year her sophomore and junior years, was team captain her final two seasons, and was Furman's Edna Hartness Female Athlete of the Year in 1999. She finished her career as the second leading scorer and rebounder in school history. For good measure, the health and exercise science major made the conference Academic Honor Roll three times. She was elected to the university's Athletic Hall of Fame in 2005.

To be reminded of Carson's contributions, her players need only look to the rafters of Timmons Arena, where her jersey (22) hangs. She is one of only three Furman women's players to have her number retired.

"The last time Furman won the Southern Conference championship was my senior year, and I hope to continue where I left off," says Carson, who succeeds Sam Dixon as coach. "The program has fallen off a little bit [7-24 last season], but I know we can get back to where we were. We just have to work hard and not be afraid to fail."

After graduating in 2000, Carson played professionally in Belgium and Israel for two years. She enjoyed the traveling and the basketball, but not the uncertainty that the lifestyle entailed.

"I'm the type who likes to have her ducks in a row," she says. "I would come home from playing overseas and I didn't have medical insurance or any kind of stability. That was the part I didn't like."

She returned home to northern Virginia and began working toward a degree as a physician assistant. But she couldn't let go of basketball altogether, so she volunteered as an assistant coach for a girls' 15-year-old AAU team that would win a national championship and produce three future Atlantic Coast Conference stars.

Soon, without any college coaching experience, she was offered an assistant's job at Bucknell University in 2004. Two years later she moved to James Madison University in Virginia, where she was recruiting coordinator and was promoted to associate head coach in 2009. During her five years at JMU the team posted a 125-40 record and advanced to post-season play each year.

It was also at James Madison that she met her husband, Rob, who played football for the Dukes and was the athletic department's academic advisor. So when Furman came calling this spring, the decision wasn't simple.

"It was easy because of the coaching opportunity," says Carson, who has been married two years, "but it was the first major decision I had to make as a wife. It wasn't an easy



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decision to leave Rob's alma mater and come to mine. He was excited for me and said let's do it, but I had the wife mentality and wanted him to have everything, too."

While Carson may be a loving wife who wears high heels and often looks as if she stepped out of the pages of *Vogue* — she actually did some modeling in Baltimore and New York after graduation — her players will soon learn that steely competitiveness comes in all shapes and sizes.

"Because I'm kind of girly and I wear heels and make-up, I think the girls had this certain impression of me," she says, smiling. "But I worked out with them for two days, and I think I shocked them. They were surprised to learn that I can shoot and still play."

After all, they don't hang your jersey from the rafters because you look good in heels.

— VINCE MOORE