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Furman basketball, Jackson appear to be perfect match

Jeff Jackson didn't know a whole lot about Furman before he went to Vanderbilt as an assistant basketball coach in 1999. He had grown up in New York City, attended Cornell University and pursued the nomadic life of a young coach in such diverse locales as California, Colorado and New Hampshire.

But one of his fellow coaches at Vanderbilt, Steve Shurina, had gone through the interview process in 1997 when Furman was looking to fill the head coaching position that would ultimately go to Larry Davis, and Shurina had some intriguing things to say.

"He kept telling me how great a situation he thought Furman was," Jackson says of Shurina, an assistant at Davidson at the time who would later become coach at Western Carolina. "He said it was very much akin to Davidson's, and there was the same potential for success. That definitely piqued my interest in Furman."

So when Davis announced last April that he was leaving Furman after nine seasons, there was no question that Jackson would apply for the job. Since he had attended an Ivy League school and coached at both Stanford and Vanderbilt, Furman seemed the right school for him.

"If you look at my background and the environments I have been comfortable with, my interest is in coaching quality student-athletes," he says. "I'm not going to be comfortable at a school that doesn't have the same priorities and the same intentions when it comes to what it wants to accomplish academically."

Jackson, 45, was named Furman's coach on April 24. And although it may appear that he has traveled a long way from home, he may have actually landed closer to his roots than he would have thought possible.

His father grew up in Edisto Beach, S.C., and his mother was a native of Charleston. The family moved to Harlem, where Jackson was born, and later lived in the South Bronx and Queens. Jackson played football and basketball in high school, but it was his test scores that really caught the attention of his football coach. They were good enough that the coach suggested that Jackson consider an Ivy League college.

Jackson received a scholarship to Cornell and played

football for two years before a separated shoulder and a concussion convinced him to give up the sport. Thinking basketball might be less stressful physically, he joined the Big Red JV team.

But the injuries kept coming, and he finally settled in with the basketball program as a student assistant coach. He graduated in 1984 with a degree in industrial and labor relations. He also married his wife, Carolyn, during his senior year, so continuing as an assistant coach at Cornell seemed a logical thing to do.

After two years, Jackson moved on to a graduate assistantship at Southern California, then served stints at St. Bonaventure (1986-89), Colorado State (1989-92) and Stanford (1992-96).

He got his opportunity to be a head coach in 1996 when he took over at the University of New Hampshire. At 35, he was one of the youngest Division I coaches in America. After posting a 21-60 record in three years, he moved to Vanderbilt, where he remained until the Furman job presented itself.

"I really liked coaching there," Jackson said. "But in terms of success, it's a monster job. No one has had a great deal of success there. But it was a great opportunity for me to be a head coach at such a young age, and it was a great laboratory to get a better understanding of how to coach, manage and recruit."

The Furman job has its own challenges. The Paladins have had only eight winning seasons in the past 26 years, and their last Southern Conference championship came in 1991.

But Jackson also knows that Davis' last few teams were competitive — the Paladins were 15-13 last season, 8-7 in the league — and that four talented seniors return. Guards Eric Webb and Robby Bostain (pictured, left) and forwards Moussa Diagne and Gerard Punch combined to score nearly 45 points a game last season. Joining them is sophomore center Stanley Jones, who averaged 6.7 points per game.

"We have a great group of guys in terms of their character and how they carry themselves on and off the court," Jackson says. "So my expectations are very high for what they will be able to accomplish."

— VINCE MOORE

