

After the firing: what does the Petrino case mean to Arkansas, college football?

Yet again we fans of college football find ourselves in a quandary, albeit a false one. We recognize that excellent coaches are tough to find. Coaches such as Nick Saban, Paul Johnson, or Urban Meyer can have an immediate, dramatic impact on a program. By going 21-5 over the past two seasons and beginning the upcoming season with a top ten ranking in the perennially tough SEC, Arkansas' Bobby Petrino surely belonged in that very exclusive fraternity. The football world was his oyster. Recruiting was impressive, the Razorback faithful showed support in nearly every way, and life in Fayetteville could hardly have been better (except of course for the losses to the two teams who would eventually meet in the National Championship). Camelot in the Ozarks. But like the Camelot of King Arthur, the idyllic kingdom was undone by an unseemly and secret affair. Only this time, it was the king himself who was involved in the dalliance. The married father of four not only engaged in a prolonged relationship with a 25 year old former Arkansas volleyball player, but was guilty of one related indiscretion of cover up and bad judgment after another. The cause? Hubris. A middle-age crisis. The leverage of positional power to gain the affection of a blonde-beauty half his age. All of these factors. Who cares? The point is a professionally accomplished, widely admired coach showed his personal fallibility. It happens.

But where does the University of Arkansas and all of college football go from here? Well, let's get back to that quandary I mentioned earlier. The Razorbacks could simply pursue the coach who gives them the best chance to win the SEC West, and thereby put them in good standing to compete for a National Championship. Hiring will come down to a quantitative analysis of winning percentage at previous schools, suitability of specific expertise in an offense or defense that will succeed in the SEC, and so on. Or Arkansas can back up the lofty rhetoric typically heard in the wake of such scandals—they should pursue a coach using criteria such as character, proven ability to guide young men toward success beyond the football field, and proper fit with a state flagship university. These criteria resist quantitative analysis. These criteria demand the perspective of someone with the larger view; someone capable of adding to the hiring conversation in non-traditional ways. Will that be the case in Fayetteville? Perhaps. The other side of the quandary for Arkansas and college football generally is to identify coaches who fit their respective institutions, ideals and values as well as offensive and defensive schemes.

I love college football. I played it and have continued to stay involved in a variety of capacities. But just as other parts of the campus have come around to seeing the value of the "universal" qualities of leadership and good institutional citizenship, the football program must do the same. It's time for an objective expert in the issue of character assessment and development to have a role in hiring such high visibility—and high stakes school leaders. I hold out optimism Arkansas and all of college football will learn the lesson of Camelot in the Ozarks. My instinct and experience tell me such optimism is terribly naïve.