



BRANCHING OUT

Herb Sendek's Growing Coaching Tree Puts Him In An Elite Class

BY MATT SIMPSON

Driving through the snow to his new home near Des Moines, Iowa, former Arizona State men's basketball associate head coach Mark Phelps was positively warm in his assessment of his previous boss.

After 12 seasons at Herb Sendek's side — first at North Carolina State and then at ASU — Phelps branched out on his own this summer when he accepted the head coaching position at Drake. And he credits his development from high school coach to Division I head man to Sendek's passion for grooming assistants into head coaches.

"He is very interested in seeing members of his staff succeed professionally," Phelps said. "The preparation of guys who go on to be head coaches is important to him. He's a true teacher and he gets fulfillment from seeing his pupils succeed."

Sendek must be feeling very fulfilled these days as the fraternity of his former assistants now in charge of their own programs continues to grow. The club expanded to eight this season when Phelps took over

Sendek's eight-man coaching tree rivals those of Louisville's Rick Pitino, Florida's Billy Donovan (above, left), Connecticut's Jim Calhoun, Duke's Mike Krzyzewski, UCLA's Ben Howland and Michigan State's Tom Izzo.

PHOTO BY JASON WISE

Drake's program and former North Carolina State assistant John Groce won the head job at Ohio.

Over the summer, highly regarded *New York Daily News* college basketball writer Dick Weiss noted that Sendek's eight-man coaching tree puts him in the same class as Louisville's Rick Pitino (whom Sendek falls under), Florida's Billy Donovan, Connecticut's Jim Calhoun, Duke's Mike Krzyzewski, UCLA's Ben Howland and Michigan State's Tom Izzo.

Sendek's former lieutenants appear across the college basketball landscape and at every level of the game's hierarchy.

There are Charlie Coles, a former high school coach who succeeded Sendek as the head coach at Miami (Ohio) in 1996, and Jim Christian, who led Kent State to six consecutive 20-win seasons before taking the head job at Texas Christian this offseason.

There are Ron Hunter and Larry Hunter — no relation — who lead the programs at Indiana University Purdue University of Indianapolis and Western Carolina, respectively.

And, of course, at the top there are Thad Matta and Sean Miller.

Matta was an assistant under Sendek at Miami (Ohio) in the 1994-95 season. Two years ago, he coached Greg Oden and Ohio State to the national championship game before finally falling to Florida.

Miller coached under Sendek from 1993-95 at Miami (Ohio) and from 1996-2001 at North Carolina State before forging out on his own. He led Xavier to the Elite Eight last March.

Sendek gave Matta and Miller their first college coaching jobs when he hired them to Miami (Ohio). They were on the bench with Sendek and Coles when the RedHawks stunned 15th-ranked Arizona and took 13th-

ranked Virginia into overtime in the first two rounds of the 1995 NCAA Tournament.

“My year with Coach Sendek was a terrific learning experience as a young coach,” Matta said. “He taught me the value of hard work, commitment and passion to be successful, [and] he does the exact same thing with his players.”

Despite their ubiquity in the college basketball world, Sendek has run into his former employees as head coach at ASU on just three occasions.

In his first season in Tempe, Sendek flew a young Sun Devils squad out to Cincinnati to play Miller’s Musketeers of Xavier. The young Sun Devils were bowled over, 76-58.

He’s done better against his former pupils the last two seasons.

Last winter, the Musketeers made a return trip to Tempe and were run out of Wells Fargo Arena. Ty Abbott scored 19 points to lead ASU to a 77-55 win over then-No. 17 Xavier. It was the largest win over a ranked team in ASU history and signaled the arrival of the Sun Devils on the national stage.

And just last month, ASU hosted Ron Hunter’s IUPUI squad at the Desert Classic at U.S. Airways Arena in Phoenix. The Sun Devils needed a 16-point second-half rally and overtime before escaping with a 59-58 win.

(That list of confrontations does not include the Sun Devils’ NIT loss to Florida last season. Sendek coached Donovan as a member of Pitino’s staff at Providence in the late 1980s. The staff also included former NBA head coach Jeff Van Gundy, current NBA executive vice president of operations Stu Jackson and longtime NBA assistant coach Gordon Chisea.)

The rarity of such matchups is not a coincidence. Sendek prefers not to compete directly against his friends. The Xavier series was scheduled prior to Sendek’s arrival, and IUPUI was an emergency replacement for Alabama-Birmingham.

What is it about Sendek’s management style that sets him apart from his peers?

Phelps and current ASU associate head coach Dedrique Taylor point to both the robustness of on-the-job training under Sendek and to Sendek’s legendary demand

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MARK PHELPS ON SENDEK

for detail-oriented execution.

“In some places, you’re hired just as just a recruiter or just as an X’s and O’s guy,” Phelps explained. “The No. 1 thing Coach Sendek does is encourage his assistant coaches to be involved in every aspect of the job. There are no specialists. He wants you to be well rounded.

“Second, he sets an incredible example in terms of the level of detail in execution, and he requires that in return from his staff. Not only are you doing a lot of different things, but you are challenged to be extremely thorough in execution. You can’t come and present a task or project unless it’s well thought out and all possibilities and contingencies are accounted for.

“If he was not coaching, he’d be a CEO of a major corporation demanding excellence of all those around him.”

The next branch on the Sendek coaching tree may very well be Taylor.

The 34-year-old has ascended quickly up the ranks, never spending more than two seasons at a single stop along a path that’s taken him from his alma mater of UC Davis to Loyola Marymount to Portland State to Nevada and finally to ASU in 2006.

Though he insists he’s in no hurry to move on to the next stop in his career, he knows that Sendek did not promote him to associate head coach to serve as his boss’s lifelong right-hand man.

“There are guys who want to play that associate head coach role,” Taylor said. “Coach Sendek doesn’t want those guys. He wants guys who are trying to prepare for that next level.

“And the proof is in the pudding, the proof is in that coaching tree.” □



Current ASU associate head coach Dedrique Taylor could be the next branch on the Sendek coaching tree.

The Sendek Coaching Tree

Coach (Current Program), Years With Sendek

- Jim Christian (Texas Christian), 1995-96
- Charlie Coles (Miami [Ohio]), 1994-96
- John Groce (Ohio), 1996-2000
- Ron Hunter (IUPUI), 1993-94
- Larry Hunter (Western Carolina), 2001-05
- Thad Matta (Ohio State), 1994-95
- Sean Miller (Xavier), 1993-95 and 1996-2001
- Mark Phelps (Drake), 1995-2008

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