

Sports

Always looking for a challenge

Monson excited by new job

By Mike Riplinger
Of the Emerald

The situation is a hot bed, and no one knows that better than Oregon's new basketball coach Don Monson.

With Jim Haney's resigning amid much turmoil, Monson knows it won't be easy turning the program around. But that doesn't seem to deter the former University of Idaho coach.

If anything, Monson seems to be excited by the pressures and added challenges. And challenges are nothing new to the man that took a team like Idaho, the perennial doormat of the Big Sky, into a power that won two NCAA tournament berths and an National Invitational Tournament bid. He definitely has had his success.

"And I hope it continues that way," Monson says with a laugh. "You have to be a little lucky. But I've got to admit I think that's the reason I'm here."

"I could have stayed at Idaho, the people there are very receptive. I think I could have had a couple of bad years — surely people wouldn't have liked it — but I don't think they would question my ability as a coach. They know I can get the job done if I have the right guys, because I've proven that."

In other words, Monson was safe.

He had done pretty well in the small town of Moscow. He had changed reactions to Vandal basketball from "Where's Idaho" to "That potato school that has the good basketball teams."

Considering Monson had grown up only 90 miles away in another small town, Coeur d'Alene, he could have been satisfied.

But the challenge wasn't quite there anymore.

"You get to a point — exactly what do you do next? You try to win the Big Sky and get into the NCAA's, but we've already done those things, so you end up duplicating them," he says.

And then along came Oregon.

With the problems that Haney had undergone in the last two years, there had been frequent calls for a new coach. And definitely the front-runner was Monson. The Vandal mentor had been mentioned for other jobs, but had stayed in Moscow.

But when Oregon athletic director Rick Bay offered the job — definitely a challenging one — he took it.

It's doubtful that he'll be able to slip unnoticed into Eugene and magically turn the Ducks into win-



Photo by Bob Baker

ners as he did at Idaho. Especially since in Moscow they were used to last-place finishes in the Big Sky and really didn't expect, or were used to much else.

"The expectations are already higher here than when I went to Idaho. The fact that I have been successful the last five years at Idaho means I'm suppose to immediately carry that over. But a lot of outside people don't understand the ramifications of a new program and how it affects the kids. And how we have to make all the pieces fall together."

"It's definitely a different situation. It could be fine, it could be great — and it could cause some problems. People aren't very patient. They don't want to wait very long."

Monson will be expected to win. Many consider him a Messiah for the Ducks. But he says the pressure doesn't bother him.

"I always feel pressure to win. I've never been in a situation where I didn't," he says. "Most of the pressure is from within me. I don't think I would coach very long if I didn't win. That's just the way I'm made up. I have a problem because've won so much," he says with a chuckle, but more than just half serious.

"The pressure is there. It would be if I was at Idaho or here or anywhere else. That's what drives me and keeps me going. If I lose that pressure I won't

be in it," he promised.

The comparisons are being made between Monson and his predecessor. While Monson says he doesn't particularly like comparisons, they don't bother him.

"It isn't a problem. I respect Jim Haney as a person and a coach. I don't want to make any comparisons because there isn't any one way to coach. All I'm doing is giving it some different direction — that's all. That's the only thing that you're here for. You're going to do it a little differently and whether it's right or not, I don't know. It's just been successful for me, so I stick with it."

It has come up with success in the past, and Monson is hoping for some more in the future.

While the rain does make Eugene different from Moscow, Monson says the people really aren't.

"So I guess the reason I took the job because I see the people here wanting to respond to a situation. I said this at Idaho. They wanted to wave a flag and thump their chest. I see the same situation here," Monson says. "To me it's really gratifying. Whether it happens or not, I feel that challenge."

"You know, I hope it isn't a disaster."

If the future is anything like the past, Monson shouldn't have anything to worry about.

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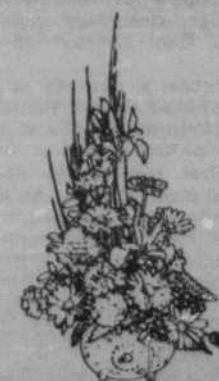
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