03/14/2001 – Ellerbe's Gone - Anyone Miss Him?

It was only a matter of time before UM fired basketball coach Brian Ellerbe, and it's a good thing that it happened as soon as possible. The next important thing is getting a quality replacement coach in place as quickly as possible.

Who should UM hire? Everyone's got their opinions, and lots of names are being tossed around, but there are 2 names that I haven't heard much of: Scott Trost and Jay Smith. Trost is the Assistant Head Coach, and has been an assistant at Michigan for quite a while. Jay Smith was an assistant at UM for many years, before he left to be the head coach at Ferris State. He's now the head coach at Central Michigan, and doing pretty well.

Why hire a current/former assistant coach, instead of a "big name" coach from outside? As the Editor-In-Chief, Phil Callihan, says "would you want to hire anyone who wants the job at this point?" The coaches that are being mentioned the most often, especially Rick Pitino, have no real connection to Michigan. At best, UM would be just another entry on their resumes. Pitino in particular seems like a "bungee coach". Look at how he left the Boston Celtics in mid-season.

For better or worse, the last 3 head coaches at UM have all been former assistants who have been promoted. Bill Frieder was Johnny Orr's right-hand man, Steve Fisher was Bill Frieder's #1 guy, and Brian Ellerbe, well, he was the guy with the most head coaching experience when Fisher got fired. I think Scott Trost is ready, and I know that Jay Smith is. If nothing else, I feel that they should be seriously considered.

One more thing: was it a good idea to fire Ellerbe? I don't think so, but not because I particularly liked him or the job he's done. I don't like the destabilizing effect it's going to have on the program. I also really don't like the fact that Michigan has climbed off it's pedestal, and has joined the ranks of the schools who would fire a coach for wins-and-losses. UM has never done that before. This is the first time. It's a turning point in the history of the Athletic Department. From now on, all head coaches will be looking over their shoulders, wondering if their jobs are safe. In the past, they could feel confident that as long as they ran a clean program, they wouldn't be fired. The Ellerbe firing changed all that. Michigan was one of the last schools to give in to that temptation. It's a big shame. It's a sad day for Michigan Athletics.

It's time to move on. Here are my suggestions for AD Bill Martin:

Hire a bright, young coach, not some "established" guy. Give him a few years. Don't micro-manage him. Don't get on him over wins and losses. Help him run a clean, respectable program. Do some marketing, to help fill Crisler again, and generate some excitement. Give the program your support. The wins will come again. These things are cyclical. Michigan has a good, solid program, and it will rise to the top again.