

COMMENTARY:

It wasn't necessarily the easy choice, but Vandals made right move hiring Petrino

By TROY WARZOCHA OF THE TRIBUNE

MOSCOW - It could've been so easy for Idaho athletic director Rob Spear.

Fresh off a 1-11 season and facing a conference-less future, the Idaho Vandals were in desperate need of a system reboot.

As pressure mounted and the rumor mill churned, it seemed entirely feasible that the athletic director would hit the safety valve.

Spear could've brought in one of the old boys. A man who had been leveraging for a return to Moscow since he left it more than a decade ago.

There were also the former quarterbacks - one who, as a first-year Football Bowl Subdivision offensive coordinator, led the San Jose State offense to likely its most productive season ever and another who has professed his love for the Palouse on several occasions since taking over for deposed coach Robb Akey in October.

Then there was the darkhorse, who was a longtime Division II coach looking to make the leap.

Each of these candidates brought something different to the table - both good and bad.

A Chris Tormey hire would have elicited a sense of nostalgia, but also a feeling of trepidation at the thought of another Idaho retreat making his way through Moscow.

Hiring Brian Lindgren would have made a splash, but his lack of experience and networking would have made it difficult to assemble a top-notch staff.

Jason Gesser's passion for Idaho is unparalleled, but, whether it's fair or not, he is still tied to the failures of the previous regime.

And despite Blaine Bennett's success at Central Washington, appointing a D-II coach to take over the Vandals would be viewed by many as an FBS white flag.

All of these choices would have provided Spear with an easy way out. He could have dumped off a barely breathing program into the hands of an unsuspecting steward and hid in his office until it was time to pull the plug on the FBS experiment.

Instead, Spear went for the obvious choice.

He went with a guy who has coaching in his DNA. Someone who has a connection to the Vandals, but at the same time, was able to pursue a very successful career several high-profile schools.

He's excelled in the SEC, the Big Ten and the Big East. He knows what good football players and good football teams should look and sound like.

He has the connections to build a talented staff and brings with him the experience that comes with coaching in bowl games played around the time people begin to replace their calendars.

Most importantly, he's a guy who firmly believes in the Vandals, Moscow and the Northwest.

Standing at the podium for his introduction on Monday, Paul Petrino was measured, but passionate. Detailed, but broad.

Petrino didn't yuck it up with stale coachspeak, hyperbole and guarantees; rather, he calmly - and sometimes humorously - explained who he was and what he expected the Vandals to become under his tutelage.

One of the new coach's best lines came when he talked about execution.

"Execution is created by constant repetition that creates a conditioned reflex in a given situation," he said. "Anyone that played for my dad can repeat that right now."

While that phrase is a little too long to fit on a T-shirt, you can bet that come Idaho's season opener on Aug. 31, every player on the Vandals will be able to repeat it as well.

On a larger scale, the hiring of Petrino isn't just a statement for the former Arkansas offensive coordinator, who wasted no time in saying on Monday that he had waited his entire life to become a head coach.

In just two days, he's generated a Mike Leach-like excitement among the Vandals' base.

For a majority of those who have stuck through the last two years, it's a statement which yielded a much-needed warm ray of sunshine in an otherwise rainy early December.

For the University of Idaho, it's a statement which confirms that the school is finally ready to play football again.

For Spear, it's a statement which reiterates the notion that there's a significant difference between doing what's right and doing what's easy.

And in the case of the Idaho Vandals, hiring Petrino was far from easy.

NOTES - Petrino's contract, which will pay him \$390,000 a year for at least the next three years, was unanimously approved by the State Board of Education on Tuesday.

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