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Personality: Sacramento Kings head coach Eric Musselman

By Rich Ehsen

Redemption is a common theme in sports. Everyone loves to see a favorite player come back from being down, to grab themselves by the bootstraps to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, yada, yada, yada. But the question for new Sacramento Kings head coach Eric Musselman is how do you redeem yourself from a career that has been filled only with success? And, moreover, how do you do it with an organization that just rewarded your predecessor's eight years of unparalleled accomplishment by unceremoniously giving him the boot?

It is a significant challenge, and not one easily conquered by the basic "giving 110 percent" and "taking it one game at a time" platitudes also common to modern sports. But even a few minutes of verbal one-on-one with Musselman illustrates at least a few of the reasons why the brothers Maloof – masters of all things Kings-related in this world – felt he was exactly the right guy to follow Rick Adelman onto the team's coaching hot seat.

He is, at first blush, not someone you would expect to find stalking an NBA sideline for a living. At 5' 7", the diminutive Musselman is a foot shorter than most of his players, and his youthful good looks make him appear to be even younger than his 41 years. But he is also exactly as advertised when the team introduced him to its adoring public in June - extremely bright, well-spoken, energetic and possessed of just enough sense of humor to break down most anyone's initial defenses. And, unlike Adelman, Musselman is totally at ease with the fans and the media, something he may need to help smooth his way with the many Kings faithful who still question the sanity of cutting loose a coach who had produced eight straight winning seasons.

But coaching in the NBA is not about winning a popularity contest, at least not with anyone other than the people signing the checks, and Musselman is no wide-eyed neophyte – he knows the Maloofs expect him to win now and to win big. If anyone could ever really be prepared for the walk on hot coals that is being an NBA head coach, Musselman seems to be it.

"Coaching is all about expectations and pressure," Musselman says. "You want expectations because that means you have a good roster and tools to work with, and that's what coaching is all about."

Musselman should definitely know about both pressure and expectations. He learned both at the knee of his late father, Bill, who coached teams from the college ranks through the basketball's minor leagues and all the way into stints coaching the NBA's Minnesota Timberwolves and Cleveland Cavaliers.

Born and raised primarily in Cleveland, Eric grew up living the life of a coach's son, which often meant long stretches of time with dad gone on road trips of some ilk. But it also meant learning to love the game down to its minutiae, which planted the first seeds of his desire to eventually follow in Bill's footsteps. When Bill was home, he also taught his son to always play to win, no matter what.

"He had an unbelievable will to win and whatever we did, it wasn't cool to lose," Musselman recalls. "I didn't beat him in basketball until 10th grade and then we never played again. It was one game and that was it. After that, we only played together on the same team, which we did all the way up until about a month before he died."

That desire to win filtered into everything, Musselman says, noting that Bill would "play Pac Man in whatever restaurant we went into, and he wouldn't leave until he beat the top score. I remember sitting at the dinner table and he'd get up and play and he'd be there for an hour and half, until my sister and I would say, 'let's get out of here.'"

Those lessons were not lost on young Eric, who went on to basketball at the University of San Diego. He was never in any danger of earning a paycheck with his jump shot, but it really didn't matter because coaching was his only real goal all along. He didn't waste any time getting to it, either, grabbing his first head coaching job came at the tender age of 23 with the Rapid City Thrillers of the Continental Basketball Association (CBA). It was far from the champagne and caviar life of the NBA, but it was coaching, which was all that mattered at the time. Like Bill, he was intense to the point of scary at times, living and breathing each game like it was his last. And, also like Bill, the younger Musselman gradually stockpiled an almost absurd number of coaching victories in almost every league in the country.

By the late 1990s he had moved on to the NBA, garnering assistant coaching jobs first with Orlando and then Atlanta. He was rapidly building a stellar reputation around the league by then as a real up-and-comer, a sure-fire NBA head coach-in-waiting. The waiting ended in 2002 when the perennially pathetic Golden State Warriors came calling, making Musselman, then just 37, the league's youngest head coach.

At first, it seemed to be a match made in heaven, with Musselman guiding the Warriors to their two most successful seasons in years. He earned near-universal kudos for taking the team from a measly 21 wins in 2002 to 38 in 2003, the biggest improvement in the league that year. But while the team was finally gaining some respectability, Musselman's take-no-prisoners style was already causing friction in the locker room, some of which played out in the press. He fully expected his players to care about winning as much as he did, which is rarely the case with teams so conditioned to losing. He quickly was earning a reputation as a hard ass, an although the team stayed steady in his second year at the helm, winning 37 games after a slow start, the locker room strife and internal politics had knocked the bloom off the rose for good by 2004. He was fired before he could complete the last year of his contract.

It was a galling situation, particularly since his single-minded focus on winning - his intense preparation and competitive passion for the game - was the very thing that got him the job in the first place. But learning to take getting fired with grace was another lesson Eric had gleaned from his father, so he simply did what his dad would have done – he went back to coaching basketball, this time as an assistant with the NBA’s Memphis Grizzlies.

These days, Musselman is nothing but gracious about his time at Golden State, saying “We changed the culture there. The two years we were there have been the best for that franchise in the last eleven years. All the coaches, the whole staff that was there, we look at that as a good learning experience and something that was very positive.”

He also says he never doubted for a moment he would someday get another chance. He interviewed for other lead jobs last year and just kept preparing himself for the right opportunity to come along. That, says long-time Kings director of player personnel and two-time head coach Jerry Reynolds, may be the key to any success he has in Sacramento.

“Any coach can feel like they are prepared for that first NBA job, but it’s always different than they expected,” Reynolds says. “Anyone who has been through that experience will benefit from it, and will most likely end up being a much better coach. If they are hard working and intelligent, and certainly Eric is both of those things, they are usually better prepared the second time around.”

Musselman concurs, saying that “I don’t think a coach is any different than any other person in life. A doctor’s probably a lot better on his 30th surgery than he is on his first surgery. Same thing with a lawyer who goes into a courtroom, he’s probably a little bit better on his 50th court case than his first.” Musselman says he has also benefited greatly from returning to the ranks of NBA assistants.

“I didn’t look at my position as a normal assistant coach,” he says of his time in Memphis. “I was looking at it from the perspective of, since I would like to get back to [the head coach’s] chair, how are the players perceiving messages being delivered, how are the players reacting to all these different situations? I probably learned more than I’ll ever know in the last year and half on things to do and things not to do.”

Reynolds says learning that a coach needs to relate to players has been a major boon to Musselman’s growth as a coach. “He understands how important communication is. A lot of people give lip service to those things, but they really don’t get it. He understands that this is a player’s league and that is up to him to communicate with the players more than it is for them to communicate with him.”

Perhaps that is because he has also learned a lot about life of late. His 13-year marriage ended not long ago, and he is doing the best he can to be a good dad to his two sons, 10-year-old Michael and 5-year-old Mathew, while living a life where family often comes second to getting the job done. His boys live in Danville with their mom, but can often be

found running around the Kings locker room during the summer or on weekends. So while Musselman says he still believes in “over-preparing” his players, he factors in the players’ need to have a home life. He even schedules his practices for mid-mornings so it is a little easier for the guys to get home to spend some time with their families.

Reynolds cautions, however, that nobody should think Musselman has gone completely soft.

“A coach has to lead,” Reynolds says. “You’ve got to make some demands of players, and not all of them are going to like it. With Eric, I’m sure there’s going to be a point where the rubber hits the road. But I think he is a coach that understands what being a head coach is.”

Reynolds also has no doubts Musselman will be fine following Adelman.

“Rick Adelman did a tremendous job here, and I’m sure Eric will be compared to Rick,” he says. “There will be high expectations here from everyone, but I don’t think Eric is afraid of that.”

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