



DePaul coach Chris Holtmann, left, and athletic director DeWayne Peavy share a moment at a news conference Monday at Wintrust Arena in Chicago. ANDREW SELIGMAN/AP

Basketball coaching carousel creates more chaos than calm

By Sheldon H. Jacobson

College basketball, especially Division I power conference teams, all seek the coveted prize of a national championship. Yet in every season, every team goes home empty except one that survives the grueling three weeks that are commonly known as March Madness.

Among the 80 teams that populate the six power conferences, a financial race exists to hire the best coach and attract the best athletes. When expectations fall short, many of these coaches are given a short leash and summarily removed in hopes of attracting another coach to take the team to the promised land of a national championship.

This coaching warfare began well before March Madness launched.

On Feb. 14, Ohio State University fired men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann. Holtmann was in his seventh season at Ohio State, having taken the Buckeyes to the NCAA Tournament in his first five years, but the Buckeyes never made it to the Sweet 16 during his tenure. It took a month for DePaul University to hire Holtmann, suggesting that he offers something that another school values.

A review of recent national championship coaches suggests that length of tenure matters.

Dan Hurley led the University of Connecticut Huskies to the 2023

national championship. He was in his fifth season as their coach, having missed the NCAA tournament his first two years and being upset in the Round of 64 in the following two tournaments. (There was no tournament in 2020 due to COVID-19.)

Fortune then smiled on him last year, when Connecticut won the national championship as a fourth seed. However, his path through the bracket was against teams seeded 13, 5, 8, 3, 5 and 5, what one would consider quite favorable. If No. 8 Arkansas had not upset No. 1 Kansas in the Round of 32, the outcome for Hurley could have been much different.

Bill Self and the University of Kansas Jayhawks won the national championship in 2022. This was his second championship, during his 20-year-plus tenure as the Jayhawks coach.

In 2021, Scott Drew led the Baylor University Bears to the national championship. He was in his 18th season as their coach when he accomplished this feat. Of note is that he missed the NCAA tournament during his first four seasons, with a breakout season in 2010, his seventh year as coach, when Baylor reached the Elite Eight.

In 2019, Tony Bennett led the University of Virginia Cavaliers to the national championship in his 10th season as their coach. He missed the NCAA tournament in his first two seasons. He made history in 2018 at the time when losing as a No. 1 seed to

a No. 16 seed, which he then followed with his national champion run in 2019.

Other national championship coaches include Jay Wright (Villanova), Roy Williams (North Carolina), Mike Krzyzewski (Duke) and John Calipari (Kentucky), all of whom enjoyed long tenures at their schools. The one recent exception to the longevity rule was Kevin Ollie (Connecticut), who won in 2014 as a No. 7 seed. He was fired just a few years later for NCAA violations, which were eventually settled in a wrongful termination lawsuit that he won.

Length of coach tenure appears necessary to win national championships, but it is by no means sufficient.

Fran McCaffery has been at the helm of the University of Iowa's team since 2010. Though he has taken Iowa to seven NCAA tournaments, he has never reached the Sweet 16. Brad Brownell has also been at the helm of Clemson University since 2010. He has taken Clemson to three NCAA tournaments during this time, reaching the Sweet 16 once. Leonard Hamilton has coached Florida State University since 2002. He has taken Florida State to eight NCAA tournaments during this time, reaching the Sweet 16 three times and the Elite Eight once.

This does not mean that these coaches should be fired for not producing national championships. To the contrary, in a single-elimination

tournament, skill and luck come into play. This means that for most teams, they will end most seasons empty-handed.

Building successful college basketball programs that are capable of winning a national championship requires many factors to go right. When quality coaches who can attract talent are not given ample time to succeed, this invariably puts headwinds on programs that ensure that success is not likely to occur anytime soon.

As of Friday, 38 coaches have left their school or been relieved of their duties. Over the next few weeks, especially after March Madness is complete, several coaches will be fired, fueling a coaching carousel that will reset several teams' coaching clock for success and perhaps for winning a national championship.

That does not mean that some schools should not look elsewhere for a new coach. Such changes are sometimes necessary. What is clear is that every time such a change occurs, the clock for success restarts and the hopes of championships in the near term should be tempered.

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