

With the New

Support surrounds Big 12 coaches just beginning tenures

BY JAY SAUNDERS
Staff writer

DALLAS — The revolving door of coaches in college football is swinging again this year in the Big 12 Conference.

A year ago, both Frank Solich at Nebraska and Mack Brown at Texas took over programs that were already successes.

But what all three incoming coaches have to tackle this year is nearly the exact opposite. Over the last three seasons, Colorado, Oklahoma and Baylor have combined for a record of 39-63.

Colorado won a national championship in 1990, and the storied tradition at Oklahoma speaks for itself.

So how does a first-year coach go about rebuilding a program? New Baylor Coach Kevin Steele said the process begins early.

"We're not going to sell them on a false pretense," Steele said. "But we are going to tell them the facts in a positive way."

Steele, Gary Barnett at Colorado and Bob Stoops at Oklahoma are poised to take the challenge. And all three are familiar names with interesting stories.

Gary Barnett returns to Folsom Field, which has changed to grass since he left CU to become the head coach at Northwestern.

Barnett, who was an assistant at Colorado under Bill McCartney, led the Wildcats to an unprecedented Rose Bowl berth in 1995.

Amid gambling scandals and mediocre seasons, Barnett decided to come back to the mountains.

"It's literally coming home again," Barnett said. "This is a great chance to see lifelong friends."

The first thing Barnett tried to do when he got to Boulder, Colo., was to visit the parents of every player.

McCartney is also back at Colorado, stopping in at practice to talk to the defense and to get a taste of Buffalo football again.

Barnett has also instituted changes in the offense and defense. Disciplined, aggressive football is on the table for Colorado this year.

"I want smash-mouth," Colorado senior Rashidi Barnes said. "Gary Barnett is bringing that to Colorado."

Discipline is also the theme at both Oklahoma and Baylor.

An example of what discipline can do to a team comes out of Baylor's spring practice.

In the Bears' first scrimmage of the spring, there were 26 penalties. A few weeks later in the final spring scrimmage, BU was called for only three infractions.

"You've got to eliminate the problems you have control over," Steele said. "It will help you win games."

And Steele has his team convinced

they can turn around from the last three seasons.

"(Steele) has brought a lot of positives to the team," sophomore Joe Jackson said. "The community is excited about watching good football."

That sentiment is echoed at Oklahoma. The Sooners have not been to a bowl game for six years and are hoping to take a disciplined football program back into the postseason.

Stoops came in from Florida with that message and wanted to make an immediate impact in Norman, Okla.

The players got the message.

"From day one, Coach Stoops came in and brought a good vibe," senior Rodney Rideau said. "He said, 'You can jump on the bandwagon, or you can jump away.'"

With a new coaching staff, Oklahoma is once again planning changes to the offense and defense. Last season, John Blake tried to make wholesale changes on both sides of the ball. The result was a 5-6 season.

The players at Oklahoma seem to think this year's new system will work.

Even though they said they don't want to make comparisons between the coaches, senior Matt Anderson said Stoops' success at Florida gets the players' attention.

"You know he knows how to win," Anderson said, "and that makes you want to listen. We are not trying to remake the team. We want to start right now."

Comparisons are something the players at Baylor have no problem making. Dave Roberts came to Baylor from Notre Dame but didn't reach the same level as the Fighting Irish.

"We didn't necessarily have confidence in the coach," Jackson said. "Everyone has faith in Coach Steele."

Like Stoops, Steele has a string of success stories.

Steele was an assistant coach under Tom Osborne at Nebraska. When he left there, Steele went to the National Football League to coach with the Carolina Panthers.

Jackson said Steele's experience and attitude have caused change at Baylor.

"It is amazing to see the difference from last year," Jackson said. "Everyone is fired up about him being here."

Players from all three teams seem to be rallying around their new coaches.

There is a sense of urgency to get these recently troubled programs back to a point of national success. All three coaches are hoping to be as successful as Solich and Brown last year, who combined for a record 18-7.

To reach that level, Stoops said he hopes to be a chip off the old block in his first season as a head coach.

"I've been very lucky to be around so many fine coaches," Stoops said. "I've taken something from each one of them."

"We are not trying to remake the team. We want to start right now."

MATT ANDERSON
OU senior



GARY BARNETT will take the field for the first time as the Colorado's head coach Saturday in Denver. Barnett is one of three new head coaches in the Big 12 Conference.

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