

The ACC: A nightly challenge for Prosser

First-year head coach will not have the luxury of easing his way into the conference schedule

By Jordan Webster
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Skip Prosser is gonna have his hands full with this one. Fortunately, just about everything those hands touch turns to gold.

As coaching careers go, the Pittsburgh, Pa. native has enjoyed a relatively short career as the head guy – only eight years of collegiate head coaching experience – that has been long on success. Prosser, who turned 51 last week, took Xavier, a team that wasn't exactly a regular postseason participant, to six 20-win seasons in seven seasons, including four NCAA tournament appearances.

Not convinced? How 'bout this: Prosser spent one season as the head man at Loyola of Maryland – not to be confused with Marymount – and led the school to its only NCAA berth in its history.

A tiny school of 3,200 students, tucked away in the outskirts of Baltimore, the Greyhounds limped to a pathetic record the year before Prosser's arrival. The following season, 1993-94, the Prosser-led Greyhounds captured the conference title and the automatic NCAA bid that went with it.

Even sporting events in which he wasn't coaching have been magically successful by association, coincidentally with a distinct black and gold flavor.

Prosser was in attendance for former Pittsburgh Pirate Roberto Clemente's 3,000th hit, as well as for former Pittsburgh Steeler Franco Harris' "Immaculate Reception," two of the biggest moments in the histories of his two favorite teams.

Whether the university's chosen color scheme in any way swayed his decision to take over in Winston-Salem is, of course, debatable, but once again, he's got that black and gold going for him, which is nice. Hopefully some of that 1970s Pittsburgh success serum is still left in Prosser's Pittsburgh accent, and will rub off on the Demon Deacons.

But for all his past triumphs, Prosser won't find winning easy in the ACC. This is not to knock Prosser's qualifications and abilities; he has proven himself a superb coach, and more importantly a winner, at every stop he has made.

But every coach this side of the Hall of Fame has his hands full with the ACC. That's what makes it the best college basketball conference in America, year in and year out.

"I thought it was a challenge I couldn't pass up," Prosser said at the ACC's media day several weeks ago, referring to coaching against the best teams in the nation on a regular basis.

And a challenge it will be. Last season, Xavier went 21-8 overall and 12-4 in the Atlantic 10 – good enough to get his team into the NCAA tourney. But 21-8 in the Atlantic-10 and 21-8 in the Atlantic Coast Conference are hardly indicative of similar teams.

Only five of his 27 regular season games came against NCAA tournament-bound teams. In a stretch of less than four weeks last January, the Deacons faced six tournament teams in eight games. Overall, 14 of the Deacs' 28 games were against teams that would qualify for the 64-team field.

There ain't no LaSalle's or Duquesnes in the ACC. Shoot the ball poorly, relax on defense or fail to take each and every opponent seriously, and the Florida States and Clemsons will whip you. Six of this conference's nine teams earned NCAA tournament berths last season, a percentage not even approached by



Chris Carlstrom/Old Gold and Black

Head Coach Skip Prosser (center) is flanked by his coaching staff on the bench during the Deacons' blowout win over Nike Elite in an exhibition game on Nov. 2. From left are Pat Kelsey, director of basketball operations; Jeff Battle, assistant coach; Prosser; Dino Gaudio, assistant coach; and Chris Mack, assistant coach. Prosser and the Demon Deacons play their first regular season game on Nov. 12, when they host UNC-Wilmington in the first round of the Preseason NIT at Joel Coliseum.

another conference in the nation.

Things were different in Cincinnati. At Xavier, Prosser's Musketeers had to make sure they brought it hard in their annual intracity tilt with the Cincinnati Bearcats, a game that the Musketeers have won each of the last two seasons and four of the last five.

But last year, following what is easily the most difficult game on their schedule, Xavier didn't face another tourney team until St. Joe's, more than a month later. In between, opponents included Marquette, Toledo, Kent, Fordham, LaSalle, UMass, Rhode Island and George Washington... you get the picture. Not exactly murderer's row. Combined record of those eight teams last season? 121-115. You don't have downtime like that on Tobacco Road.

Beyond that, Prosser has a tough act to follow. Although former Head Coach Dave Odom had started to rub people the wrong way – first with his slowdown, halfcourt style of play, and more importantly with the mid-January meltdowns of his last several teams – Odom did direct the most successful decade in Demon Deacon basketball history.

His teams reached the postseason in 11 straight years, including seven straight NCAA appearances. Three All-Americans played under Odom's watch in Winston-Salem. He was National Coach of the Year in 1995, and captured back-to-back ACC Tournament titles in 1995 and 1996.

Considering the circumstances of his four seasons A.D. – After Duncan – it was time for Odom and the university to part ways, and there's little doubt that the move was made in the best interests of both parties.

There's also little doubt, though, that with 240 career wins and a .645 winning percentage during his tenure

in Winston-Salem, Odom was the best coach in the history of the program, and his contributions to Demon Deacon basketball should not be discredited because of several seasons that failed to live up to expectations.

By no means should Prosser measure success against Odom's legacy. Other things – consistency and motivation, to name two – are areas that need to be improved upon.

Furthermore, Prosser has and will continue to put his mark on the team, from the new strategy to new uniforms.

He is not Odom, which at least in part is why Athletics Director Ron Wellman chose Prosser, and at least initially, and why he will not be expected to imitate Odom, and even encouraged to move in a different direction.

But the standard for wins and losses has been set high by his predecessor, and eventually Prosser is expected not merely to maintain, but to improve.

To this point, Prosser couldn't have been any more perfect.

He encourages a raucous atmosphere at Joel Coliseum, he caters to student interests as much as possible, and he has dedicated himself to the university and the program since April 25, the day he accepted the position.

But starting Nov. 12, when the Deacs take the floor of Joel Coliseum against UNC-Wilmington in the first round of the Preseason NIT, Prosser will finally get his hands on what he came for: the challenge of ACC basketball.

Then we'll start to see if the man with the Midas touch can turn things black and golden.