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Pirates need a shark

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By **ADRIAN WOJNAROWSKI**

He is the ultimate street fighter of a basketball coach, a survivor of a hard-knock basketball life. There is nothing pretty, nor polished about Iona's men's basketball coach. And that's the beauty of Jeff Ruland. Those elbows are still sharp from his days as part of the Bruise Brothers in the NBA, his disposition still making him the toughest character to walk into every room.



Seton Hall will forever need this to be its own persona, on the court and the recruiting trails, an underdog school in a power conference needing some swagger to its step. Ruland is a perfect gentleman, but there's always been something of a chip on his shoulder, a brass-knuckles persona that went a long way to hanging three NCAA tournament banners as Iona's coach.

"Just get me in front of the Seton Hall people," Ruland was saying by phone on Friday afternoon, "and I think I can win that job."

Consider this the strongest of endorsements for Ruland as Seton Hall's next basketball coach, a job that he could've had five years ago if he hadn't been so loyal to his alma mater. This is the right coach, at the right time, for the Pirates. Now, his work is done at Iona. There's nothing else for America's biggest coach at 6 feet 10, but to make this move. It should be Ruland in a close decision over Manhattan's Bobby Gonzalez at the Hall.

This is a job for a junkyard dog, a label that Ruland and Gonzalez proudly have worn with the five NCAA tournament bids between them in the past eight MAAC seasons. Ruland has been recruiting and developing some serious talent at that little school in Westchester for years, and it would be a hell of an idea to let him loose in the New York and New Jersey Catholic leagues with a Big East program to sell kids.

The way that the Seton Hall job can make a lot of rising star coaches uneasy, it makes Ruland drunk on the possibilities.

"They've been to the [NCAA title] game, and that tells you it can be done," Ruland said. "I've recruited low Big East and Atlantic 10 players at Iona. I can certainly recruit toe-to-toe with the Big East at Seton Hall. Listen, it's a tough job, but I recruit New York and New Jersey and I'll recruit nationally there. Around the country, I'll walk into people's homes and they're going to know who I am."

He does have that presence. Only trouble is, Ruland could be running behind in the mind of Seton Hall athletic director Joe Quinlan, who appears enamored of the idea of hiring the next golden boy, Hofstra's Tom Pecora. The way several sources described it on Friday afternoon, within hours of Louis Orr's firing, this job already was deep into the pipeline for Hofstra's coach.

As one Big East source said, "Pecora has had his people working all the right people for this job, won over a lot of the higher-ups."

One source went so far to suggest that Pecora could be introduced at Seton Hall before the Final Four, a possibility considering that intermediaries of the Hofstra coach had contacted at least one assistant coach with New Jersey ties about joining his staff at the Hall.

"This job needs a shark," one Big East coach said Friday, "and that's 'Rules' and 'Gonzo.' Those are sharks. That said, Ruland scares us the most in that job. I would much rather that they just kept Orr in there and we could keep getting [recruits] out of there."

Listen, Pecora has done a superb job at Hofstra. This isn't to suggest he shouldn't be on the short lists of athletic directors. Yet, he's had two good seasons. And still hasn't gone to the NCAA tournament. The best thing going for him is that he's an offspring of Villanova's Jay Wright, a pedigree that's carrying clout these days.

Just remember this: Seton Hall isn't a pretty program. It's a rough-and-tumble urban school without a practice facility, without a favorable home-court advantage, without the niceties that come built with most Big East programs. The Hall needs someone with New York and Jersey street cred, who's going to turn the New York and New Jersey markets inside out, who has a reputation for developing players, who has gone the distance in the NCAA tournament against higher seeds, the way Ruland did to Mississippi and to a lesser extent, Louisiana State.

Seton Hall needs to be careful here. Pecora could win the press conference with his Wright Lite way. He's a good coach, a good package, but that doesn't make him the most suited for Seton Hall.

Ruland brings Vin Parise, an assistant whom Bob and Dan Hurley will tell you is one of the rising stars in the profession, the kind of recruiting assistant that walks into the New Jersey high school gym with credibility that didn't exist on Orr's staff. Mostly, Ruland brings that Ruland swagger. He's grown immensely as a bench coach, beating two Top 25 teams in his career, reaching three NCAA tournaments, including this March Madness when Iona was beating Duke-killer LSU at halftime.

The way that Gonzalez has paid a price for immature and boorish behavior in the past, something that a lot of people believe he's finally outgrown, Ruland has his own baggage now. He's been dogged by a CBS Sportsline.com report on several schools' relationships with D1 Scheduling, a company that had Los Angeles City College coach Mike Miller doubling as paid matchmaker for several Division I programs. Iona used him to schedule several games, inspiring this question: Had this been a way to funnel money to the junior college coach for recruiting favors?

"Show me that super JUCO stud that I've been getting from L.A. City?" said Ruland, who hasn't had had an L.A. City player on his roster since 2000. "We were scrambling after my scheduling guy had been fired [two years ago], and without [D-1 Scheduling's] help, I wouldn't have gotten the games that I got to play. The money we got from playing Fresno, Kentucky and Iowa State [through D1 Scheduling] is the same as the guarantee money we got from playing Seton Hall [which wasn't scheduled through D1]."

"There was nothing here that was a violation of any NCAA rules."

Sorry, but Ruland's never had the rep of a cheater. Never. Truth be told, Ruland, Pecora and Gonzalez have good reps that way.

There is always more than one way to win at a school, at a job, but Seton Hall made its Big East name on tough, scrappy street fighters, someone willing to deliver an elbow upside your head when necessary. In a lot of ways, this is a bear-knuckles brawl of a coaching gig. Get Jeff Ruland down to South Orange, give him his shot to win a job that he was born and bred to do.

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