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Coaches: Caught in crosshairs

Coaches try to survive in a culture that gets a rush out of "You're fired!"

By [Rachel Blount](#), Star Tribune

Given the unstable nature of their profession, coaches need a strong set of psychic tools to survive in a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately world. A thick skin insulates them from the public venom flowing through talk radio and fire-the-coach websites. A resilient nature helps them climb back on the career tightrope in a business defined by the motto "you're hired to be fired."

A healthy sense of humor doesn't hurt, either. "My friend Harry Neale was taking a lot of heat once," said Glen Sonmor, the former Gophers and North Stars hockey coach. "He was told the players didn't like his practices. He said, 'Well, I don't really care for their games.' "

Several high-profile coaches in the Twin Cities have had to rely on those qualities recently. Over the past 13 months, five of them -- Mike Tice (Vikings), Suzie McConnell Serio (Lynx), Dan Monson (Gophers men's basketball), Glen Mason (Gophers football) and Dwane Casey (Timberwolves) -- have been fired.

A complex stew of cultural trends has made coaching more precarious than ever. A sports-mad population hooked on instant gratification, in which Donald Trump has transformed firing people into mass entertainment for the sensitivity-impaired, has turned up the heat on an already sizzling seat. Coaching has become a model of social Darwinism, in which only the strongest endure -- and even they probably will hear the words "You're fired" at some point in their careers.

"It's not surprising," said Mark Dienhart, who was both the dismitter and the dismissee during his five years as Gophers men's athletic director. "The conflict, impatience and hard edges we see in society, we see now in sports. When I see the stuff going on right now, my heart goes out to the people involved."

Coaches always have shouldered a heavy share of blame when a team doesn't win, and it's always been a callous business. Sonmor remembers the story of Chicago Blackhawks coach Billy Reay, fired on a Christmas Eve road trip via a note shoved under his door.

Coaches like CEOs

Sports fan, CEO and author Harvey Mackay said coaches and business executives -- two of America's most visible and highly paid professions -- face many of the same pressures these days. And they have the brief job tenures to match. A CEO's success is measured from quarter to quarter by demanding shareholders, just as a coach is judged from game to game by fans.

According to the outplacement firm Challenger, Gray and Christmas, the average tenure of an NFL coach is 3.8 years; **executive search firm Crist Associates reports that a CEO's average tenure is 4.5 years.** In that kind of environment, Mackay said, coaches must expect to be fired.

"You have to accept rejection as a part of life, especially in athletics," said Mackay, whose 2004 book "We Got Fired!" tells the stories of coaches and executives who went on to greater success after dismissal. "The days of staying around 35 years and getting the gold watch are over with.

"In 2006, the average college graduate will have 12 to 14 different jobs. With that going on, the stigma of being fired has faded -- and the most important thing is, what did you learn from it?"

Dr. Rick Aberman specializes in helping people figure that out. A sports psychotherapist, his Lennick Aberman Group consults with coaches and athletes at the University of Minnesota and around the country.

Many coaches get fired, Aberman said, because they lack the self-awareness to understand how their behavior impacts their success. He trains coaches to observe themselves honestly so they can be better leaders in their current job or their next one.

"One reason we see so many coaches not being effective is that they're knowledgeable in only one area -- Xs and Os," Aberman said. "There is very little training in areas such as moral and emotional intelligence, and both are important. We try to teach them to be more psychologically sophisticated."

Dienhart said the general coarsening of American culture has contributed to a more hostile climate for coaches. He theorizes that talk radio, blogs and websites have fragmented our society, and they are part of a trend that finds entertainment in denigrating, criticizing or mocking others.

Angry fans used to hang coaches in effigy. Today, they do it in cyberspace. Fireronzook.com was started in 2002 by fans dedicated to unseating the University of Florida football coach. Within two years, he lost his job, and hundreds of similar sites have sprung up across the Internet.

To tolerate that level of cruel scrutiny, Dienhart said, a coach must possess tremendous confidence. That can impress the public, especially fans of a team that isn't winning, but it won't last unless the victory total grows as big as the ego. The same fickleness affects warm, fuzzy coaches, too.

"It's part of the entertainment aspect -- people get tired of you," said Dienhart, who went on to become chief administrative officer of the University of St. Thomas after his Gophers contract was not renewed in the wake of the Clem Haskins academic fraud scandal. "People had fun with [former Gophers football coach] Jim Wacker for a certain period of time, but when the wins and losses didn't measure up, he was dealt with in a cruel way.

"Coaching is certainly more unforgiving, because it's so visible, and you're trying to control things that are so difficult to control. You can claim to be the best at something in any walk of life, but in sports, you have to prove it on Saturday afternoon -- and people are going to remember, and they won't take a long-term view."

Twins an exception

Occasionally, coaches and administrators do have the luxury of security. Beginning in 1993, two seasons after winning their second World Series, the Twins spun their wheels through eight consecutive summers of losing.

The team had a record of 528-699 over that span and finished at least 14 games back every season. General Manager Terry Ryan didn't pass blame to manager Tom Kelly, and owner Carl

Pohlad didn't demand any firings. He told Ryan he had faith in the team's philosophy and personnel, and as Kelly retired after righting the ship, Pohlad's patience was rewarded with six consecutive winning seasons and four Central Division championships.

"In the late '90s, there didn't look to be much hope," Ryan said. "We really struggled. But through those lean years, Mr. Pohlad allowed us to work through it.

"It wasn't Tom's fault. He knew how to win; he just didn't have the horses. You can't panic, and you can't make snap decisions. If you stay with your approach and philosophy and surround yourself with quality people, there's a good chance there will be some good fortune in the end."

Money raises stakes

Fortune of another sort plays a huge part in the short leash afforded many coaches. According to USA Today, head football coaches at NCAA Division I-A schools made an average salary of \$950,000 in 2006, not counting benefits, incentives or other perks. Dienhart said escalating salaries have created a disconnect with fans, who harbor no empathy for fired coaches who float off on golden parachutes the size of the Metrodome roof.

High ticket costs mean spectators expect a winning return on their investment, and the need for teams to generate profits through victory keeps the pressure high and the patience low. But Ryan said a long-range view has tangible benefits. With only two managers in the past 20 years, the Twins have enjoyed continuity and stability, creating an environment that makes players comfortable and has nurtured a kinship with fans that is unusual in pro sports.

So with all those demanding fans, impatient owners and head-case athletes, why would anyone want this job? No matter what the pitfalls, many coaches say, they still see working in sports as a privilege they are lucky to have.

"That stuff is just in you," Sonmor said. "If it's in your blood, if it's your passion, you can't imagine doing anything else."

Rachel Blount • rblount@startribune.com

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