

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Coaching Carousel Spins Ever Faster

On College Football

By MARC TRACY DEC. 1, 2015

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Before the 1987 season, Virginia Tech hired a new football coach. The new boss was 2-9 in his first season. A half-dozen recruiting classes later, he finished his sixth season with a record that was, on paper, only microscopically improved: 2-8-1.

Contemporary fans will be surprised to learn the coach was not fired. Instead, he proceeded to reel off 23 consecutive nonlosing regular seasons, ending each with a bowl trip. More than 200 wins later, his teams have finished in the top 10 six times, and played for a national championship.

“Frank Beamer,” said Bill Carr, a former athletic director at Florida who consults on coaching hires, “would not have had his opportunity in this environment.”

Such is the present-day reality of college football, with new coaches on incredibly short leashes and even old ones feeling insecure as rising revenues

lead directly to rising turnover. Louisiana State nearly fired Les Miles last week, only four years after he led the Tigers to the national title game. Georgia did part ways with Mark Richt, who won almost 100 more games than he lost in 15 seasons in Athens. Miami dumped Al Golden at midseason — even though he had a winning record at the time.

Over all, nearly two dozen jobs came open at some point this season. The process of filling them will surely open a few others. The carousel is spinning: On Sunday, Virginia Tech announced that Memphis Coach Justin Fuente had been hired to replace Beamer, who announced his retirement a month ago. And on Monday, Southern California said that Clay Helton, who took over for the fired Steve Sarkisian in October, would remain the head coach.

But, like coaches, not all jobs are created equal. History, administration support and in-state talent all play a role in a program's success, and those factors — and others — make some of the recent openings a lot more desirable than others.

PLUM GIGS

Southern California is one of college football's great programs, and it was able to land highly rated recruiting classes even while under N.C.A.A. sanctions (since expired). Helton had the inside track and got the job, but job security is something else: He is, after all, the fourth Trojans coach, including interims, in the past three seasons.

The bad news about **Georgia** is that expectations are so high that you can win nearly 75 percent of your games over 15 seasons and still be given your walking papers, as just happened to Richt. The good news is that with one of the country's largest hubs of talent, tradition and prestige, and membership in the Southeastern Conference's weaker division, those expectations are justified. This is the best job on the market.

Virginia Tech's record of success is not as long as U.S.C.'s or Georgia's, but the program has practically every factor in its favor: a relatively uncompetitive division, heavy investments in new facilities, a recruiting-rich state it dominates and even the retention of the experienced and respected defensive coordinator Bud Foster.

Miami has made little noise over the past decade, but it has won five national championships — with four different head coaches — and finished second another three times in the 30 seasons from 1983 to 2002, primarily by feeding off South Florida's plentiful talent.

While Gary Pinkel steps down as one of **Missouri**'s most accomplished coaches, he leaves behind a program in far better shape than the one he inherited. Once a Big 12 also-ran, the Tigers now play in the SEC, and they have won their division twice in three seasons.

REBUILDING PROJECTS

Like several Atlantic Coast Conference members, **Virginia** is traditionally a basketball school that has been impelled by N.C.A.A. economics to beef up its football program. It will be difficult for it to gain much traction without first overcoming Virginia Tech, against which it has won only one of its last 17 meetings.

Illinois and **Minnesota** had their head coaches leave either just before or during the season and then saw their interim athletic directors give their interim coaches short-term contracts. (The Illinois interim athletic director, Paul Kowalczyk, called his hiring of Bill Cubit "not ideal" Sunday, a comment that will probably not be a bonus on the recruiting trail.)

Syracuse, Jim Brown's alma mater, enjoyed a string of successes in the late 1980s and early 1990s and has a football-minded athletic director. But the Orange have struggled to adjust to the A.C.C., going 7-17 in their three seasons.

Also, it is very snowy up there for players considering sunnier options.

Despite playing in — and winning — the first college football game, in 1869, **Rutgers** has had only brief cameos as a nationally competitive program, and none since joining the Big Ten. Until Rutgers figures out how to dominate New Jersey's prospect-rich but nationally-known high schools, the Scarlet Knights' coaching job will continue to look like a poisoned chalice.

It is more than possible that Matt Campbell, the talented Toledo coach whom **Iowa State** plucked to head its program, sees something in Ames that others do not. But here's what others see: a program that has four winning seasons since 1990 and last won its conference in 1912, and is the perpetual second choice even in its own small state.

WILD CARDS

Less than two years ago, **South Carolina** was the fourth ranked team in the country, pushing out a homegrown No. 1 over all N.F.L. draft pick. But there is little evidence the Gamecocks can replicate their recent success without the recently retired Steve Spurrier.

Maryland is coming off a 3-9 season and remains, to many, a basketball school playing in perhaps college football's toughest division, the Big Ten East. Its administration mishandled Randy Edsall's firing, but the support of the booster Kevin Plank, the founder of Under Armour, makes the Terps a high-risk, high-reward play for an ambitious coach.

Memphis and **Houston** (which currently has a head coach, Tom Herman) are typically among the first candidates mentioned when prognosticators speculate about which members the Big 12 might add if (when?) the conference seeks to expand. They both have commitments to investing in football, and both sit on the recruiting equivalent of oil gushers. But until realignment happens, expect both of these programs to be sellers, not

buyers, in the coaching market.

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