

INSIDE HIGHER ED

Advertisement



News

Just Like Everyone Else?

December 16, 2009



With each passing day, it gets harder and harder to tell the Ivy League from the rest of big-time college sports.

Last year news reports suggested that Harvard University was [bending its admissions standards](#) under its new men's basketball coach, Tommy Amaker, a former Duke University star -- allegations that Harvard officials disputed.

After holding out for years against holding its own postseason tournaments of any kind, which league officials said would cut into class time, the Ivy conference is [starting a postseason lacrosse playoff](#) next spring, a possible precursor to a postseason basketball tournament.

And Monday, the University of Pennsylvania did the almost unthinkable: It [fired its men's basketball coach](#), Glen Miller, several weeks into the 2009-10 season. Midseason firings are highly unusual ([and highly controversial](#)) in college basketball, and almost unheard of in a league that likes to hold itself to higher-than-average (some would say holier-than-thou) standards when it comes to the appropriate place of sports in a higher education context. The decision brought a barrage of criticism from newspaper columnists (["Is This the Ivy League, or the NBA?"](#)), [sports commentators](#), and some long-time observers of the league.

"People in the Ivy League love to say, 'Oh, we're different,' and it's not all about winning. But when something like this happens, it's fair to ask the question, Are they really different?" said Robert Malekoff, an assistant professor of sport studies at Guilford College and former associate athletics director at Harvard University. (Malekoff also hired Miller as the basketball coach at Division III Connecticut College, where Miller coached before turning the basketball program around at Brown University and then, ultimately, going to Penn. So Malekoff is a Miller fan.)

Penn officials said they hoped that replacing Miller with one of the university's best-ever basketball players, Jerome Allen, as interim coach would begin to restore the program's luster. "I think this is an opportunity for us to recapture the Penn identity or begin to recapture that by hiring Jerome," Steve Bilsky, the athletics director, said in [a news release](#) about the change. "He represents to me the essence of what a student-athlete at Penn is, both in terms of how he got to Penn ..., what he did when he got here, how he feels about the school, and how he has kept in touch with us subsequently."

But despite Bilsky's suggestion that Allen represents the "essence" of Penn athletics, the new interim coach is not the prototypical Ivy League athlete in one key way: Despite playing four years at Penn in the 1990s, he did not earn an undergraduate degree, *Inside Higher Ed* confirmed with the National Student Clearinghouse, which manages enrollment records for Penn and many other colleges.

Miller had started his fourth year as Penn's coach with seven straight losses; that followed two seasons marked by overall losing records (although in one, Penn had a winning record in the Ivy League) and a conference championship in his first full season, 2006-7.

Penn officials insisted that factors other than team's record prompted their decision. "This isn't really about wins and losses," Steve Bilsky, the athletics director, told the *Philadelphia Daily News*. (He did not respond to requests from *Inside Higher Ed* for comment.) "I think of Penn basketball as more than just a sport that plays games to win and lose." The other factors? In that and other interviews, Bilsky suggested that Miller had failed to win over alumni and other supporters of the basketball program, some of whom did not like

the fact that he had no Penn connections in his background.

"This really is about a sense of direction and leadership," he [told the Associated Press](#). "Where we were at this point indicated it was time to make a change and this was the time to do it."

"[T]here are a lot of different constituents that look at us for more than just playing [games]," Bilsky said to the *Daily News*. "It's also being a representative of the university to all these constituents and being one of the most prominent people at Penn. I think that's incumbent on the person who has that job to have those skills and have that ability and generate good will and enthusiasm."

Bilsky shed more light on the decision he made (in conjunction with Penn's president, Amy Gutmann, and other higher-ups) in discussing his choice to replace Miller with Allen. "This was not just a kind of basketball X-and-O résumé decision," Bilsky said of hiring Allen. "I can't tell you the calls that have come in already: 'I'm back in the Palestra [the university's home arena]; I'm coming to games; I'm going to write you a check.' It's all about, 'I'm back in the family.' "

If Penn's decision pleased many of its own fans, it surprised commentators elsewhere. Midseason firings are uncommon, but have increased in number (from none to a handful) in recent years, to the dismay of some people. Last year, [writing in *Sports Illustrated*](#) after a small flurry of such findings at that time, Seth Davis urged all athletics directors to take the following vow: "I hereby pledge never to fire a coach or ask for a coach's resignation before his or her season has concluded, except under extraordinary circumstances. I understand 'extraordinary circumstances' to include egregious personal behavior, the commission of a major NCAA violation or some other circumstance which is not related to the athletic performance of a coach's team."

He added: "If we can't force ADs to take my pledge, then we should all do our best to shame them into abiding by it. Because replacing college coaches before their season is completed is not only shameful, it is cowardly. The only reason to do it is to pull the plug on an uncomfortable situation. It certainly does not enable an AD to hire a better coach. I can appreciate the difficulty of having a revenue-generating program being run by a dead-man coaching, but that is no excuse for taking the easy way out. Yes, college athletics is a multibillion-dollar business, but these are still supposed to be educational institutions. I would think there is value in teaching student-athletes the importance of finishing what they started, even when it's hard."

Those weighing in on Penn's dismissal of Miller, which followed by a few days Fordham University's ["release" of its coach](#), Dereck Whittenburg, suggested that as a member of the Ivy League, the university should be held to a higher standard -- in large part because it and the other Ivies like to hold themselves to such a standard.

"[F]or an Ivy League university to fire a coach seven games into the season is stunning, because it goes against the grain of the values the Ivies espouse and makes Penn appear no different than the 'football factories' and 'jock houses' where winning is everything, and anything goes -- anything, that is, that can be slipped past the NCAA investigators," Jim Donaldson [wrote Monday](#) in the *Providence Journal*.

Penn officials told reporters that they knew they would come in for that sort of criticism. "I was concerned [about that]," Bilsky told the *Philadelphia Daily News*. "I think there was a consensus of the higher-ups here at the university that I had to do what I had to do.... The question was raised: Is this the right thing for an Ivy League institution to do?"

The answer, apparently, was Yes -- at least in the current Ivy League.

— [Doug Lederman](#)