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College Football Returns to High School

Long Passed Over for Collegiate Jobs, a Wave of Prep Coaches Is Thriving at the Next Level

By BEN COHEN



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Clemson coach Dabo Swinney (left) along with offensive coordinator Chad Morris (right), who came from the highschool ranks.

high-school defenses with offensive pyrotechnics until he moved to the next level in 2006 and won the 2010 national championship as Auburn's offensive coordinator.

Hugh Freeze followed Michael Oher, the subject of "The Blind Side," from Briarcrest Christian School to Mississippi and is now Ole Miss's head coach.

"I still run the same offense today that I did then," he said. "People probably look at me as a high-school coach, and I do feel like that."



Zuma Press

Gus Malzahn, a former offensive coordinator for Auburn who is now with Arkansas State, also has a high-school football background.

And there is Morris at Clemson, the No. 10 team in the country, which plays at No. 4 Florida State on Saturday. Before the end of the 2011 season—only Morris's second year on a college staff—Clemson bumped his annual salary to \$1.3 million and made a coach two years removed from the Texas state championship the highest-paid assistant in college football.

"There's a lot of high-school coaches out there who could do what I'm doing right now," Morris said.

Coaches say the first college job is the hardest one to get. When Tulsa's Bill Blankenship decided to make the leap from high school, it took him a year to find a college gig. He spent his idle time working in talk radio and with a ministry group. "If you're in the club, you can bounce around," he said. "But if you're not in the club, you're just not in the club yet."

Arizona State coach Todd Graham, a high-school coach in the 1980s and 1990s, gambled on hiring Morris, Malzahn and Blankenship at Tulsa when they had a combined 14 games of college experience. He recalled the reaction to the unorthodox choices: "It was not the most popular thing to do."

The rise of graduate assistants in college football stunted the professional advancement of high-school coaches. Former Michigan coach Lloyd Carr, a high-school assistant before he became a college assistant, said aspiring college coaches once started in high schools and moved up not long afterward. Those jobs disappeared in the last 30 years when young wannabe coaches eschewed the high-school route for the low spot on the college totem pole.

That, too, changed recently. Now high-school coaches in football hotbeds earn boatloads of money and preside over pristine facilities. Before he retired, Carr recruited a player from Malzahn's powerhouse high school in Springdale, Ark. He remembers being blown away by the program's sophistication. "It was like going into a college situation," Carr said.

High-school coaches with premium college prospects on their teams also have front-row seats to a master class in football recruiting. And they recruit in their

own, unexpected way: by making sure their town's best athletes aren't ditching football for basketball and baseball. Plus, prep coaches boast experiences their college counterparts wouldn't dream of.

"They have to deal with parents, line the field, wash the laundry—all that and teach class," Morris said.

Morris, a math teacher who flirted with a job as an actuary before he climbed the coaching ladder, almost certainly wouldn't be doing what he is doing if not for Malzahn.

It was Malzahn who taught Morris his hurry-up, no-huddle offense when they were high-school coaches last decade. Malzahn left Tulsa and his position opened for Morris, coming off undefeated seasons in 2008 and 2009 at Lake Travis High School in Austin, Texas. Malzahn helped convince Morris to accept the Tulsa job after he turned it down three times. And Malzahn was a reference for Morris when Swinney needed an offensive mastermind at Clemson.

Morris inherited a Clemson offense coming off a 6-7 season and desperate for something radical. He took a team that averaged 68 plays per game and turbocharged it to the tune of 78 plays per game last season and 88 plays per game so far this year.

It has made all the difference for the Tigers, now a sneaky pick to wreak Bowl Championship Series chaos. In 2010, Clemson averaged 335 yards per game, 88th in the country. Last season: 441 yards (26th) and an Atlantic Coast Conference championship, Clemson's first since 1991. Through three games this year: 517 yards (21st) and who knows what.

Morris's new network of college peers took notice. He was thought to be a hot coaching candidate until Clemson extended his contract and nearly tripled his salary in December. Swinney has said he doesn't expect Morris to leave for anything but a head job.

Meanwhile, Malzahn and Morris are trying to pay it forward by finding the latest blue-chip coaches: They have decided to organize an off-season clinic for high-school coaches interested in college jobs.

"I'm a big believer in high-school coaches," Malzahn said. "Put it that way."

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