The big one that got away

Before Ben Howland made a name for himself and Pittsburgh and UCLA, local schools missed out on a chance to hire a fiery young assistant.

By Robyn Norwood

ON COLLEGE BASKETBALL

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Ouch.

UCLA Coach Ben Howland is taking the Bruins to the Final Four for the third year in a row. Yet there was a time when he couldn't get a head coaching job in Southern California.

Couldn't. Get. A. Job.

It seems almost unfair to criticize an athletic director who didn't hire him, because, well, there are so many of them. How do you single out one?

How could Loyola Marymount, UC Irvine (twice) and UC Santa Barbara not hire a coach who, let's be frank, could end up in the Hall of Fame?

"What a fool I was," former Loyola Marymount athletic director Brian Quinn said, laughing.

"Big mistake, big mistake, and I know that," said Quinn, now the athletic director at Cal State Fullerton. "But honestly, how long would he have lasted at LMU? A couple of years and someone much bigger would have grabbed him."

That was back in 1992, when Howland, now 50, was a young UC Santa Barbara assistant, the same hard-driving coach he is today, and maybe a little on the brash side.

Quinn chose John Olive, a Villanova assistant.

"John Olive looked like a perfect fit for LMU," Quinn said. "He was from a Catholic university. He had a law degree. He seemed like the right guy and Rollie Massimino was enormously high on him."

Olive lasted five years, going 7-21 his final season.

Howland had missed out on the Irvine job in 1991 too.

"He was an assistant at UCSB and he called and said, 'Tom, I'm your guy,' or something to that effect," said Tom Ford, the Irvine athletic director at the time who is now associate AD for external relations at Cal State Northridge. "The tone of it was, 'You don't need to look any further. I'm here.'"
"I explained that we needed someone who had been a head coach at some level. We had in our criteria that you had to have been a head coach. That eliminated Ben."

It was probably good for Howland's career.

Irvine hired Seton Hall assistant Rod Baker, who was gone after five years, with a 1-25 record his final season.

Even Dan Guerrero, the UCLA athletic director who hired Howland from Pittsburgh in 2003, didn't hire him the first time he had a chance.

Guerrero was the Irvine AD in 1997, by which time Howland had gotten his first college job, at Northern Arizona. Guerrero chose Pat Douglass, who has won more games than any coach in Irvine history but has yet to take the Anteaters to the NCAA tournament.

"Ultimately, what it boiled down to was I had a relationship with Pat Douglass from when I was at Dominguez Hills," said Guerrero, who had been AD at Division II Cal State Dominguez Hills. "I had seen what he had done at Cal State Bakersfield. He had won three national championships. He had been a head coach previously, even though it was another level."

But Howland had made an impression.

"It was one of those things, somebody needed to pull the trigger on a young, unproven coach," Guerrero said. "There was nothing to make me hesitate. He was aggressive, I'd say, in a good way. He called me several times, and when I called to tell him he wasn't getting the job, he not only thanked me, he sent me a card.

"He was a star for Jerry Pimm at Santa Barbara. It didn't surprise me when he went to Northern Arizona and did well. I watched him there, and then when I saw what he did at Pittsburgh . . ."

Give Guerrero credit for this: He didn't pass on Howland the second time he got a chance, moving decisively to hire him at UCLA in 2003.

What could be the matter with a system in which a coach as good as Howland has to wait so long to get his chance?

Northern Arizona gave Howland his first job as a head coach in 1994, and he took a program that had been the dregs of Division I to the NCAA tournament and a near-upset of No. 2-seeded Cincinnati in 1998.

He left for Pittsburgh in 1999 -- by then with the backing of shoe company power broker Sonny Vaccaro -- and he took the Panthers to two Sweet 16s before leaving for UCLA in 2003.

"It is hard to get that first head coaching job," Howland said. "I think you have to be in a good program, more often than not, have gone to the NCAA tournament. It helps if you are working for a high-profile coach.

"My personal example, my first job [at Northern Arizona], no one else really wanted it, per se. There were still 70-80 applicants and NAU was in the bottom 10 of all schools in winning percentage and I got a secure, one-year contract worth $60,000 a year."

His greatest disappointment was still to come.

Howland had been an assistant at Santa Barbara for 12 years, and he was Pimm's choice to succeed him. But the Santa Barbara program -- once the rival of Nevada Las Vegas in the heyday of the Big West Conference -- had slipped in Pimm's later years.
When Santa Barbara chose Pimm's replacement in 1998, it wasn't Howland.

"We had a committee and chose four finalists," said Gary Cunningham, the athletic director at Santa Barbara and former UCLA player and coach.

Howland was among the four. But although Cunningham wouldn't address the decision because the committee had a confidentiality agreement, others noted that the athletic department administration had changed and that although Howland had many supporters at the school, he had rubbed others wrong in 12 years there.

Santa Barbara chose Bob Williams, who had just won the NCAA Division II championship at UC Davis. He has been a solid choice, taking the Gauchos to the NCAA tournament in 2002, and beating UCLA at Pauley Pavilion in 2003 in Howland's first season.

But he hasn't touched what Howland has done.

And here's the trick, who knows what Howland would have done if he had gotten one of those jobs at Loyola Marymount or Irvine or Santa Barbara?

Would he have lasted more than five years?

"He's an excellent coach," Cunningham said. "No rock is left unturned. He's an excellent defensive coach, and I always say, when offense fails, defense can win. He's been a winner everywhere he's gone.

"I kid him, 'I did you a favor.' He's done a great job and made UCLA proud."

Kim Howland, Ben's wife, stood on the court last week with their two children, now young adults, watching her husband cut down the nets for a third consecutive trip to the Final Four.

Someone asked her about those days when Howland couldn't get a head coaching job, and about not being hired at Santa Barbara.

"I think it was disappointing and emotional," she said. "It was something he really wanted. He loves Santa Barbara. He grew up there."

But it worked out.

Yes, Howland's wife said with a smile, "There was something better down the road."

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