

BALZA

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"I always felt at the Division 2 level you could outwork the competition, but at Division I there's very little different in terms of how hard coaches work and prepare," Balza said.

"And in terms of skill, I've seen Division 3 coaches who are better X and O coaches, better on-the-floor coaches. But at Division I it's a matter of how smart you work, how hard you work, and whether you are still willing to learn. You can't be a know-it-all. But you also have to be like a corporate CEO."

At schools like the University of Michigan, where, as a student manager, Balza was part of the 1989 National Championship team — or at the Universities of Florida or Florida State or North Carolina or Kentucky or Duke or UCLA, or the other elite rarities among the nation's 340 Division I teams — staffs of 40 or more and budgets in the millions (along with coaches' salaries that can climb into the millions) make that CEO model inevitable.

At FGCU, however, where Balza makes about \$80,000 a year and his three assistants together make only about \$90,000, coaching and CEO-ing become a do-it-yourself experience.

"What's the difference between us and them?" he asks rhetorically. "A zero. Maybe two zeros." As in the difference between five figures and a dollar sign, or six or seven figures and a dollar sign, and the staffs to go with the big bucks: the game scouts, the video scouts (sometimes 8 or 10 people just to study clips of players with potential, all year long), the secretaries, all of it.

But James Naismith's national game, to which Balza is connected genealogically (he once took a class from the late great black coach and Hall-of-Famer John McClendon, who in turn had studied under Naismith, the game's inventor) requires more than money, massive size, or even mere court smarts, the coach insists.

At 38, Balza has been part of college basketball for 20 years, graduating from Michigan to assistant jobs at Cleveland State and elsewhere.

He puts in 60 to 80-hour work weeks year-around, in which a great deal depends on recruiting, and a great deal depends on the conditioning and coaching and counseling and managing he can provide to players. And finally, a great deal also depends on glad-handing.

On one typical day Coach Balza changed his clothes five times, twice switching to shirt and tie with jacket, extracted from his tidy but minimalist locker space in the coaches' locker room: once for a fund-raising luncheon, and again in the evening to appear on court for the game.

He watched hours of film in his small office, where high school players from Connecticut to Croatia struggled across his high-def television or computer screens, or where a future opponent — not that day's opponent — revealed its playbook in a taped game.

He encouraged wealthy donors to give seven-figure gifts to the Athletic program in general, and basketball in particular, he said. He ate chicken while he did it, ignored his cheesecake, and listened to the FGCU president and a development officer thank donors at his and the surrounding tables from a small podium at least eight times in a single hour.

He also called his wife, Karrie, a couple of times. When he asked her what she wanted for her birthday, on Saturday — the day the Eagles and seven seniors from his 17-man squad played their final game at home to end their champagne season in Division I — she replied, "Bring me a win." He did, noting that he would celebrate Karrie's birthday on a Sunday night, during a bit of downtime.

"Even when I go home, I think about the game — I'm thinking about it all the time, that's just my personality," he admitted.

He learned that one player had missed a tutoring session the night before, and sought to know why. (With Balza, living right and working hard are important components of playing the game, he explained. And he doesn't flinch from that, either: he's kicked three players permanently off the team for violations of the 42-page code of conduct, which he summarizes as, "Four words — do the right thing." He would not say what they did. And he expressed great pride that all seven seniors are



COURTESY PHOTO

FGCU basketball coach Dave Balza instructs the Eagles during an afternoon "shoot off."

graduating and moving into "good jobs.")

He checked on the dress of players slated to sit at the luncheon tables of donors whose money provided their scholarships (an FGCU hostess, immaculately coiffed and greeting arriving guests, informed the coach that one player "needs to tuck his shirt in").

He conducted a "shoot off," designed to loosen up his players and make them run the offenses they would likely see their opponents stage hours later; he took his team to an afternoon lunch at a local restaurant (a game-day tradition); he worried about handing out game tickets to people who had asked (for a big game, such as Tuesday night's run-and-gun against Marquette, the season finale, he'll get upwards of 70 requests for free tickets, he said, meeting as many of them as he can, maybe 50 or so).

He watched the highly rated women's team play a 5 p.m. game, less than three hours before his own; and finally he coached a tough, close contest that had the Eagles up by 8 points in the third period over a bigger, more experienced Jacksonville team, which finally overwhelmed the home boys in the last minutes of play.

Then he drove home to Three Oaks, where he and Karrie, a social worker and his bride of two years, make their home. A 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. day, typical of many, was over.

Balza met his wife at church, he recalled, not long after the coach arrived at FGCU to kick off the 2001-2002 season, with no players and no games scheduled, jumping initially into Division II.

"In this job, there isn't much time for a social life," he admitted. "So there I was in church, and it wasn't hard to notice the most beautiful woman there." Later he added, "She's the most patient person I've ever met."

The Division I trenches

Balza's first season of Division I play may seem a long way from the successes of those small schools that fielded nationally celebrated Cinderella teams in recent years.

Those coaches, the ones at George Mason or Valparaiso or Gonzaga or St. Mary's, for example, played with long-established programs, and wider fund-raising and donor support than Balza will likely enjoy for the next few years. His teams won't even be eligible to compete in the NCAA playoffs for the first four years of play, an NCAA rule.

But even so, the "little guys" he reveres beat opposing teams with much more widely recruited and lavishly supported players in front of millions of viewers, achieving a far-reaching notoriety for their basketball programs that even now is swelling the coffers of their universities with significant wealth, and garnering higher-profile recruits.

That's where Dave Balza is going with the Eagles in the Atlantic Sun Conference, he hopes. "Who gets into March Madness, and how they establish the rules about who can play and who can't (conference winners get automatic berths, and a committee selects a few other teams) — that's all about money, just money," Balza said.

He completed the Eagle's first-ever Division I season last week with a respectable 10 wins, including a victory at the lustrous new Alico Arena in the final game there on Saturday night, thus earning the right to be respected.

His rival at Jacksonville, Head Coach Cliff Warren, only won a single game in his first

Division I season three years ago. But last year his team won 16 games, and last week it was playing one game out of first place. At the University of North Florida, meanwhile, the men's basketball team hasn't won 5 games in three years of Division I play.

That's usually a recipe for getting fired, but Balza isn't worried about it, he said. "There's so much pressure these days to win, and winning is great, sure. But if I do it the right way, and do it as well as I can, without worrying about the numbers, I feel better."

How all of this is going to turn out in the next three or four seasons at FGCU depends on Balza's recruiting skills, on his money-raising skills, and in part on his ability to schedule higher profile games at home — which can add to his recruiting and fund-raising success, since money for the program comes from three sources: donors, ticket sales and student fees. (He now has 13 of his 17 players on scholarships, per NCAA rules, but only 10 of them on full scholarships. He'd like to provide that full support to the 13 eligible, he noted.)

Scheduling is a bug-a-bear of sorts. This year he was able to play Marquette, Butler, Arizona State and DePaul, solid "mid-majors" — the level at which most Division I teams claim to be, but probably aren't, Balza said. Only a few teams can claim to be "high-majors," he explained. And those who win conference titles or three games in three days here and there "should be defined as mid-majors, while the rest are low majors, no matter what they say."

The Butler game, against a top-20-ranked team, was a scheduling coup of sorts (the Eagles had to play twice at Butler to get that coach to agree to come to FGCU once); and DePaul will make a visit next season because "I sort of held them up," Balza admitted. When DePaul had a sudden scheduling hole, the Eagles agreed to travel to fill it on short notice. But after Balza agreed, he then waited to confirm until DePaul's coach would promise a visit to FGCU.

Getting an Ohio State here, however — even though Balza is a friend of head coach Thad Matta — is a different, and entirely financial matter.

"They can make \$250,000 for their program on every home game, from tickets, concessions and parking, that kind of thing," Balza explained. "And we can't pay them that much to come here, obviously. But they can pay us \$30,000 or \$40,000 to go there, which is a lot of money for us, and even if they have to do that, they've still made more than \$200,000. So we can't draw them, yet."

And that makes it harder for Balza to draw talented recruits.

A great deal of Balza's year — like a great deal of his busy day — is spent trying to locate the best unknown players.

"The computer has changed all this, because now in a year we probably looked at 20,000 players," he said. "A lot of kids now send you three-minute clips, hoping to be recruited."

As he spoke, he leaned forward and turned on his computer, where somebody on the screen fired a 3-point shot in a game, and a file counter noted that this clip was number 699. "The next guy will be number 700," Balza said.

"Even when you're still relatively unknown, so many kids want you to recruit them. But we won't even look at most of them." Not enough time, not enough talent.

He and his three hustling assistants, Denny Hinson, Nick Bennett and Chris Highfield, are allowed 140 recruiting man-days during

a school year, in which they can go out on the road, according to NCAA rules, Balza explained. "So if three of us go out one day to see games or players, that counts as three of those man days."

During 14 particularly intense days in July, they visit big basketball camps in regional centers such as Las Vegas or Orlando or Miami, where games take place all day and players are vying for attention from scouts.

The coaches probably see 16 games a day, between teams with 10 players each, so the art of looking and seeing quickly — of spotting something that leads them to make a contact with a student and ask for clips or tape — becomes crucial.

The coaches together might see 2,000 players in a single day in July, from which they'll recruit 50 and hope to sign 5, Balza said.

He explained recruiting and ultimately signing players this way: "If you hurry, you make a mistake. Do you recruit skill or athleticism or bulk size? You're going to get all of that. The things you can see on film show you the skill level. What you can't see is how hard they practice, how quick they really are, whether they're back-to-the-basket guys or face-up guys. You can't really see their free throw ability."

And maybe most important of all, you can't see if they're players who think they know everything already, or if they're players who recognize that somebody else, somebody like Dave Balza, might be able to teach them something.

"A lot of times, the kids most willing to learn, and willing to work the hardest, are the ones who go farthest, even if they don't have the most pure athletic ability," Balza noted.

Like himself. Since he never played college or pro ball, and he's a balding, 5-foot 11-inch white man with thick glasses who probably can't jump, how does he compensate for his small size, or for that matter coach a great team?

"You yell really loud," he replied with an authoritative grin. Then he named a number of winning coaches who had never been college or pro players, either.

"Sometimes the greatest economists are not necessarily millionaires, either," he said.

His players appear to confirm the notion that he is, indeed, a capable coach — for a variety of reasons.

One of his most promising recruits, a freshman from Tampa/St. Petersburg who is red-shirted this year, Edward Rolax, cited both Balza's solid knowledge of the basics, and his familial charisma.

"I thought a lot about whether to come here, and I decided I wanted something new, to be part of something new," he said.

"And coach is like family. My mom passed last year, and coach came to the funeral, and to be with us.

"And he knows a lot about the basics of basketball, plus he does a great job breaking down other teams."

Balza's definition of not hurrying and not making mistakes may be Rolax, a self-described small forward who probably needed a year to get used to a college environment and the changes in his own life, before getting into the high pressure environment of practice, play and study.

"Sure, if I played him now, and then red-shirted him his fifth year if he hadn't finished his degree, then we might have won three or four more games this season, who knows," Balza theorized. (The NCAA allows a player five years as a team member, four of them game-eligible, and one red-shirted.)

"But Ed needed to get used to it this year, and besides, now he's going to have four good years with us, and he'll be playing that fifth year."

Another prized recruit, Roman Narmbaye, an African player who hails from Chad and gives the team some muscle on the boards plus exceptional athleticism, put it this way:

"First, he is a good man. A GOOD man. And second, he knows the game better than anybody. He is very smart."

Smart enough to look for players who want to win, but who know it probably won't happen until the team can gain some Division I momentum. Which means he has to convince them that making that happen — creating something entirely novel — is both a joy and a privilege.

"When you're recruiting, you always want to have a tag line," said Balza.

"Ours is, 'Be part of history.'" ■