

Ringo: Phil DiStefano needs to be part of his own plan

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We probably won't know for several years if hiring Rick George as athletic director was the right move for the University of Colorado, but Chancellor Phil DiStefano deserves credit for being bold enough to give it a try.

President Bruce Benson might also deserve some credit but I'll stop short of giving it to him since he has always been so consistent in insisting that he doesn't micromanage these types of decisions on campus. He says he trusts the people who work for him to make these choices.

We were told back in May that the decision to fire Mike Bohn was made by DiStefano. It only makes sense then that we give DiStefano the pat on the back here.

Mr. Benson can't have it both ways.

There has been a lot of carping by CU fans over the past year about the lack of leadership on campus. Whether it was the eternity CU faithful had to wait for an announcement about plans for facilities upgrades or the embarrassing press conference that followed the firing of football coach Jon Embree. (Yes, that was organized at the campus level).

Whether you agreed with the decision to fire Bohn or not, DiStefano seems to have rebounded to demonstrate that, yes, he does want the athletic department to compete for Pac-12 and national titles and he has a plan for helping the department do so.

He said in May that he wants the athletic department to function more like a business. I still question whether that's a realistic goal given the bureaucracy that is inherent in a higher education environment, but I guess we'll find out in the coming months.

It didn't look like DiStefano had much interest in running the department like a business when it took a month just to get a search committee in place to find George. But DiStefano rebounded from that as well by taking decisive action to hire George once it became obvious he didn't have any other candidates with a resume to compete with George.

He is the kind of candidate DiStefano had to have. He couldn't oust the most successful fundraiser in the athletic department's history and replace him with a ho-hum administrator who has spent years in higher education. He had to break new ground and he's done that by hiring George.

What makes the hire so interesting and groundbreaking for CU is that the school has never before had an athletic director with a background leading big business.

Bohn built his career in college athletics. Dick Tharp was an attorney first and foremost. Bill Marolt and Eddie Crowder were both successful coaches before moving into the athletic director job.

You have to think a guy like George is going to bring a different perspective and some fresh ideas to the job after years running pro golf tours and playing a key role in one of the most successful Major League Baseball franchises in recent years.

I asked George this week who he can bring under the CU athletics umbrella that the school hasn't been able to build a relationship with previously.

"I don't know, but we're going to find out," he said.

I had heard in recent years that the school and the president's office were reluctant to allow the athletic department to approach some of its biggest boosters for donations.

DiStefano, who said he could only speak for himself, told me he has never prevented Bohn or any other athletics fundraiser from trying to build relationships and earn donations from donors who have given to academic endeavors on campus and George also has a green light.

DiStefano also didn't allow the cost of hiring George to scare him away. He made him the highest paid administrator in CU history.

It has taken awhile for him and others at the school to get here, but it appears they finally have realized that competing at the highest level requires paying competitive salaries to the coaches and administrators leading the way.

But DiStefano's job isn't done here. He can't simply pass this off to George and check back a year or two from now. And he certainly can't reverse course on some of the progress that has been made in the past eight years in terms of the way the school and athletic department work together.

Remember eight years ago, the athletic department received just four percent of its funding in the form of institutional support. That number grew substantially with Bohn working hard to forge partnerships and workarounds with others on campus.

DiStefano understandably wants the department to eventually stand on its own. The school has plenty of its own financial challenges, but he and others need to be patient with trimming the institutional support.

George is going to need some time to be the miracle worker DiStefano thinks he is.

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