



UIS hires Evansville assistant as men's hoops coach

By **MARCIA MARTINEZ** (marcia.martinez@sj-r.com)

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The start of college basketball practice is a little more than a month away, and the University of Illinois Springfield finally has a coach for its men's team.

Ben Wierzba was introduced as coach Thursday. The 33-year-old first-time head coach comes to UIS from the University of Evansville, where he was an NCAA Division I assistant.

Wierzba is UIS' second coach in program history. He replaces Kevin Gamble, who resigned to become director of player development at Division I Providence College.

The transition should be made easier since he has strong ties to the Great Lakes Valley Conference and central Illinois.

"I've been in their shoes," Wierzba said. "When I was at South Alabama, coach (Bill) Musselman left 10 days before practice started. Now, they're going through it three weeks into school.

"I know what they're going through. The biggest thing is building a relationship with these players. We'll gradually build toward Oct. 15, that first day of practice."

Hoops family

Wierzba grew up in Farmington, just west of Peoria, and was literally born into a basketball household. His father, former Farmington High School coach Tom Wierzba, was head coach at Greenview High School at the time of Ben's birth in the 1970s.

Ben Wierzba was chosen from a field of 102 candidates, which included four finalists. There was something that set Wierzba apart from some of the other candidates, according to UIS athletic director Rodger Jehlicka.

"He has been involved with all facets of coaching," Jehlicka said. "Everything from fundraising to camps to speaking to civic groups. He has done it all. Some of the other candidates have been assistants for a number of years, but hadn't had all those experiences. Ben was just the most well rounded. We felt he was the most ready to be our next head men's basketball coach.

"He knows a lot of the high school coaches in Illinois. A lot of the high school coaches know the name Wierzba because of his father and Ben's excellence as a high school player in Illinois."

Wierzba's father, who retired in 2009, earned more than 600 coaching victories with stints at Greenview, Bushnell-Prairie City, Jerseyville and Farmington, where he spent 2½ decades.

Ben's brother, Rhet Wierzba, is an assistant women's basketball coach at Mercer University in Georgia. Rhet previously was director of operations for the University of Maryland women's basketball program and the University of Evansville men's basketball team.

Tom, Ben and Rhet are all members of the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame.

Ben's playing career took him from Farmington, where he was the Peoria Journal Star Class A Basketball Player of the Year in

1995, to Lake Land College, South Alabama and Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville.

Familiar league

Wierzba comes to the GLVC with lots of knowledge of the conference. He was an assistant at a pair of GLVC schools, Lewis University and St. Joseph's, and at SIU-Edwardsville, a former member of the GLVC. He also was on the staff at the University of North Dakota and Army.

"He has been at a couple of different (GLVC) schools," Evansville head coach Marty Simmons said. "He competed in the league. He has knowledge of the league and the type of player that needs to be recruited. He has networked very well to where he has good contacts. I think that is going to benefit him. He has recruited Illinois and Indiana. He has recruited all over the United States.

"The players (at Evansville) liked his passion to be accessible at all times and his willingness to help them whether it was on the court or off the court. Nobody is going to outwork him."

Wierzba met with his players late Thursday night. He officially starts Monday.

UIS has been without a coach since June. Jeremy Herring, who was an assistant under Gamble, oversaw the program during that stretch. Herring will remain on staff, whereas Gamble's other assistant, Aaron Boettcher, has left the program to work full time in admissions.

Herring, who has conducted individual workouts with players in the last couple weeks, spent Thursday bringing Wierzba up to speed. UIS returns five players from the 2009-10 that compiled an 11-13 overall record and 7-11 GLVC mark in its first season competing in NCAA Division II.

Marcia Martinez can be reached at 788-1547.