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Roster of grievances about UIS athletics is long

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The University of Illinois Springfield made a really nice hire last week when it tabbed Ben Wierzba to be its new men's basketball coach.

Wierzba played for a coaching legend at Farmington High School, a man named Tom Wierzba, who happens to be Ben's father. Ben Wierzba played at South Alabama for the late Bill Musselman, a coaching legend in his own right. Wierzba also played for and worked with Marty Simmons, and he was an assistant to Jim Crews at Army. There's a whole lot of pedigrees in that mix.

We wish Wierzba luck and success. But we hope he has an easier time getting a copy of exactly who plays on the UIS men's basketball team than we at The State Journal-Register have had getting our hands on the roster.

Marcia Martinez from the SJ-R staff, whose beat it is to cover UIS athletics, was at the get-together last Thursday when Wierzba was introduced as the head coach.

After interviewing the new coach and athletic director Rodger Jehlicka, Martinez asked Jehlicka if he had a copy of the Prairie Stars' men's basketball roster. Jehlicka referred Martinez to Scott Reed, assistant athletic director in charge of sports information.

When Martinez asked Reed for the information, he said he didn't have a copy of the roster and referred Martinez to an assistant coach. The assistant promised he'd e-mail that information later in the day. Martinez made follow-up calls. We still don't have that list.

How can the top officials in an athletic department not know where to go to find out who plays for their men's basketball team?

More shortcomings

And that's just the tip of the iceberg to some of the things that seem to have fallen through the cracks when it comes to athletics at UIS.

While we understand that the school wanted to make sure it hired the best candidate for the men's basketball job, what took so long? Yes, there were 102 candidates. Certainly, there was red tape to work through and hoops through which to jump.

But The State Journal-Register reported in its June 29 editions that Kevin Gamble was leaving UIS to join Keno Davis' staff at Providence. Gamble had been a lame-duck coach for nearly a month when he got the job at Providence. Was UIS at least making contacts with potential coaching candidates in July?

The fall term at UIS began on Aug. 24, and word was the school hoped to have a coach in place by then. The coach finally was named the third week of classes. That cut into the time Wierzba could work with his new players in NCAA-designed individual workouts.

There have been roster problems in other sports. New men's soccer coach Chad Jones — he got the job in February, replacing Joe Eck — didn't have a roster available when practice began. Jones had been on the job six months by then, yet he contended he was having open tryouts in August?

Most colleges and universities put together media guides with information about team members, the coaching staff and historical data. Publishing costs have forced schools to make media guides available only online. If you go on the UIS website under soccer and click on the media guide icon, you find out you can read about the 2007 or 2008 Prairie Stars, but not the 2010 team. Under men's basketball, the headline proclaims, "The 2007 Prairie Stars Men's Basketball Media Guide is here!" Oh, goody.

If you enter the UIS website "GoPrairieStars.com," you will find no reference to the fact the school has a baseball team that begins play in the spring. A schedule would be nice.

As an aside to our taking UIS to task here, it is worth noting that UIS baseball coach Brian Grunzke was a mainstay at high school baseball games all spring, and his list of recruits shows his hard work has paid off. Grunzke is going to do a great job with the UIS baseball program.

University officials say the website is being updated, and they have given a couple of dates already as to when it will be up and running. It's mid-September, and there has been no update.

Growing pains

Yes, UIS has gone through an upgrade, going from NAIA to NCAA Division II. There are more important matters to tend to than putting together a media guide. We understand that.

UIS wants to become a part of the Springfield sporting community. It has very nice facilities, but it says here the university hasn't done a very good job of marketing its athletic programs. There's one way to get Springfield to come out and watch: free tickets, or at

least reduced-price tickets. That's the cold, hard fact about marketing sports in Springfield. UIS needs to find a way to try it.

Since the school's glory days in men's soccer as Sangamon State University, much of the publicity generated by UIS has been negative. Problems with a former women's golf coach. Sealed records in the departure of coaches in other sports. A horrendous first season, record-wise, in NCAA Division II.

UIS needs something good to happen, but the school has to work harder at getting out the good news. It has to work harder at getting out any kind of news.

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