



UIS guard Farmer on committee that chose new coach Wierzba

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Brandon Farmer was given an inside look at an aspect of college athletics that most players don't get to see, let alone be a part of.

The 5-foot-10 University of Illinois Springfield senior point guard was a part of the search committee whose job it was to help find a replacement for former UIS men's basketball coach Kevin Gamble. Gamble resigned in June to become the director of player development at NCAA Division I Providence College.

"At first I thought, 'Why would they want a player on the committee?' Then it made sense," said Farmer, a former Lincoln High School standout and two-time Central State Eight Conference Player of the Year. "I kind of thought I was just going to be there, but I actually felt they used my opinion a little bit.

"They wanted to hear what I thought as a player, and I think they listened to me a little. I enjoyed picking our new coach and having some kind of say in it from a player's perspective."

As part of the committee, Farmer spent three days studying more than 100 applications. He says from there, they narrowed the list to seven candidates, then three finalists. He was present for interviews and other aspects of the search.

Farmer, the Stars' leading returning scorer (10.3 points per game) and only returning full-time starter, was honored to have participated in the hiring process.

"The (candidates) that had high scores on my charts and the reasons why were very different compared to other people's," he said. "Some people were doing it on if they broke regulations or had a bad reputation and graduation rates. I was interested in where you've been and how long were you there and in what kind of offense and defense you ran and how many games you won."

UIS hired Evansville assistant Ben Wierzba to replace Gamble in September.

Leadership skills

Wierzba was immediately aware of Farmer's leadership.

"Coming in here and having a guy with his work ethic and his leadership abilities, it has been the smooth transition because I could call him in and tell him what we're kind of looking for and he expresses this to the team and gets it through to the team," Wierzba said.

It was Farmer who had his finger on the pulse during the summer when UIS was without a head coach and assistant Jeremy Herring was overseeing the program. Farmer, one of five players back from last season's team, made a point to stay in contact with his teammates.

"I had calls from and called every player who could have returned from last year to see what they were thinking when Kevin resigned for his new job," Farmer said.

Once classes resumed, Farmer organized pick-up games and planned off-the-court activities for all the players.

"The team respects him and they all look up to him," Wierzba said. "They know how hard he has worked."

After college

Serving on the search committee provided Farmer with some real-world experience that should benefit him when he graduates with a business degree next summer.

He has many options for life after college. Farmer might go back to school to obtain a teacher's certificate. Another choice is returning to his family's farm — where they grow corn and beans — to help with the business. Either way, he plans to take up coaching. Farmer figures this is his final season playing organized basketball, so he's excited about the next four months.

He's just as thrilled about the season and sees a lot of possibilities.

"We have 14 players, and 14 of us could play in every game," Farmer said. "One player might start and one might be the backup. The backup might play more one game than the other.

"Our team is almost even down the line in ability, and we've got people who can play any position. There are only two people who are stuck in the post and two who are stuck at guard. It's a good mix. We want to win, and we plan on winning."

The 2009-10 UIS team laid a solid foundation with an 11-13 overall record and a 7-11 Great Lakes Valley Conference mark in the program's first season competing at the Division II level.

"I felt we surprised a lot of people last year, and we're looking better in practice right now than we were last year," Farmer said. "We should be able to compete just as well or maybe even better."

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UIS MEN'S BASKETBALL 2010-2011

COACH: Ben Wierzba (1st season)

2009-10 RECORD: 11-13 (7-11 Great Lakes Valley Conf.)

KEY LOSSES: Guard Richard Oruche (19.8 points per game, 5.8 rebounds per game, 47 3-pointers); Zach Lewis (9.3 points, 28 3-pointers); Justin Sims (9.3 points, 4.4 rebounds); DeAndre Miranda (5.5 rebounds)

2010-11 GLVC PREDICTION: 5th in North Division of GLVC, according to coaches' poll

OVERALL OUTLOOK: New coach Ben Wierzba will unveil his new look team. The Stars have nine newcomers, including Northern Illinois transfers Michael Fakuade and Keith Smith. Five players return, including Steffen Spinks who red-shirted last year due to an injury. Senior point guard Brandon Farmer is the top returning scorer at 10.3 points per game. He's also the only full-time starter who is back. "We've got a lot of different pieces to the puzzle and we can play a lot of different ways," Wierzba said. "We've got depth at every position. We're trying to get up and down the court. The little things are going to make the big things. We've got guys who can really shoot it. We've got 14 guys that are mobile. They can move." Senior returnee Ryan Thornton at 6 feet 7 has the size to play inside but he's most dangerous from behind the 3-point line. He led the Stars with 53 3-pointers.

FRONTCOURT: The Stars lack a true center but have six forwards. Among them are 6-4 sophomore Chigozie Umeadi, the team's third-leading returning scorer, and the 6-7 Fakuade. Chigozie averaged 5.1 points and as a freshman. Fakuade started 15 games at NIU and averaged 3.5 points and 3 rebounds last season.

BACKCOURT: Three key ballhandlers for the Stars are Farmer, who averaged four assists per game last season, Keith Smith and junior Jermaine Love-Roberts. "Keith gets up and down the court and can guard the basketball," Wierzba said. "Jermaine Love went to Southern Illinois University-Carbondale on a track scholarship, so that kind of speaks for itself." Smith played just 20 minutes for NIU last season. Love-Roberts led Prairie State College in scoring at 18.3 points.

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