



The Oregonian

No doubt who's running the show

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Canzano:

UO sells out in exchange for new arena

Apparently, Phil Knight wasn't interested, so Wednesday the job of director of athletics at the University of Oregon fell to another majority shareholder.

Pat Kilkenny -- an insurance mogul, not a sneaker mogul -- is the Ducks' new boss man, and you're forgiven if your reaction was, "Wow, a big fan with a bunch of money just became the AD." Because that's pretty much what happened.

Kilkenny is a pleasant enough man, but he has no experience working in a college athletic department. He has never negotiated a television contract. He's never hired or fired a coach, or scheduled a football or basketball game. In fact, until 24 hours ago Kilkenny, who grew up in a small town in Eastern Oregon, might have been best characterized as a wealthy insurance-company founder and ultra-involved Ducks season-ticket holder/booster.

Today though, Kilkenny probably is huddling in some warm corner of his new digs with Knight and a couple others from the booster crew circled around. Maybe they're rubbing their hands together and saying, wide-eyed, "Goody, goody. Now, how many luxury suites do we want in our new basketball arena?"

I suppose the upside here is that the university has finally abandoned any pretense about who is running the institution, and whether a public place of learning was for sale. Transparency is healthy. But like a friend said after hearing about Kilkenny: "This whole thing would have made a pretty good joke if it had been a joke."

Kilkenny is wealthy enough to do the job pro bono, which I suppose helps during an era of cutbacks in the athletic department. And there's no debating that he's a proven business leader who cares deeply about the Ducks. Also, Kilkenny is so tightly linked with Mark Few that he flew the Gonzaga men's basketball coach to Eugene two seasons ago for a Oregon football game. It's logical, then, that Few might someday open the booster's new basketball arena.

Still, this hiring smacks of a small-town mentality for a university that badly needed a dose of big-city thinking. University President Dave Frohnmayer decided to turn the operation into Sugar Daddy U instead of seeking a legitimate, qualified candidate with a grand vision and fresh ideas.

Oh heavens, what will those wild and crazy booster cats do now that they're holding the keys to the place? Offer up naming rights for the parking lot to their buddies? Hold a silent auction for locker room football passes during a Duck Club fundraiser? Put a giant Swoosh on the front lawn?

Well, at least it's transparent.

Of course, this booster-to-boss news is going to be greeted with vigor and enthusiasm from windbag donors across the college landscape. Those smarmy white-collar booster luncheons during football season are going to bubble with talk about how, in a couple of short, rip-roaring months, you too, can rise from rubbing the game ball, buying raffle tickets and dining on rice pilaf at the weekly football luncheon to the coveted position of Grand Poohbah.

It was Kilkenny who helped personally "retire" incumbent athletic director Bill Moos with a reported \$2 million shove to the family cattle ranch a couple of months ago. Now, he's got the big desk to himself. To Kilkenny,

we say, "Try not to burn the place down." To Frohnmayer we say, "Hope you know what you're doing." And to each other we should say, "Whew, good thing Kilkenny didn't want my job or yours."

In recent weeks, the hiring announcement was guarded on campus like the deepest company secret. Early Wednesday morning, the whisper coming from inside the athletic department was that the hiring announcement would be "eye opening."

Um, more like "eye rolling."

The standard response when people on the street learned that a major donor had become the head of Oregon's athletic department, was, "Come on, are you serious?!?" Then, it was, "For real?!?" Then, it was, "Man. That's really weird."

Welcome to the inexplicable, bewildering universe that is the campus in Eugene. Abandon the straitjacket of logic. Think in infinite terms. Stop looking for fully-satisfying, rational explanations .

Right about now, you're probably ready to rename the Casanova Center, "The Theater of Absurd."

The athletic department has officially sold its roots. In exchange for selling out, Knight sticks around, and a new basketball arena will be built. Kilkenny will then pass his new job off in two years or so to someone more qualified to do it -- probably Oregon track and field director Vin Lananna, another Knight ally.

If you're a Ducks fan, don't kid yourself, you knew who was calling the shots. Still, the waters are choppy, and Oregon just hired a man with no proof of buoyancy. It amounts to risky business.

Kilkenny is a businessman. He might be qualified to run a department with a \$40 million annual budget, but what's he going to say when one of his coaches flops down the stretch of a season? Or when a coach fails to show up with enthusiasm or a game plan for a bowl game? And what's he going to say when one of his coaches gets desperate and recruits an athlete with questionable character and a criminal record?

The new guy starts today. He'll spend the next two years attempting to prove he deserves the job. And Moos will spend it attempting to keep from falling down in his cattle-ranch barn, laughing so hard that he ends up kicking his boots at the rafters.

By the way, the new guy probably didn't consider this before he accepted the gig, but as part of the job he gets the pleasure of dealing with quirky big-dollar boosters. Kilkenny gets to rub elbows with a group plagued with unrealistic expectations, delusions of grandeur and a skewed sense of entitlement. Also, Kilkenny will be told by his boss, "Your job is to keep 'em happy."

The lucky dog.

John Canzano: 503-294-5065; JohnCanzano@aol.com; to read his blog, go to <http://johncanzano.blogs.oregonlive.com>