

'Shocked' Sloop talks about dismissal

INTERVIEW BY JOE BARKER
Sports Editor

Former women's basketball head coach John Sloop talked with the Index about his recent dismissal from the University. The complete transcript of the interview follows.

Index: How and when did you find out?

John Sloop: I found out a week ago [Monday] at 2 o'clock. I received an e-mail from our athletic director that morning requesting to meet with me. I scheduled the earliest possible time that he had available, which was 2 o'clock. He told me at that meeting.

Index: Did you have any idea going into that meeting that that's what the meeting was about?

John Sloop: No. **Index: What was the meeting like? Was it a long meeting?**

John Sloop: No, it was pretty short. He basically said that when they hired me eight years ago they were excited about the direction of where the program was, going. After eight years they weren't as excited or whatever in terms of where the program was and so they weren't going to renew my contract. At that point I said OK and started to leave. He then said he wanted to discuss a couple more things with me. He gave me the opportunity to resign and I declined that opportunity. And then I think he mentioned that coach Fauser's job would be determined by whoever the next head coach was.

Index: What was your initial reaction to the news?

John Sloop: I was shocked and disappointed. When I was brought here 13 years ago — when coach [Jack] Schrader interviewed me to be his assistant men's coach and then when he put me up for it and I went through the interview process with our athletic director Walt Ryle at the time and with our president Jack Magruder at the time — they both specifically said, you know, this is a highly selective institution. We expect you to recruit the same students that the rest of the University, under the same guidelines of the state-mandated highly selective, that the rest of the student body is. We understand that that makes your job very difficult. You're not evaluated — you're not going to be evaluated on wins and losses. And so, and they both specifically said it to me in separate interviews. Eight years ago when the current administration came to me — when the current athletic director came and asked, through coach Schrader, if I would be interested in being the women's head coach, when we got to the point of meeting with President [Jack] Magruder again, the athletic director, President Magruder and myself — sitting in President Magruder's office, he emphasized exactly the same thing again: Not dependent on wins and losses because we want you to recruit the people — the same people here, the same things he had hammered before, that the high selective, the retention, run a clean program. And don't — I guess they had a coach previous to my being here that in terms would yell — who, I guess people hadn't viewed as treating the kids very well. And so for 13 years, I had done everything that I had been asked to do. And then to be dismissed for what I was specifically told twice when I had interviewed for the job both times, that — like I said, it was shocking and disappointing. I have — I have no — I have no illusions. Coaches in sports at all kinds of levels, usually one of the requirements is the success of the program. So when you take a job, and not only take a job but then take another job at the same university, when they come ask you and then turn down other opportunities and don't pursue other opportunities because you [were] specifically told by the CEO of the university in front of the athletic director that this is not a criteria for you to lose your job, and then you lose your job based on that criteria, I don't know how else you react. Like I said, it was extremely disappointing for me. For 13 years, I've trusted the people I work for. In a way, I feel like I just had the rug pulled out from under me.

Index: A lot of the other women's programs have had levels of success — the women's swim team is a seven-time national champion, etc., etc. — did you, were you at any point

told that you need to step up your success, that you need to start winning?

John Sloop: No. No, I was never told that. It's not just women's sports — with the men's basketball program in '99 that I was a part of and other men's programs here, there has been success too. Right around that time in '99 when Walt [Ryle] and Dr. Magruder — when we were doing things in terms of recruiting student athletes that the University mandated just like everybody else — was probably the time that we had our most success. You know, [we had the] most support throughout the University and, I don't think by any coincidence, success. But you mention women's swimming. You can't compare — it's very difficult to compare men's and women's anything, but it's extremely difficult to compare different sports here. Some sports — in women's basketball we probably have eight, nine, 10 times as many schools at the Div. II level as they do in swimming. You're competing in a pool of the high 200s, maybe 300 as opposed to, I don't know, somewhere to 30 to 40 in terms of women's swimming. I think what women's swimming has done is absolutely astounding, and it's great. But you're looking at two completely different sports and different — they are not an MIAA sport. The MIAA is one of, if not the, toughest Div. II leagues in the country. And while I guess our MIAA record was cited — and while our record isn't what I wanted it to be during my time, we've still been competitive. And again, I go back to citing what I was asked to do, who I was asked to recruit, the guidelines that I was asked to follow.

Index: The athletic director gave me the mission statement, and it says to get good students and to be competitive at the Div. II level. Your team's record, as you said, was not the best. How do you justify staying on board when you don't win 75 percent of your conference games?

John Sloop: I'm not trying to justify anything. What I'm telling you — I've been asked to be interviewed by everybody that's covered us. I haven't sought out any of these interviews, and I've answered the questions that I've been asked. I have not, in any way, tried to get my job back. So I'm not trying to justify — I'm just answering the questions that I've been asked and telling my story. And I would think my only really — my real thing that really disappoints me about this whole thing — you're asked to do a certain thing for 13 years and you're never told anything different by the head of your university, and then you're let go for the exact thing that you were told you were not going to be evaluated on.

Index: Do you think this sends a message to other programs in the University that winning is going to be something that the emphasis will be put on?

John Sloop: What I think you've seen is the public illumination of change that has been going on behind the scenes for a couple of years. I know there are a lot of coaches that are scared. I can't tell you how many coaches who have said, "Oh my gosh, if you're gone, I'm next." They're scared. Most, if not all of them — most of them came here, head coaches, during the time that I was hired, the first or the second time. And so I would assume they were told the same thing if they were hired by Jack Magruder. I don't know since Dr. Dixon has been here what exactly they've told them. You've got a lot of scared coaches out there. Like I said, it brings to light what has been going on behind the scenes in terms of some stuff in the last couple of years. You know, that things are changing. I think that everybody, myself included, would have appreciated a heads-up. As much as I love this university and love the community and enjoyed the 13 years that I've been here — if you would have told me at any point that that was the case, I would probably would have had a hard time staying for very long, and I think a lot of coaches would, because the circumstances under which you have to recruit make it extremely difficult, especially in certain sports, to consistently have success. Is it possible? Absolutely. That's what we were striving for every day. We were

trying to prepare and win every game and put the best possible program forward. But it's — with everything you have to fight here in terms of — and especially the reduced pool of student athletes you have to choose from because of our highly selective mission. That, as much as anything, makes it extremely difficult. In '99, when we went to the Final Four, up until I came here, all of my college experience had been at the Div. I level. All my friends, especially at that level, were saying, "You're as hot as you'll ever be, you've got to get out of here, because it is a difficult job." But I had the reliance of what my president and athletic director had told me and I bought into the entire University culture, recruiting, and then we had success with the true Truman student athlete. There was never a thing where you had to worry at that time about kids walking across campus and looking at an athlete, someone wearing a leather jacket and saying, "Well, you know, they're just here because they're an athlete," because I think everybody knew through that time that we were doing exactly the same thing as everyone else that was here. And you know, I've seen that change over the last couple of years.

Index: Isn't it a little bit you being naïve to think that you're not going to be judged on your wins and losses even though you were assured that that wasn't the case? As a coach, your job is to win games.

John Sloop: OK, my job is to do — is to do what any employee's job is to do. And that's to do what your boss communicates to you what your job is. That's — I said earlier in this interview that I'm not naïve to the fact that in the vast majority of situations, coaches are hired and fired based on wins and losses. But when you're specifically told both times you are hired here that that is not the criteria, and you're never told anything any differently, to then be fired and that is cited as the reason why — I guess it's a question of trust. I don't think it's me being naïve at all. I've been in this business too long. I've seen what's happened to too many people and too many friends of mine. But the biggest part of me staying and being loyal to Truman for 13 years was the loyalty that Truman had, and I thought for the whole time I was here, apparently not, had to me. At some point in the last eight years, that changed and nobody communicated that to me, to us.

Index: If you had to do it all over again, would you have done anything differently? Would you have spoken up — you've said you felt this change coming — would you have spoken up and asked —

John Sloop: No, change throughout the University has come over the last couple of years. The last couple of years, yeah, probably in terms of how I addressed [the] entire University situation, because I would say over my first 11 years here that I was an outspoken member of the department in terms of things that I thought benefited the student athlete and the University as a whole in support of the mission that we had. The last couple of years, the last couple of those 11 years, you felt like you were beating your head against a wall. Nobody was listening — and it's not just me — nobody was listening. Change, especially for those who have been here a long time, we were sliding away from the ideal — what we had been and what we had great success in being. And so, the last couple of years, you know, I've done the things — I've really concentrated on things I really enjoy: coaching our team, recruiting good kids, teaching my classes and enjoying the people that I worked with. If I would do one thing, I would do that. Had I known, now had you told me at any point, had you come to me and said, "Look, we're changing. This is now going to be, the wins and losses part, is going to be like it is at a lot of places," I would have said OK. And I would've continued to work to recruit and get better. I would've determined what the academic standards, what kids that I could get into school here and recruit with. And, to be honest, I would have started looking for other jobs. Because as much as I love this place, particularly in the jobs that I've been in here, it's extremely difficult if you're going to follow



Joe Barker/Index

John Sloop watches a women's basketball game this season. After eight seasons on the bench for the women, Sloop was told he will not be offered a contract for the 2008-09 season.

the highly selective mission of the University to be successful. Because basketball is one of those — basketball is one [of] those sports where it's one of, if not the, highest participation in terms of sports for kids in the United States in high school that are going through college. When you've got that great group of diversity and your pool of talent to recruit from is really small, it makes it really difficult for you compared to the universities that we are competing against. And you look at the other universities in our league in terms of who we're competing against: One of them is an open-enrollment institution, and pretty much the rest of them, if they've got an athlete that they want to be a part of their program, they will get into their school. That's not a problem. For us, it was never that way here.

Index: Have you gotten a chance to talk with your players about anything, have you gauged their reaction?

John Sloop: I called the kids that were coming back that afternoon because I felt they needed to know, and I wanted them to know from me. What I did was, I informed them of the decision the University had made. I thanked them for their effort for the past however many years that they have been here. I thanked them. I really enjoyed getting to know them as a player, and I really felt I developed a friendship on different levels with all of those kids, as you do with everyone that you have in your program. I wish them the best of luck, and I told them that if there was ever anything they needed from me, they could contact me at any time, because what they had given us in the amount of time they had been here, had — their loyalty to me in terms of showing up and working hard every day and doing what we asked. As a coach, that's something that's invaluable to a coach. And, when you are done, I at least feel like you owe those people a lot in terms of what you can do for them in life. Help them get jobs, whatever.

Index: Do you have anything you want to add, any final thoughts?

John Sloop: My only final thought is — I've done a few interviews now, this probably being the last one — is, I think as a university you have to decide — like you would in any business or anything — you have got to decide who you are and who you're going to be. I've had a tremendous outpouring of support throughout the entire — I mean through the community but throughout all aspects of campus. I've had people I haven't even met before in terms of being extremely kind and sympathetic to my situation. I think a lot of people are scared and a lot of people are nervous in terms of the direction — and not sure what the direction of the University is in terms of, are we highly selective? Are we going

to now use the non-cognitive variables that kids that don't meet the 140 combined ability requirement? Is athletics going to be enough of a non-cognitive variable, just your skill as an athlete, that no matter how far below you are that 140, you get into school? There have always been kids below that 140 level that have gotten into school here, but it was a pretty — it was within a pretty tight range in terms of kids I've ever seen getting in in terms of school here. I've had a lot of people express to me that they have no idea — is this still the mission of the University? What is the mission of the University? What is the direction of the University? I know the University feels challenged in terms of their ability to recruit students — to keep enrollment up. The increase in the number of kids that are going to start graduating here from high school in the next few years because of, I don't know, baby boom or whatever — exactly what we're going through there and trying to attract people. Somebody mentioned that the University spent another however many hundreds of thousands of dollars on another study in terms of what can do it. And I know they've talked about athletics being the front porch. Well, I've had this discussion with a professor. Yes, athletics can be a front porch in terms of putting a good face on your university — how your student athletes represent themselves. The success can also be there.

If a kid in St. Louis, Mo., is going to choose a school based on their athletics program, they're not looking to go Div. II. That's not their primary focus. There are other ways to attack the problem that we haven't discussed. At the beginning of the year we played Central Christian College in a game down there in

Moberly and I got a chance to talk to them. That school was in trouble in terms of kids. And in the last five years, they've tripled enrollment. What they did, they eliminated tuition. Now there's different things — they based off the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and I didn't get into details with them, but I've expressed it up the line to a couple of people in terms of why aren't we looking — you know, when we went to highly selective in the '80s, it was because the school was having a real problem attracting students and that was a niche. Now, Miz-zou and a lot of schools have become more competitive for that student that Truman was able to attract when they first did it. Well, now you've got to find another niche. Well, lowering those standards — you may put a temporary Band-Aid on it, but you're not only not addressing the problem, you've opened up the dike and here comes the flood. While you may initially get some of those kids, then the highly selective status is no longer there, the luster is off and

now you start losing some of those kids that would have come here because of the academic reputation. And so where do you go from there? You've got to look at other sides of the problem in terms of that. Or, if you don't want to be highly selective anymore, say that. You know, state that publicly. Get the charter changed — whatever. Just state that. Be who you're going to be. Like I said, from my standpoint, we've seen it the last couple of years, in terms of one particular meeting that we had in athletics. The football coach, the men's basketball coach, myself, the athletic director, John Fraire, who was the VP of admissions at the time, another someone from the admissions department, and discussing those non-cognitive variables in athletics. So I think that's the way the school is going, and if it is, it's a disappointment to me. Because I think this was the ideal. While everyone else was the Div. Is and everything — you're going to look here at the tournament in the next couple of weeks at these great schools, these great academic schools, but they let kids [in] that would have otherwise no business getting into school because of their athletics. Is that who we're going to be? And for most of my 13 years, that's not who [we] were. We not only lived up to the ideal, we espoused that. And we were proud of it. And now, it looks like we were just trying to put a Band-Aid on a problem that's not going away.

Index: Last question before I let you go, what's next for you?

John Sloop: You know, I'm going to look at all my opportunities both outside and within athletics. I'm going to turn 40 this summer, and this is an all-consuming business. It is not a 9-to-5 job. It's not a basketball season's over, time-off deal. I mean, I was recruiting — our season was done Saturday. I got home Saturday night and actually caught the replay of the Missouri State [class] five tournament game. I was watching that game. I was going to be on the road now, doing a lot of recruiting stuff, trying to get our kids who were here ready for next year. You get a little time between when school's out and June 15 in terms of when you can't go out and recruit, but then you've got to go to recruiting again. It's nights, it's weekends, it's basically year-round. You miss a lot [of] holidays, or you're working through those holidays. And for our kids, we made it a point to allow them to go home on Thanksgiving for a couple of days and Christmas for a week to have a little bit of balance to their life. So I'm going to look at all my opportunities because it's not conducive to families. My mom's in remission from cancer that she's battled for the last couple of years. I guess if I could — maybe if I found something that I could do where I could spend some a little more time with her, which is extremely difficult, particularly from Oct. 15 until whenever your season is over. Because family is important to me. And, especially with your parents, you don't know how long they will be around.