

Josh Pastner Confidential, Part 1: The art of scheduling

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“Josh Pastner Confidential” is a five-part series offering an unfiltered look at the University of Memphis men’s basketball program via the emails of coach Josh Pastner obtained through a public records request. The newspaper examined more than 2,000 pages of Pastner’s correspondence, and each story focuses on a specific aspect of the program, such as scheduling, recruiting and coaching.

On the afternoon of March 10, 2014, three days before the University of Memphis was trounced on its home floor in the inaugural American Athletic Conference tournament, head coach Josh Pastner entertained an offer from ESPN.

The network, and more specifically Nick Dawson, senior director of programing and acquisitions, dangled the possibility of a home-and-home series between Memphis and Florida that would begin the following season, in 2014-15.

“I would love that game,” Pastner wrote in an email to Dawson, “but concerned that is too much for us.”

Pastner, whose team was already slated to play Wichita State, Baylor, Oklahoma State and Gonzaga in difficult nonconference matchups, promised to broach the opportunity with his staff. “You know I love ya,” he wrote to Dawson, pleased to be considered for another nationally televised game against an opponent with legitimate name recognition.

But then came the kicker — a closing line that offered a glint of insight into Pastner unplugged, the unfiltered zing of coach inside a pressure cooker.

“Question for you though,” Pastner wrote, “if those games don’t go our way, will you pay for my security here in Memphis for the remainder of the season? I will probably need 3 to 4 body guards.”

The electronic discussion with Dawson, which ultimately fell through, was obtained by The Commercial Appeal in a broad public records request for Pastner’s email. This conversation and others, all from 2014, can be pieced together to form a behind-the-scenes look at how Pastner constructs his nonconference schedule. And whether he is consulting with NCAA employees or pondering TV time slots with athletic director Tom Bowen, Pastner, as you might expect, has a hand in it all.

Hands-on approach

The premise for a home-and-home series between Memphis and Florida originated, according to Dawson, after a game at Madison Square Garden on Dec. 17, 2013. That night, with a primetime television audience watching the Jimmy V Classic, No. 16 Florida defeated No. 15 Memphis, 77-75, in a game where both teams shot better than 47 percent from the floor.

It was, as Dawson told the newspaper, “an attractive game.”

During his time at ESPN, Dawson said the network has typically created five or fewer nonconference matchups per year, with the majority of time devoted to filling slots in various neutral-site tournaments, like the Jimmy V Classic. But the memory of that 2013 game, combined with Pastner’s persistence and professionalism when communicating with ESPN, set in motion the idea to involve Memphis in a new home-and-home pairing with Florida, according to Dawson.

Discussions between networks and schools vary depending on who the athletic department uses as its scheduling conduit. Some head coaches are extremely involved; others prefer not to be bothered until a final decision must be made, delegating the intermediate dialogue to an assistant coach or another member of the athletic department.

Pastner, according to Dawson, is on the “upper end of sort of hands-on,” meaning he is very accessible. Conversations with Memphis are streamlined, Dawson said, because he is able to pick up the phone and call Pastner directly, thus avoiding the red tape and misunderstandings of a lengthy chain of command.

“It’s refreshing for me,” Dawson said. “I don’t get that a ton of places.”

Though Pastner often prefers to handle the network interaction himself, scheduling conversations almost always included former deputy athletic director Wren Baker and director of operations Eric Sebastian. Documents show that Bowen chimed in on topics like game times and TV lineup placement.

“I believe this is a good thing ...” Bowen wrote when asked about a nationally televised game against Oklahoma that will be played in November, “and a fantastic national moment for our program.”

Dawson’s pitch to Pastner in regard to the Florida series targeted Memphis’ strength of schedule in the wake of Louisville’s departure for the Atlantic Coast Conference. Playing Florida in the nonconference, Dawson wrote to Pastner, would “balance against what should be a slightly lighter conference schedule.”

But with a home-and-home against Ole Miss beginning the following season and a young team that lacked experienced guards, Pastner demurred. He offered to accept a home-and-home with Florida, but only if a game against Gonzaga was moved to the following season. Then he offered to play both Florida and Gonzaga, but only if Dawson could extricate Memphis from the neutral-site tournament in Las Vegas.

The discussions crumbled.

Greg Procino, like Dawson, has grown accustomed to the fragility of nonconference scheduling. As the director of events and awards for the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, Procino worked with Pastner and Sebastian to secure a date with Ohio State as a headlining act for the Basketball Hall of Fame Invitational. The event grants Memphis multiple home games against mid-major opponents, followed by an appealing neutral-site matchup with Ohio State on Nov. 27 in Miami.

Emails show discussions between Procino and the U of M began prior to March 25, 2014, and continued through at least November of 2014. Even then, Sebastian had reservations about playing multiple teams from the Southwestern Athletic Conference in the same season.

“This,” Procino told the newspaper, “has been a couple of years’ worth of work to get Memphis and Ohio State and then the other three teams committed.”

Asking the NCAA

At 2:37 p.m. on June 25, 2014, Pastner clicked send on an email designed to gather advice as he put finishing touches on his schedule for the upcoming season. He copied the text from the email, pasted it into a new message and sent a second copy into cyberspace, four minutes after the first.

“What are your thoughts below on our schedule and the one additional game we need to have,” Pastner wrote in both messages. “Would love to get your input”

The body of the message contained a simple outline of the Tigers’ non-conference opponents that were already secured for the 2014-15 season, a campaign still six months away. He divided the schedule into four categories based on RPI values from the previous year, with better teams like Wichita State (RPI of 4) and Gonzaga (20) at the top, and inferior schools like Western Illinois (290) and Prairie View A&M (304) at the bottom.

Then he typed out a question: “Do you think it would hurt us if we added a 300+ (RPI) opponent for the last game or do you think this is strong enough that it shouldn’t matter?”

The recipients of the email were two NCAA employees.

In perhaps his most unique scheduling tactic, Pastner sought the input of both Dan Gavitt, vice president of men’s basketball championships, and Gary Johnson, an associate director of media coordination and statistics, about the final nonconference opening on last year’s schedule. His fear, according to the emails, was suffering the same fate as Southern Methodist the season prior, a 23-win team in the regular season whose nonconference schedule was so weak as to be shunted to the National Invitation Tournament.

Pastner told the newspaper he sends emails like this frequently, and in addition to Gavitt and Johnson he seeks the input of the head of the selection committee every year, along with several other committee members.

“I’ve always felt that getting as much feedback from the people who are making the decision (is beneficial),” Pastner said.

Gavitt, whose father Dave was the primary founder and first commissioner of the Big East in 1979, wrote back the following morning. He offered little in the way of specific insight but informed Pastner that his schedule looked “solid,” adding that he didn’t “want to go too far to advise you what to do with that last game.”

Johnson, though, replied with a detailed response reminding Pastner that won-lost record is a heavily weighted component of strength of schedule (SOS), which is calculated using two-thirds opponents’ winning percentage and one-third of the opponents’ opponents’ winning percentage. In other words, playing a team with a terrific overall record can strongly influence SOS.

“Rather than concentrating on RPI,” Johnson wrote to Pastner, “look at possible won-lost records.”

Johnson suggested that Pastner schedule the “best teams from one-bid or two-bid conferences,” the kinds of teams that rack up a lot of wins but do not qualify as powerhouse opponents. His potential candidates included Vermont, Stony Brook, Mercer, Green Bay, Harvard, Iona, North Carolina Central, Belmont and Murray State, among others.

Johnson’s influence on Pastner revealed itself when the Tigers’ final schedule was released later that summer. High Point, a team which posted a mediocre 16-15 record the year prior, had been removed.

The replacement? North Carolina Central, a team from Johnson’s list, a team with the 102nd-best RPI and far less talent than, say, Florida.

“That’s a better game than going and beating Auburn,” Pastner told the newspaper. “... But would the general public rather see us play Auburn? It’s not an exact science.”