Moser Struggles Through Tough First Season

Porter Moser lingered over Ronald Nored's line as he studied the box score from last month's Butler-Loyola game. The Ramblers coach sounded as if he wanted to kidnap Butler's versatile, tough-minded point guard, or maybe adopt him, as he contemplated Nored's numbers: 16 points, 9 assists, 6 rebounds, 3 steals and 0 turnovers in the Bulldogs' 63-57 victory.

"If I were a guard, I'd take out a notebook and write down what I saw on the tape of this game," Moser said. "Every time there was a play to be made down the stretch, Nored made it, at both ends of the floor. He's the product of a winning culture, and it shows."

Two weeks later, Youngstown State's Kendrick Perry victimized Loyola through different means, but to a similar end. Perry, a cool-breeze sophomore, torched the Ramblers for 28 points with 6 assists in an 80-63 win.

"Perry exposed our lack of quickness," Moser acknowledged. "When we crowded him, he went by us. When we played off him, he shot it over us. We had no answer for him."

No answer for Perry's slick talent — he barely broke a sweat in hitting 11 of 14 shots while going wo where he wanted to go without much resistance. And no answer for Nored's veteran savvy — the heady senior played major minutes for Butler's Final Four teams the last two years and has helped the Bulldogs to 100 victories during his tenure in Indianapolis.

Moser expected a transitional season in his first year at Loyola — the Ramblers were 16-15 in 2010-11 and finished eighth in the 10-team Horizon League. Throw in injuries to the four best players on a talent-challenged roster and it's a nightmare — Loyola is 5-18 over all, 0-13 in the conference and carrying an 11-game losing streak into Saturday's intra-city meeting with Illinois-Chicago.

The Horizon, meanwhile, has attained top-tier status among so-called mid-major conferences — Butler's storied book N.C.A.A. tournament success has prompted its rivals to raise their games, and the league has produced first-round picks in the last two N.B.A. drafts.

Loyola Coach Porter Moser has watched his team spiral into an 11-game losing streak. Right, Loyola's Jordan Hicks fouled Shawn Amiker, Jr.

Perhaps it was the sedate setting — the announced crowd of 1,700 at Loyola's Gentile Center would not have filled a church for morning services — but Moser seemed deflated by the Youngstown State beatdown in a Super Bowl Sunday matinee.

"We had some guys just check out today, and this is the first time I've said that," he said. "We need a group that's committed, that plays with passion and effort. We've shown it in spurts, but we're not getting it from some spots."

Passion, effort and a cold-blooded shooting stroke defined Moser as a player — he walked on at Creighton and wound up starting for two years after a much-decorated prep career at Benet Academy in Lisle.

He was a boy wonder in the coaching world: head man at Arkansas-Little Rock at age 31, then at Illinois State three seasons and 54 victories later.

But an athletic director who hadn't hired him thought the Redbirds should have been better than 51-67 over four seasons. Moser was fired with three years left on his contract.

"It hurt for a long time," he said. "No one likes to be told they've failed at something. In coaching, it's right there in the newspaper, and it goes out across that ESPN ticker to millions of people."

Moser overcame his bitterness by going back to school, as it were. He took a job as Rick Majerus' top assistant at St. Louis University and spent four years absorbing the wisdom of a basketball savant.

"Every day was a learning experience, whether it was game coaching, running practice, recruiting or dealing with players and their academics," Moser said. "I believe everything happens for a reason. Getting fired at Illinois State put me in position to go to work for Rick and become a better coach."

At 43, the trim, youthful-looking Moser is in his 22nd year of college coaching. His experience and his Chicago ties appealed to Dr. M. Grace Calhoun, Loyola's first-year athletic director, when she sought a replacement for Jim Whitesell, who was fired last April after seven so-so seasons.

It could be that its demanding academic standards scare off the top prospects, but save for the occasional David Bailey, Loyola's roster has been mostly bereft of Chicago-area talent since Alfrederick Hughes led the Ramblers to their last N.C.A.A. tournament appearance in 1988.

"Chicago is craving to have a college team step up, and there's no reason it can't be us," Moser said from the road, where he was out recruiting and clearly in better spirits than he'd been in after the Youngstown State drubbing one day earlier. "We're a great university with great facilities and great tradition. Turnarounds don't happen overnight, but I get excited just thinking about what's possible for us. I look forward to coming to work every day, and not many coaches with our record can say that."

Loyola remains the only Illinois school to win the N.C.A.A. tournament, a point made to Sunday's meager crowd by the reading of a City Council resolution urging the Nailsish Basketball Hall of Fame to induct George Ireland, coach of the Ramblers' 1963 national champions.

That's 50 years next season. It only seems longer.