



OAKLAND ATHLETICS: THE SECRET OF SUCCESS

by Greg Kampe

You might expect an article in this publication authored by the men's basketball coach to be propaganda. I promise these words will not be such. I've left the cheerleading uniform in its proper place and sit at the computer only to answer a question posed to me. The question is simplistic. The answer is as subjective and complicated as one's mind will let it be.

I have been asked "WHY?" Why has Oakland University made such a successful jump to Division I athletics in such a short period of time, when the road to major college bliss is littered with universities that have failed? I don't offer a long story shortened here; only perceptions and facts to be analyzed, devoured, and then presented. So, I will present and let you decide.

Oakland University's decision to move to Division I athletics came at a time when the move was vogue. Three hundred and seven universities and colleges competed in Division I athletics at the time Oakland made the decision to move. After Oakland completed its probationary period, the number stood at 318 member institutions. Currently, there are 334 Division I schools. The decision to go D-I was not an easy one. The administration held open forums seeking advice and opinions from many constituencies on campus. After a year of research, Oakland made its decision and took the leap. All OU athletic teams began competing in the 1998–1999 school year.

Last March, Oakland University became a household name in the sports world when an unknown player, Pierre Dukes, made an unforgettable 20-foot jump shot that sent an even more unknown team, Oakland University, to the NCAA men's basketball tournament for the first time. It was a gripping story about an underrated team that the nation's newspapers, radio and television stations told over and over during this team's run in the tournament. From a two-page spread in the *New York Times* to appearances by the coach on national television shows, the media told the story to the entire country.

While this team's stunning and unexpected triumph brought the national spotlight to our athletic program, a close inspection shows the department as a whole prospered at the D-I level from infancy. Since the start of Division I competition in 1998 through December 2005, Oakland has won 41 league championships and made 17 NCAA tournament appearances in Oakland's 14 sports (we now stand at 16 with the addition of men's and women's track this season). These numbers are staggering. Oakland has had numerous all-conference players, conference players of the year, coaches of the year, All-Americans, and a coach named the National Division I Coach of the Year. This year, Oakland placed our first player in the National Basketball Association. Previous years have seen a number of baseball players drafted by Major League Baseball and a men's soccer player drafted by Major League Soccer.

In addition to all of the success on the courts, fields and in the pool, Oakland's athletes exhibit excellence in the classroom. Last year, 69%, or 145 of the 209 student athletes, earned a GPA or 3.0 or higher. On average, 90 athletes annually receive Mid-Continent All-Academic Team honors. Oakland boasts eight Academic All-Americans and six student athletes have been selected by the NCAA to participate in the annual NCAA leadership conference. As impressive as the winning totals are for the teams, these academic numbers really quantify the mission of the athletic department.

OK, perhaps I picked up the pom-poms, but to answer the question why, one needs to know the facts. My first premise

why Oakland has had this unique success lies with the coaching staff. Oakland has long-term coaches in a number of sports. I have been at Oakland University for 22 years. Nationally, there are only eight men's basketball coaches in D-I who have been at their respective school longer than that. I rank third in longevity among the coaching staff at Oakland. Our swim coach, Pete Hovland, and men's soccer coach, Gary Parsons have both been here longer. This is very unusual in the college coaching profession. Most coaches win and seek higher-paying, higher-profile jobs or they lose and get fired. To give you an example of how long I have been at Oakland; during my time here the Detroit Pistons have had nine coaches, the Red Wings eight, the Tigers and the Lions seven coaches each, Central Michigan five basketball coaches, Eastern Michigan, The University of Michigan, Western Michigan and the University of Detroit four basketball coaches each, and Michigan State University two basketball coaches. Because our coaches have been at their jobs so long, they believe in, and in many cases have set the policies for, the mission of the Oakland Athletics department. In simpler terms, the coaches just get it!! They recruit student athletes that fit the profile of what the university wants: talented athletes who want a great education and use their athletic ability as a vehicle to gain their degree. This stability supported a seamless transition from an athletic department functioning successfully in a Division II "under the radar" atmosphere, to navigating a program through the shark-infested waters of Division I.

Next, we have an administration that just gets it!! Our university made the move to Division I for the right reasons. They did not make the move to share in television riches or bowl revenue, but rather to develop a successful athletic program that could become the front porch of the university. Successful Division I athletics enhance student life, promote campus life, increase enrollment and give faculty and students a common pride that is infectious, as witnessed by the rallies and fan support during that incredible run last March. By taking the time to make a proper decision on whether or not to turn D-I, the

administration put a successful game plan together and followed that plan. There have been few surprises down this trail because the obstacles were known and addressed ahead of time. The most important accomplishment the administration made during the entry stage of Division I was to find Conference affiliation. By being a member of the Mid-Continent Conference at Division I birth, the athletes and coaches had the ability to find their niche in recruiting.

Stability—a good plan and a commitment to excellence are the calling card for an infant D-I program to reach high levels of excellence. It will not be easy to maintain, let alone improve on, our early successes. Hopefully, a decade from now I will still be here and the editors of this journal will come back to me and ask for an update. In the meantime, let me pick those pompoms back up and give a hefty cheer to all those athletes, coaches and administrators whose actions have prompted the simple question, “WHY?”