

Welcome To The Dark Side

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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There is a Chinese proverb that says in desperation, a dog will leap over a wall. Over the many decades of its existence, the University of Michigan has attempted to build a certain wall of elitism around its school. Gary Benz says they just jumped that wall with the hiring of Rich Rodriguez ... who is not only an outsider, but is a guy that will always have one eye firmly trained on the next opportunity of a lifetime. Great, great stuff from Gary here.



There is a Chinese proverb that says in desperation, a dog will leap over a wall. Over the many decades of its existence, the University of Michigan has attempted to build a certain wall of elitism around its school, effectively telling everyone in the world that it is a different and better place, academically and otherwise, than say the Ohio States of the world.

Well, that wall not only just got jumped it got torn down and all it took was Michigan selling its soul with the hiring of a coach who couldn't close the deal in a game he needed to win in order to gain a berth in the National Championship game on the line. Rich Rodriguez meet Lloyd Carr.

It's hard to know, of course, how Michigan's hiring of the former West Virginia Mountaineers coach ultimately will play out, though its fun to speculate, given Rodriguez's continued inability to actually win really big games. What isn't so hard to know, of course, is that Michigan fans better get used to two things: their school is no longer an above-it-all institution of higher learning and their football program is now being led by a coach with one eye always firmly trained on the next opportunity of a lifetime.

Former Louisville and Atlanta Falcons coach Bobby Petrino has been getting a tremendous amount of abuse from conveniently high-minded types like former players and ESPN talking heads for supposedly running out on a hapless Atlanta Falcons team and franchise but Rodriguez's similar move in West Virginia has been met with mostly a shrug. Hard to figure, particularly as the facts continue to trickle out about Rodriguez.

Make no mistake about it, Rodriguez is running out on his team in much the same way Petrino ran out on Atlanta. Keep in mind first that the ink on the contract Rodriguez had signed just this past August with West Virginia is barely dry. Second, West Virginia's season isn't over. They have a little matter of a Fiesta Bowl game on January 2nd against Oklahoma before the season is over. Arguably, that game is far more meaningful to West Virginia and its program than the three remaining games that were on the Atlanta Falcons schedule when Petrino abruptly quit.

Maybe Petrino should have stuck around the hopelessness that is Atlanta these days, but no one has yet come up with a plausible reason why Rodriguez shouldn't be similarly criticized or chastised. If Michigan truly wanted Rodriguez, which is somewhat questionable since he was, after all, their third choice, why couldn't they wait until after the Fiesta Bowl?

Actually, there is an answer to that question. It's tied up in the engine that really drives the college football machine these days: recruiting. Rodriguez met with Michigan representatives last Friday in Toledo. By Saturday morning, according to published reports, Rodriguez had made his decision. How do we know that? Well, it appears that one of the first persons told about the decision was not his team, maybe not even his wife. It was Pittsburgh Jeanette high school player, Terrelle Pryor, who just happens to be one of the most highly sought recruits in the nation.

According to a [story](#) in the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, Rodriguez called Pryor Saturday morning, just hours actually after the Toledo meeting, to tell Pryor he was headed to Michigan. Pryor's immediate reaction was to take West Virginia off his list of schools under consideration and to add Michigan to it instead.

Pryor is so highly sought, including by Ohio State, because he runs the spread offense, which just happens to be Rodriguez's specialty and is the current rage in offensive schemes. In fact, while Ohio State is one of Pryor's top choices, along with Oregon, Penn State and Florida, Pryor has openly mused that Ohio State's offensive philosophy may not be the right fit for him.

But now that Rodriguez has taken his act to Michigan, Pryor now has three Big Ten schools on his list. Given how quickly Rodriguez called Pryor with the news, it is fair to ask (though no one seemingly has) what role the potential to land Pryor in Michigan played in Michigan's decision to offer Rodriguez the job. In fact, if Pryor does end up at Michigan, those questions shouldn't just be asked on the internet, the NCAA should actually investigate.

It's doubtful that anyone officially associated with Michigan would actually admit that the chance to lure Pryor to the Wolverines in order to resurrect a program in sore need of resurrection played any role whatsoever. But if anyone officially associated with Michigan denies that Pryor's name ever came up, then the last piece of Michigan's so-called mystique-credibility-will have been forever compromised. Welcome, Wolverines, to the dark side.

Another aspect about Rodriguez's hiring, which not only reflects poorly on Michigan but also tells you a great deal about Rodriguez's ethics, is the little matter of the pesky \$4 million buyout in that flimsy contract he signed last August. According to a [story](#) in the Charleston Daily Mail, it sure seems like Rodriguez is trying to avoid paying the penalty he voluntarily accepted without so much as a gun to his head just eight months ago if he ever quit and went to another school.

No one actually expected Rodriguez to pay the penalty personally. These things are usually handled by a combination of the school and its boosters that lured him away. But \$4 million is actually one of the bigger penalty clauses that you'll see in a contract and neither the University of Michigan nor its boosters seem all that keen on paying an extra \$4 million just to buy their third choice.

Attempting to escape the obligation, Rodriguez has done a couple of things, on the advice undoubtedly of his attorneys. First, he's actually intimated that he's not leaving because of the great opportunity that Michigan supposedly presents but more so because West Virginia wasn't meeting its contractual commitments to him regarding the completion of an academic center and an upgrade to the locker room. In this battle, he's enlisted some alums to spread the word while remaining oh so distant from it personally. Coward.

Apparently, the Mountaineers academic center was completed, just a little later than planned. The locker room upgrade is supposedly on schedule. If this all seems more than a little trivial, just remember the two great adages of most major college coaches these days: Greed know no bounds and no amount of money is too small to quibble over when it's mine. Remember, too, that all this is really just an attempt to

insert leverage into a discussion on how to reduce the \$4 million to, perhaps a more manageable number. In that regard, it's also instructive to remember that this is the same tactic that Michigan and John Beilein used just last year when Beilein, too, bolted the Mountaineers for the sunny shores of Ann Arbor and sought to reduce his \$2.5 million buyout penalty. It worked. He paid only \$1.5 million. Cheapskate.

Second, the effective date of Rodriguez's resignation letter is January 3^r
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. The point here is to try and encourage West Virginia to actually fire Rodriguez before that date, which, too, would avoid Rodriguez having to pay the penalty.

If all this seems just a little underhanded or a little sordid, remember that Michigan could make this all go away by simply paying the penalty in the first place. Of course, they didn't do that in the case of Beilein when the stakes were less, so why would anyone expect anything different here? You may rightly surmise that this is the least that this supposedly stand-up institution could do, but you'd be wrong. Doing the right thing always has its price and, in this case, we now know that at Michigan, it's less than \$4 million.

Eventually, you do reap what you sow and all this will someday come back to revisit Rodriguez and Michigan, and probably at the least opportune time. In the short-term, though, Michigan

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and its fans can go off and celebrate this hiring and all that it will supposedly bring to the program. But as they're drinking themselves giddy, no amount of alcohol can hide the fact that as of now, the only differences between themselves and Arkansas are geography and conference affiliation. And when their heads eventually clear, maybe then they'll awake to the reality of the permanent damage they've done to the school and its reputation.