

Punching out was a long time coming The Oregonian (Portland, Oregon) March 2, 2007
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Sunrise Edition

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BYLINE: John Canzano, The Oregonian

His reign ended on the ropes, as if this were some kind of corporate boxing match. Steve Patterson --"The Raging Bully" --and one-time heavyweight leader of Trail Blazers Inc. was pinned to a wall of the team practice facility in Tualatin, ducking and covering, leaning and bobbing, before he resigned on Thursday.

When it was over, Patterson hustled toward the back door, ushered along by a team employee who held his arms out, shielding off a journalist who asked, "Steve, was throwing the arena into bankruptcy a bad decision?"

Patterson smirked, and walked out the door.

The End.

Roll the credits.

Let's see. Patterson's franchise finished with the worst record in the NBA a year ago, and the team was last in revenues. The value of the franchise, routinely among the top half of the league while Bob Whitsitt ran things, recently was placed last in the league by Forbes Magazine.

Patterson fired so many people it felt like he was flipping pages in a magazine. He negotiated a kickback of Darius Miles' \$150,000 fine, with interest, behind the backs of his coaching staff, then fumbled his way through the fallout. And he was at the center of the Rose Garden Arena bankruptcy fiasco, which cost Allen \$100 million more than what it would have cost him to buy the building outright in the first place.

The dirty little secret buried in Patterson's departure is that had he been more pleasant, had he connected better with people, had he not been heavy-handed and woefully phony --had he showed any charisma at all --fair or not, he probably would have survived.

Call it the Jerry Glanville effect. Just look across the city. On the day Patterson announced his departure, Portland State was making a killing selling season tickets while riding a wave of support for a coach who is known in some circles as a dirty, self-important, egotistical bounty hunter.

Yet, you put Glanville in a room of those same people, give him 30 minutes, and he'll make them want to name their children after him. He has charisma, and passion, and he connects on so many levels it's ridiculous.

Patterson?

He got cannibalized by the Vulcans on Thursday. And remember, 43 months ago, Paul Allen's handlers at Vulcan Inc. handpicked Patterson and certified him to lead the franchise into a new era. They decided he was one of them. And then, they spent some time getting to know him.

Patterson could have been authentic. He could have led, and inspired. He could have taken the Blazers through rebuilding, without the use of rehearsed speeches, and orchestrated public-relations ploys (read: Blazerganda), still made a few

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mistakes, and come out the other side riding in a parade. Patterson could have owned this city.

The Miles fiasco, in particular, crushed his image. Not because Patterson attempted to slip one by his coaches, or because he stomped on the franchise's 25-point pledge. Rather, because when Patterson finally realized he was wrong, instead of saying it was a mistake and promising to do better next time, he insulted the intelligence of the public by claiming it was part of a larger "rehabilitation" of Miles.

Over lunch once, Patterson told me that giving Miles his money back was a mistake. He seemed to get it. And I asked him why, instead of apologizing to fans who surely would have forgiven him, he instead participated in that orchestrated halftime news conference --the one in which Patterson scripted his speech with the words "smile" and "smile bigger" after his speech punch lines.

He just shrugged.

Patterson can point to accomplishments, primarily players who perform better on the court and, for the most part, behave off it. But in the end, what we have here is a man who was unable to get out of his own way.

Insiders will tell you that it was Kevin Pritchard, then the player personnel director, and not Patterson who had primarily orchestrated the ambitious draft-day bonanza last June that resulted in an NBA-record six trades.

And those in the know say Patterson gagged Pritchard from talking to the media at various junctures, to ensure the flow of credit moved toward the top. And Patterson wanted to cut Ime Udoka, but after a near mutiny, he backed off.

As Patterson spoke on Thursday, only one player peeked out from the weight room across the way --Martell Webster. And Webster had every right to be interested, because there's a good chance it would have been Chris Paul peeking out of that room if Patterson hadn't overruled Pritchard two drafts ago.

Thursday, Patterson said: "Sometimes it's better for somebody to take the ball the last 10 yards than somebody who has taken it the first 90 yards, or 20 yards, or however far we have come from."

Ninety yards? Twenty yards? It felt a lot like sack, sack, sack, punt for a long while there, bub. Nate McMillan was hired, sure, and the draft put the operation in position to possibly take a major step, but anyone who spent time around Patterson --vendors, fans, associates, colleagues and the media --must have wondered if Patterson was trying to run the franchise into the ground with his personality.

Allen should promote Pritchard, now in the assistant's position, to general manager. If not, nobody will blame Pritchard a bit for cleaning out his desk, taking a job with some other team and haunting Allen for the next decade.

When it comes to the job of team president, we can only hope that Allen has learned a thing or three about a bad hiring, and will go for a credible, smart candidate with good personal skills this time. Forget the resume, Paul. Get the guy in a room with real, live people and see if he cares enough to look them in the eyes when he talks to them. Insist on social skills, and tact, in addition to a little business savvy.

Everyone kept trying to sift through Thursday's wreckage and make sense of it. Sad day for the franchise? Happy day? I don't think we'd be wondering about it had the guy in charge not alienated everyone with his personality.

What Patterson never really wrapped his head around, was that Blazers fans wanted to believe all along. That all they needed to reconnect wasn't a phony pledge, politics, or promises. What they needed to believe again, was hope.

He's finally given it to them.

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