

Rowe Leans On Support Of Friends

When Louis Rowe speaks his eyes give it away.

Everyone knows James Madison's fourth-year head coach is going through the most trying time of his professional life — but still often he can mask it with a smile or a positive tone while he compliments a freshman's work ethic.

Whether he's sitting down for a post-game press conference, stopping to shake a hand at a restaurant or greeting a player's family in the Convocation Center hallway, most of the time you can see just how much a fourth losing season is weighing on him since he returned to his alma mater.

There's a sadness behind those eyes and bags underneath. When he tells you he doesn't sleep, you know he's telling the truth.

The exceptions are the days when he's talked to his former teammates. Then, even after a loss — and there have been 14 in the past 15 games — Rowe enters the room with more energy and a glint in the eye. He looks and sounds like a man who has the job he always wanted.

“When Lou transferred from Florida, I was in my freshman year,” Darren McLinton, who played at JMU from 1992-96, said. “So that recruiting class, he was part of that with myself and Kareem Robinson. Lou was a long way from home and we bonded quick. We've been so tight we consider each other brothers. If he's winning or in the middle of a losing streak, we talk about everything, as brothers do.”

Rowe was one of the best players to come out of JMU in the 1990s, and back then Lefty Driesell brought a lot of good players to Harrisonburg.

A first-team All-CAA performer as a senior when he averaged more than 21 points per game, Rowe was also a key contributor on the Dukes 1994 NCAA Tournament team that nearly upset Florida in the first round. He then had a decade long professional career — winning championships in Sweden and Belgium — with stops in four other countries — before returning to the U.S. to coach.

“He's always been a winner,” Kent Culuko, Rowe's former roommate and another standout of that 1994 team, said. “He just has won consistently all his life. I was so happy that he came back home. I thought he would have more success, but unfortunately, he didn't. I don't know if that falls on him though.”

Rowe didn't yet have an extensive resume when the JMU job opened in 2016, having served as an assistant at JMU, Rider, Florida International, and Bowling Green. But given an opportunity to interview, he won the job. He was supposed to be the link to the Dukes' glory days, having played for them when Driesell usually had JMU at or near the top of the CAA standings and postseason appearances were the norm.

It hasn't worked out that way. His fourth year on the job was supposedly when it all might come together with four starters and two preseason all-conference players returning. Instead it's the worst season yet. Rowe has in public alluded to the harsh truth in every way he can without coming right out and saying what it was still a bit too early to say: The CAA Tournament, which begins Saturday, is likely it for him at JMU.

"I had a really fun career here as a player," Rowe said. "Really tough as a coach, but fun as a player and nobody can take away those memories. When I took this job, I knew it was a hard job. I know what this year has been about. I know what's at stake. But I wanted these guys here now to feel what we felt."

To get a real sense of what James Madison means to Rowe, you have to go back to 1989, years before he'd ever set foot in Harrisonburg. Rowe, the son of a high school basketball coach in St. Petersburg, Fla., was talented on the court and reserved off it. He kind of always knew a mid-major program was where he would fit both as a player and a person and was just about to commit to Stetson in Florida before his senior year.

But then he had the best game of his life to that point in a summer AAU tournament. All the big programs were there. Suddenly the phone at the Rowe house was ringing constantly. Kentucky and Michigan were on the line the most.

Lon Kruger had just taken over at Florida after a successful run of four-consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances at Kansas State. When the scholarship offer came, the opportunity to play for his home state's flagship school was too great to turn down.

But in his first two seasons, Rowe didn't play much and Florida didn't win a lot either. He needed a change. He'd had his best game as a Gator his sophomore season in Harrisonburg against JMU, and he remembered the electric atmosphere inside the Convocation Center. When he visited Driesell at JMU that summer he knew he'd found a new home.

The adoration Rowe has for his alma mater in a lot of ways starts with McLinton. When Rowe was in his first season at JMU and sitting out per NCAA transfer rules, he was also living more than two hours away from his tight-knit family for the first time in his life.

When Rowe couldn't go home for the holidays, he went to Washington with McLinton. These days, when McLinton visits Harrisonburg from his home in Maryland he stays at Rowe's house.

"I love that guy. I really do," Rowe said. "A lot of people wouldn't care if I died on the sidelines, as long as JMU won. He loves JMU as much as any of us. He wants to see a winner here as much as anyone. But he's also the one guy who says to me 'don't let this job kill you.'"

McLinton is well connected in the DC-area basketball scene working with young players through personal training, high school, and AAU programs and the famed Kenner League at Georgetown.

He regularly vouches for Rowe and the program. He's driven his players down to JMU for visits. But he also is well aware of the seething hunger among Dukes fans for a return to winning basketball. He has it too, and his best friend has struggled mightily in that department.

"It's nothing for me to come down to Harrisonburg and discuss some things," McLinton said. "I'm always here for him. I'm going to do that anyway for him. I did when he was at FIU or Rider or Bowling Green. You need that, especially in this business of coaching, man. Sometimes you need to have some constructive, critical conversations."

Nobody has quite figured out why this particular JMU team hasn't won more. Like any coach's son, Rowe can break down a particular play with great detail and explain exactly why it did or didn't work. He's come up with game plans that against the best teams in the conference have initially put the Dukes in position to win.

It's universally accepted among the league's coaches this JMU roster, picked to finish fourth with three first-place votes in the preseason, is one of the most talented in the CAA. Opposing coaches promise they don't want to be on the other sideline if the Dukes figure it out.

And yet they finished in last place.

"Maybe he wasn't able to get those last couple of studs that Lefty was able to get in there," Culuko said. "It's not that these guys aren't talented, but maybe one or two studs in there are missing to fill in the gaps, I don't know. I think it doesn't matter what kind of coach you are. You need those guys."

When former Virginia football coach Al Groh was on his way out in 2009 he burned redshirts and bridges all over Charlottesville in a desperate attempt to save his job. By the time his tenure ended following a home loss to Virginia Tech and a bizarre recitation of the poem "The Guy In The Glass," there was little love left between the former Cavaliers player and his alma mater.

Rowe isn't like that. If he's bitter, he doesn't show it. He wants JMU to win whether he's the coach or not. He hasn't won, but he'll leave the program in solid shape. The Dukes are scandal-free and in good academic standing. There's a lot the next coach won't have to worry about.

He's also refused to sacrifice the future of his players for his own gain.

He and his staff spent extra time working individually with freshmen who wouldn't contribute enough to save this season or their jobs. They may very well be good players for another coach down the line.

That matters to Rowe, just as JMU will continue to matter to him.

"For these guys, there's basketball ahead," Rowe said. "I've got to keep teaching."

Black Coaches Continue To Show They're More Than Recruiters

African-American coaches coming up through the ranks of college basketball know what you might think. They've been hearing it for years, but it's high time they want the world to know they do a lot more than just bring in black players.

"I think my background would show I'm more than just a recruiter," Xavier Joyner, who is in his first season as an assistant at James Madison, said. "I ran my own program for 12 years at the junior college level. More than 40 guys graduated from my program and now have four-year degrees. To get guys through the junior college system you have to do more than just recruit and coach basketball."

Joyner, who came to JMU after two seasons at Mount St. Mary's, has an extensive resume. One of the most accomplished junior college coaches in Maryland history, he won more than 200 games at Prince George's and Montgomery Community Colleges and spent time working at Paul VI High School in Northern Virginia and with the Team Takeover AAU program.

There's no denying his ties to DC-area AAU and high school powerhouses are intriguing from a recruiting perspective. The same goes for JMU women's assistant Ashely Langford, who just this season was key to the Dukes signing Jamia Hazell, a top-100 recruit out of Raleigh, N.C. But each has also played key roles in developing all-conference players and working in every aspect of their programs.

"I think I am a good recruiter," Langford said. "I want you to say I am a good recruiter, but that's not the only thing I do. I'm also breaking down film and working with players as much as anyone else."

Basketball has fought a decade's long battle with lazy, stereotypical descriptors. A 2013 University of Dayton study of sports media concluded that black players are more often complimented on physical strength and natural abilities while white counterparts receive more praise for leadership skills and basketball IQ.

"People say African-Americans are strong, but white people can shoot," Kiki Jefferson, the CAA Rookie of the Year last season for the JMU women said. "Why is that a stereotype? I'm a city kid and sometimes I play a streetball style, but I'm also a gym rat."

Similar subtle racism seems to extend beyond players, with the success of black coaches often attributed simply to their recruiting.

“That’s real,” Langford said. “That’s very real. I’m going into my ninth year and when I first got in it was very much that way. We were the recruiters. We weren’t Xs and Os. We weren’t smart enough for that. We were there to recruit. That’s what was portrayed.”

Andrew Wilson, another new assistant with the JMU men, played five seasons at Florida State under Leonard Hamilton.

Hamilton, one of the pioneers for black coaches in college basketball, took over as head coach at Oklahoma State in 1986, but has only in more recent years really begun to shed the label of “just a recruiter.”

Wilson said those who played for Hamilton know he’s always been much more than that.

“I just learned so much from him,” said Wilson, who is white. “To be able to play for such a well-respected and well-connected coach, but also somebody who looked after his players and was willing to share all his knowledge, was amazing. That’s one thing about coach Hamilton. He always wanted to share his knowledge with players and it’s made a major impact on my life, relating to players, with my own family and in my coaching career.”

While the media can be guilty of painting that picture of the black recruiter, it can also come from within the programs themselves. According to Langford, there are some programs that do little more than hire token black assistants and don’t give them the same levels of responsibility or trust as their white counterparts.

Langford said that hasn’t been her experience under Sean O’Regan at JMU. Joyner said the same about new men’s head coach Mark Byington, but said he knows people in the business who have felt isolated within their programs.

“I have heard those stories and I know that it exists,” Joyner said. “I was fortunate in my two years at Mount St. Mary’s and now I’m on to a third year where I was given responsibility other than to just recruit. Coach Byington has made that very clear that he wants his staff to all be involved in all aspects of it. I’m very fortunate to work for a head coach that values my voice other than just to recruit.”

Ironically, when black coaches are pigeonholed as recruiters it can actually have a negative effect on their ability to do so. How black coaches are valued within an athletic department doesn’t go unnoticed by college athletes.

“On recruiting trips, I’ve definitely seen it,” JMU junior guard Madison Green said. “Having the black assistant coach who was only there to signal diversity. That’s how they want to get black kids. That’s their token coach. But we can tell when it’s a program where the black coaches are actually appreciated.”

JMU Loses At Buzzer In What Was Likely Rowe's Last Game

WASHINGTON — A game James Madison led most of the way turned into one last crushing defeat as the most disappointing JMU season in recent memory came to an end Saturday night in the opening round of the Colonial Athletic Association tournament when seventh-seeded Elon rallied to top No. 10 JMU, 63-61.

Now all the Dukes can do is wait for official word on the fate of their head coach, Louis Rowe, whose overall record at his alma mater fell to 43-85 in four seasons after Elon's Marcus Sheffield nailed a jumper with three seconds left to give the Phoenix their first lead of the game.

When asked whether he thinks he will return to JMU next season, Rowe pulled few punches.

"Out of respect for these guys," Rowe said following the game, motioning to his players, "and to be honest, out of respect for the people who gave me this job, who made an announcement that I was going to coach until the end of the year, I think you know the reality to that answer.

"I respect these player and I don't want that to be answered up here. I would be a fool to sit up here and answer that question, but I will say this, I think we all know the reality of that and I think there was a feeling a long time ago. You have a season like this and this is what the head coach faces."

Matt Lewis scored 17 points to lead JMU while Dwight Wilson and Deshon Parker each added 11 for the Dukes, who finished 9-21. Hunter Woods scored 15 and Federico Poser came off the bench to add 14 for the Phoenix before Sheffield and Kris Wooten hit the key shots down the stretch.

Playing with the fire that had often been missing in recent weeks, JMU opened its postseason in impressive fashion as back-to-back dunks by Lewis and freshman forward Julien Wooden gave the Dukes a 14-0 lead four minutes into the game.

Elon eventually began to find a bit of offense, but JMU controlled the glass against the undersized Phoenix most of the first half and the Dukes managed to hang on to a 34-28 halftime lead.

But Poser, getting extended minutes in place of the injured Simon Wright, continued to give JMU trouble in the second period. The 6-8 Italian forward had already matched his career high of 14 points after making a turnaround shot in the lane to tie the game at 43-all with 13:39 remaining.

"We told the guys in the locker room there was no way we were only down two possessions at halftime without his contribution," Elon coach Mike Schrage said. "He's the one guy for us

inside right now that can take advantage — they were switching a lot — and he can take advantage of a switch. He's our one true low post scorer.”

JMU was able to regain the lead, and a put-back by Darius Banks with less than three minutes remaining gave the Dukes a seven-point advantage.

But Wooten hit back-to-back 3-pointers as Elon chipped away at the lead and Sheffield, a second-team All-CAA player who had been quiet most of the evening before finishing with 10 points, drove the baseline for a two-handed slam that tied the game at 61-61 with 45 seconds left.

“I don't care for the whole world to know,” Schrage said. “I am going to Marcus Sheffield. I've known him for seven years and I believe in him so much as a player in any moment.”

JMU had a final possession following a timeout with 41 seconds remaining, but as the horn sounded to warn the teams they needed to return to the floor, the Dukes coaching staff had not returned to the players huddle and had to scurry to relay the play call.

Lewis got the ball and drove to the basket with 25 seconds remaining, but missed a short jumper that went out of bounds, and after from debate by the officials was given to the Phoenix.

“It's a good observation that I didn't get it in before the horn sounded,” Rowe said. “I take all the blame. That was on me that I didn't get the play to the guys in time. I thought it was a good look. I wanted the ball in Matt's hands, but that was unfortunate and definitely my fault that I didn't get it to them in time.”

Elon got one more look at it and Sheffield delivered to create a tearful ending to the season for JMU, and likely the end of Rowe's time leading the program.

“I think our effort was where it needed to be,” Parker said. “We got a big lead coming out. It hurts because this team has been through so much. I get emotional talking about it. We stuck together and kept battling.”