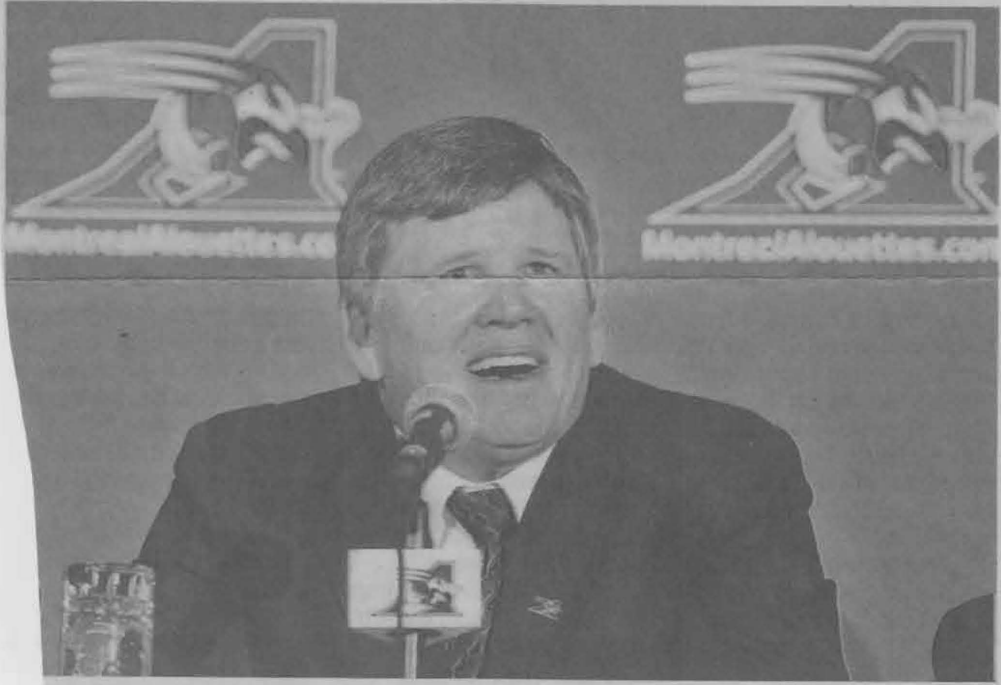


Alouettes hire Dan Hawkins

New head coach has much to learn, but relishes challenge



Alouettes head coach Dan Hawkins answers questions in Montreal on Tuesday.

JOHN MAHONEY/THE GAZETTE



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Of course there will be skeptics out there, second-guessing the decision to hire Dan Hawkins as the 20th head coach in Alouettes history. There will be some just waiting for him to fail, quick to note his lack of CFL experience.

Guess what? You can find fault in everyone who went through the interview process. Danny Maciocia won a Grey Cup in Edmonton before the Eskimos experienced some lean years. Jim Zorn and Turk Schonert have no CFL experience. Mark Washington has never been a head coach. Steve Fairchild? Who's he?

This is not Hawkins's first rodeo, although it marks the first time he has coached professional athletes. And it would seem he understands precisely the challenge he has undertaken.

"Totally. I get it. I know how the world works. You've got to back it up. I get it and understand it," Hawkins said on Tuesday, after the Als confirmed what montrealgazette.com reported last Thursday — the hiring of Hawkins along with Mike Miller as his offensive co-ordinator.

"Getting out of your comfort zone and learning and challenging yourself ... that's how I live. Some would shy away from a job like this. What do you know about 12 guys ... about everybody in motion ... about the Canadian league? I'm not that guy."

You'll remember the same skepticism surrounded the hiring of Marc Trestman in December 2007 — a guy who had never coached in the CFL but spent several days six months earlier as a guest coach at Montreal's training camp. The Als reached the Grey Cup in Trestman's first season, capturing consecutive championships the next two. And now Trestman's with the Chicago Bears.

This is not to suggest history will be repeated. For every Trestman there has been a

Bart Andrus, who went to Toronto in 2009, the Argonauts losing 15 of 18 games under his guidance — and was promptly jettisoned. Andrus, it could be argued, didn't have the pieces at his disposal that Hawkins will, from general manager Jim Popp to quarterback Anthony Calvillo, not to mention an 11-member assistant coaching staff.

If Trestman had a working knowledge of the Als upon his arrival, so, too, does Hawkins, having attended coaches' meetings last spring in Raleigh, N.C. Hawkins spent time in Montreal last season, watched two games, saw others on tape and had conversations with Popp and Trestman throughout the year.

Hawkins denied the foundation was being laid at that time for him to replace Trestman, but the fact he has known Popp for two decades, ever since Popp worked for Saskatchewan and Hawkins did some scouting for the Roughriders, didn't jeopardize his chances.

"I didn't do it then, thinking this is my ticket," said Hawkins, 52. "Never did I think I was going to be the next head coach of Montreal."

We know this much about Hawkins following just one session — he's comfortable in his skin. In naming Miller to his staff as OC, assistant head coach and quarterbacks coach, he approved the hiring of someone who interviewed for the same job Hawkins got. So there shouldn't be any egos at work here. He has re-

tained Noel Thorpe as his defensive co-ordinator, hiring both Doug Berry and Mark Nelson, as *The Gazette* had predicted. So Hawkins has some CFL knowledge and experience on his side.

And Hawkins reached out to Calvillo before being hired, assuring the 40-year-old veteran he wouldn't be forced to learn a new offence entering his 20th CFL season. Hawkins wants Calvillo to be comfortable, knowing the pivot still gives the Als their best chance at success. And Hawkins understands others in the dressing room will follow Calvillo's lead and mojo, feeding off his body language.

There are similarities between Hawkins and Trestman, both sharing parallel philosophies when it comes to life, players and the role of football. They share the same vision and passion, Hawkins discussing the journey on which he's about to embark. Hawkins will treat players with the same respect as did Trestman — although, thankfully, his quotes to the media figure to be somewhat more animated than the vanilla words Trestman uttered, repeatedly, for five seasons.

Like Trestman, the Als came calling at a time in Hawkins's life when he truly required a knock on his door. He made it clear to both Popp and owner Robert Wetenhall he desperately wanted this job, and forever will be thankful for the opportunity with which he has been presented.

"We hire people to have success, no matter the view of them," Popp said. "My concern is finding good coaches. People can adapt. How quickly? We'll find out. But Dan's very articulate. He loves ball and understands. He wanted the job, and worked at it more than the other candidates. Dan showed real leadership and passion."

"I won't compare Hawkins to Trestman. I truly believe he can be as successful as Montreal's other head coaches."

Hawkins admits he has much to learn about Canadian football, and has no problem admitting mistakes were made at Colorado, his last collegiate job following earlier success at Boise State. But there's no coach, at any level, who hasn't failed, learned from it, grown and matured. So give the guy a chance and remember the quarterback he's inheriting is five years older than the one Trestman received.

"Maybe I fit what this team needs right now," Hawkins said. "My whole life has been about change and growth. I told my staff today, 'Guy, mark my words. You're going to look back on life and your career and think back on that magical moment when, for whatever reason, the stars were aligned and we went to Montreal.'"

"I truly believe that."

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