

## **Q&A W/ Old Dominion Monarchs Head Basketball Coach Blaine Taylor BY MATTHEW HATFIELD**

### **A chat with the man coaching our #1 Surprise Team to watch for in 2005-06!**

In 2004-05, the Colonial Athletic Association's Old Dominion Monarchs turned heads around the country, knocking off the reigning league Champion VCU Rams to earn an automatic NCAA Tournament berth. Not only that, but ODU sported the CAA Player of the Year and Tournament MVP - Alex Loughton (14.1PPG, 8.2RPG) - and conference Coach of the Year Blaine Taylor. Taylor's Monarchs used a stifling defense, togetherness and team efficiency on the offensive end en route to setting a school record in victories at 28. Even though ODU fell to a Final Four team in Michigan State by a count of 89-81, the Monarchs return the necessary players (all but Kiah Thomas) to get out of the first round and beyond in 2006.



**Old Dominion Head Basketball Coach Blaine Taylor could be next year's Bruce Pearl - the hot name every program with a coaching vacancy wants. Prior to landing in Norfolk, Virginia, Taylor was the Head Coach at Montana and an assistant to Golden State Warriors Coach Mike Montgomery at Stanford.**

**Hatfield - Q.** First off, I want to congratulate you Coach Taylor on a great season.

**Taylor - A.** "Thank you. A lot of good stuff happened."

**Q.** When did you realize this team could be as good as it was? Was there a particular game during the season that stood out that said to you we've taken that next step?

**A.** "Well, we had a pretty good year the season before. Finished fourth in the league, lost in the conference tournament semis (to VCU), and were tops in CAA scoring. We were right in the middle of the league race. [I] Thought our team gained perspective last year. Two games early: Kent State on the road. Our team showed pretty good qualities in a tough spot when trailing in that game before going on to win."

**Q.** And the other one was?

A. “At TCU, an NIT team that’s a tough to place to win at. Bob Knight and Texas Tech lost there. After that I thought we had a chance. Any time when numbers get gaudy we seem to have pretty good fortune coming from behind.”

Q. There weren’t a lot of weaknesses or gray areas last season. If there was one particular thing that stood out that someone could be critical of it would be the relatively soft non-conference schedule, which probably was a needed thing since there were so many young guys on the team. I personally thought you got a brutal draw with Michigan State, who showed us all they were no ordinary #5 seed. That being said, what’s it do for your team from a confidence level and experience level to show them how well they’ve got play to beat a Final Four caliber ball club?

A. “Well, the thing I was most proud of was the belief. You know the end result wasn’t there, but you gotta give Michigan State a lot of credit. We showed we belonged. When I got to the locker room, tears were running down my cheek. Told the guys I was proud of them. You know you talk about the schedule - at Liberty was a big game for us with the way the new RPI is. There’s a lot of dumb luck involved with the schedule. I believe we had ten road wins and I think we went 11-3 vs. the top 100. So that says something.”

Q. Just as a follow up - I was definitely impressed with your team for much of that Michigan State game until the fouls started to add up and turnovers became a bit of an issue. How surprising and at the same time disappointing was that for you knowing your team had protected the ball well for much of the year, and if you did better in those two areas, who knows maybe you walk out with a W?

A. “Certainly the foul circumstance with about ten minutes to go was difficult. We had our three front-line guys all with four fouls and had to juggle lineups and back off. People were surprised how aggressive we went at them (pressing, trapping, things of that nature). Our point guard [Drew Williamson] was the best in the conference in assists-to-turnovers and probably near the top in the country, although I don’t have the numbers in front of me. We even set a school record in steals. In a game of that magnitude things kind of get magnified. People forget they (being Michigan State) were the #1 free-throw shooting team in the nation and [we] didn’t want to get in a free-throw match with them at the end.”

Q. From my perspective, coach, it appears that a lot of your Cinderella teams that go into the NCAA Tournament and a pull an upset or two (i.e. Wisconsin-Milwaukee) are able to do it with pressure defense of course, but also three-point shooting. It looked like in the CAA tourney your team started to develop more of a consistent outside game. Would you concur with that assessment, and what kind of team do you think you’ll be from the perimeter?

**A.** “We think we’re a pretty balanced team. Different guys can score, inside and out. People kind of focus in on stuff like that. Sometimes it’s not how fast you played, it’s how slow the other guys play.”

**Q.** Right. Where do you stand recruiting wise if you can comment on it? You’ve gotten a number of tough-nosed players from out of the US waters in Dahi, Loughton, Vasylius, and Harris. Are you looking more at local kids? Duke Crews from Bethel is an interesting name that’s mentioned ODU as a possible place for him. Comment if you would on the recruiting process.

**A.** “We’ll be built with kids from this region and the eastern sea board. One-third of the U.S. population is within a day’s driving distance. It’s led to a nice melt and a nice chemistry talent wise. We’re definitely going to keep an eyeball on guys in the immediate area.”

**Q.** I don’t know how many if any media people around here locally have asked you this or not. Do you think Alex (Loughton) has the potential to play at the next level, meaning the NBA, and how much of it depends on what he does as a senior, especially in spotlight games?

**A.** “Alex has a very bright future. It remains to be seen. I’d like to think he can enjoy his senior year. Last year was a good experience for him. He really sacrificed a lot for our team. The first half of the year he really was getting a lot of attention from other teams, got into foul trouble, and we were trying to develop other pieces and weaponry. I was most pleased that when we needed him, he stepped up. It’s right there when you look at the rebounds and field goal percentage. I remember one time where he played about 15 minutes, scored about nine points, and said to me ‘I’ve had enough, let the other guys play’. His unselfishness goes beyond the stat sheet. First and foremost, I think good players play well in a competitive environment.”

**Q.** For me, if the brackets align correctly I don’t think you can rule out a possible run to the Sweet 16. Have you set any personal expectations for this team and if so, what are they specifically? Also, tell me about how a team blocks out distractions during a run?

**A.** “You get a sense of what’s possible. There’s a price to pay for success. It’s out there. An ambitious schedule is out there with six games against top 100 RPI schools. I don’t think we’ll tune into our record and act like that’ll tell the whole story. There will be some great games, great story to follow and we want to play forward. I thought we did the smart thing - the fans, media and players. Everyone took it in and were able to enjoy it from day one. It took a little time to build. It’s a gradual process and people have appreciated the positive setting.”

**Q.** You bring me to my final question. A lot of teams don't enjoy their season and before you know it, it's all over. Talk about how some of the bigger programs tend to not enjoy playing basketball, whereas others are able to go out and have fun.

**A.** "In Michigan State's case, after they beat us they really relaxed. The setting can really be unhealthy for kids. Your right about how they should have fun and have the chance to make mistakes."