

Eric Musselman Is Thriving in College Hoops. Will the NBA Ever Call Again?

Eric Musselman flamed out as a young head coach for the Warriors and Kings, but he's built a powerhouse in the college ranks at Nevada. Now 54, will the NBA ever come calling again?

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The NBA, like every other pro sports league, recycles coaches. Mike D'Antoni failed in Denver, succeeded in Phoenix, quit in New York and flopped in Los Angeles before regaining his footing in Houston. Terry Stotts was fired in Atlanta and Milwaukee before finding success in Portland. And there are countless others.

Which brings me to Eric Musselman.

College hoop junkies know Musselman as the hyperactive coach of [No. 10 Nevada](#). He took over a careening program in 2015, won 24 games in his first year, 28 in his second and last season led the Wolfpack to the Sweet 16, where he earned accolades for his coaching—and [internet infamy](#) for his willingness to take his shirt off.

NBA fans remember Musselman a little differently. They remember a 37-year-old wunderkind taking over the Warriors in 2002, only to be fired after two seasons. They remember him moving across the Bay, to Sacramento, in 2006, where he was let go after one turbulent, 33-win season.

In 2015, I flew out to Reno to better understand Eric Musselman 2.0. It has been a humbling journey for the nomadic coach. Radioactive after Sacramento, Musselman disappeared for three years. He reemerged in 2010, in the G-League, as the head coach of the Lakers minor league affiliate. Two years later he jumped to the college ranks—as an assistant. He spent two years at Arizona State and one at LSU before taking the job at Nevada.

“I think for my sons, it was hard, because they were used to seeing their dad as an NBA head coach or an NBA assistant,” Musselman told SI.com. “And so I think that, from a pride standpoint, I think it was hurtful to them. My younger son especially kept saying, ‘Dad, just go back to the NBA. I want you to be an NBA assistant.’ That was tough.”

Indeed. But more than a decade after his firing in Sacramento, Musselman is on top again. Nevada is 16–1 this season. They are tracking for a high seed in the NCAA tournament. Some are calling the Wolfpack the next iteration of Gonzaga, a mid-major powerhouse. Pundits like Steve Lappas believe they can win a national title.

This is where you wonder if the NBA is watching again. Think of the hot assistants the last ten years. Mike Budenholzer. Quin Snyder. Kenny Atkinson. *That* was Musselman. He was Erik Spoelstra before Erik Spoelstra. He apprenticed under Chuck Daly and Doc Rivers. The son of legendary CBA coach Bill Musselman, Eric has coaching in his DNA.

And yet when NBA coaching jobs open up, Musselman isn't mentioned. When college-to-pro coaching candidates are talked about, Musselman's name isn't on any lists.

Few people are as familiar with Musselman's NBA bona fides as Garry St. Jean, the ex-Warriors GM who hired Musselman in 2002. On Thursday, St. Jean recalled how prepared Musselman was for his job interview ("The amount of material he brought weighed more than him," St. Jean told SI.com) while lamenting how things ended for him, with clashes with upper management accelerating his exit.

"I can't say anything negative about his coaching," St. Jean said. "When [you get fired], it's not all about you. It's about the entire organization, and its philosophies. You have to have everyone on the same page."

Musselman has no regrets about his time in Golden State. "When I left there, my head was held high," Musselman said. Sacramento was a different story. Musselman walked into a tough situation. Many of the players on the roster spent years playing for Rick Adelman—and most still wanted to be. He never clicked with GM Geoff Petrie—who didn't want to hire him in the first place. That was an ownership decision, which set the tone for a shaky relationship.

Musselman won't make excuses for his time in Sacramento. "That was the one time I felt as a coach I failed," Musselman said. But it was a turbulent time in his life. He was going through a divorce. His kids lived 90 minutes away, with their mother. He'd finish practices and spend hours in traffic to spend time with his children. The stress, he says, was overwhelming. In the preseason, Musselman was arrested for DUI.

"A divorce is hard enough when you're living in the same city, but the guilt that I had on a daily basis, of not seeing my son play or be there to pick him up after school, was a distraction for sure," Musselman said. "I don't think it was healthy. I'd probably do the same thing even today, just because my kids are that important. But I know it affected my energy level at times."

In short: Sacramento was a mess. But that was 12 years ago. Musselman's personal life has stabilized. He is remarried, to former sports broadcaster Danyelle Sargent, and his son, Michael, is a graduate assistant on his coaching staff. He has rebuilt his reputation in the G-League and international coaching stops in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela. In a couple of months, he hopes to compete for a national championship.

So why hasn't the NBA noticed?

Ask around and you get a variety of vague answers. In the NBA, Musselman had a reputation of being tough to deal with. In Golden State, he clashed with management over his preference to play veterans over younger players. "He's a very straightforward guy," St. Jean said. "There's no debate about his basketball knowledge. The basketball stuff, he checks all the boxes. But you have to feel comfortable with him."

Sacramento was a mess, but the Kings have cycled through eight coaches since firing Musselman and have zero playoff appearances to show for it. Musselman may have contributed to the Kings downturn, but he was far from the root cause of it.

In a recent telephone interview, Musselman makes it clear he's not lobbying for another job. "I love it at Nevada," Musselman said. "It's probably the most fun 3 1/2 years I've had in coaching." But reminisce with him for a few minutes on his NBA days and it's obvious there's a part of him that believes there is unfinished business. He still follows the NBA closely; if he's not watching Mountain West conference games, the NBA is on the TV. He talks about the staffers in Golden State he is still in touch with. He looks at coaches like Daly and Tom Thibodeau, coaches who didn't get head coaching opportunities until later in their careers, and wonders what might have been had he been a little more seasoned.

"There are a lot of guys that get jobs before they had enough experience," Musselman said. "I think I was one of those guys."

Who knows if the NBA will ever come calling again? Orlando had internal discussions about Musselman during its coaching search last summer, league sources told SI.com. Musselman is 54, but still coaches with the zeal of a man decades younger. "I see the same personality, I see the same love and thirst for the game," St. Jean said. "The passion on the sideline, it's there. Players can tell, too. They know where you are in terms of your knowledge, your passion. He had it a long time ago, and he's still got it."

Come March, Musselman will have a chance to thicken his college résumé, to take Nevada deep into the tournament and maybe make a few new fans with his wild, shirtless celebrations in the process. College basketball has taken notice of Eric Musselman—even if the NBA won't.