



College assistant coaches lack security

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In just a few months, Joe Sawyer has gone from teaching SMU defensive linemen to shed blocks to temporarily working on the loading docks. He's not alone in facing a jarring career transition.

Eighteen NCAA Bowl Subdivision schools have hired new football head coaches. As Sawyer and other assistants at schools like Baylor, Texas A&M and Houston have discovered, a change at the top creates an uncertain existence for assistants.

"You're a working man like everybody else," said Sawyer, who spent six years on Phil Bennett's staff. "It's good, it's what you do. Still, if you're let go, you don't have an agent; you don't have three years left on your contract where you can play golf and go."

At many major colleges, assistants are essentially at-will employees, depending on state laws and university policy. Sawyer fared better than some; SMU paid its outgoing football assistants through the end of May.

The quick cutoff in salary and benefits at many schools has drawn scrutiny from the American Football Coaches Association for two decades. The organization advocates 12-month contracts that would run from July 1 to June 30.



MICHAEL AINSWORTH / DMN
Former SMU assistant Eric Roark thought about leaving football, then became defensive coordinator at Grand Prairie.

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AFCA executive director Grant Teaff estimated that only 40 percent to 50 percent of the Bowl Subdivision members offer assistants 12-month contracts.

Teaff has personally lobbied athletic directors to extend the contracts of displaced assistants.

"If I'm out there with a family, not only do I want to go to a place I can win, I want to go to a place that will take care of my family," Teaff said.

With head coaches' salaries in the Bowl Subdivision averaging more than \$1 million, assistant coaches' compensation has improved.

Texas, under Mack Brown, was one of the first to raise assistants' salaries and offer multiyear contracts.

New Texas A&M coach Mike Sherman reportedly took less money so assistants could receive better contracts. The new Aggies coordinators received guaranteed three-year contracts, with the other seven assistants getting two-year deals ranging from \$165,000 to \$330,000.

"We are simply meeting the market," A&M athletic director Bill Byrne wrote in an e-mail. "I think we are already seeing a trend of longer contracts in the Big 12. ... Colleges are hiring more and more NFL coaches, and the two- and three-year contracts are similar to what the NFL coaches have had in the past."

But at a Conference USA school like SMU, assistant coaches' salaries can average between \$60,000 and slightly more than \$100,000 – less than most schools in power conferences pay.

Security can be nonexistent in a profession filled with stories about the abrupt end of staffs.

Former SMU assistant Eric Roark landed as the defensive coordinator at Grand Prairie High School. Grand Prairie head coach Gary Bartel had been through the same thing, as a member of the final staff ever at UT-Arlington.

Roark considered working in the oil and gas industry, or for an NFL agent.

"One month goes by, two months go by," Roark said. "If you miss out on the December [hiring] period, you're going to have to hustle. If you miss out on the January period, there's a little more pressure."

Eventually Roark chose the high school route, because he wouldn't have to move. He's taken courses through the Region 10 Education Service Center to receive his teacher's certification.

Sawyer has already accepted an offer to be the defensive coordinator under new Bryan Adams coach Derick Roberson.

Because Sawyer wouldn't collect his first check until mid-September, he took a summer job on a loading dock near Texas Stadium.

The change was difficult.

Sawyer considered SMU his coaching "utopia." Even now, he would love to eventually return to the Hilltop.

Upon being fired, he had to pursue other jobs.

"You sit down and write a list of everybody you do know," Sawyer said. "Then it becomes the Kevin Bacon thing, the degrees of separation. You try to find a job before it opens."

Sawyer even drove eight hours through three tornado-producing storms to Hattiesburg, Miss., for an interview with new Southern Miss coach Larry Fedora, arranged by Rockwall coach Scott Smith. Fedora liked Sawyer but had already offered the job to another candidate.

And he drove to Lubbock to shake hands with Texas Tech coach Mike Leach at a camp.

For now, Sawyer is looking forward to the high school season. "I'm just excited to have a job," he said.