



SPORTS INFORMATION



BASKETBALL

Mark Slonaker, Georgia State University Assistant Men's Basketball Coach

Known to fans and friends as "The Slon", this former collegiate star has quickly moved up in the coaching ranks. A 1979 graduate of the University of Georgia, Slonaker served as an Undergraduate Assistant for Hugh Durham while obtaining his degree. From there the New Jersey native went to Lovett High School in Atlanta, where he turned their program around by leading them to their most succesful season in a decade.

Slonaker left Lovett to join the NCAA Division I coaching ranks as an Assistant on Tom Pugliese's 1983-84 coaching staff. Ironically, Slonaker was the man named to replace Pugliese three games into the past season as Head Coach. While serving under Interim status, Slonaker was given the un-enviable duty of holding together a team of young players who had only been together a few months. The record does not show what an outstanding job he did in keeping his team from falling apart, but any fans who saw his squad lose no less than four heartbreaking conference games in the second half of the season would attest to his dedication and knowledge.

A former High School All American at Rahway High School in New Jersey, the 28-year-old Slonaker has earned a great deal of respect around the nation for his job with the Panthers this past season, despite the overall record. His team will be known as one that didn't quit in the face of adversity, and that is a good testament to any coach.

Mark and his wife Kathy currently reside in Northwest Atlanta with their one-year-old son, Michael.

-GSU-

Mark Slonaker, Georgia State's interim coach, talks to his players during practice Friday at the Omni

GSU coach has Georgia connection

By Tom McCollister
Staff Writer

Mark Slonaker knows two things await him Saturday night when he takes his Georgia State Panthers into the Georgia Coliseum to play Georgia at 7:30 — a tough game and major-league kidding.

He's looking forward to both.

Slonaker was a member of the Bulldogs basketball team from 1975 to 1979, and in 1977 he led the team in assists with 93. He was a volunteer assistant for a year while getting his degree and served as a member of coach Hugh Durham's summer camp staff for several years.

"It feels strange to be going back over there and taking a team with me," said Slonaker, who was named Georgia State's interim head coach Dec. 4 following the firing of Tom Pugliese three games into the season. "I may head to the wrong bench.

"But I'm looking forward to it. I spent a lot of years there, know their coaches well and you can bet they're going to let me have it both before and after the game. During the game, though, I'm sure it will be all business. It's going to be tough, but interesting."

The Panthers are 1-5 and have a three-game losing streak. Their last game was an 89-40 loss to Iowa.

"Realistically, we aren't in Georgia's league," Slonaker said, "but I know we'll play better than we did against Iowa. We were tight, and playing before 15,000 fans, but Saturday I think we'll be more relaxed and there won't be 15,000 there.

"Our players know Georgia's reputation — they have great athletes — and it's definitely a big challenge for all of us. And I think we'll have fun playing, but our goal, as always, is to win."

Georgia State athletic director Sherman Day said Slonaker will continue as interim coach through this season, and that no decision will be made about next year's coach until after the season.

"I've been impressed with the way Mark has taken charge of the team under some very difficult circumstances," Day said. "He's a young, positive guy, knows the area and the coaches, and we've decided to wait until the season is over to evaluate what we have."

Georgia State has had five coaches in the past eight years, a situation that Day admits makes it difficult to attract players to the downtown school.

"We want a positive feeling at Georgia State," he said. "We have to scrap like crazy to

Slonaker returns to Athens to play Dogs

get quality student-athletes here in the first place, and if we seem to always be in a state of confusion, the job becomes more difficult. Some of the things we need to do are cut down our recruiting area, tone down our maniac schedule and work toward being competitive in our conference, the Trans America.

"We need to limit our recruiting to this area, and I think we have a shot at getting those kind of players who have been going to places like Furman or East Tennessee State. We don't have the budget it takes to recruit players outside our area and I think we can meet our needs by staying closer to home. We are not trying to be the DePaul of the South, only the best in the Trans America Conference, competing against schools with our kind of budget. If we can't be successful at that level, then I'd be the first to recommend that we not continue the program on this level."

His differences with Pugliese included conflicts in all of the above areas.

"Tom Pugliese is a dedicated basketball man," Day said. "A hard worker and hard charger, but we had a great difference of opinion in the way we should get things done, the direction in which we were going. Sometimes you have to be able to laugh at yourself while you're building and that is not his personality.

"There were some doubts on my part before the start of preseason practice that he would start the season as our coach. There were some serious conflicts, but in the best interest of our program, I wanted him to make it through the season. I wanted him to be successful."

Pugliese was hired last year to replace Jim Jarrett, who replaced Roger Couch, who replaced Jack Waters. Pugliese maintains that he and Day were on a collision course from Day One.

"My firing was inevitable from the beginning," Pugliese said, "but I thought our differences could be overcome. I knew I was in trouble when he told me I would have to change my style of coaching. I am the demanding type and I don't think my image fit what Dr. Day wanted for Georgia State.

"I wish the players, their families and Mark the best of luck. I hope the kids continue to work toward their education, which is more important than anything else. The kids will survive."

Since the change, some players see a different team attitude, despite an 0-3 record. Pu-

gliese was excitable; Slonaker is calm. Pugliese had a set lineup, Slonaker has opened up the competition. Pugliese used fear to motivate, Slonaker seeks motivation from within the player.

"I played as hard as I could for coach Pugliese," said team captain Joe Brus, "and it was a shock when he was fired. You always want to do your best for whoever is the coach, and he had his good points. But I see excitement in our team now that wasn't there before. Coach Pugliese had a tendency to be a little harsh at times. If somebody made a mistake at practice, he'd stop practice and make a big deal out of it. Coach Slonaker is demanding, too, but in a way that doesn't offend you or make you tense, afraid to make a mistake."

For his part, Slonaker has mixed emotions about his elevation to head coach, interim or otherwise.

"It's very rare you get a chance at 27 to be a head coach on this level," said Slonaker. "The sad part is that it had to come this way. Tom is the one who gave me the break and I hate for my gain to be his loss, but now it's my job and I've got to do the very best that I can."

It doesn't bother Slonaker that he may be looking elsewhere when the season is over. He isn't approaching the job as if it's only interim.

"My approach is that the job is mine," he said, "and that this is just a long-term interview. As far as I can tell the players have responded to me pretty good; morale seems to be good. The biggest adjustment for me is that before I was their buddy, had them over to my house at times. Now I'm more an authority figure."

Day said that Slonaker would be given every consideration when the position is filled following the season.

Georgia State's only victory this season was 82-77 over Huntington College, an NAIA school, and it was immediately after that game that Pugliese was fired. But except for the one-sided loss to Iowa, the Panthers played well during their recent three-game road trip. They lost 74-62 to Montana, but trailed by only five with two minutes left, and were down by only three with 1:10 to go in a 76-68 loss to Trans America Conference opponent Little Rock.

The Panthers are led in scoring by senior guard Chris Jackson, who is averaging 12.2 points a game, and junior forward Paul Norris at 11.7. Junior center 6-9 Jevon Estes is averaging 6.5 rebounds per game.

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INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

**SPORTS
RELEASE**

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NEW JERSEY NATIVE HIRED AT GSU

Mark Slonaker was recently hired by Georgia State University as Assistant Basketball Coach. A native of Rahway, New Jersey, Slonaker played for the University of Georgia where he was co-captain of the Bulldog's basketball team.

Following graduation from UGA, this New Jersey native took the job of head basketball coach at Atlanta area Lovett High School. In his three years at Lovett, this popular young coach turned around the Lion's lack-luster past and a previous two-year winless record.

The personable player-coach is also a favorite with professional coaches Hubie Brown of the New York Knicks and Mike Fratello, new head of the Atlanta Hawks. Slonaker worked with both coaches at the annual Hubie Brown Basketball Camp in Atlanta.

Slonaker, 26, was recruited by GSU's new head coach, Tom Pugliese, also a New Jersian from Dunellen. Slonaker reflected on his selection by Pugliese with: "This is a great career move up for me. Lovett and athletic director Bill Holliman were super and its unfortunate I could not be around to coach those kids in their senior year. But when opportunity knocks, you've got to take advantage of it."

Following Slonaker's hiring, Pugliese rounded out his coaching staff with another New Jersey-ite, Bill Muse, from Glen Rock.