

Trestman takes long road to CFL

Head coach begins first season with Alouettes after 25-year journey earning his football stripes

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Marc Trestman could have turned out to be a brilliant scholar. He was, after all, a keen student - the one who always sat in the front row, taking copious notes and then regurgitating them back during an exam, even if good grades didn't come inherently.

Trestman could have turned out to be a lawyer. He graduated from the University of Miami, passed his Florida bar exam in 1983 and interviewed with a personal-injury litigation firm. That firm subsequently dissolved, simply because the attorneys were so wealthy, they no longer required the work. Today, one lives in Malibu, Calif., another in Aspen, Colo.

Trestman might have become a pro athlete. A college quarterback, he twice went to training camp as a defensive back with his hometown Minnesota Vikings. He was enjoying a decent camp his rookie season, until head coach Bud Grant lured Hall of Fame safety Paul Krause out of retirement. Trestman, a free safety, didn't last long after that, sustaining an injury his second year.

The last thing Trestman ever figured to become - a football coach - is precisely the path he chose, albeit by fluke. Today, about 25 years after it all began, he'll make his opening remarks to the Alouettes, signifying the start of training camp in St. Jean. Tomorrow morning, the team practises for the first time, led by Trestman, named the team's 19th head coach last December. This marks the first time the 52-year-old, who spent 17 years as an assistant and offensive co-ordinator in the National Football League, has been the head guy.

He inherits a team that was 8-10 last season - the first time since 1996, when the franchise returned to Montreal, it has finished with a losing record. And, while much is being made of Trestman's lack of Canadian Football League experience, he's one of four new coaches in an eight-team league. While he might be one story around the CFL, he isn't the only one, in other words.

"Not one fear," Trestman stated emphatically this week, during a lengthy interview in the Als' football operations boardroom at Olympic Stadium.

"You can't put yourself out there unless you're fearless. That doesn't mean you won't feel (fear) along the way. You'll have your moments, because you're human. You can't perform at the highest level as a player or do anything if you have fear." When the Als' braintrust -



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"You can't perform at the highest level as a player or do anything if you have fear," says Alouettes' Marc Trestman, one of four new head coaches in the CFL this season.

owner Robert Wetenhall and president Larry Smith - decided last November to have Jim Popp return to being the team's general manager exclusively, relinquishing his coaching duties, a list of at least a dozen candidates was formulated, including: Winnipeg defensive co-ordinator Greg Marshall; Steve Buratto, who co-ordinates Toronto's offence; Saskatchewan defensive co-ordinator Richie Hall; and former Calgary head coach Tom Higgins.

Trestman, who spent a brief stint as a guest coach at Montreal's camp last spring, was recommended by Popp - almost considered an afterthought at the time. But this longest of longshots quickly impressed with his organizational and communication skills.

Smith said the management team undertook the most analytical process it ever has in its search. Trestman, a career coach who's expected to excel at managing the Als dressing room, constantly scored higher than any other candidate. In the end, Wetenhall, Smith and Popp were unanimous in their selection.

"Marc adds a different dimension," Smith said. "I'm not saying better, because it hasn't been proven. But what Marc may bring is his depth of people skills. What impressed me ... was his great listening skills and values. Those were two things that jumped out at us. He didn't tell us how to run or manage a team. He's humble and asked a lot of questions, and he was well-prepared. He makes an impression when he talks to you. Competing against others, that was important. First impressions are made in the initial 30 seconds." Trestman has left everlasting impressions during his nomadic coaching career. He has been an offensive co-ordinator in Cleveland - where Popp's father was a former assistant coach - San Francisco, Arizona and Oakland. Trestman also has served as an assistant with Minnesota, Tampa Bay, Detroit and Miami.

He has coached with Grant, George Seifert, Jon Gruden and Bobby Ross. He has tutored quarterbacks like Steve Young, Bernie Kosar, Rich Gannon and Jake Plummer, along with receivers Jerry Rice, Webster Slaughter and rusher Barry Sanders. The Browns, 49ers, Cardinals and Raiders each made the playoffs during their first seasons with Trestman, with the Raiders reaching the Super Bowl in 2002, when Gannon was named the league's most valuable player.

"Marc leaves no stone unturned," Rice says on CoachMarcTrestman.com, a website that was established some 18 months ago, when Trestman was out of coaching. "It's amazing how he can comprehend all of his stuff. He has to understand everything."

The website, a testimonial to Trestman's virtues, outlines his philosophy and career highlights. It contains platitudes from Grant, Bill Walsh, Seifert and Bill Callahan, along with a photo autographed by Gannon. Gruden has called Trestman "one of the most creative minds in football."

But this all has been accomplished in the NFL, a game played by different athletes who possess distinct skills. It's a different game and mindset north of the border, and the CFL is strewn with the carcasses of NFL coaches incapable of making the transition.

Trestman has hired some assistants - defensive co-ordinator Tim Burke, linebacker coach Casey Creehan and special-teams co-ordinator Scott Squires - with CFL experience. He also has retained Scott Milanovich, the only surviving member of Popp's staff, as his quarterbacks coach, promoting Milanovich to offensive co-ordinator in the process.

And Trestman, almost immediately, decreed veteran Anthony Calvillo to be his starting quarterback. Although as many as six other pivots could be brought to camp, Trestman has stated Calvillo's position isn't in jeopardy; the others fighting for what crumbs might remain as Calvillo's backup.

The last head coach who came to the Als and did this was Don Matthews. Coincidence? Not likely.

"I think that's the one thing that stands out. It says a lot," Calvillo said. "It reassures you and it's good to know you'll be leading the team. He also has asked for my input, along with that of (Ben) Cahoon and (Kerry) Watkins. He's open to what we say.

"I enjoy the new concepts and ideas. It's good to get fresh ideas and new plays. He's an open person. His door's always open. And he's very enthusiastic. He lets you know where he stands. His communication skills are way up there."

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Growing up in Minneapolis, Trestman seemingly was a jack of all trades, yet master of none. The eldest of two children, he lived in a middle-class neighbourhood. When he wasn't playing sports - football, baseball, basketball and even some recreational hockey - Trestman worked at his father's bar, busing tables, washing dishes and even tending bar.

"I wasn't great at any sport, but was good enough to play and start," he said. "I never considered myself a super player. I was all-state in high-school football as a senior. But being all-state in Minnesota isn't like being all-state in Texas or Florida. I enjoyed playing sports. It grounded me and my time was always arranged."

He was a quarterback at the University of Minnesota, starting against Northwestern as a freshman. But mostly, he explained, he was thrown in to clean up, when games against powerhouses like Ohio State or Nebraska had long been decided.

"We'd be losing by 40 points ... and I'd be thrown in to get killed," he quipped. "I was very, very average, if not less, as a player."

Trestman believes he might have fared better had he changed to defence earlier. He had the mentality of a defensive player, was very aggressive and liked the contact.

That aggression should have made him an effective lawyer, but Trestman believed he didn't have the long-term resiliency to succeed. Nonetheless, he refused to quit, and today his degree sits in the basement of his home in Raleigh, N.C.

"I didn't think I would ever compete against some of the minds that were going to law school, no matter how hard I worked at it," he said. "But I worked at it and got through it.

"I knew early on that I didn't want to be a lawyer. But I didn't want to quit."

Indeed, he began his coaching career in 1981 while attending law school, serving as a volunteer at the University of Miami following a chance meeting with Hurricanes secondary coach Mike Archer, who lived in the same apartment complex.

Trestman prepared a three-page outline detailing why he should be allowed to coach freshmen pivots Kosar and Vinny Testaverde, although neither would play that season. And he coached them, twice each week, with the blessing of senior fulltime assistants. Two years later, having passed the bar, he was named Miami's quarterback coach under the famed Howard Schnellenberger. Trestman was 27.

"Coaching never crossed my mind for a minute," he said. "I never had a great relationship with my coaches, to my recollection. I always tell coach Schnellenberger he saw something in me I never saw in myself. To hire me as the quarterback coach ... as young as I was. And I really coached them. The quarterback's the centre of the game. I was just winging it. I had no experience, no criteria, no mentorship, no training. Nothing. I'm just grateful he saw that in me."

Trestman figures he has moved perhaps 15 times in his life. Married 17 years and the father of two teenage girls, he decided to settle in North Carolina four years ago, tired of constantly

uprooting his family.

Trestman brings the same effervescence and vibrancy to coaching today he did more than a quarter-century ago. Coaching in its basic element, he explained, is teaching and being around players, studying tape and formulating ideas, while bringing a diverse group of athletes together.

"It's not only about how they can play," he explained. "I want to know what they're all about. That's this game. It's taking a diverse group of people and bringing them together. You can't unless you know what they're about. I'll just be as honest with the players as I can ... as direct as I can.

"I know I'm getting paid to get criticized. That's what sells tickets. That's why people love this game. Everybody has opinions. Everybody thinks they can do it. You have a week between games to critique what happened and is going to happen. And you have time between each play to talk about it. That's why this is the greatest game."

Trestman has waited a lifetime for this opportunity - one he likely believed would come sooner. But he's not bitter. He has taken something from each stop, learning as much from success as he has through adversity.

"I've really enjoyed this ride," he said. "And it's just halftime. We're just coming out of halftime. I feel prepared to be a head coach ... as good as anybody could be prepared."

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2008 Alouettes at a Glance

Here's a quick look at the Alouettes and what to look for as they get ready to open training camp:

2007 record: 8-10; third place in East Division; lost division semi-final 24-22 at Winnipeg.

Training camp: Begins tomorrow in St. Jean.

Off-field moves: They were substantial, starting with general manager Jim Popp being replaced as head coach by Marc Trestman. Trestman has retained only one coach from Popp's staff - Scott Milanovich, who becomes offensive co-ordinator and quarterbacks coach. Trestman has hired seven new assistants: Andrew Bischoff (running backs); Tim Burke

(defensive co-ordinator and secondary); Casey Creehan (linebackers); Jaime Elizondo (receivers); Vince Martino (offensive line); Mike Sinclair (defensive line) and Scott Squires (special teams).

Also, former Hamilton GM Marcel Desjardins returns to the organization as Popp's assistant.

Key on-field additions: Reggie Hunt, LB; Jamel Richardson, WR; Jeff Keeping, DT; Adrian McPherson, QB; Peter Warrick, WR; Tay Cody, DB; Tony Tompkins, KR.

Key on-field subtractions: Timothy Strickland, LB; Dario Romero, DT; Étienne Boulay, S; Coby Rhinehart, DB; Randy Spencer, DT; Jason Maas, QB.

Stories to watch: Not only is Trestman a first-time head coach, he has no CFL experience. His three-down learning curve must be quick, or the AIs will experience growing pains. Trestman has identified QB protection and pressure on opposing QBs as two areas that

require improvement. Montreal allowed a league-high 68 sacks in 2007, recording only 36 sacks, ahead of only Hamilton.

To see how the other teams look heading into training camp, check out Herb Zurkowsky's The Snap blog on montrealgazette.com.

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