

Fired power five ADs find tough road back to high-profile jobs

By Michael Smith, Staff Writer

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John Currie

Photo: MICHAEL SMITH

John Currie was considered the answer at the University of Tennessee last year when he energetically began reshaping the Volunteers' program and making several new hires.

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But the 47-year-old athletic director, thought to be among the best in the business, never made it to his one-year anniversary in Knoxville. His scattershot football coaching search after the 2017 season led to his shocking dismissal after just eight months on the job.

Since then, Currie has been charting a course for what's next as he attempts to do what few others in the profession have done — rebound from a power five AD job loss to get another power five AD position.

"I certainly want to be an AD again, if that's something that's in the cards," he said.

In the increasingly volatile business of college athletics, even the most respected ADs are one misstep from a pink slip, and seldom do they get a second chance at the highest levels.

In the past six months, Auburn parted with Jay Jacobs, who had been AD at his alma mater since 2004; Arkansas fired Jeff Long, the 2015 AD of the Year by SportsBusiness Journal; and Tennessee dismissed Currie.

Kansas fired Sheahon Zenger last month, almost exactly a year after the school signed him to a three-year extension, and Mark Hollis, SBJ's 2012 AD of the Year and one of the most revered minds in college athletics, was swept up in the Michigan State/Larry Nassar scandal that cost him his job in January.

Long and Currie have publicly expressed their desire to be an AD again and they're the two most likely to get a long look, industry experts say, but examples of power five ADs who have bounced back from a job loss to get another power five AD position are exceedingly rare. Power five ADs almost always are hired on their way up or from another power five school.

The lone exception among the 62 sitting ADs in the power five is Penn State's Sandy Barbour. She agreed to step down at California in June 2014 in response to the chancellor's desire for new leadership in athletics, but landed at Penn State the following month and has successfully guided the school out of the Jerry Sandusky scandal era while returning the Nittany Lions to competitive excellence.



Jay Jacobs took a position as the No. 2 executive in Florida's athletic department this month.

Photo: AUBURN UNIVERSITY

She soon could have company on this short list if Damon Evans gets the Maryland job. Evans, fired at Georgia after a DUI arrest in 2010, has resurfaced at Maryland as interim AD and a candidate to succeed Kevin

Anderson, who resigned in April. That job is still open and the Terrapins are in the midst of an exhaustive search.

Of the 62 ADs (three schools have vacancies), 18 came from other power five schools, 18 came from AD jobs outside the power five and 11 came from non-AD positions, like deputy AD.

Currie sees the trends and still believes there is another high-level AD job out there for him. Kansas, Maryland and Michigan State are open, as is South Florida.

“I’m excited to get back to what I love doing, which is building great organizational teams, growing resources and solving problems,” said Currie, who settled with Tennessee for \$2.5 million.

Determining what’s next, especially for veteran ADs who want to stay in college athletics, is the biggest challenge. Do they pursue another power five job or seek a position at a lower level?

Jacobs, who parted with Auburn, his alma mater and only place of employment, earlier this year, took a job at Florida as Scott Stricklin’s executive associate AD earlier this month. Likewise, former Nebraska AD Shawn Eichorst, fired by the Cornhuskers last fall, was hired last week by Texas as executive senior associate AD.

For Jacobs and Eichorst, who were in high-pressure jobs, it’s time to let someone else take the arrows.

On the AD path

A look at where ADs in the power five came from in their previous job

18
AD at another power five school

18
AD at a non-power five school

11
Senior-level associate position

7
Outside business, law

5
Coaching

2
University administration

1
Other

“I’ve said before that the No. 2 job is the best job in college athletics,” said Jacobs, who wasn’t sure he’d want to return to the college space after leaving Auburn. “I don’t think I’ll be an AD again, but I didn’t think I’d be in this role again. It would just take a unique place.”

Todd Turner, a former power five AD who now conducts searches for schools with AD and coaching vacancies, said taking a secondary role has its benefits, like pay in the \$200,000 to \$300,000 range and a lower public profile than the AD.

“It could be that these guys have to take a different type of job to eventually get back to where they were,” Turner said. “It’s not like coaching,” meaning that it’s more common for head coaches in football and basketball to recycle into other head coaching jobs, whereas ADs don’t.

(Sandy Barbour stepped down at Cal and was hired one month later at Penn State.)

3

Vacancies

(Kansas, Maryland, Michigan State)

Source: SportsBusiness Journal

“It’s really unfortunate because you’ve got really smart people like John Currie who have incredible experience,” Turner said. “You learn a lot; you see where you made your errors, and you’re better for it.”

Another question: How receptive will schools with vacancies be? Can they sell an AD hire to their fan base if the AD left the last job unceremoniously?

Turner ran the search for Penn State when it hired Barbour, who interviewed well and erased any concerns about how her time at Cal ended. Penn State President Eric Barron saw the fit with Barbour and didn’t worry about any other perceptions.

“They just hit it off,” Turner said. “There were some big-time people he was talking to, but he just felt like Sandy was right for the job. Sometimes, it just takes someone in a decision-making position who has courage and a strong intuition about people.”

Most industry experts believe Currie will wind up back in the AD chair because of his accomplishments in eight years at Kansas State, where he was AD before Tennessee, and the unprecedented nature of his situation with the Vols. Currie was replaced as AD when his unpopular

football coaching hire, Ohio State defensive coordinator Greg Schiano, led to a social media firestorm from fans that thoroughly disrupted Currie's search. It got so crazy that a story on Saturdaydownsouth.com suggested that Currie should hire a bodyguard, and his cellphone number circulated on social media sites.



Jeff Long

Photo: GETTY IMAGES

The school suspended Currie, who never completed the search and ultimately was replaced by former football coach Phillip Fulmer. School Chancellor Beverly Davenport, who hired Currie last year and later dismissed him, was fired months later.

Long, like Currie, has his sights set high. Long's settlement with Arkansas pays him \$1 million per year for four years, but the 58-year-old, who spent a decade leading the Razorbacks, made it clear that he wants to be an AD again.

"It's been six months, so I've been through the wave of emotions that come when you're asked to leave a position that you've really enjoyed," said Long, who chaired the first College Football Playoff selection committee. "Over time, I've just become even more convinced by what we accomplished, the leadership required to do that and, most importantly, who I am.

"I'm an athletic director and I certainly believe there's another AD job in my future."