

## GOPHERS

# Old wounds haven't healed for Gophers men's basketball program

Three able coaches have tried but taken Gophers only so far in post-scandal era

By Marcus Fuller (<https://www.startribune.com/marcus-fuller/388384352/>) Star Tribune |

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Since the academic fraud scandal that shattered Gophers men's basketball in 1999, three coaches have tried putting the pieces back together.

Arriving at different stages of the rebuilding process, Dan Monson, Tubby Smith and Richard Pitino have faced their own challenges, and the team's on-court success just hasn't been the same.

Monson lasted seven-plus seasons, Smith stayed for six, and now Pitino is deep into his seventh year, his future uncertain.

The Gophers (13-14) will play at Wisconsin on Sunday, facing long odds to return to the NCAA tournament after making it twice in the past three seasons. Their chances all but evaporated Wednesday vs. Maryland after a third straight second-half meltdown at home.

"The only thing you can do is you win games and that shuts people up," Pitino said of those questioning his job security. "I certainly have control over hopefully impacting that."

During the Clem Haskins era, the Gophers made separate runs to the Sweet 16, Elite Eight and Final Four. The NCAA vacated the latter achievement, along with the accompanying 1997 Big Ten title, after the scandal.

Two years after Minnesota's electrifying Final Four run, a former academic counselor admitted to writing hundreds of papers for players during a six-year span under Haskins. The NCAA slammed Minnesota with four years' probation, wiping the results from six seasons.

In the two decades since, the Gophers have reached the NCAA tournament just six times, never finishing higher than fourth in the Big Ten. For comparison, Wisconsin has made 20 NCAA tournaments (and three Final Fours) during that span, finishing higher than fourth 11 times.

Like Pitino, Monson and Smith went through trying times at Minnesota. Hard feelings aside, they both returned to campus last April, when they were in town for the Final Four, to see the program's new facilities with their own eyes.

"I was thinking about the death penalty and SMU football and how long it's taken them, 30-something years, to get back," Monson said earlier this season. "Minnesota basketball could've easily been in that same rut, like SMU football. It could've taken a longer time to get to where it is now."

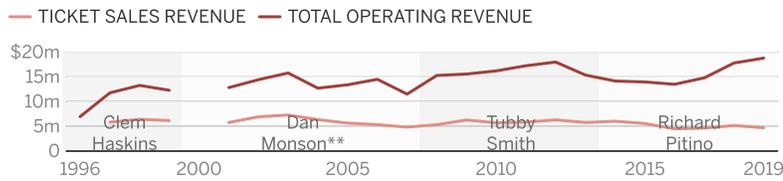


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Richard Pitino had his team poised for a victory over Maryland on Wednesday, but in the end the game turned into another in a string of

### Increased investment, inconsistent returns

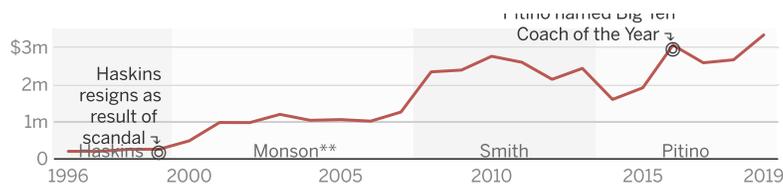
Despite a steady decline in income from ticket sales, total annual revenue has increased



Financial reports for FY2000 were unavailable. Ticket sales revenue unavailable for 1996.

Earnings were 16 times higher in 2018-19 season than two decades earlier.

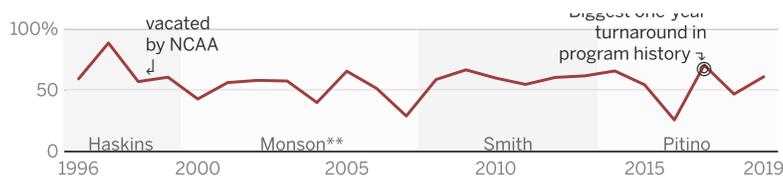
### HEAD COACH'S SALARY, BENEFITS AND BONUSES



2000 includes base rate salary only.

Wins have not returned to levels seen during the 1996-97 season.

### PERCENTAGE OF GAMES WON



All figures are adjusted to 2019-equivalent dollars.

\*\*Monson coached the first seven games of the 2006-07 season before resigning. Jim Molinari took over as interim coach.

Chart: Natalie Rademacher, Special to the Star Tribune • Source: University of Minnesota Athletics, basketball-reference

### Scandal aftershocks

Monson turned down the Gophers job twice before accepting the position in July 1999.

After taking Gonzaga to the Elite Eight in his second season as a Division I head coach, Monson didn't want to be the "cleanup guy" between Haskins and the next coach. But then-Gophers athletic director Mark Dienhart convinced him the sanctions wouldn't be a death sentence.

"The gravity of it was much more than I knew," Monson said. "They say, 'There's a cloud over your head.' That's all it takes for it to become monumental to change the perception."

During his first week, Monson had conversations with Gophers marketers about how to promote the program post-scandal.

Their response was that they didn't need to do much. They spent more money on football because the basketball fans "just come," Monson said.

Monson thought it was a big mistake to assume the fan support would always be there.

"We had a lot of work to do in the program to get the team going," he said. "I thought when the 13,000 [fans] goes down to 9,000, 10,000, they're going to be looking for a new coach. Unfortunately, I was kind of a prophet in some ways."

According to budget data obtained by the Star Tribune, the team's ticket revenue dropped 34% from 2003 until Monson's last season in 2006-07. It started with a slow trickle, as the Gophers drew an average of 13,895 fans over Monson's first four seasons.

He inherited 7-foot-1 Monticello standout Joel Przybilla, but the sophomore left the team during Monson's first season, declaring for the NBA draft following an academic suspension.

"I thought, 'Oh no, these people are going to boo me out of the gym,'" Monson said. "And I remember getting a standing ovation. It just goes to show those people ... wanted to win more than we were winning, but they stuck with that program through some really tough times."

These days, Gophers faithful can only dream of a five-star McDonald's All-American from Minnesota wearing maroon and gold. But two such recruiting victories for Monson helped pump life into the program.

First, Duluth East's Rick Rickert reneged on his commitment to Arizona in 2001 to stay home. Then two years later — after Rickert entered the NBA draft — Hopkins' Kris Humphries flipped from Duke to the Gophers and played one season. Neither reached the NCAA tournament, but they remain the only Gophers players drafted in the past 20 years.

"They were the beginning of the healing process for the state," Monson said.

Monson, who resigned after seven games in 2006, led the Gophers to one NCAA tournament appearance. He is now in his 13th season as the head coach at Long Beach State.

"I didn't realize the magnitude that the sanctions and the probation would be on the program," he said. "There was a reason so many people turned that job down that were more established and veterans. I was a younger guy who wasn't going to anguish on the sanctions ... and try to move it forward."

### **One practice facility short**

Smith spent years telling recruits the Gophers were planning on building a practice facility. He still looks back on that empty promise with regret.

Late in his tenure, the Gophers fell out of the running for Apple Valley's Tyus Jones, who went on to star at Duke for one season and is now in the NBA. Smith still wonders how different that recruitment, and others, could have been if he'd had more than facility blueprints to show.

Florida had jumped out in front in the facilities war, winning back-to-back national titles in 2006 and '07. Kentucky had done the fundraising for a new one just as Smith was leaving in 2007. But the U's new practice facility didn't come until five years after Smith's departure.

"It was disappointing that we couldn't get that started when we were there," Smith said. "Makes you look bad as a coach when you're selling, 'We're going to have this practice facility.' And six years later when I was there, it wasn't even started.

"We missed on Tyus Jones. That's where the facility would've made a difference."

While U fundraising focused on football at the time, the men's basketball operating expenses did rise from \$3.8 million in Monson's final year to \$6.7 million by Smith's third year. Smith had hoped for an even bigger surge.

"We were never at the top, but we were competitive with everyone else in the league," said Smith, who went to back-to-back NCAA tournaments in 2009 and 2010. "They had to step it up from a financial, recruiting and investment into the basketball program standpoint — take a big leap. I expected to win more when I was there. I expected to take Minnesota to a Big Ten championship."

Smith went on to coach at Texas Tech and Memphis and is now at High Point. More than a decade after his vision, the U opened the \$188 million Athletes Village in January 2018.

"That was one of the [main] recruiting points that Tubby sold to us on," said Andre Hollins, who played for both Smith and Pitino. "I think that's the only thing that was lacking, but now they have one. They have everything they need to thrive."

### **Recruiting misses mount**

After winning an NIT championship in his first year, Pitino saw the program sink to its lowest point since the scandal with an 8-23 season in Year 3.

While bouncing back with two NCAA tournaments in three years, Pitino didn't have the stigma of the scandal to worry about and could show recruits a glistening new practice facility.

But he has signed just three of 22 local players offered in his past three classes.

"I think every state when there's in-state talent, you're going to get evaluated on that," Pitino said. "So, it's important for us to get the right ones."

A tipping came in 2017, with Champlin Park's McKinley Wright. Wright visited the U and was seriously considering making a commitment before the Gophers landed New York point guard Isaiah Washington. Right or wrong, it caused a perception that Pitino valued out-of-state talent more.

The ripple effect was lasting. Washington was a disappointment and eventually transferred to Iona, while Wright has become an All-Pac-12 player at Colorado. And the Gophers have not landed a recruit from Wright's D1 Minnesota AAU program since, including McDonald's All-American Matthew Hurt, Zeke Nnaji, Tyler Wahl and Tyrell Terry last year — and Ben Carlson, Dawson Garcia and Steven Crawl this year.

Pitino still hopes to land another D1 Minnesota prospect: Hopkins shooter Kerwin Walton, who has attended several Gophers home games this season.

"It just comes down to preference and relationships," said Jeremy Miller, the program director for D1 Minnesota. "People who these guys have looked up to, like McKinley Wright — they see and can make up their own mind."

Pitino's prized recruits have been in-state players: Amir Coffey in 2016 and Daniel Oturu in 2018. Both helped the Gophers reach the NCAA tournament as freshman standouts. Coffey is the only former Gopher to see time in the NBA this season, and Oturu has the potential to follow.

"I've always believed in the message in what they're trying to do there," said Coffey, who has a two-way contract with the Los Angeles Clippers. "I'm still happy I went there. It was a big move for me."

Former Alexandria star and four-star 2021 big man Treyton Thompson committed this year to U's 2021 class, the first local Pitino landed since the 2018 class with Oturu, Gabe Kalscheur and Jarvis Omersa.

As excited as fans have been over those in-state hits, they have anguished more over the Gophers' big misses, especially the eight McDonald's All-Americans since 2013, including Garcia and Jalen Suggs this year.

### Still establishing roots

Smith had the same staff for his entire six seasons with the Gophers, but turnover has been a factor for Pitino, who lost four assistant coaches in his first five seasons. Ben Johnson, a DeLaSalle grad and former Gophers guard, left for Xavier two years ago, which was the biggest hit locally.

Garcia, for example, in explaining the reasons he chose Marquette over the Gophers, said, "Ben Johnson was my main recruiter. He was super cool. I didn't know what to think at first [when he left]."

Pitino's staff has gained more ground on some younger local prospects after being together for a couple of years, and he has received support from the university to recruit at a higher level. The team's total revenue and recruiting budget, adjusted for inflation, has more than tripled from 1996 to 2019. In fact, the Gophers spent more than six times as much on recruiting last year (\$505,000) than did Wisconsin (\$81,000). Minnesota's other border rival, Iowa, spent \$466,000.

Pitino and Iowa coach Fran McCaffery recruit more nationally, while Badgers coach Greg Gard focuses more regionally. Regardless, Gard landed a top-20 recruiting class, which includes Minnesota natives Carlson and Cowl.

Pitino has landed two four-star, out-of-state recruits in Jamal Mashburn Jr. (New Hampshire) and Martice Mitchell (Illinois). Minnesota's class ranks 48th nationally, according to 247Sports.com.

All told, the Gophers have had only spurts of post-scandal success, but they are in a better position after more than two decades since Haskins to take the next step.

Gophers athletic director Mark Coyle, who worked at the U during Monson's tenure, witnessed how difficult it was to rebuild the program after the scandal. Coyle gave Pitino a two-year contract extension last April after the team defeated Louisville in the NCAA tournament.

"It's hard to build a program and to continue that momentum," Coyle said then.

Pitino cites the team's 2017 and '19 NCAA tournament trips as signs the program is still heading in the right direction.

"It's gotten better," Pitino said. "Academically, the guys are flourishing as well. We've tried to do little things to make sure this program is better. It continues to build and grow."

Natalie Rademacher, a University of Minnesota student on assignment for the Star Tribune, contributed to this story.

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