

*In this excerpt from his new biography, **Color Him Orange: The Jim Boeheim Story**, author Scott Pitoniak looks back at the series of events that led to Boeheim's hiring as Syracuse University basketball coach several weeks after the 1975-76 season had ended.*

About a month after SU's elimination from the NCAA tournament, Roy Danforth informed SU athletic director Les Dye that he was resigning to take the Tulane University head coaching job. The timing of the resignation – just two weeks before National Letter-of-Intent Signing Day – caught many by surprise. Some critics surmised that Danforth had already made up his mind about bolting for the New Orleans college weeks before, but had delayed his decision because he was a delegate for Democratic presidential candidate Henry “Scoop” Jackson and didn't want to leave until he had casted his ballot in the New York State primary. An editorial in the school newspaper, *The Daily Orange*, ripped Danforth for putting his own interests ahead of the program that had given him his first head coaching opportunity. Although the manner in which he departed may have irked some, there was no denying that Danforth had built upon the foundation Lewis had established. His squads had won 68 percent of their games and made it to four consecutive NCAA tournaments and the school's first Final Four. In his hastily called farewell news conference, Danforth thanked the university and the community and also put in a plug for Boeheim to replace him, saying, “He is as responsible for our success over the past six years as I am.”

In retrospect, the promotion of Boeheim to the top spot seemed like a no-brainer. But the move did not come without a little drama. Before landing his dream job – the one he still holds nearly four decades later – Boeheim interviewed for the University of Rochester head coaching position that had become vacant when Lyle Brown, the Yellowjackets head man for 19 seasons, retired. “They were Division II back then,” he said. “But they were talking about going to Division I.” Boeheim walked out of that morning meeting believing that the Rochester job was his. But as he drove back to the Salt City for a meeting with the Syracuse University search committee, he knew, deep down, that the position he really wanted was the one open at his alma mater.

The Syracuse search committee of Dye, vice-chancellor Cliff Winters, trustee W. Carroll Coyne and board chairman David Bennett were high on the 31-year-old Boeheim, but thought it also might be wise to interview several men with Division I head coaching experience. Among the candidates they discussed were Tom Young, who in just this third season at Rutgers had guided the Scarlet Knights to the 1976 Final Four, and Bill Blair, whose Virginia Military Institute team had lost to Rutgers in the East Regional finals. In a 2002 interview with Mike Waters of the Syracuse *Post-Standard*, Bennett recalled the name of Michigan assistant Bill Frieder also being broached.

“At that point, we said if we're talking about assistant coaches, we've got Jim about to come in here anyway,” Bennett said.

The committee members didn't really know what to expect from Boeheim because he had kept such a low profile as an assistant. “He never took credit for the team's achievements,” Bennett said. “But, now, it was his opportunity to tell us what he had done.” Boeheim was aware that several outside

candidates were being considered. But he also knew that he had the UR job in his hip pocket, and he wasn't afraid to use it as leverage. "They wanted to open the process up," he recalled. "I told them I was going to go to Rochester if I didn't get the job. I didn't want to wait around for the interview process. I strongly believed that if you had an assistant who's capable and been there and done the work, he should be given a chance in that situation."

Boeheim also stressed that there was a sense of urgency because National Letter-of-Intent Day was just around the corner, and that prized recruits were about to be lost. He mentioned how the Orangemen were locked in a recruiting battle with St. Bonaventure University for the services of Roosevelt Bouie, a highly coveted 6-foot-11 center from Kendall, a small town northwest of Rochester. And Boeheim told the committee that he believed he had the inside track on landing him. "But time was of the essence," the coach explained. "If (the committee) was going to wait two more weeks before making a decision, we would have lost out on the guy who really could help the program take off."

Boeheim's interview went well, but the feedback the committee received from current and former players may have been the deciding factor. The player who spoke most passionately about Boeheim was guard Jim "Bug" Williams. "Jim Williams said 'Coach Boeheim put in the 2-3 (zone defense), Coach Boeheim did this, Coach Boeheim did that,'" Bennett recalled. "They were not only very affirmative about him, but they wanted to make clear how critical he was to the team's success and how they thought it was obvious he should be the guy."

After Boeheim left the meeting, the committee deliberated for about 30 minutes before calling him back in to tell him the job was his. "It was not obvious that Jim would be the choice at the beginning of the two-hour meeting," Bennett said. "It was only when he spoke in own behalf and the players spoke about him that it became clear that there was no point looking elsewhere."

Details of a three-year, \$75,000 deal were worked out quickly and on April 3, 1976, the walk-on from Lyons was introduced as the seventh men's basketball coach in school history.

"We already felt that Jim was the best assistant coach in the country," Syracuse University chancellor Melvin Eggers said at the news conference introducing Boeheim. "The only question the committee had to decide was whether the pick would be Jim or an established coach. We received overwhelming support for Jim from the present members of this team and from several former players. Because of his keen basketball mind and his knowledge of what had to be done to keep Syracuse basketball at the top, the (search) committee quickly realized the best man for the job was right here." Boeheim told reporters he had always had his eye on the head coaching job, and said he asked for a three-year contract because "I wanted the opportunity to develop my own program." He also joked that, unlike his predecessor, he would avoid politics. Asked whom he was supporting in the upcoming Presidential election, Boeheim quipped: "Roosevelt Bouie."

Several newspaper stories about his hiring included a parenthetical explanation about how to pronounce his name (BAY-hyme.) Reporters felt compelled to include that information because despite Boeheim's background as a player and six seasons as an assistant coach, he was somewhat of an anonymous figure even among Syracuse basketball fans, having been greatly overshadowed by his

former teammate, Dave Bing, and his former boss, Roy Danforth. Interestingly, his name would continue to be botched by fans and sportscasters alike in the ensuing decades.

Boeheim thanked the athletic administrators at the University of Rochester, saying that his talks with them had been excellent. But he admitted Syracuse was the job he wanted all along, adding that “everybody wants to coach where he played.” With Letter-of-Intent Day just a week away, Boeheim said he would immediately hit the recruiting trail in hopes of landing Bouie. “Anytime you have a coaching change at this late date, it will affect the recruiting situation,” he said. “But I have seen all the recruits personally, at least once, so it should not make that much of a difference. Roosevelt Bouie is still our number one kid. Our center position has been weak and we need some support there.” Boeheim also told the media that “there’s no real difference in coaching philosophy between Roy and myself. I plan to stress defense a little more, but that’s about it.” Players wouldn’t be the only personnel Boeheim would need to recruit. He’d also need to find two new assistant coaches because Tommy Green, who also had worked on Danforth’s staff at SU, had announced he was following his boss to Tulane.

News of Boeheim’s hiring was cause for celebration in his hometown of Lyons. His parents were understandably thrilled, but the person most proud may have been Jimmy’s mentor and former high school coach, Dick Blackwell. “He was really shy when I coached him,” Blackwell said, reminiscing about Boeheim with Norm Jollow, a sportswriter with the *Finger Lakes Times*. “He would hardly look at you when you were talking to him. But I watched him being interviewed on TV and he’s really poised. He’s matured and if he comes off with his players and in recruiting as well as he did on TV, he should be great.” Not long after watching the news conference on television, Blackwell wrote his protégé a letter telling him that there was no doubt in his mind that he would become a successful head coach. “There’s never been anybody more dedicated,” continued Blackwell, who joked that Boeheim must have been born with a basketball in his hands. “I’m sure all he dreams about is basketball. He didn’t know anything else.” The news of Boeheim’s promotion didn’t surprise Blackwell one iota. “I understand a couple of years ago, when Roy was thinking of going somewhere else, the Hardwood Club of Syracuse was reported to say they wouldn’t mind losing Danforth but wanted to keep Jimmy. They knew how well he worked with the kids. I’ll tell you this much: Nobody will ever be more completely dedicated than he will. It’s all he ever wanted to do.”

Nearly a quarter of a century later, as the school prepared to honor Boeheim by naming the Carrier Dome basketball court after him, the coach was asked what would have happened if the SU search committee had wanted to interview another candidate. “I would’ve probably ended up in Rochester and they’d be naming that court after somebody else,” he said. And what happened to the other candidates? Young stayed at Rutgers until 1985 before taking over at Old Dominion University. Blair left VMI that spring for the University of Colorado, where he spent four seasons before embarking on a long career in the National Basketball Association, capped by the head coaching job of the Minnesota Timberwolves. And Frieder took over for the legendary Johnny Orr at Michigan and left for Arizona State in 1989 just as the Wolverines were beginning their run to the 1989 national championship. And Mike Neer, a former assistant at the Naval Academy, took the Rochester job, leading the Yellowjackets to 563 wins and a Division III national title, before retiring following the 2009-10

season. "It's funny how things worked out for each of us," Boenheim said years later. "One move can have a domino effect. It can impact an awful lot of lives."