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Andy Kennedy is home again and ready to turn UAB into a winner



By Seth Davis (/author/seth-davis/) Apr 7, 2020

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After Andy Kennedy resigned as the coach at Ole Miss toward the end of the 2017-18 season, he had to decide where to live. He didn't want to stay in Oxford, and because he and his wife, Kimber, were on the verge of becoming empty nesters, they could go wherever they wanted. They chose Birmingham, Ala., where Kennedy spent three years as a player and six as an assistant at UAB. "This place is home for me," Kennedy says. "I played here and coached here. I have lots of friends here. It just made sense for us."

The move put Kennedy in a suitable location for his next gig as a broadcaster for the SEC Network and ESPN. The league is headquartered in Birmingham, and living there allowed Kennedy easy access to all of the SEC schools as well as the network's studio in Charlotte, N.C. Kennedy was especially well-positioned in March, when UAB fired coach Robert Ehsan after he went 76-57 over four seasons. One week after making that decision, UAB tapped Kennedy, 52, to be Ehsan's replacement. It is never easy to start a new gig, especially these days given all the upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but Kennedy's transition has been relatively seamless. "It's not like I'm having to delve into a place where I really don't know," he says. "This part of the country is my footprint. That's made it as efficient as possible under the circumstances."

Kennedy did not spend the last two years plotting his return to the sideline, so he did not arrive with a specific to-do list. He stayed in familiar territory when it came to assembling a staff. He started with Philip Pearson, who played at Alabama for Wimp Sanderson while Kennedy was at UAB. Pearson has spent nearly three decades working on college coaching staffs in the South, including under Mark Fox at Georgia from 2009 to '18. Pearson still lives in Athens and spent last season working as director of recruiting at Clemson. Although the only time he has been on UAB's campus since taking the job was when he visited for a few hours last week to sign some paperwork, he has slid easily into the job with his longtime friend. "You're talking about 30 years worth of knowing each other," Pearson says. "We were able to get right to work."

Kennedy also has longstanding ties with the other two assistants he brought on board. He first met Ryan Cross when Kennedy was an assistant at UAB and was recruiting players at Chipola College in Florida, where Cross was an assistant. Cross spent the last eight years at Louisiana Monroe. And Kennedy's new director of basketball operations is Sidney Ball, who was a senior starting guard at UAB when Kennedy was an assistant coach and the Blazers made the Sweet 16 in 2004. Ball spent the last six years working at Samford.

When it came to the players, however, Kennedy was in unfamiliar territory. Even though he lives in town, his loaded schedule as a broadcaster prevented him from watching a lot of UAB games. It isn't easy to form relationships during a pandemic, but he has done his level best. The only player whom Kennedy has met with in person is Makhtar Gueye, a 6-10 junior

forward from Senegal who was the team's leading rebounder (5.1 per game) last season and was unable to leave campus because he is so far from home. Gueye told Kennedy he preferred to stay at UAB if Kennedy wanted him, and Kennedy assured him he did.

Kennedy communicated the same wish to several other players, and he has spent the last few weeks following up. Those efforts have paid off. Though three Blazers put their names in the transfer portal, all five of the top scorers who were not seniors last season are coming back. That includes Jalen Benjamin, a 5-10 point guard from Raleigh, N.C., who was named to Conference USA's All-Freshman team. "I had done some research (on Kennedy) and I liked that he had some all-conference guards at Ole Miss," Benjamin says. "I figured that if I stayed or went somewhere else, I was going to be with a new coach either way. Building that relationship, even though it was only on the phone, made it easier for me to stay."

Kennedy also reached out to Rongie Gordon, a 6-8 forward from Montgomery, Ala., who was recruited by the previous staff, and persuaded him to follow through on his decision to sign with UAB. In addition, Kennedy has secured commitments from two high school seniors: Terrell Ard, a 6-7 forward from Georgia, and Tony Toney, a 6-2 combo guard from Huntsville, Ala.

Ideally, Kennedy would offer scholarships to recruits he has seen play, but these are not ideal times. Instead, he has had to rely on video evaluations and recommendations from basketball folks he trusts. His recruitment of Toney is a prime example. According to Toney's high school coach, Howard Pride, Kennedy became interested partly because of a recommendation by Robi Coker, a fellow Alabama high school coach who worked on Kennedy's staff at Ole Miss. Toney had attracted interest from Auburn and Iowa State, but those schools never offered him a scholarship during the basketball season, so he had yet to make a decision. Kennedy called Pride and asked him to email some video of Toney. He called back to report he liked what he saw.

Kennedy then wrote a direct message to Toney over Twitter. The two of them spoke by phone later that afternoon. After a couple of days and multiple phone conversations, Toney was ready to be a Blazer. "I didn't know much about him at first, except that he had played at UAB and that he was a downtown shooter," Toney says. "We bonded real tight during that period of time. I wish we could have talked in person, but you can feel the vibes over the phone."

Kennedy and his staff will continue to rely on such unconventional methods as they work to fill out their roster. “It’s a lot of video and due diligence, but it’s also a lot of trusting guys that I have dealt with during my 23-year coaching run,” Kennedy says. “This has forced me out of my comfort zone because I have to be dependent on someone else’s perspective over my own.”



Benjamin will give Kennedy a building block as he starts his tenure at UAB. (Mark Zerof / USA Today Sports)

It will be interesting to see in the next couple of years whether coaches around the country conclude that the lack of in-person evaluation led to more mistakes. It’s possible they won’t. After all, recruiting always involves guesswork — especially at the mid-major level, where coaches must decide which low-ranked players have the potential to develop. “I worked with Tom Asbury (when both were assistants at Alabama), who said 90 percent of recruiting was wasted time,” Pearson says. “You spend a lot of time chasing prospects you don’t end up signing or don’t end up wanting. Sometimes you just have an old buddy who says a kid’s good, and that turns out to be all you need.”

Kennedy still has several scholarships to give. Like every other coach in America, he and his staff have been checking the transfer portal daily. They haven't done any Zoom calls yet, but they speak often and have a group text going to bounce ideas off each other. The coaches' task is not only to research stats and check out video but also to scavenge for possible connections. "I'm basically on the phone 20 hours a day trying to vet through all the different options," Kennedy says. "You're looking at the list thinking, is this a family I know? Does he have ties to Birmingham? Have we recruited him before?"

It has been 19 years since Kennedy worked at a mid-major (before taking over at Ole Miss in 2006 he spent five years at Cincinnati), so a major part of his adjustment will be re-learning how to spot the type of player he needs to pursue. He is also drawing on the things he learned the last two years at ESPN. "Working in TV allowed me to watch games from 30,000 feet as opposed to wondering how it would affect my team," he says. "I had so much exposure to how other guys ran their programs. Coaches were tremendously open to me and allowed me to be in their practices and film sessions. It gave me a lot of ideas I can implement."

The inability to make face-to-face contact is only part of the uncertainty that Kennedy and his colleagues are facing these days. As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Collegiate Commissioners Association, which administers the National Letter of Intent program, extended the annual spring signing period for high school recruits to Aug. 1. (It begins on April 15.) Moreover, while the NCAA's Division I Council is hoping to decide sometime in June whether to pass a rule that allows undergrads one opportunity to transfer without having to sit out a season, there is no clarity as to when that will go into effect.

For all the challenges, however, Kennedy is thrilled for the chance to resume his career at a place he knows so well. He has been itching to return to the sideline ever since he left Ole Miss, but he wanted to be sure it was the right school at the right time. Much to his delight, he found one that was also in the right place. "I told my bosses at ESPN, my goal is for you guys to appreciate what I bring enough so I don't have to take a bad job," he says. "So when this one came along, it was a no-brainer. I'm excited to get things going."

(Photo of Andy Kennedy: Wesley Hitt / Getty Images)

What did you think of this story?



MEH



SOLID



AWESOME

Seth Davis ([/author/seth-davis/](#)) is Managing Editor of The Athletic's college basketball coverage. Since 2004, he has served as a studio analyst for CBS and Turner's coverage of college basketball and the NCAA tournament. He is also the author of five books, including the New York Times best seller, *Wooden: A Coach's Life Follow Seth on Twitter* [@SethDavisHoops](#) (<https://twitter.com/SethDavisHoops>).



14 COMMENTS

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Tyler G. Apr 7, 1:33pm

Really looking forward to what Andy will be able to accomplish here. Go Blazers!



Jay B. Apr 7, 2:21pm

As a Cincinnati fan, I am happy for Andy and wish him the best.



Greg L. Apr 7, 2:33pm

The UAB basketball program (along with Charlotte) have been adversely affected by the erosion of C-USA 's standing in Division I over the past decade. What once was a multi-bid league is now a one-bid conference with the quality of competition showing a significant decline. Kennedy will have to improve the non-conference slate in order to return the program to the prominence it had under Bartow and Anderson.



Scott G. Apr 7, 5:13pm

@Greg L. I'm a recent fan of UAB, but it's always seemed odd that this iteration of CUSA has so many would-be good basketball programs, but the league is always terrible. UAB, ODU, WKU, Charlotte, UTEP, Middle, La Tech, So Miss and Marshall are all top-150 programs according to KenPom, but only one or two are good in a given year.



Drew C. Apr 7, 9:12pm

@Scott G. UTEP is bad now. The Florida programs have really brought down the league. UAB has been a middle of the pack team for the last few years and ODU was bad this year. It seems like these programs can't be good all at once, like you said.



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Scott G. Apr 7, 5:08pm

This is the kind of detail I've been desperate for since AK got hired. The detail you went into on recruiting alone was fascinating, even if it hadn't have been specific to my team. The quote from Benjamin was good...hopefully someone just showed him some Marshall Henderson stats or something. Rongie Gordon remaining committed is probably the biggest news from this article though.



Chris P. Apr 7, 5:29pm

Remember when UAB would go head-to-head with 'bama in recruiting some top in-state players in the early-mid 80's. Would be nice for UAB to get back back to that.



Adam G. Apr 7, 7:58pm

Go to a school that will always be football-first no matter what, or go to a school where basketball should be king. Should be appealing to at least a few recruits.



Scott G. Apr 9, 3:39am

It wasn't even that long ago, this last staff just didn't recruit the state of Alabama well. Haase was able to get William Lee to come to UAB. He was the AL Mr. Basketball, and I think was a 4-star on some sites.

Ehsan Lansing Gordon was huge. But now Kennedy is able to keep him, and then he lands Toney, UAB has the #2 & #3 players in the state this year.



Howard C. Apr 8, 12:16am

Loved him on TV and great coach at Ole Miss. He will bring them back



Leslie L. Apr 8, 10:42pm

I really like Andy Kennedy, glad to see he'll be back on the sidelines. Enjoyed him on the SEC Network. He's a great guy.



Justin C. Apr 9, 3:33am

Looking forward to Hoops season



He and Tom Hart were one of the best play-by-play/analyst duos on television.



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