

Former Vanderbilt players praise Kevin Stallings' offensive mind, honesty

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There are different sides to new Pitt coach Kevin Stallings, at least according to Julian Terrell, who played for Stallings at Vanderbilt from 2002-06 and is now an assistant coach at Austin Peay,

There's the version fans see on television: Spirited, passionate, sometimes over the top. Then, there's the Stallings that comes out away from the court: A coach who always leaves his door open to his players, who has a good sense of humor and a great personality.

His team, Terrell said, will learn to appreciate both.

"He meets with players all the time," Terrell said. "He tells them what he expects from them. He invites them over to his house. He has them over to watch a random game. He's very fiery on the court, so he's tough on guys. But guys need that love, too, off the court and I think he does a great job at that."

Derrick Byars, who attended Virginia from 2002-04 and then transferred to Vanderbilt in 2005, echoed Terrell's assessment.

"Whenever you wanted to contact him, you could," said Byars, who was drafted in the second round of the NBA draft and played in the developmental league as well as overseas. "He makes you very comfortable to play for him as well as spend time with him off the court, whether it be at his house or just having fun."

On Sunday, Stallings was hired by Pitt to replace Jamie Dixon, who left the program after 13 years as head coach for TCU, his alma mater. Fan reaction to Stallings' hiring was less than enthusiastic. He compiled a 322-220 record over 17 seasons at Vanderbilt, including a sub-.500 138-142 mark in Southeastern Conference play. In the last four seasons, he's won 20 games just once.

Terrell, though, believes there's plenty about Stallings that will appeal to fans, even if it doesn't happen right away. Coming into a new program with a fresh start, he's a coach that can make an impact, Terrell said, and thrives during in-game situations.

"When he gets there," he said, "I think he has the ability to just walk in from day one and raise the bar, set the standard for the players early and let them know his expectations early and right off the bat."

"Even before I transferred there, I could see all the different schemes he had," Byars said. "He was able to make adjustments based on the strength of the roster."

For a while, Byars said Stallings ran the Princeton offense. But while Byars was there, the Commodores put more athletic teams on the floor, and that allowed them to play more uptempo. That's one of the reasons Byars believes he'll be able to have success in the Atlantic Coast Conference.

Fellow former player Steve Tchiengang agreed, saying Stallings has the "tools, staff and experience" to make an immediate impact. He expects him to be able to build on an already successful Pitt program. Tchiengang came to Vanderbilt from Cameroon, choosing the Commodores over Oklahoma, Baylor, Notre Dame and Georgia Tech, among others. He played for Stallings from 2008-12.

"He didn't just tell me things that I wanted to hear," Tchiengang said. "He was honest with me about my game and things that I needed to improve and that's something I needed to hear."

"He really honed in on, 'Your not going to improve until you start playing with more physicality,'" Byars said. "I hadn't had a coach that let me play freely up until that point during college. He let me play through my mistakes as long as I was learning and improving."

That honestly is something Tchiengang and Terrell said factored heavily into their decisions to commit to Vanderbilt. One of the qualities Pitt athletic director Scott Barnes laid out for the Panthers' new coach is someone who can "absolutely recruit his tail off." Terrell, who chose Vanderbilt over Alabama, UConn, Kentucky and Tennessee, said that could be Stallings.

"He's a guy that when he talks, you listen," he said. "It's kind of a running joke with some of his ex-players where I'm a 31-year-old man and if he talks to me, I kind of still feel like he's still my coach no matter what, to this day.

"When he talks to you, he tells you directly what he expects out of you. He's not going to tell lies. He's not going to sugar coat it. He's just going to tell you exactly how it is. Nowadays, I think most players need that if you're going to be successful you've got to be able to handle that. No player is going to want to go play for a coach that lies to them or makes them believe what's not true."

Stallings started recruiting Byars starting when the latter was in 10th grade, and Byars said it was a "mistake not to go to him in the first place."

Tchiengang added he made the international players feel right at home. He still keeps in touch with Stallings four years later, and said the coach didn't just prepare the players for what they would see on the court, he prepared them for life. Some of the lessons, Tchiengang said, he didn't appreciate until years later.

"He related to me and made me feel comfortable," he said. "He had such a great understanding of where we were from."

As for style of play, it will likely depend on the Panthers' personnel. Terrell added, though, that Stallings will most likely run a more uptempo style the first couple of years in order to "appeal to the fans" and "put (the players) in a position to score."

"He's a great offensive mind," Tchiengang immediately responded when asked what kind of coach Stallings was. "He has such a great understanding of the game. He had schemes and backup schemes and backup schemes."

“I do believe he will grab (fans’) attention,” Terrell said. “He will change the program for the better.”