

Rice keeping a close eye on RMU, Toole

By Lauren Kirschman lkirschman@timesonline.com

CHARLOTTE, N.C. -- Mike Rice hasn't been the coach of Robert Morris since 2010, but that doesn't mean he's left the program far behind. In fact, anytime the Colonials are playing, you can bet Rice is watching -- and tweeting about it.

The experience is fun for him, watching every game with his family while simultaneously reconnecting with his former players on Twitter. It's a way for Rice to stay attached to a team he still refers to as his, just in a different way now. Instead of a coach, he's a fan and, more importantly, a reliable and willing sounding board for his former assistant, Andy Toole.

Toole was an assistant on Rice's staff from 2007-10, and the Colonials went to consecutive NCAA Tournaments in 2009 and 2010. Now, Toole has them back for the first time as a head coach -- and Rice is thrilled.

He followed along as Toole pursued an NEC tournament championship year after year, only to fall just short. Rice understood what that felt like, but he also had no doubt Toole would eventually take the Colonials to an NCAA Tournament. He wouldn't stop until he did. Toole has always been that way.

Relentless.

"He just has that it-factor," Rice said. "He has a complete grasp of the game and an understanding. He's confident in everything he does. He's always searching for ways to improve the team. He has a thirst and a hunger for improvement."

Those aren't new traits for Toole. He had them as a college player, too. He was small for a Division I guard, both in height and weight, but that wasn't going to stop him. Toole went on to have a successful college career, helping guide Penn to back-to-back NCAA Tournaments.

And now, he's there as a head coach, a position Rice predicted Toole would eventually hold from the first time he met him. There was never any doubt in his mind.

"He had such a knowledge and a grasp of teaching the game at such an early age," Rice said. "He has a way of communicating and then putting that together with a great basketball mind. I kind of always knew he would be successful."

The two talk often throughout the course of the year, especially early in this season when Toole was frustrated with his young and inconsistent team.

Rice was there to remind him that they could still win the NEC championship, and that the team was talented enough to do it. Those words meant a lot to Toole, not just because they came from a friend, but because Rice had so much NEC success of his own.

"Obviously, he's following our program and wants us to do well," Toole said. "He's always throwing in his two cents, encouraging our staff with things that we need to hear and helping us get over the hurdle."

"There's a lot of the same type of culture and mentality that we built at Robert Morris," Rice said. "I know what he's thinking and what he wants. Most importantly, it's just listening to him. He usually ends up working it out himself."

It took awhile for this team to buy into that culture. The formula -- based heavily in relentlessness and toughness -- is very much a reflection of Toole. It was hard at times waiting for all of the players to grasp it, but once they did, the difference was clear. And while Toole was working to make everything click, Rice was there to remind him that he would.

"Now, they are doing it on the floor," said Rice, who was fired by Rutgers in 2013 amid controversy over his treatment of players. "Now, the ball is getting out of their hands quicker. They understand

their roles and how to do it. They always had talent. The talent was fine. Now that they've all come together, you can see what a beautiful thing he's made it out to be.”

But for all the encouragement Rice offered this season, he didn't have much advice for Toole's first NCAA Tournament berth. Rice thought he'd be just fine on his own. So far, Toole has proven him right.

He did make sure to tell Toole to include his family, to take them to the dinners, to make them feel apart of it. If Toole's 2-year-old son Ryan bouncing a basketball through the Colonials' practice on Thursday evening was any indication, Toole is having no problem with that part. And judging by the First Four win over North Florida, the coaching side is going pretty well, too.

“Have fun, enjoy it, go compete” Toole said Rice told him. “That was our mindset when we came here eight years ago as a staff. That's what we wanted to do and we have to stay true to that.”