

Kozuback leaves a legacy ... but will we miss him?

The rumor was in the woodwork for quite some time but it's now finally out in the open that the big, bad Penticton Knights will be winging through this B.C. Junior Hockey League season without Rick Kozuback behind the bench.

Kozuback, the guy we all loved to hate, but respected just the same, is heading for greener pastures ... and rightly so. Winning a national junior A hockey championship after just four years at the helm is quite an accomplishment and definitely qualifies Kozuback for bigger and better things.

The bigger and better thing is a head coaching position with River Falls, Wisconsin Falcons. River Falls is a satellite university campus of University of Wisconsin where the somewhat more famous Badgers play.

Badgers are a division one team while Falcons play in division three of the National Collegiate Athletic Association or just plain NCAA ... or else the NC two A if you happen to be an American (NC two -eh? if you're Canadian).

After confiding with one another in our sports department following hearing the news Kozuback was leaving, the question arose as to whether or not this was actually a step in the right direction for Kozuback. After all, it seemed that a guy with his credentials and his resume in the sport could at least attract an offer from an NCAA division I club.

It was later learned, through Knights public relations director Ron Taylor, that this was indeed the case — that Kozuback had entertained quite a healthy number of offers from not only NCAA division I teams but also from Major Junior clubs, and several semi-pro clubs.

Unfortunately, the bottom line in these cases seemed to be that our friend Kozuback would have to join these clubs in some lesser capacity than head coach. Naturally, when



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the opportunity to become head coach of a U.S. college came along it looked much sweeter than any of the previous offers.

This alone might have been enough to persuade Kozuback to pull up anchor and head for the U.S. but the River Falls campus also threw a few more incentives into the offer which made it virtually irresistible.

For one thing, Kozuback will have a full-time teaching position, something for which he's also qualified but hasn't had a chance to do in Penticton for the past two and a half years. In addition, the university apparently has taken care of his housing needs and as if that wasn't enough the school, according to Taylor, is also harboring thoughts of going division I in the next several years.

All of which means that our man from Penticton would be in a dandy position to become head coach of an NCAA division I team (Just like Herb Brooks, Badger Bob Johnson and the like). From there the sky is probably the limit, who knows?

But there's more. According to Taylor's information sources, Kozuback's appointment means he would be the first Canadian head coach to crack the American college circuit in more than eight years.

So, the position more than fills Kozuback's hopes and expectations and he's gone.

Kozuback also leaves a legacy for Penticton Knights and the BCJHL in general.

During his four years with Knights he worked hard to get the top college prospective players to play for Knights so that college scouts would flock to the Peach City each hockey season in search of the elusive hockey talent needed to fill their ranks. In the past several years that has managed to rub off on a lot of the other clubs in the league, including Vernon Lakers. A few years ago a college scout at a BCJHL game was a rare sight. Now it's common to see two or three at any given game throughout the regular season and many times that number come playoffs. In addition, the presence of so many college scouts has lured a few big-league scouts into the area, too, and in the next few seasons I think we're going to see more and more of the top draftable players in the BCJHL going in the June amateur draft ... especially the ones who are covered by the blanket of protection offered by NCAA.

And it's not as though Kozuback is deserting a sinking ship in Penticton, either. Far from it. The former Knights' coach has already run a number of evaluation camps and made up a good list of top prospects which will be in the Penticton camp early next month.

And, with that problem out of the way, Knights have just one stumbling block to overcome ... finding a new head coach.

Though the Penticton organization is reluctant to offer any clues as to whom they have in mind for the position, don't be too surprised if it's Larry Lund who has been in the organization for a number of seasons. Another name that comes to mind is Nick Iannone.

Either one of these guys is a suitable replacement and with either at the helm Knights will be as fearsome a bunch of competitors as ever.

There's just one problem with both of them.

They're nice guys.