



Coach Jim Molinari Sets the Record Straight

By Nadine Babu

Jim Molinari is going into his third year as an Assistant Coach for the University of Minnesota Men's Basketball team. Coach Molinari is a defensive specialist and made an immediate impact on the team, which helped lead to our NCAA appearance in 2005. Following that, he received accolades from numerous publications, including Street and Smiths, as the best assistant coach in the Big Ten. After spending the past 17 days on the road, he was gracious enough to give The Barnyard an exclusive interview on pressing topics such as academics, players, expectations, and recruiting.

General

Barnyard: Going into last year, most people thought The Gophers would finish in the top half of the Big 10. What happened?

JM: First off, as people know, I've been here for two years. I tell people that in my time, we've had 23 out of 24 great months of Gopher Basketball. I think what happened last year was a combination of things; one, the Big ten was really, really tough. It was ranked the number one conference all year long, and I don't think the showing in the NCAA tournament takes away from what they did all year long. Two, I believe that we let one get away: our first game at home against Northwestern and then we played Wisconsin. We just had a bad two or three weeks, which we accept responsibility for. And three, our chemistry didn't come along until later in the year. I really do believe the team didn't quit, I believe the team got better and better, we had some big wins over ranked opponents, plus, knocking Michigan out of the Big Ten Tournament.

Barnyard: What's fascinating about this team is the combination of no seniors and so many new players. What kind of a challenge does that pose for a coaching staff?

JM: People talk about recruiting all the time, I don't think they talk enough about the players you have. And, we believe our future is on campus for the next two years, not that we can add a piece of the puzzle in this recruiting class. I think it will be interesting, I think we have a group that's really going to blend well

together, I think we're going to have excellent chemistry, I think we have some athleticism. I think we need to find out what we see in the individuals and in practice, and I hope some will step up and really take the leadership role. I think leadership is a huge question for our team; who's going to be the leader of this team. I always tell people as a Coach, you can name a Captain, but you can't name a leader. What makes it uncertain, also makes it exciting.

Barnyard: How does the team develop an identity when it's such an amalgam of players who haven't played as a team much before and who may be learning some new systems?

JM: Well, I think your program needs to have an identity. Then, you plug the players into your identity. You can definitely make little adjustments within that identity, but I think the identity of our program is on the defensive end, we want to be a strong defensive team, we want to make it hard for the other team to score. We're basically a half-court defensive team. On the offensive end, I think Coach's philosophy is that we always take good shots and get the ball inside. Our identity is going to be hard-nosed defense, plus great shot selection and making the extra pass on offense. I think that identity was the case last year, and it was also the case two years ago. I just think we need to get these players to totally buy into the identity and play the identity.

Barnyard: What are your reservations about pressing?

JM: Personally, I think pressing has a role in basketball, especially early in the year. It's more my personal philosophy, I've just never done it and so I'm not used to it. But I am realistic and I know that 2 years ago, if we didn't hard press Wisconsin, we don't win that game at home. Coach Monson blends it in well. I think when you're a half court defensive coach like myself, pressing can give them easy baskets. And it's very hard when you're a defensive minded coach to give up easy baskets. I think there are many different ways to victory, and I think the way Coach Monson blends in pressing had been really effective.

Barnyard: What would it take to run an effective $\frac{3}{4}$ press like we did 2 years ago?

JM: I think it takes quickness and athletic ability. I think this year, with some of the new players we've added, we'll be a faster team. Coach Monson is always going to have a $\frac{3}{4}$ press in his arsenal, he's always going to have a $\frac{1}{2}$ court press, play some zone, and changing defenses. I think you need to have one main defense, but I think you have to change. It also takes someone in the back of the press to block the shot.

Barnyard: During games, you sit further down on the bench with the players – why do you prefer this? Why don't you sit with the other coaches?

JM: We all have different roles, it's not anything that's preferred or not preferred. When I came here, Coach and Coach Walker had been with Coach

Monson for years, and I think they have relationships. I think one of the key elements of building a relationship is time and they have tremendous relationships, and they have a tremendous rapport. My niche is more on the defensive end, and I do like being around the players down there. If you look at a lot of benches, they are spread out. I don't think you need 6 guys down at one end, and 7 players down at the other end. That's why I sit down there, I really enjoy that spot, I still can get my message across. Everyone has different roles, Coach Couch works a lot with the offense, and during the game Coach Walker calls out of bounds plays. Coach Monson still calls the defenses, I just try to sit down at that end and really concentrate on the match-ups.

Barnyard: For the record, there were some rumors about you taking the HC position at NDSU, was that ever an option for you?

JM: No, because Tim Miles is a great guy and never left. I'm a believer that if you do a good job at where you're at, you get opportunities. All of our assistants, Bill Walker, Vic Couch and myself; I don't think Coach Monson would want us around if we didn't want to be head coaches someday. Someday I'd like to be a head coach again. The way to get there is to have our program do as well as possible.

Individual Players

Barnyard: What position do you think Kevin Payton will play? PG/SG/SF?

JM: With Kevin it's really interesting because we haven't seen Kevin basically healthy in a year and a half. As everyone knows, we recruited the young man and last summer, when he went to visit his parents in Austria, because that's where he grew up, he separated his shoulder for the second time. He had to have major surgery. He came back in practice towards the end of this year, but was really only 70%. From what we saw before, Kevin is very athletic, he won 400 in state, he's very long, which I think is key in athlete. I think he's a combination guard, he plays the one, can play some two, but I think he can be a defensive stopper. I think Kevin can give us some good minutes, as the rest of those incoming players. A lot of those young players are very athletic.

Barnyard: Is Lawrence McKenzie grasping the role of the PG or will he end up being a SG?

JM: That's another good question. I think Lawrence, whether he's a point guard or a shooting guard, we need major production out of him. I think Lawrence is a very, very good basketball player. I'm hoping the year off will not affect him too much. I think Lawrence has been through a very tough program at Oklahoma, he knows what it takes, a program that won. Lawrence is a tremendous outside shooter, one of the best outside shooter's I've been around. I mean he hit deep

range, gets it off quick, but I expect him to play a lot of point. I think he's unselfish, so it's not like he won't give up the ball, which is a point guard's mentality. I just want Lawrence, and we want Lawrence personally, to set the defense. He needs to be aggressive on the defensive end, get everyone involved, and he has to be a vocal leader. Lawrence is someone we're counting on heavily.

Barnyard: Is Lawrence Westbrook strictly a SG, or can he develop into a PG?

JM: That's interesting because Lawrence Westbrook was a late signee, and personally, I've never seen Lawrence play in person. But, I'm very confident because Coach Monson and Coach Couch are very competent and they know what they're looking for. I think what people will see in him is he's very strong, that his greatest quality to me. When you're a Big Ten guard, you have to be strong. He'll probably be able to contribute earlier because he is a scorer. I think as much as he is a shooter, he's a scorer, he can get to the basket and take body contact and finish the play from what I've seen on tape. I think Lawrence comes in here as a person who has that ability. Like any other freshman, it will be a huge adjustment to adapt to the physical-ness and adapt to the defense end, but he's had a very good summer.

Barnyard: Last year, I think a lot of us expected a lot of out Dan Coleman, and he seemed to plateau a little bit, is his head and heart in it this year?

JM: Oh yes. I think Dan works as hard as anybody on our team at his game. I'm going to lump Dan Coleman and Spencer Tollackson together. They both had some very good moments last year, and I could point them out for both of them. Spencer at the Big Ten Tournament, and Dan at Penn State. I think what happened is when we started the season in the Big 10, we had very dominant personalities in the backcourt, Adam Boone, Moe Hargrow and Vincent Grier, so maybe they didn't feel as comfortable being as aggressive as they needed to be, because we were more guard oriented. I'm going to give them a lot of credit, because one, once they lost their positions to Zach Pachtel and J'son Stamper, they still worked hard in practice, they fought through it, they were ready to play. I believe failure is always a part of the road to success. I really believe that they are a key part and they need to produce big, and I think they're approaching it right - Spencer has lost a lot of weight, Dan's been working on his game. I just think the thing they both have to do is remember where they really need to help dominant this team is in rebounding, so I think that's their greatest challenge.

Barnyard: You recruited Damian Johnson, I think he's a question mark in a lot of people's heads. What did you see in him when you saw him play in high school?

JM: It was interesting, I saw Damian in Florida with Tom Izzo, and we were sitting there talking and he was playing a Michigan team and playing really,

really well. Tom Izzo said, "That guy could play in Minneapolis." I asked, "Could he play in East Lansing?" I said if he couldn't play in East Lansing; I don't want him in Minneapolis. He said he thought he could play in the Big Ten. The harder the road to get somewhere, the easier the adjustment, and quite frankly, his road his senior year wasn't hard enough. He was a student, but he got out for half of the day, and he got good grades, but he was in a work program. He came here, and I don't think he was ready at all, physically, emotionally, and mentally. When you go from Thibodaux, Louisiana and come up to Minneapolis, it's a great change. What I see in him is activity. We need someone on the front line that's an active player. I think the big question is, and I told him he couldn't play in the Big 10 at a four-spot at 195. I told him not to walk over any sewers. I think he's got to continue gaining weight and Cal Dietz has done a great job working with him with that. He's got to get to 210, but he's a freshman, so it's going to take a while to adjust. What he needs to do is come in and give us active offensive rebounds, he can block shots because he's very long, I love length in players, and some defensive rebounding, and keep working on his individual offensive skills. I try to recruit character and athletic ability, I think Damian is from a great family, and I think deep down, they instilled great things into him that are going to come out.

Barnyard: How much weight had Damian put on since he's been at the U?

JM: I'd say Damian's gained 15 pounds. I've told him, and Coach Monson and Cal have told him, we need to get him to 210. Damian might keep growing a little bit.

Recruiting

Barnyard: How much stock do you take in nationally ranked recruits? Top 100 players, etc?

JM: I think you can take stock if they're in the top 10, because there's a reason why they're in the top 10. Other than that, if you say top 100, I really wouldn't get too involved in that. I don't think you can judge recruits until after their freshman year, and some after their sophomore year. So, I don't put too much stock in rankings.

Barnyard: Both Ohio State and Purdue have new coaches that have been incredibly successful recruiting in a short amount of time. What do you attribute their success to?

JM: Well, Ohio State had a special relationship to get Greg Oden. If you look at it, they've gotten their in-state players, Daquan Cook, David Lighty - but the thing that put them over the top was Greg Oden. I think part of that was, Greg Oden's AAU team, and this is all legal and ethical, someone involved in that

AAU team was more about the Ohio State program in the sense that there was some connection. It used to be Bo Ryan's son could coach the AAU team, James Ware could coach the AAU team, and they changed that rule this year. I call it the Ware rule. I think that was the connection there. And, let's give credit to That Matta; first of all, Ohio State's the biggest school in the country, second, it has a tremendous tradition, and Thad's come in there and they got a couple key guys. Now, what Matt Painter did, last year, he just knew he was going to take a beating, two of their best players were hurt. So, he took his beating and spent most of his time recruiting, and as a result, they committed three excellent prospects. I think the players that we have wanted and really targeted in Minnesota, most of the players we've wanted, we've gotten. Like Bryce Webster, he was recruited by every school in the Big 10, and that was our target recruit last year and we were able to sign him.

Barnyard: So regarding in-state recruits, are you saying that we've gotten who we've targeted?

JM: We can't comment on current recruits, but I can tell you this, from my observation, yes I think they have gotten who we've wanted. You can be involved with someone and that doesn't mean they're your priority. Now you can look back and say they didn't get them the first time, like Kris Humphries or Rick Rickert, but I think those players also realized sometimes when you're close to a place, you're going to see it's beauty and it's warts. And every program has warts. And when they go away, they realize that. I think in-state recruiting has been really strong.

Barnyard: As you mentioned, Purdue just signed 3 top 100 recruits in Painter's 2nd year (E'twaun Moore #30, Robbie Hummell #72, Jajuan Johnson #85), why are we having such difficulty getting these kind of guys?

JM: I don't think we are. I can't talk about current recruiting, but I can talk about past recruiting. I can talk last year, last year, when you think about Isiah Dahlen, I think at that point, they didn't see the need for him in our program. He wasn't someone who was targeted. The one who was targeted last year was the highest ranked recruit from here by the end of the summer, Bryce Webster, and we signed him. Just because you read that someone goes somewhere else, that doesn't mean you're not having any in-state success. Have we gotten them all? No. But have we gotten most of them? Yes.

Barnyard: What is our overall recruiting strategy?

JM: I think we try to get people that can handle a big school. I think sometimes, coming from a small private school background, it's a little easier to handle than a big school. Coach likes people who can shoot. We try to get players that can compete athletically; we try to get players with good attitudes. There's going to be some immaturity, I always tell people that maturity and chronology are not

the same things. Some people mature as a junior, some people mature later. Our philosophy is to get character and attitude, ability to shoot, and athletic ability, and if we can get the ones closer to home, we try to do that first.

Barnyard: James Ware was just offered a coaching position at Utah St. He has a number of ties in MN, and has relationships with many high schoolers – how will this hinder your in-state recruiting?

JM: I don't know about in recruiting, but I think in losing someone like James hurts. I don't tend to look at how it hurts us; I'm just excited for James. James Ware, to me, has an excellent, young, basketball mind. He's a gifted communicator, so I think this was the next, natural step for him. He's working with a great coach, Stew Morrill. Now he can go out and recruit, and coach on the floor. They've made the ops (Director of Basketball Operations) very administrative. The U will go on no matter who's here, because it's always gone on, I think we are all just trying to add to the tradition. It's like Rick Pitino said at Kentucky, you're trying to add to the Roman Empire, not create the Roman Empire. So, will we miss some things about James? Absolutely. Do I think what we miss we can fill up and overcome? Yes, I think we can do that. We're just real excited for him.

Scholarships

Barnyard: Is JAS on a year-by-year scholarship? If so, does he know he may lose it after this year? How is this communicated to he and his family?

JM: I just think Jamal and Coach have a special arrangement. Here's what gets lost in all these Jamal rumors; we love Jamal, Jamal did a tremendous job for us. But I think sometimes a little bit of knowledge is dangerous. I always tell people, when Jamal came to Minnesota, he had no scholarship offers at this level. It can mean everybody was wrong, obviously. Coach Monson has done exactly what he told him he'd do, he said – Jamal, you come here, we'll see how it goes, and we'll go from that. So by the time Jamal is done here, whatever he and Coach agree on, most of his years will be on scholarship. Which is more than he would of ever had. I think we're happy he's here; he's a big part of our family. I do get a little offended when I hear that Coach Monson isn't doing this or that with Jamal. I think Coach has been really gracious, and Jamal's been the same, it's working out great and I really don't think it's an issue.

Barnyard: From what the public knows, we are out of scholarships for next year, is this true? If a big name player becomes available and wants to attend the U, how would you deal with this?

JM: The situation for our scholarships is that when Coach meets with these people, he goes time by time. And you are getting back to different situations.

All people need to know is that we have never over-signed, that's against Big 10 rules. Yes, I think Coach is recruiting like we have a scholarship.

Barnyard: Do you and the other assistants have a "home" recruiting area where you really know the HS and AAU Coaches and are tapped into and have access to top talent?

JM: I think we all have a background, I've been around Chicago more than the other coaches, Coach Couch has been on the West Coast, Coach Walker had been in Kansas a lot more, and knows a lot of Junior College coaches and high school coaches in that area, and James knew Minnesota, so there's a lot of that. Basically, that's not as important as you may think. It's really identifying who you want, and trying to figure out who's important in making the decision and building the relationship.

ACADEMICS

Barnyard: How does your academic system for the team work?

JM: I really believe, the bigger the school, the more support you need, because it's not as personal. Now that may hurt us in recruiting, but you also get the benefit of a lot of other great programs. The way we do it in Minnesota is this, and it's done with the utmost integrity; we have a great concern in our program that people graduate. It's been harder for most schools to graduate them in four years plus a summer, because getting the course on time and when you have practice time. What we do as a staff is first of all, they have an academic counselor, we just hired a new one, Jen Townsend, I think she's going to be a great addition. She's going to be the academic coach, help us with scheduling. And, we have learning specialists who work with these young men too. And then on our staff, Coach Monson assigns each of us four to be more personally in-touch with. I think it's a great way to do it, and you really try to stay on top of those young men. I think the challenge is great at Minnesota because the higher the reward the higher the sacrifice. People don't understand the sacrifice of being a student-athlete. Yes, there are great benefits, but you're going to give up 4-5 hours a day. Our day is, you lift weights in the morning, go to class, go to practice from 1-4pm, get something to eat and come back for study hall. I always tell them, four years of pain, four years of pleasure. Four years of pleasure, four years of pain. Yes, they're given a full ride, but what's taken on them physically, emotionally, and mentally is a great sacrifice. But I really do appreciate that at the U, they do value academics and they value, obviously, doing it the right way.