

## Sports

# Living The Dream: UConn's New AD Grew Up In Sports



David Benedict talks with the media during a press conference where he was introduced as UConn's new Athletic Director. (Mark Mirko)



By **Paul Doyle · Contact Reporter**

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**T**o the coaching staff at Mesa Community College in Arizona, Dave Benedict was a constant presence.

The son of the football coach, Benedict was the ball boy on game days as an early teen. He was at meetings, absorbing the X's and O's as the staff prepared for the next opponent. At practice, he roamed the sidelines and watched.

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"He was always involved," said Allen Benedict, the Mesa coach in the early 1980s. "The coaches, they eventually treated him just like another coach."

Benedict's son went on to play football in high school, at Mesa and at Southern Utah. He was identified by more than one of his coaches as another coach on the field, a kid with a future in the profession.

Nearly 30 years after shadowing his father, David Benedict is indeed immersed in a life of athletics, opting for a life in athletic administration over the world of coaching.

As the new UConn athletic director, he has a challenge.

Benedict inherits a program with a winning tradition in many sports and a need to raise revenue. Fans are hoping he can guide the school into a Power Five conference, the administration is looking for him to run a fiscally sound department, coaches and athletes want support.

When Benedict was hired, UConn President Susan Herbst touted his resume and fundraising ability while stressing that he was raised by a coach. He said that he appreciates the complexities of the job, but that there will be no preferential treatment.

"The way I deal with coaches is the same way I deal with everybody," Benedict said. "It's going to be about trust and respect. Certainly in the position I am in, I have to hold people accountable. ... Trust, respect and accountability. If you do those things, typically you're going to be able to have good relationships with people, whether they're head coaches of very high-profile programs or not."

Benedict, 44, brings a diverse resume to Storrs. He has cultivated his reputation as a fundraiser at various schools, from Arizona State and Minnesota to Virginia Commonwealth and **Long Beach State**. Most recently, he worked as the right-hand man for **Auburn** athletic director Jay Jacobs, operating at the highest level in the athletic department of a Southeastern Conference giant.

Yet, at his core, he's a competitive coach's kid.

"He could have been a great, great coach," said Navy defensive coordinator Dale Pehrson, who was Benedict's position coach at Southern Utah. "I thought that's what he would become."

The road that began in Tempe, Ariz., and led Benedict to Storrs was very much defined by his relationship with his father, who grew up in Harrisburg, Pa., and relocated to play football under the legendary Frank Kush at Arizona State in the late 1950s. Allen Benedict married and settled in Arizona after college, building a career as a high school football coach before moving to Mesa CC.

Allen Benedict eventually became the athletic director at the community college. But it was during his coaching career when his sons, David and Benjamin, got an up-close view of athletics. It only heightened David's love of sports, but he decided early on that he would take a different route.

"As a young boy wanting to spend time with my dad, I saw how hard he worked and everything that he went through," Benedict said. "Coaches are in such a difficult position because they work extremely hard and their life can be changed by one injury. So I experienced the ups and downs with my father as coach. I felt like I wanted to be in a position to where I could impact student-athletes in a more broad way than just being a coach, as well as being engaged in all of the sports programs and not necessarily just one."

After earning a master's degree in sports performance and management from New Mexico Highlands University, Benedict returned to Arizona with the intention of carving his own niche at his father's old school. He landed a job in the Arizona State athletic department, igniting a career that has taken him all over the country.

Now the father of twin boys, he never blew a whistle at practice or formulated a game plan for a team. But like his father, his life is steeped in athletics.

"This is the fulfillment of my dream," Benedict said.

## **Poker Face**

Cynthia Benedict jokes that her son attended his first football game before he was born. She was pregnant with David when she attended a game in Arizona involving her husband's team, Tempe High School.

Months after he was born, he was at the football field. Welcome to the family business.

"He never missed another game from that point on," Cynthia said. "When he was old enough to go

down the stairs to the field, he and his brother went down. Then when they were old enough, they became ball boys. Since birth, there has never been a break in David's exposure and participation in athletics and, in particular, football."

At Mesa CC, it was not uncommon for David to mingle with adults more than kids his own age. The family vacationed in San Diego and David, then a middle schooler, talked himself into a nightly poker game reserved for the men.

"They allowed him to play and he cleaned them out," Cynthia said. "From that point on, David became a regular at the poker table with these men his father's age or older."

After playing football in high school, Benedict played at Mesa CC. His father was no longer coaching, although he did help as an assistant. And David, a center and linebacker, was a de facto coach — he gathered teammates to his family's home for film sessions and pregame meals and he conferred with coaches on play-calling. His opinion was valued.

Allen recalls the coaching staff asking David for input on a goal-line play with the game on the line against a school Mesa had never beaten. David, the center, told his coaches to "run it right over his butt."

They did. They scored. They won.

"That was the regard David was held by, by people who had been coaching their entire adulthood," Allen said. "They were having a 19-year-old kid calling the most important play of the game."

At Southern Utah, Benedict played with many older kids, including junior college transfers and Mormons who resumed college football after their mission assignment.

"Very hard worker, very good football player," Pehrson, his linebacker coach, said. "He was a real team guy. ... I think he knew where he was heading from the very beginning."

## **Returning Home**

After graduate school, Benedict returned home and approached the ASU athletic department in search of work, paid or unpaid.

Vic Cegles, then a top administrator at ASU, interviewed Benedict for an internship marked for women or minorities. "He was neither, obviously" said Cegles, now the AD at Long Beach State.

But Cegles was impressed with Benedict, so he hired the recent graduate for a specific assignment — overseeing a weekend event in 1996 centered on the dedication of the football field in honor of Frank Kush.

Kush had been fired 17 years earlier after he was accused of punching a player, and he remained a controversial figure.

The Benedict family, of course, has strong ties to Kush. Allen Benedict played for Kush and coached Kush's son in high school.

"It was very ironic," Cynthia said. "I remember David sitting at our dining room table, stuffing envelopes. He was in charge of the whole event."

Frank Kush was hired back at ASU in 2000 as a special assistant to the athletic director. Kush would go on football road trips. His roommate: Benedict. Benedict's assignment: Make sure Frank doesn't get into any trouble.

But by acing his first assignment, David's career was launched. Cegles became a mentor, as did former ASU athletic directors Kevin White and Gene Smith, longtime Division I ADs.

Cegles, known for his fundraising prowess, saw in Benedict a personality ideal for the ever-changing world of college athletic administration.

"First, he loved athletics," Cegles said. "He had a passion for it and he's very competitive. He wants to win. But he could interact with coaches or student-athletics and he connected with people. I've been fundraising for most of my career. When I hire kids in development it's all about how they connect with people. How do you connect with that donor? How do you connect with that coach? He really has that ability to do it. And when you've grown up around coaches, you know how to figure them out."

Benedict settled into a fundraising role and would hold various titles at ASU for nearly 10 years. How well did he bond with donors? When he married Lisa Zeis, a former All-America gymnast at ASU, some of those very donors attended the wedding. There are donors from his ASU days who remain friends.

## **Back In The Game**

Benedict left athletic administration to work in health care 10 years ago, but he wanted back in. He peppered Cegles with questions about jobs and was intrigued when Cegles interviewed for the AD position at Buffalo, where Lisa Zeis-Benedict grew up. That job went to Warde Manuel, whom Benedict replaced at UConn.

Benedict would get back into the business at Long Beach State, where Cegles was AD. He would work under Cegles for three years before moving to VCU in 2010 and then Minnesota in 2012. At both stops, he worked for former ASU colleague Norwood Teague.

Almost 18 months after Benedict left Minnesota for Auburn, Teague resigned as Minnesota AD because of his involvement in sexual harassment incidents. Herbst told The Courant's **Jeff Jacobs** that Benedict was asked during his interview about his connection to Teague and that the school determined there was no issue.

Cegles, who refers to Benedict as another son, said the career path had a purpose.

"He had this goal of becoming an AD," Cegles said. "He was making the right moves with that in mind. When he left here for VCU, I got that. I could see what he wanted. Then he gets a taste of another level at Minnesota. It made sense."

They were senior administration jobs and fundraising was his forte.

"When you work at VCU and you work at Long Beach State, you learn things that you don't necessarily learn at Minnesota or Auburn," Cegles said. "Look, it's not hard to raise money at Auburn. What you're trying to do at Auburn is control expectations and that kind of stuff. It's different at those other places."

The frequent moves have framed continuous changes in job titles. Allen and Cynthia have multiple business cards hanging on their refrigerator, marking their son's climb. "Every move was a step toward this job," Cynthia said.

With the goal of becoming an AD, Benedict saw the Auburn position as an opportunity to gain more administrative experience. Jay Jacobs, an Auburn graduate and the AD since 2004, had never met Benedict before interviewing him for the newly created position of Chief Operating Officer.

It took one dinner at his home with David and Lisa. "I knew I had my guy," said Jacobs, who hired Benedict in January 2014.

Jacobs had Benedict involved in virtually every aspect of the \$120 million operation. Benedict had his fingers in fundraising and budgeting, he oversaw the men's basketball team and constructed a plan to improve the game-day football experience for fans. He also negotiated a nine-year contract with Under Armour.

"He is an outstanding administrator," Jacobs said. "But an even better person. ... He's very balanced. He's not overly emotional. He's not reactive. I just think that comes with wisdom and knowledge and experience."

Back in Tempe, Allen Benedict said he is beyond proud. His son set out to be an athletic director 20 years ago and here he is.

And while Connecticut seems an unlikely place for an Arizona kid to find his dream job, there is family history in the state. Cynthia's mother came to the United States from Russia at age 6 and was sent to live with a relative in Hartford. She remained in Hartford until she was a teenager.

Cynthia has never been to Connecticut, but she said she had an "Oh my God" moment when her son landed the UConn job.

"If only my mother had lived to see this," she said. "It would have been amazing. I mean, he's the direct descendant of a girl who grew up in Hartford."

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