



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Denny Huston, a former basketball player at Clark College, was recently named interim athletic director at the school.

CHANGE OF DIRECTION

Huston temporarily gives up retirement to assist Clark

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The last few weeks have brought a series of adjustments to Denny Huston's lifestyle.

Retired for the last several years, Clark College's interim athletic director is now rising earlier each morning and keeping to a schedule once again.

He jokes that it only took two days to figure out how to turn on his computer. And

after spending more than 30 years as a college basketball player and coach, he is getting a crash course on the business side of athletics.

"When you're retired for nine years, and all of a sudden you have a schedule and you have to get up at a certain time, let's put it this way, it's somewhat shocking," Huston said. "The learning curve has been very steep."

And yet Huston was the first person Clark College President Robert Knight considered to stabilize the department during the search for a replacement for Lisa Quednow-Bickler, who resigned in early August,

because of his extensive experience and close connections to the school.

Long before assisting Mike Montgomery at Stanford, or heading up the Weber State and Wyoming programs, Clark College gave Huston his start.

He said Clark taught him the importance of discipline, organization and punctuality, in addition to developing his people skills. It connected him to important mentors, such as former basketball coach Claude "Skeets" O'Connell. And it's where Huston found early successes as the captain of the basketball team and student body

president.

And now that Huston's career has come full circle, he is helping to stabilize a program that has seen a revolving door of athletic directors for the last decade by researching other programs and providing suggestions for reorganizing the department.

It's a big change for a man who left his coaching career behind in 1992, and has occupied the time between selling insurance and spending time with his wife, grandchildren and traveling regularly to Arizona and Kauai. But Huston also brings several advantages

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in his new position.

He has maintained a long relationship with Clark, which he calls "the best kept secret in the city of Vancouver."

He coached its basketball team early in his career and maintained close contact with the school as he moved to positions at Washington, Western Washington, Wyoming, Stanford and Weber State. He also served on the board of the Penguin Athletic Club, during which he developed a respect for Knight's leadership and the school's accomplishments with limited resources.

Those connections give Huston an intimate understanding of the athletic department's unique challenges and needs.

"He is very well respected and connected in the athletic community," Knight said in an e-mail correspondence. "I don't think I could find a better pick. The positive comments I have received around the

community after naming him the interim AD appear to confirm my perception of Denny."

Huston sees the opportunity as more than a temporary management position, though. It is also a chance to directly affect and change the program from within — something with which Knight said he has asked for Huston's assistance.

After a decade of instability — with athletic directors seeming to come and go every other year — Huston sees his time with the school as a chance to help the program reconnect with the community and local coaches.

He also sees an opportunity to start restructuring a department whose coaches often have to work full-time jobs outside the college. It's a much different situation than Huston had as a Clark student, when O'Connell was a constant presence on campus.

"Skeet was my mentor," Huston said. "He was here all the time. And when you don't have that individual here, we're missing a big piece of the mentoring process that coaches can do for athletes."

So Huston hopes to find ways for the

athletic department to offer its coaches dual appointments, allowing them to work in other capacities at the school — either as teachers or staff members — in addition to their coaching duties.

Currently, only two of Clark's eight coaches hold dual appointments.

Huston admits it will take time to fulfill that goal — most likely much longer than he will be around as athletic director. Knight said he hopes to have the position filled by the end of the fall quarter, which ends in mid-December.

And while Knight said he would consider him for the full-time job, Huston suggested that a return to retirement will likely take precedence.

His purpose in the position, Huston said, is more to "keep the ship going on the right course, and then get the right person in here and then let me exit left."

But for now, Huston is engaging in a labor of love that both allows him to give back to his alma mater, and influence its path for the future.

"I owe this institution a lot," Huston said. "And whatever I can do to help it, I'm always available."