

# ONE NOAH ISN'T ENOUGH FOR COACH SMESKO AT FLORIDA GULF COAST

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You could say that Karl Smesko is a great coach because he comes from a family of great coaches. His father, Albert, is a former high school boy's basketball coach in Richfield, Ohio, and a member of the Greater Akron Coaches Association Hall of Fame. His brother, Kyle, is the offensive line coach at Thiel College and helped lead the Diplomats to 347.2 yards per game of total offense.

But perhaps there's a better reason he's so successful—despite being the only women's basketball coach Florida Gulf Coast University has ever known and despite compiling an impressive 180-34 record there since 2001, Smesko still seeks innovative ways to improve his system and the program.

"When it comes to basketball, I don't ever rule anything out," Smesko said. "If there's a way to make the players better and win more games, I will take the time to analyze it and if it's something that will work for us, I will incorporate it into the program."

The Eagles have played NCAA Division I basketball for just two years after dominating Division II for several seasons. The 2006-2007 team completed its regular season undefeated and was ranked No. 1 in the nation. The Eagles advanced through the Division II national tournament before losing in the championship game. It was the second time Smesko had taken a team that far—he led Walsh University to an NAIA national title in 1998.

The Eagles compete in the Atlantic Sun Conference and finished 22-9 in their inaugural Division I season. The impressive debut included a victory over South Florida in the Women's NIT and a tough 5-point loss to Florida in the second round of the postseason tournament.

That first year and the Division II national championship run could have been enough proof to Smesko that his program was on the rise and in a great place.

He could have left everything alone and continued to ride the wave.

But he didn't and this fact is a testament to his humility and competitive nature. He wanted to find a way to get even better.

"I watched a video of Don Meyer (Northern State University men's basketball coach and No. 1 on the NCAA all-time coaching wins list) and he talked about his success with Noah," Smesko said. "Scientifically, it made sense to me. So I called him and we talked about Noah."

That phone conversation just cemented what Smesko already knew.

"I went ahead and ordered one," he said.

The university financed the acquisition and Noah arrived in Fort Meyers last November.

"It's a large purchase for a university our size," Smesko said. "To be able to spread the payments out was very beneficial to us."

Smesko's teams always had a reputation for marksmanship from behind



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the three-point line and from the foul line. He places an emphasis on recruiting skilled players at each position and spends hours of practice working on shooting. Simply put, if you want to play for Smesko, you need to be able to shoot well.

So when the Eagles unwrapped Noah, the team was already pretty competent with the release and rotation.

"I thought we could get even better," Smesko said.

He incorporated Noah at the beginning and at the end of practice. The team used the system more on three-pointers than foul shooting.

The results?

Remarkable.

Florida Gulf Coast University finished this past season 26-5 and made 296 of 763 from behind the arc, which was good for 39 percent. The 296 converted three-pointers averages to 9.5 per game—tops in the nation.

Equally impressive was that the Eagles recorded 501 of 710 free throws for 71 percent. The total averages to 16.2 free throws made per game.

"The players liked it," Smesko said. "They were really excited when we first got it so the key was to make sure they used it after the newness went away. I think that being able to get instant feedback and seeing improvement was a big factor in the players continuing to enjoy using it."

The Eagles once again won a game in the WNIT despite having no seniors on the team.

So given his penchant to tinker and find ways to improve his program, what did Smesko do this offseason?

"We bought a second Noah," he said.

That's right. Florida Gulf Coast University now owns two Noahs and Smesko believes it will benefit his team immeasurably.

"Now that I have a better idea how to use Noah in practice, I felt we needed a second one," Smesko said. "It takes up a lot of time having 12 players get enough reps on Noah. Now we'll have the second unit work on it and it will make it easier for our players to get better. It will cut the amount of time we use it in half."