

# Pollard 'selling hope' at ISU

Scott Dochterman, *Cedar Rapids Gazette* (May 6, 2007)

**AMES** Jamie Pollard didn't just sign up for a job when he went to Iowa State 19 months ago. He did it for the adventure.

Pollard, 42, has become the state's most controversial sports figure with a take-charge approach. Within 14 months of taking over as athletics director, he changed coaches in men's basketball, wrestling and football. He nearly doubled the cost of football season tickets and restructured the department's donation standards.

But few can argue with Pollard's results. His wrestling coach, Iowa State legend Cael Sanderson, took the Cyclones to an NCAA second-place finish. He hired two of the nation's hottest young coaches in Greg McDermott (basketball) and Gene Chizik (football).

For the second straight year, Iowa State has blown away its record for season-ticket football sales - now standing at 32,616 - nearly four months before the first game. Pollard pushed through a near-\$20 million renovation at Jack Trice Stadium that includes 24 additional suites. He sold his own suite to increase the bottom line. He formulated a \$135 million facilities and strategic model to get Iowa State closer to its Big 12 rivals.

That's all in Pollard's aggressive plan to make Iowa State relevant, not only in the state or his league but nationwide.

"I think you have to really know who you are," Pollard said. "The best analogy I can give is really bizarre, but I grew up in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, the heart of winters. I remember I loved to build snow forts, but after you built them, they were no fun to play in. And I think that's kind of an analogy of my professional career. I'm a builder, not a maintainer."

Pollard gets a pass from most Iowa State fans. Adam Batcheller, secretary of the Greater Des Moines Cyclone Club, said the ticket hike initially shocked some Cyclone fans, but they're willing to absorb the cost to ensure success.

"I think he's definitely put Cyclone fans first and asked us to step up at the plate and look at the program overall and try to support it the best we can," Batcheller said.

Some of Pollard's supporters - and many of his detractors - say Pollard will stay at Iowa State long enough to build his resume and then move on to his next conquest. This is a university, after all, that lost football coaches Johnny Majors and Earle Bruce to more prestigious programs.

Pollard shrugs off that criticism and issues a challenge.

"All I worry about is to try to make it better and make this a great place to be," he said. "If the fans don't step up and help us do all those things, that's not only going to be a challenge to keep Jamie Pollard, that's going to be a challenge for Greg McDermott and Cael Sanderson and Gene Chizik and (women's basketball coach) Bill Fennelly, and we'll have all those issues to deal with. I don't spend my time worrying about what may happen if we're too successful."

## **A day with the family**

Pollard begins his day with a run, an interest he's maintained since childhood. When he parks his SUV in a lot adjacent to Iowa State's Jacobson Building, Pollard most likely has checked his e-mail and voice messages - while driving.

But not with his kids in the car. Not anymore.

“Where I did draw the line,” wife Ellen said, “was he used to read his e-mail while he was driving down the interstate. I’m like, ‘Stop that. You can do that when you’re by yourself but not when you have your family in the car.’ He is addicted to that e-mail.”

With four children younger than 10 and an ambitious work agenda, Pollard calls his life “one big run-on sentence.” He admits Janet Lovell, his administrative assistant, controls his life. Sometimes, he asks her to hold open time blocks just to think. Often, she does it without his asking.

“You have to make certain things a priority - easier said than done,” Pollard said. “I’ll schedule in the kids’ swimming or kids’ swim banquet because if I don’t put it down as a scheduled event, it’ll get away from me. So those almost become appointments. But that’s just how you learn to survive.

“It’s not as bad as it looks. I’m a victim of my own circumstances.”

Doubling up is a way of life. Children’s birthdays often are combined with sporting events. In March, daughter Maggie spent her seventh birthday with friends watching Iowa State compete against Iowa and Denver in women’s gymnastics. Last year, son Thomas celebrated his ninth birthday as an honorary coach for Iowa State’s spring football game. With his classmates in attendance, Thomas spoke to Cyclone football players before they took the field.

“My kids have been brought up on it - they’re still pretty young so it’s still cool to do it,” Pollard said. “But I’m sure there will come a time when they get to be teenagers and they’ve got their own ideas.”

### **Running down a dream**

Pollard’s love for running is well-demonstrated by his 1987 national title in the 5,000 meters. It was that love that helped him land perhaps his most important relationship.

At a 1991 Super Bowl party - Bills-Giants as Ellen remembers - Pollard threw out a line that hooked his future wife.

Well, sort of.

Ellen and Jamie worked at St. Louis University at the time. Ellen, an athletic sort who walked on with Notre Dame’s women’s basketball team for a season, wore an Iron Man triathlon watch to the party.

“He said, ‘So, do you run?’ That was kind of his pick-up line with me,” Ellen said, chuckling because of her husband’s likely embarrassment. “‘Do you run?’”

The next day, Pollard called her office and asked if she was interested in running with him. She was.

“It just clicked,” she said.

The couple married in June 1993 at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart on Notre Dame’s campus. They stayed in St. Louis for a year before leaving for Maryland, where they had two children, 12 months apart. But something was missing.

Ellen grew up in Texas and Louisiana, and Pollard was raised in Wisconsin. With their young family growing and feeling an inherit need for their roots, the Pollards looked for jobs in the Midwest or Texas. Wisconsin, it turned out, was the place to go. But the move wasn’t without its challenges.

The couple's second child, Annie, was two weeks old when Pollard left to become Wisconsin's senior associate athletics director and chief financial officer. Ellen stayed behind with their two infant children. Six weeks later, after Annie's two-month check-up, they headed to Madison as a family.

### **Personal drive**

Pollard shaped his competitive streak growing up in Oshkosh, Wis. He entered Wisconsin-Oshkosh a tall, skinny runner with a competitive streak. He exited a champion.

By 1987, Pollard was among the nation's best distance runners. His career culminated with a Division III national title in the 5,000-meter run. Perhaps even more important, his will to succeed individually on the track shaped his business outlook.

“You were the only one in charge of your outcomes,” Pollard said. “It wasn't because someone didn't pass you the ball or the coach didn't put you in the game. If you were the fastest, you ran in the meet. If you were the fastest, you won the meet. If you worked the hardest, you had the best chance of winning.”

“I was very independent, and I took it very personal. If I lost a race, I took it personally. I lost. It wasn't that our team lost. I lost. And I remember that from when I was a little kid all the way up.”

In college, Pollard was one of the boys. Long-time friend Dan Thome said Pollard brought a confident, almost cocky presence to the track team, even as a freshman.

Right out of school Pollard worked for Thome at Arthur Andersen, the formerly massive accounting firm. Thome recalled Pollard as a talented accountant who wanted to switch professions less than two years into the job.

“He came in one day and said he wanted to go into sports administration and left,” Thome said. “A lot of people at age 23 don't have that kind of vision.”

“He sets goals and focuses like a laser on them. He was a very competitive guy. He's not a good loser. He wants to win. He'd be like that whether you're chipping golf balls or shooting free throws or playing a game of cards.”

Pollard spent five years as an assistant athletics director for internal operations at St. Louis University. He worked four years as an assistant athletics director at Maryland under Debbie Yow, a person he said helped define him professionally.

At Maryland he hired and befriended Rob Mullens, now Kentucky's deputy athletics director. The two grew close, and Pollard served as Mullens' best man.

Mullens calls Pollard a mentor and the first person he calls when he needs advice. He said Pollard stands for values, a strong work ethic, loyalty and integrity.

“He's a superstar. That's what I think,” Mullens said. “He's got priorities. He always, always, always is going to do what's best for the university. I think that's one of the greatest things I learned from him is to do what's best in the long-term interest of his employer.”

Thome and Mullens can attest Pollard is not just one-track driven. Thome said Pollard shares a drink or two with old teammates at Oshkosh reunions. Mullens has plenty of stories of Pollard on Bourbon Street in early 1997 but won't disclose many details.

“He didn't quite paint his face, but he was a rabid Green Bay Packer fan when we went to New Orleans for the Super Bowl,” Mullens said. “He was into it. We had a good time. He wore the

green beads with a chunk of cheese around his neck. They wouldn't take that too seriously, would they?"

Pollard and McDermott have become good friends. Often they exchange text messages when attending the same events.

"He's got a great sense of humor," McDermott said. "He'll leave some joking e-mails or a message on my voice mail once in a while after a tough game or something that might appear in the national media to poke fun at. He's not all business."

### **The challenge**

Parker Executive Search called Pollard about Iowa State's opening. The easy answer for Pollard was staying at Wisconsin. He's from the state. He likes the state. He was former football coach-turned-athletics director Barry Alvarez's right-hand man. As deputy athletics director, Pollard may have moved into Alvarez's office and taken over at a posh Big Ten school with resources, prestige and tradition.

But that's not how Pollard works. His inner drive resists complacency. Not now. Maybe not ever.

"I really felt when I took the (Iowa State) job or thought about taking the job, it was one of the few programs left that was a state institution in a major conference that really hadn't done something of great signature value," Pollard said.

Pollard pointed to a 2002 football game when Florida State beat the Cyclones, 38-31, and the 2000 regional basketball final when Michigan State ousted Iowa State to reach the Final Four. He noted the football team hasn't won an outright title since 1912.

"When I actually took the job and you hear the culture you ran up against, not everybody but I'd say the critical mass, kind of had come to accept the fact that that was never going to happen, at least not in their lifetime," Pollard said. "Because they get to the point of beyond disappointment, that it's OK to be disappointed."

"I think what we've tried to do is re-energize them and say, 'Let's think bigger than that. Let's try to do something maybe we thought we couldn't do. I can't guarantee that we can do it, but let's have fun trying to do. And if we do it, then it will be a blast.'"

Ambition is less an art for Pollard than an extension of his agenda. In 18 months he has blown the lid off a stagnant athletics department with a bold vision.

His plan called "Taking the Next Step" is designed to construct or renovate facilities, increase donations and boost Iowa State's profile. His budget languishes in last place among league counterparts. He concedes Iowa State won't catch Texas' \$75 million budget, but middle of the pack looks good for his \$33 million budget.

"To me (success) is, if we can do everything we possibly can within reason, to give our constituents hope, excitement and fun," he said. "That doesn't always translate into winning, but it certainly helps."

"Here at Iowa State, you've got to sell hope because we're selling futures. We're trying to get people to buy into a concept that will bring them a lot of excitement."

Part of that hope is making radical changes. After the 2005-06 season, Pollard fired men's basketball coach Wayne Morgan. He sought two people immediately - McDermott, who was at Northern Iowa, and Rob Jeter at Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Pollard used mutual acquaintances instead of a search firm. He contacted McDermott on a Saturday, one day after Georgetown eliminated UNI from the NCAA tournament. Pollard interviewed McDermott Sunday and hired him

Monday.

“He was very straight-forward, very honest in his approach,” McDermott said. “He was someone that I felt 100 percent comfortable doing the contract negotiations with, just he and I.

“I think it's obvious to everyone that he has great vision for this department. Frankly, that was one of the things that was very attractive to me when I considered the job.”

Sanderson, who served as an assistant through the 2005-06 season, finished his wrestling career with a 159-0 record and four national titles at Iowa State. When other schools courted him for openings, Pollard never hesitated. He convinced Bobby Douglas to accept an administrative position and elevated Sanderson.

And then there's Dan McCarney.

### **Tough choices**

Pollard met with a group of students one rainy afternoon in March. Perhaps the most revealing discussion came when students asked about McCarney, the football program's winningest coach. Pollard admitted McCarney's departure - officially a resignation - was more personal than his other moves.

Later, when meeting with a reporter, he said McCarney was a perfect fit for Iowa State's ideals, just not for the school's aching fan base.

“If we could have held on to the critical mass, we would have been OK,” Pollard said. “But the critical mass had shifted, and we couldn't sell them hope anymore.

“We had gotten to a spot where the fan base was divided and if everybody's divided, you can't move forward. Half the people want this, half the people want that.

“In the long run, you're an accident waiting to happen, and we all came to that conclusion. We have to pull the plug for everybody's sake.”

Several fans and media outlets took shots at Pollard for a tearful sendoff in McCarney's resignation press conference. With a record that includes three high-profile coaching changes, some have called Pollard everything from a hatchet man to a one-man firing squad. But Ellen said tough decisions deeply affect her husband.

“He had trouble sleeping at night,” she said. “I don't say that because, obviously other people had trouble sleeping, too, after that happened, but it was truly a difficult decision for him. I don't think people can understand the magnitude of that.

“He just doesn't take those situations lightly, and he knows how it affects, not only that individual, but their family and everything.” **Shifting gears**

Pollard juggles his work and family time. He reads non-fiction, watches television and digs in the garden in limited spare time. He often spends weekends making calls and taking routine office trips.

He shuts down his palm pilot only for church services. Even then, when he's kneeling in prayer during a Catholic Mass, it's difficult to turn off his one-track mind.

“It's hard sometimes to shift gears when you have to shift gears,” he said. “There's time when you have to say, ‘I've got to be the father here. My wife will say, ‘Do you talk to people like that at work?’”

That's all a part of leadership, something Pollard embodies. Whether you love him, hate him or

love to hate him, he wants to drive Iowa State somewhere in the vicinity of greatness. His legacy is in the trunk and the road is full of potholes - some pre-existing, others self-inflicted.

“I want to be the athletic director to take a program from A to Z,” he said, “versus going to an athletic program that’s already at a P and trying to get to Z.”