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'Secret' to recent success

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By Mark Medina - While riding the team bus to the airport for a recent road trip, Washington Mystics interim coach Tree Rollins noticed guard Nikki Blue reading a book.

"Oh you're reading, 'The Secret,' " said Rollins, who read Rhonda Byrne's work last year.

"Yeah, they gave it to us to read," Blue said.

Mystics officials suggested the team read the book, hoping that during the road trip players could learn from Byrne's message of positive thinking. Officials even supplied the book's DVD version.

"When you have a collection of athletes, how do you get all of them to buy into something?" Rollins asked. "But that wasn't my idea. That was ownership. I can't afford that many DVDs. I'm still the interim coach."

But the message still resonates with Rollins' plan to fix the team. After starting the season with a 1-9 record, the Mystics won three of four road games to improve to 4-10. The plan is to continue that success once they return to Verizon Center, where they play host to the Detroit Shock (11-2) tonight.

The Mystics have switched to a transition offense and have averaged 91.2 points in the last six games as a result. In recent practices, Rollins scrapped halfcourt drills to push his players' endurance.

In the league's 11-year history, teams that have started off poorly have finished with mixed results. The 2001 Charlotte Sting rebounded from a 1-10 start to reach the WNBA Finals. The 1999 Cleveland Rockers and 2001 Minnesota Lynx failed to overcome slow starts and posted 7-25 and 10-22 records, respectively.

After opening this season with a 0-10 record, the Houston Comets have won three of their last four games despite losing Sheryl Swoops for the season with an injury.

"The frustrating part wasn't because we were losing," Comets center Michelle Snow said. "The frustrating part was we were losing because we weren't playing for 40 minutes."

Detroit posted the league's longest losing streak in 2002, opening the year with a 0-13 mark. After 10 games, the Shock fired coach Greg Williams and replaced him with former Detroit Pistons forward Bill Laimbeer.

Laimbeer guided the Shock to the WNBA title in 2003 and 2006.

Detroit wasn't helped by its schedule in 2002, when it played eight of its 10 first games on the road. Williams also felt overwhelmed when starting point guard Dominique Canty suffered a broken hand before the season started, leaving the Shock with just two players from their 1999 playoff team.

But Williams said he regrets making what he calls a "humanistic mistake" in which he felt his loyalty trumped team needs. Williams planned to start guard Claudia Maria das Neves for a second straight year even though the team had acquired Jennifer Rizzotti in the offseason. Rather than holding a competition for the starting job, Williams decided to trade Rizzotti to the Cleveland Rockers for a 2002 third-round pick.

The Shock benefited little from the move; das Neves soon was traded to the Miami Sol.

"We tried to look for little positives within the losses that we had," Williams said. "It's hard to win at the professional level without some very quality veteran players. We just didn't have that. We tried to keep the kids working hard and staying positive with them as best as we could. But it's not easy to do when there's a downward spiral."

The Shock eventually fired Williams, who said he did not discuss the team's dynamic when Laimbeer took the helm. He declined to explain the reasoning.

But Heidi VanDerveer, currently an assistant coach for the Seattle Storm, had that luxury with Minnesota. Her predecessor, Brian Agler, was fired midway through a season that included an eight-game road losing streak, but he kept the general manager position.

"We talked a little bit that summer," VanDerveer said. "It gives you reassurance about things. I'd probably talk to him the most about what's going on, regardless of what it was. Brian, his advantage was he knew the players and knew them in a different light."

University of Buffalo coach Linda Hill-McDonald, who coached the Cleveland Rockers from 1997 to 1999, said coaching shifts are a short-sighted trend in the WNBA. She lost her job after struggling to adapt when her team lost two starters; point guard Suzie McConnell-Serio was injured, and center Isabelle Fijalkowski suddenly left the team.

"We tried making some changes, altering and simplify things, to work our systems to the talent we had," Hill-McDonald said. "Had I known [about Fijalkowski's absence beforehand], I would've drafted differently, no doubt about it. I didn't know I needed a center. We won a conference championship the year before, and she was a huge part of it. There was no loyalty there on the part of that player."

Washington seems to have corrected its problem despite the early season changes. Richie Aduabo resigned June 1 because the Mystics did not renew his contract and because of a trade that sent Chasity Melvin to Chicago for Monique Currie.

But during their trials, the Mystics have followed the message of "The Secret." And it has shown on the floor.

"It's all about positive thinking," Blue said. "The whole country has read it by now. The hardest thing for us was to get out of that slump that we were in. There was so much transition with the coaches and the trade. We were all on our own individual page. Now we're on the same page, and I think we're clicking."
