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Jay Triano the coach is a combination of the styles of coaches that came before him

OTTAWA - Jay Triano the coach is a combination of the styles of coaches that came before him, a tapestry, he says woven from everyone that he's ever learned from.

When Triano paces courtside at the Toronto Raptors' season opener on Oct. 28, several of his most instrumental teachers will be in attendance.

"They just said, we want to be there," Triano said Friday, as his first training camp as Raptors head coach neared completion. "They said, we're coming for that first game, we want to see it."

Stan Stewardson, who recruited Triano out of Niagara Falls to play at Simon Fraser University in 1977, will be at the Air Canada Centre for Toronto's opener against Cleveland. He'll be joined by former SFU coaches Mike McNeill and Stu Graham, and Basketball B.C. president John Buis.

"It does mean a lot," Triano said. "I feel almost unworthy."

Triano, 51, took over as Toronto's interim coach when Sam Mitchell was fired last December. General manager Bryan Colangelo then removed the interim tag in May as his first order of business in the off-season, signing Triano to a three-year contract. The move made Triano the first Canadian head coach in the NBA, and seemed only natural for the man who has been the face of Canadian basketball for a couple of decades.

Triano said he owes much of his success to the people that guided him along the way.

"I think you take a little bit from anybody who has ever coached you," Triano said. "Stan, for example, taught me more than anything was how to be mentally tough. He was very tough and I think I needed that. I had pretty decent skill but I didn't have the mind, he taught my mind how to be better.

"As far as coaches, who you are is a little bit of a fabric from everybody."

A considerable piece of that fabric will be missing at the season opener in the late Jack Donohue, Triano's coach with the Canadian men's team for 11 years. Donohue died in 2003 after a lengthy battle with cancer.



"He was a huge basketball fan and I know that when he came down to the qualifying tournament before the (2000) Olympics (when Triano was Canada's head coach) that meant a lot to me. We put him at the front of the bus where he always sat when he was a coach, and that meant a lot," Triano said. "I know he would be happy for me and where I am now."

Triano became the first Canadian-born coach in the NBA when he was hired as an assistant to Lenny Wilkens in 2002, and has since outlasted Wilkens, Kevin O'Neill and Mitchell in Toronto.

He was 25-40 as an interim coach last season but finished on a high note, guiding the club to a 9-4 mark in its final 13 games.

Raptors captain Chris Bosh, who's come to know Triano well in their six seasons together in Toronto, said the coach connects with the players with his laid-back demeanour.

"He knows that everybody loves to play basketball and he knows that this is a very hard game and we put 100 per cent into it, but it should also be fun," Bosh said. "He really understands that, come and work, and after your work, have a good time. And you should have a good time while you're working, especially if you're doing something that you love."

Bosh said Triano hasn't changed at all since his promotion.

"He's the same dude," Bosh said.

"That's another funny thing, he's always been the same. You know how somebody is an assistant and they're a little more loose, and then they get to be the head coach, and they're all: 'So this is what we're going to do,'" Bosh said, straightening his imaginary tie. "He's never been like that. He's kept it the same."

Bosh is one of just three players back from last year's training camp -- the others are Jose Calderon and Andrea Bargnani -- and with 10 new faces on the roster this season, Triano faces a tough task in getting them all playing as a cohesive unit.

Wayne Embry, a Hall of Famer and senior adviser with the team, said he believes Triano possesses the people skills to get it done quickly.

"I think communication is probably his biggest strength and managing people," Embry said. "I've always maintained that people talk about (NBA coaching legend) Red Auerbach and why he was such a great coach, I think what people don't realize is he was a great manager of people. That's why he was such a great coach, and I see a little bit of that in Jay."

Colangelo has given Triano a diverse and distinguished staff, including Hall of Famer Alex English, former Raptors guard Alvin Williams, former Memphis Grizzlies head coach Marc Iavaroni, and longtime Benetton Treviso strength coach Francesco Cuzzolin.



"I've had great support. Bryan has been great, he's got a very open mind about things," Triano said. "He wants to know why I'm doing certain things but we're on the same page."

Triano compiled a lengthy basketball career before arriving in Toronto. He spent 11 years as a player on the national team, plus six more as its coach, leading Canada to a seventh-place finish at the 2000 Olympics. He set 11 school records at SFU and then went on to be the Clan's head coach, eventually landing an NBA job as director of communications with the Vancouver Grizzlies.

He said becoming an NBA head coach was never a conscious goal. But he's been gathering bits of pieces of knowledge along the way that are proving useful in the job now.

"I don't think there was ever a time where I thought, I want to be a head coach, " Triano said. "But I always thought, 'if I ever have the opportunity I might do that differently,' or 'I really like that so if I was ever coaching I would definitely do that.' You kind of just build all that up inside. Even at this time last year I never thought about being a head coach.

"I thought, I'm going to be an assistant and do my job and this is a great life and I'm enjoying it. Now I have the opportunity to pick up all those things I said I was going to do and implement them."

Yours in Basketball

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