On Campus

Former UConn Offensive Coordinator Norries Wilson Takes Over Lions Football

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As offensive coordinator of the University of Connecticut football squad for the past four seasons, Norries Wilson helped turn a fledgling Division I also-ran into one of the most potent scoring machines in the nation.

He intends to lead a similar turnaround at Columbia University. Wilson, who oversaw a wide-open, pro-style offensive attack at UConn, was named the Lions' football head coach in December. He is the first African-American football head coach in Ivy League history and the 18th head coach in 135 years of football at Columbia. He takes over for Bob Shoop, who was released in November following a 2-8 season and a three-year record of 7-23.

Under Wilson's guidance, UConn led the Big East in scoring and total offense in 2004, a year when the Huskies defeated Toledo in the Motor City Bowl.Wilson was one of five finalists for the 2004 Frank Broyles Award, which recognizes the nation's top assistant coach. The previous season, which was only UConn's second in Division I competition, he guided an offense that posted 478 yards per game, ranking eighth in the nation. Wilson's star quarterback from 2001 to 2004, Dan Orlovsky, now plays for the Detroit Lions.

Wilson, a native of Markham, Illinois, says he is bringing his aggressive style of football to Baker Field. "On offense, we're going to spread out the other team, attacking people on the edges and up the middle, and pounding the ball on the ground when we want to," he says."It won't be a Michigan–Ohio State game from the mid-'70s, I'll tell you that. No three yards and a cloud of dust. On defense, we're going to play just as aggressively, swarming the ball and taking chances. It's going to be exciting to watch." In January,Wilson began recruiting players and studying

tapes of Lions games. He says he believes that the players he has inherited can be winners, although his goals for next season are modest.

“These young men made a commitment to Columbia, and my staff and I are making a commitment to them,” he says.“We are going to help them build something that they haven’t had here in the past.We’re going to set small goals on our way to reach our ultimate goal, and that is to win the Ivy League title.”

The Lions were winless in the Ivy League last year and have not had a winning season since 1996. Their last Ivy League crown came in 1961, when they shared the title with Harvard.

M. Dianne Murphy, director of intercollegiate athletics and physical education, calls Wilson “a true leader, in every sense of the word. He cares about his players on and off the field. His people skills and his passion, along with his knowledge of the game, will produce the results that we want from the Columbia football program.”

A former offensive lineman,Wilson was a football captain and two-year starter at the University of Minnesota, from which he graduated in 1989 with a degree in psychology. He subsequently coached at North Carolina Central, Livingstone College, and Bucknell, before joining UConn as offensive line coach in 1999. Wilson has held coaching fellowships in the NFL with the Kansas City Chiefs, the Jacksonville Jaguars, and the Indianapolis Colts.

He says that being the first African-American football head coach in the Ivies is both an honor and a source of responsibility. “I have a lot to prove,” he says, “not just for myself, but so that other African-American coaches will be given the opportunity to be a head coach in college football.”

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