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Ollie is proof of a brand that works

By Myron Medcalf
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ARLINGTON, Texas -- Richard Hamilton and Ray Allen, NBA veterans and former [Connecticut](#) standouts, were standing 15 feet from the podium as the Huskies -- their Huskies -- celebrated atop the podium at AT&T Stadium while confetti fell from the rafters.

Connecticut, a 7-seed that lost to Louisville three times in the regular season by a combined 55 points and finished third in the new American Athletic Conference, had just won the national title by defeating the rumbling [Kentucky Wildcats](#) 60-54 on Monday night. "Man, just imagine if you'd gone to Las Vegas three weeks ago and...", Hamilton said.

Before he could finish, Allen began to nod. "You'd win money," the Miami Heat star said.

Few outside Storrs, Conn., thought the Huskies would be here. Of the 11 million-plus people who entered a bracket into ESPN.com's Tournament Challenge, .016 percent had the Huskies and Wildcats facing off in the championship.

But UConn coach Kevin Ollie, who represents a new breed of young, relatable coaches, thought this was attainable. And his players believed him when he told them they could win a national championship a year after the NCAA blocked the program from the postseason because of APR (academic progress rate) failures.



Kevin Ollie hoisted the national championship trophy in just his second season as UConn head coach.

He's been the motivator, the teacher and the leader all season.

And now, he's just the winner.

"They've got something special inside of them," Ollie said. "I wanted them to step outside of their egos and just play basketball the right way. And that's what they've been doing through this magical run. When we lost by 33 to Louisville [on March 8], everybody said we were over with. Those guys have been through so much. When it was dark days, they still played together. And now we're in the light and it's real good to see the emotions on those kids' faces because they're the ones who stuck in and believed. A lot of other people didn't."

Welcome to the new age of coaching.

Ollie, 41, made money in the NBA as a gritty guard for 12 franchises in a 13-year playing career. Most of his coaching peers began their careers as low-level assistants and pushed through the various hierarchical rungs to eventually secure head-coaching gigs.

Ollie didn't do it that way. And that's fine.

Longtime coach Jim Calhoun essentially bequeathed this Connecticut program to his former standout guard, then an assistant coach, two years ago. Ollie's limited time on the bench -- a common knock against young coaches -- was fodder for doubters when he accepted the job in 2012. He had coached only two seasons as a member of Calhoun's staff. But he was ready. Clearly.

"Every day, you saw these guys being inspired," Allen said. "You saw them out there playing with so much passion. You saw Kevin's passion on the floor. That's how he always played. ... I don't believe that there's ever a traditional path of life. We all find our journeys in many different ways."

Ollie's rapid ascent is remarkable but no longer foreign. Ollie is a member of a new breed of younger coaches who've rebuked tradition and assembled successful programs with tactics past generations did not embrace.

The Bobby Knight era of coaching encouraged discipline over everything. Ollie and his peers still demand it, but they're also willing to take the steps to close the gap and bond with their players. They're mentors and friends. They're tough yet approachable. They're professional and fashionable. They're superiors who feel comfortable enough to talk about their affinity for rap music without worrying that they'll lose respect.

Ollie prefers Snoop Dogg. Um, Snoop Lion.

But he's not one of them. He's also not some ruler sitting on a throne. And that's what the Huskies like about him.

He wants to connect with them.

"I mean, he loves us, man," [Tor Watts](#) said. "He told us in the beginning of the year that we're going to be here. And we love him. And we love each other. When we have an actual team, you can just do whatever you want on the court and we were able to get here. He's more of a bigger, older father figure than a coach because he just came out of the NBA. He's young, he's energetic. He's able to practice with us. He's able to run hills with us. ... We just try to win for him."

Before Monday's game, [Shabazz Napier](#) discussed the day he cried in Ollie's arms after a rough stretch. [Niels Giffey](#) said the coach's confidence in his players resulted in the nightly scrappiness and passion that fueled the run for the only 7-seed in NCAA tournament history to win a national title.

And [Ryan Boatright](#) praised Ollie for his willingness to relax. He said he expected his coach to dance with the players after the game. "He's like our best friend but a father figure at the same time," Boatright said. "He's gonna turn up [in the locker room]."

Ollie didn't deny that.

"Oh, yeah. I gotta break my moves out," he said. "I gotta warm my knees up first, though."

These 45-and-under, locker room-dancing, basketball-savvy, foot-stomping, advanced-stats-driven, father-figure, big-



Kevin Ollie picked up where his former coach, Jim Calhoun, left off.

brother-like, hip-hop-listening leaders have been bubbling to the brim of a game that's still owned by a group of legends who go by mere single names or letters: Boeheim. Coach K. Roy. Self. The new breed isn't as powerful, tenured or successful -- yet. But Kevin (Ollie), Fred (Hoiberg), Archie (Miller), Shaka (Smart), Richard (Pitino), Josh (Pastner), Mick (Cronin) and Cuonzo (Martin) are next.

Well, Ollie is now. And that's proof that knowledge can supersede coaching experience.

"This is what UConn basketball is all about," Ollie said. "This is what Coach Calhoun built, and he gave me the baton. I'm just trying to keep proving everybody wrong. Everybody said our university is going to go down after the sanctions. And people left. We're still here. Somebody the other day said we're a Cinderella. We're UConn. UConn is always gonna stay here."

Ollie didn't have a lengthy résumé, beyond his NBA career, when he took the job in 2012. But he knew the game. And he knew how to convey that wisdom to a bunch of youngsters, who took it and won the national championship Monday night. He knew how to talk to them. He knew how to jell with them.

He knew how to be real with them.

That's why they love him.

That's why they fight for him.

And that's why they won it all for him.

"He's just a great motivator," Giffey said. "Honest person. He's always 100 percent positive, and he believes in me. He does that while being demanding in a way."
