

Polzin

From B1

to pause here to ask one thing of anybody reading this: Please don't take this monumental moment in program history and use it as a chance to dance on a good man's grave.

Chryst's personality has taken a beating from some fans, particularly once things went south after a sizzling start to his time leading this program. Glad-handing with fans and speaking to groups was not something that was in his DNA, but it's part of the job and Chryst should have embraced that kind of stuff. And I'll admit that I wish he would have put more thought into preparing for moments in front of the camera so he didn't come off so poorly while serving in a position where optics mean so much.

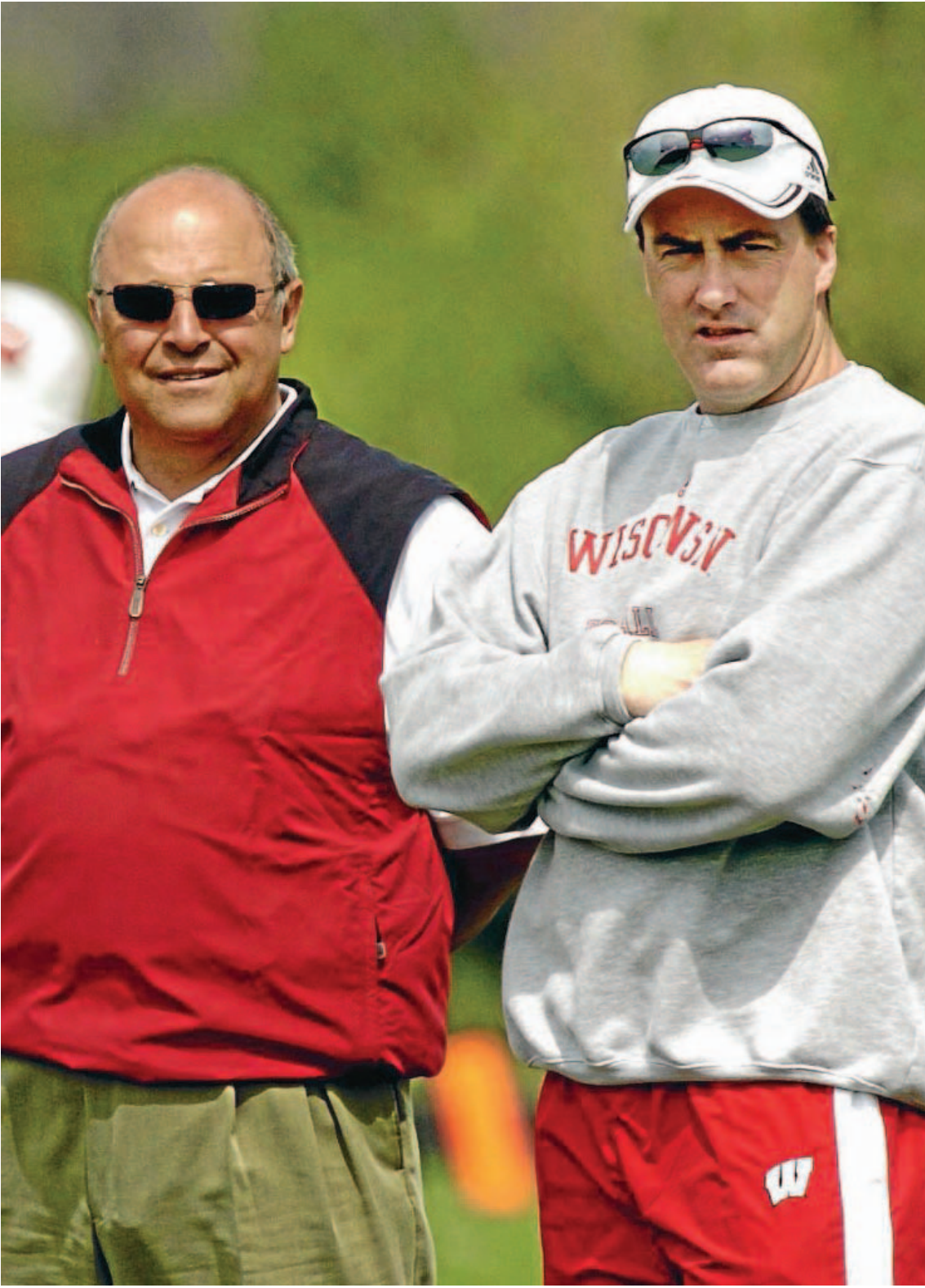
But Chryst cares about this program, his alma mater and certainly his former and current players. I've never doubted that for a second. He wants what's best for the Badgers, and that perhaps played a role in his decision to accept a reduced settlement rather than the full amount of liquidated damages he could have walked away with as he and McIntosh were working out the details of his departure Sunday.

"I've got nothing but love and respect for Paul as a coach and as a person and for everything he did to advance our program and all the success that we had and certainly the way that he took care of and loved and mentored his players," McIntosh said. "So it's an extremely difficult day for everybody. I don't discount the impact this has on Paul, on his family, on our players, fans and beyond."

But McIntosh said in his next breath he felt it was time for a change to be made.

So here we are at a critical juncture for an athletic department that hadn't fired a football coach in nearly 33 years. It was a no-brainer decision when it came to Don Morton in 1989, but this one wasn't nearly as easy, no matter how embarrassed you were by a 52-31 loss at No. 3 Ohio State on national television last week or the home loss to Bielema and Co. on Saturday at Camp Randall Stadium.

The first half at Ohio State and second half against Illinois were 60 of the most uninspiring minutes I can recall from this



Paul Chryst was UW's co-offensive coordinator (he shared the role with Brian White) and tight ends coach in 2005, the last year Barry Alvarez served as head coach.

program in a long time. Combine that with a stretch of multiple years in which UW seemed stuck in the rut, and I thought it was time to acknowledge the seat under Chryst should be warm.

What I didn't anticipate was it was scorching hot and ready to be pulled out from under him. Let's not sit here and pretend this isn't a risky decision. Nebraska fired Frank Solich in

2003 because he didn't come close to matching Tom Osborne's success. But Solich was no slouch, going 58-19 (.753) in six seasons with the Cornhuskers. That program has cycled through four coaches — Bill Callahan, Bo Pelini, Mike Riley and Scott Frost — and is in the midst of another search.

Chryst went 67-26 overall and 43-18 in the Big Ten Conference

in seven-plus seasons. Yes, there's been a dip since he began his career by winning 34 of his first 41 games, but McIntosh has set a precedent with this move: If the next coach has won 72% of his games overall and 70.5% in Big Ten play through 93 games, will he be on the firing block as well?

The situation Leonhard is walking into reminds me of the

one Greg Gard found himself in when he was named interim coach for the UW men's basketball program back in December 2015. The big difference, of course, is Gard followed a coach who retired (Bo Ryan) and Leonhard is following one who got fired.

Gard not only took over a team that was 7-5 with home losses to Western Illinois and UW-Milwaukee, he inherited a broken locker room. Repairing that was the first order of business, before any X's and O's adjustments, and Gard did such a great job of guiding that team through turbulence Barry Alvarez had no other choice but to take the interim tag off his title.

Leonhard inherits a mess as well. The Badgers (2-3, 0-2 Big Ten) have been beaten by a combined 55 points the past two games, and safety John Torchio admitted "something's off" with the team. Better play at the quarterback and offensive line positions certainly would help, and maybe Chryst had lost at least part of the locker room, but I sense UW's issues run deeper than that.

One reason for McIntosh to make this bold move now rather than in two months is it'll give him a chance to see what he has in Leonhard. While it seems like everything Leonhard touches turns to gold — walk-on player turned All-American at UW, solid career in the NFL as an undrafted free agent, a star on the rise in the coaching profession — nobody knows for sure how effective he'll be leading a program.

These next seven games at least give McIntosh some data to analyze rather than play a guessing game. McIntosh can open the position for a national search in December if the job is too big for Leonhard.

That this discussion even is happening Oct. 2 is mind-blowing. I expected Leonhard to be the next coach here at some point; I never would have imagined it'd be five games into this season.

Four days after saying this — "The time for reflection on the season — and my position on this has been consistent across all our sports — is once the season is done" — McIntosh made a power move and played a hand I never saw coming.

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