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Pressure to win at UCLA little concern to Cronin

Scott Gleeson
USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — Mick Cronin knows about all of the skepticism.

News reports that he wasn't UCLA's first choice as a new head basketball coach. Message boards that balk at his lack of NCAA tournament success at Cincinnati. Pundits who believe his grit-over-flair style won't win over a hard-to-satisfy fan base.

"You know what? It doesn't matter. I don't give a (expletive) about that (expletive)," Cronin told USA TODAY.

The 47-year-old isn't the censoring type, and he has no plans to sugarcoat anything — to the media, unrelenting boosters or his players — in this new high-pressure job, which he acknowledges has national title-or-bust expectations.

"The noise is louder here," Cronin says, "just like it's louder at Kentucky, louder at North Carolina and louder at Duke. It's a (blueblood). I deflect criticism and focus on the job. I stay oblivious to it on purpose, and it's liberating. If you want your players to block it out, you have to live it yourself."

Cronin is two months into a dream job on a coaching trajectory that began as a junior varsity high school coach at Woodward (Ohio) High School — when a then 21-year-old Cronin would drive single-parent kids home and scrape up car change for the 5-for-\$5 deal at Arby's along the way.

"As much as I want to win it all here, and I'm in Beverly Hills and all that, it's not going to change who I am as a man and what I'm about," Cronin says. "That's what my players will see in me — not the coach who's on TV yelling at his players, the one who cares about them individually and collectively. The one who will be honest with them and have their back."

Cronin sits in an empty office with bare walls and a previous coach's furniture. In one breath he informs assistant coach Michael Lewis (who followed him from Cincinnati along with associate head coach Darren Savino) that's he's nearing a close on a new home to live in as a single parent with his 12-year-old daughter, Samantha. In another breath, he's spitballing an idea to his office assistant about a barbecue for the athletic staff to grow camaraderie. He pinballs from topic to topic about the future, as if he didn't just sign a six-year contract for one of the hardest jobs in America.

"Obviously, my goal is to turn this into a winning program, always competing for (Pac-12) conference championships and then winning national championships," Cronin says. "But how it looks on the outside — that this is an impossible job to please the fans — trust me when I say I'll go 10 times harder on myself if I can't win. This idea that I'll feel like we have to win because everybody else wants us to win is a fallacy. We're the ones who are doing this every damn day, who are moving our families across the country. As much as fans want certain things, they don't want it more than we do as coaches and players."

Although his tunnel vision is on the 2019-20 season, Cronin admits to googling "UCLA coach" quite often — for the



New UCLA men's basketball coach Mick Cronin previously held the top job at Murray State and then Cincinnati.
KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS

one whose statue is outside Pauley Pavilion as a symbol of the greatness from 10 national championships.

"John Wooden sure as hell wouldn't be looking at message boards or blogs to see how people felt about him or his program," Cronin says with a smirk. "And I won't either."

Wooden's towering legacy has made decent coaching tenures — Steve Alford led UCLA to three Sweet 16 appearances in five-plus seasons before a December firing — seem unworthy. Cronin replaced Alford as the 10th full-time coach in Westwood since Wooden was on the sidelines from 1948 to 1975.

There's been plenty of winning in the years since Wooden retired: The Hall of Famer's nine predecessors won 70% of their games while reaching six Final Fours and winning one national title. But the last five UCLA coaches have all been fired for not meeting expectations, including the program's second-winningest coach, Ben Howland, who led the Bruins to three consecutive Final Fours from 2006 to 2008.

Cronin sees Wooden's shadow as more of a gift than a curse, however.

"I caught an interview where Coach Wooden was asked about the pressures of those who were following in his footsteps," Cronin says. "He said only the guy who immediately preceded him (Gene Bartow) would have to deal with that. For anybody else, it's something they have to reconcile within themselves. If they can't do that, it's their own mistake. I think I've come to this program knowing who I am, what I can do and really everything else I've done leading up to this has got me here."

Cronin knows his 13-season resume at Cincinnati — which included a .670 winning percentage and top-three finishes in all six of the Bearcats' seasons in the American Athletic Conference — was missing a deep NCAA tournament run (his Bearcats advanced past the first weekend once, in 2012, despite nine consecutive appearances and being seeded sixth or higher five times). But he says he often tells former players and aspiring coaches to "never let someone else define your success."

"I'm not a sentimental guy," Cronin says of his tenure leading the Bearcats. "I'm a life's a journey kind of guy. I feel

like I did everything I was hired to do (at Cincinnati) except take them to a Final Four or win a title. In my business, you can't live by that. For years, (Virginia) caught no breaks and then bang, they win it all. You put yourself in a position to win a title, and that's what you can control."

"At Cincinnati, I felt like I raised the Titanic. It was dead in every aspect. Not only was it buried, it was buried beneath the greatest conference — the 16-team Big East. In six years we went from last to playing for the title (in 2012). When you're coaching in a league that's like the NBA every night, it's like the world is caving in on you. ... Coaching in that league, when you've got Syracuse, Connecticut, Louisville, Georgetown, Pitt ... that prepared me for this chapter I'm in now."

Except this next chapter will see UCLA play in a Pac-12 Conference that last season ranked last among power conferences in the NCAA's new metric, the NET. UCLA lost to mid-major Liberty, an outcome that ultimately prompted Alford's firing before a 17-16 finish.

Cronin inherits a team with an interesting mix of returning and incoming talent. Among the players who are looking to turn a new chapter are red-shirt sophomores Jalen Hill and Cody Riley, two of the players involved in a shoplifting incident in China that drew national attention and led to former guard LiAngelo Ball leaving the team.

One area Alford excelled in was recruiting — with three consecutive top-five recruiting classes (2016, '17 and '18), according to Rivals. Cronin says he expects to coach a mix of chip-on-their-shoulder players who develop into All-Americans as he did at Cincinnati along with the five-star talent.

"We tried to recruit five-star guys at Cincinnati. We just never got them," Cronin says. "Obviously, I came here for a lot of reasons. The recruiting is easier. The real reason is there's a better chance to cut the nets down that you don't have at other places."

"I've always been about keeping your eye on the ball or you're not a good hitter. That's a little harder to do here, but I'm going to do everything in my power to get the job done."

NBA teams sensitive to 'owner' use

AJ Neuharth-Keusch
USA TODAY

NBA commissioner Adam Silver says teams across the league are moving away from classifying their highest-ranking executive as an "owner."

"I don't want to overreact to the term, because as I've said earlier, people end up twisting themselves into knots avoiding the use of the word," Silver said in a recent interview with TMZ. "We moved away from that term years ago at the league. We call our team owners 'governor' of the team and 'alternate governor.'"

"I think it makes sense. ... You'll find the word throughout memos over the past decade in the NBA. But I'm sensitive to it and I think teams are moving away from the term (and) will stick with using 'governor.'"

While many teams use terms such as "governor," "chairman" and "CEO," a handful — including the Warriors and Rockets — still use the term "owner" in the staff directory of their official team media guides. The 76ers, meanwhile, list their executives as "managing partner" and "co-managing partner."

Silver said he's seen mixed reactions from players regarding the use of the term, which has been criticized by many over the years for having racial connotations.

"A few players have actually spoken out in saying the greatest thing that ever happened was when Michael Jordan was able to call himself an owner (of the Hornets)," he said.

Silver also said "I completely respect" when players are against the term, including Warriors forward Draymond Green, who has spoken out about it on multiple occasions.

In 2017, Green had a back and forth with Mark Cuban, who's listed as "owner" on the Mavericks' media guide, after Green wrote on Instagram that "to be owned by someone just sets a bad precedent."

Cuban responded, telling ESPN that Green "owes the NBA an apology" for his comments. "To try to create some connotation that owning equity in a company that you busted your ass for is the equivalent of ownership in terms of people, that's just wrong. That's just wrong in every which way."

"People who read that message and misinterpret it — make it seem like we don't do everything possible to help our players succeed and don't care about their families and don't care about their lives, like hopefully we do for all of our employees — that's just wrong."

Green, while speaking at Harvard University, responded to Cuban, saying that his intention was to "start a conversation that may need to be had."

"When you look at Mark Cuban, for instance, with the whole equity thing. We all can own equity and that's fine. But Mark Cuban will never know or understand how it feels for me, a young, black, African American, to turn on the TV and see what happened in Charlottesville."

"It's not to take a shot at the owners of these entities. It's more so trying to help spark change to help others that may be similar to me."

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