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School Of Head Fish

New Haven Proud To Have Spawned Sparano

By TOM YANTZ

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Tony Sparano's previous head coaching experience reads: University of New Haven, 1994-98.

On Wednesday he was hired by Bill Parcells to coach the Miami Dolphins, receiving a four-year contract worth an estimated \$11 million, according to the South Florida Sun-Sentinel.

"I've coached for a lot of people and worked for a lot of great coaches," Sparano, 46, said in Miami. "Coach Parcells has taught me the most and prepared me the most for this job."

When Parcells was named Dolphins vice president of football operations last month, it was thought he might turn to Sparano, his assistant coach for four years in Dallas.

Sparano replaces Cam Cameron, who went 1-15 in his first year as an NFL head coach. Of the four candidates Miami interviewed, Sparano was the only one with ties to the new regime, which includes general manager Jeff Ireland.

The trail for Sparano's arrival as an NFL head coach can be traced to the University of New Haven. He was a four-year letter winner as the starting center after playing at Lee High School in New Haven. He was the offensive line coach and recruiting coordinator in 1984-87 and head coach in 1994-98.

The next year, his NFL coaching career started as offensive quality control coach with the Cleveland Browns under former New Haven coach Chris Palmer.

Two of Sparano's New Haven teams went to the NCAA Division II playoffs. In '97, New Haven finished 12-2 and lost the NCAA Division II championship game to Northern Colorado.

Sparano was the second-winningest coach in New Haven history (41-14-1) behind Mark Whipple (48-17, '88-93).

"[Sparano] was the first coach I hired here," New Haven athletic director Deborah Chin said. "What impressed me from the start was he was clear in his mission. He wanted to be a head coach. When he started at New Haven as an assistant, he didn't get paid much or at all.

"He left a large footprint here. And he was destined for greater things after he left for the NFL."

Sparano's presence is still felt at New Haven. Though the program was dropped in 2003, it will return in 2009.

Chin said Sparano has been a strong supporter among the football alumni, donating flights and tickets to Cowboys games to support the yearly Chargers Classic golf tournament auction.

In December, Chin sought Sparano's input during New Haven's search for the next football coach. Sparano endorsed Albany associate head coach Peter Rossomando, who is the godfather of Sparano's son Andy.

Andy and his older brother Tony play at Albany.

On Dec. 13, when New Haven introduced Rossomando as coach, Sparano called and gave a glowing assessment of his former New Haven assistant ('94-98).

"I first met him when I played at Boston University ['90-93] when he was an assistant there," Rossomando said. "He has been my coaching mentor, like a father and big brother to me."

Rossomando said the Dolphins won't have to worry about Sparano being outworked.

"That won't happen," Rossomando said. "When I was at New Haven with Tony, he'd be there every day from August to early July [when he'd go on a brief vacation]. The rest of the time Tony would be there at 5 a.m., sometimes 4:30, and wouldn't leave until 8:30 or 9 at night. That's because the work had to be done. His family was great and would come in to have dinner sometimes."

Sparano's wife Jeanette, sons Tony and Andy and daughter Ryan Leigh have moved often during Sparano's NFL journey. The stops include Cleveland (1999-2000 as offensive quality control coach and offensive line coach), Washington ('01 as tight ends coach), Jacksonville ('02 as tight ends coach) and Dallas ('03-07 as tight ends coach and later offensive line coach). He added the title of assistant head coach in 2006.

And now it's on to Miami.

The University of New Haven has a rich athletic tradition, marked by such figures as Palmer (Giants quarterback coach and former Browns coach), Whipple (who won the 1998 Division I-AA title at UMass), Steve Bedrosian (1987 NL Cy Young winner with the Phillies) and former baseball coach Frank "Porky" Vieira (1,127 wins).

"They're all great, and Chris [a Southern Connecticut graduate] was a head coach, but he didn't graduate from New Haven," Chin said. "Tony is the first New Haven alumnus to be a head coach at the professional level.

"He's going to be recognized as one of our distinguished alumni at our annual Alumni Scholarship Ball April 12. And that was decided long before this. Now with [being named Dolphins coach], it's just a wonderful honor

that makes us all so proud."

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