



Staff file photo by David Smith

N.C. State coach Sidney Lowe says of last season, 'I really don't know what I could have done. Because initially, we were fine.'

A new Lowe?

N.C. State's coach says it's his way or the highway, but only time will tell if he can resuscitate the Pack after last season's disaster

RALEIGH — Attention N.C. State bookstores, RBC Center souvenir stands and the Go Pack Store at Crabtree Valley Mall.

Wolfpack basketball coach Sidney Lowe is overflowing with potential mottos for the 2008-09 basketball season.

T-shirt sales should spike with any one of these new-and-improved Lowe slogans.

"There's only one voice and it's my voice."

"I'm the ring leader. It's time for me to take total control."

"It's my way."

N.C. State's season opener comes Saturday at New Orleans and it's clear that — at the starting line anyway — Lowe already has his chest puffed,



**DAN
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promising to become a more commanding and assertive leader.

But whether his firm words are received with loyal acceptance or dismissed as unproven bravado remains to be seen.

In the world of college basketball, being authoritative and convincing is one thing. Dictatorial and stubborn is quite

another. And Lowe's ability to walk that tightrope this winter may just determine the future of the program.

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Before long, we'll know whether those commanding quotes can take off as catchphrases of a basketball resurgence in Raleigh or whether they'll become the eventual epitaph on Lowe's college coaching headstone.

Crash

It's hard to imagine that a year ago at this time, State was

seen as a program on the rise with Lowe's unique combination of swagger and desire rousing an always passionate and fervent fan base.

He had a sense of history. He had style. Best of all, he had the gall to stare down neighborhood bullies North Carolina and Duke without cowering.

By beating both the Tar Heels and Blue Devils in his first season on the bench, Lowe X'd off one of the biggest boxes on

OPENER

- **Who:** N.C. State at New Orleans
- **When:** Saturday, 8 p.m.

Wiederer

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the program's checklist, accomplishing a feat that had been achieved only twice in the previous 17 seasons.

But just when it looked like the Wolfpack was in the express lane toward the top of the ACC, Lowe's joyride hit a pothole, spinning out of control and plowing through the guard rail. Last season's startling 15-16 wreck left players and fans and even the athletic administration sitting on the side of the road, their eyes wide and their fingernails digging into their skulls.

State's 12 losses in ACC play were its most in 11 seasons. Its nine-game losing streak to end the season set a new program record.

All that hope and enthusiasm? Not only has it completely evaporated but there's a growing buzz that if the Wolfpack doesn't show marked progress this winter, Lowe's job could be in jeopardy. After just three seasons.

'You don't see it coming'

Ask the State coach where he erred last season and he can't quite put a finger on it.

"I really don't know what I could have done," Lowe says. "Because initially, we were fine. We won a very good tournament (the Old Spice Classic) down in Orlando (in November). So I don't know. Again, I'm not sure what I could have done. It's hard for me to explain. You don't see it coming."

He shakes his head and tries again to put his finger on it.

"I only know one way and that's to play the game the right way and to play the game to win," he says. "Anything else is foreign to me. Anything else I just have a problem with. And I don't know if we were all playing it to win the game last year."

But if there's a Cliff's Notes version to what went wrong, it is this.

"We were just way too one-dimensional," says forward Brandon Costner.

And that one dimension was freshman center J.J.

Hickson, the team's leading scorer (14.8 ppg) and rebounder (8.5 rpg). By now, it's been well-documented that Hickson's arrival and Lowe's insistence on making him the focal point of everything State did disrupted team chemistry.

By giving Hickson the leading role with no questions asked, Lowe inadvertently handcuffed the playmaking skills of guys like Costner, Ben McCauley and Courtney Fells, all of whom saw their statistical averages plunge and their enthusiasm dissipate.

"It's not that people expected too much out of us," McCauley says. "It's just that we thoroughly underachieved. Sometimes when you add new pieces, certain things just don't mix well. The best part about last year is that it's over. It's been draining to revisit."

Still, Lowe refuses to admit he made any mistakes with how he used Hickson, even after State finished dead last in the ACC in scoring (67.3 ppg) and 10th in turnovers per game (15.5).

"It's very difficult to find a negative when you're going through your best player," Lowe says. "I mean, you've got to call it the way it is. J.J. was the best player. You have to play around that and guys have to play their roles. If you have Karl Malone, you go through Karl Malone. Michael Jordan, you go through Michael Jordan. You go through your best player."

Follow the leader

Perhaps the best news — ironic as it might be — is that by making good on his promise to deliver Hickson to the NBA as quickly as possible, Lowe has put the Wolfpack in a better position to regain its winning edge this season.

With Hickson gone, much of the turbulence that ruined last year — the rotation issues, the sharing of the ball, the personality conflicts — won't be a problem.

Bothered by last season's difficulties, Lowe spent the spring and summer orchestrating "an attitude adjustment" in the State locker room. And he's repeatedly vowed that he won't stand around waiting for one of his players to take

control when things get tense.

In Lowe's first season, point guard Engin Atsur was the on-court general. Atsur was the guy who calmed everybody down, set up the offense and barked orders to keep everyone focused — just like Lowe had done during his playing days.

But last season, Atsur's successor never materialized.

"I thought maybe we had somebody else and it didn't work out that way," Lowe says. "So now it has to be me."

And so here comes another T-shirt slogan.

"It's the old Sid without the jersey now," Lowe says. "I'll do exactly what I did when I played. When I played, I'd chew guys out. I'd tell Coach V to take them out. Simple as that. It's just the way it was. If you weren't going to do what we needed you to go, I'd tell Coach, 'Take them out.' For me, it's about playing the game the right way and winning. And it's better to have five guys out there playing the way you want them to play than have five guys out there playing their way and lose."

In the preseason, such soliloquies can seem energizing and motivational. But to be successful, Lowe will ultimately have to offer a bit of give-and-take. Winning programs always need players who respond to the coach's directives. But those players also need a coach who's in tune with their needs, cognizant of their skills and willing to play masseuse with their college-aged egos.

After two roller coaster seasons, Lowe believes he has things under control.

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"I'm the ring leader. It's time for me to take total control."

"It's my way."

Certainly sounds powerful.

But it's time to see whether Lowe's voice can motivate and inspire, whether his way is the right way. And for a coach who has a 9-23 ACC record as the head coach at N.C. State after a 79-228 overall mark as a head coach in the NBA, it's logical to question whether Lowe's way works.

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