

20 questions

Interview by Angelo Pizzo Photography by Tom Stio

for Kelvin Sampson

A Small-town Kid's Next Challenge

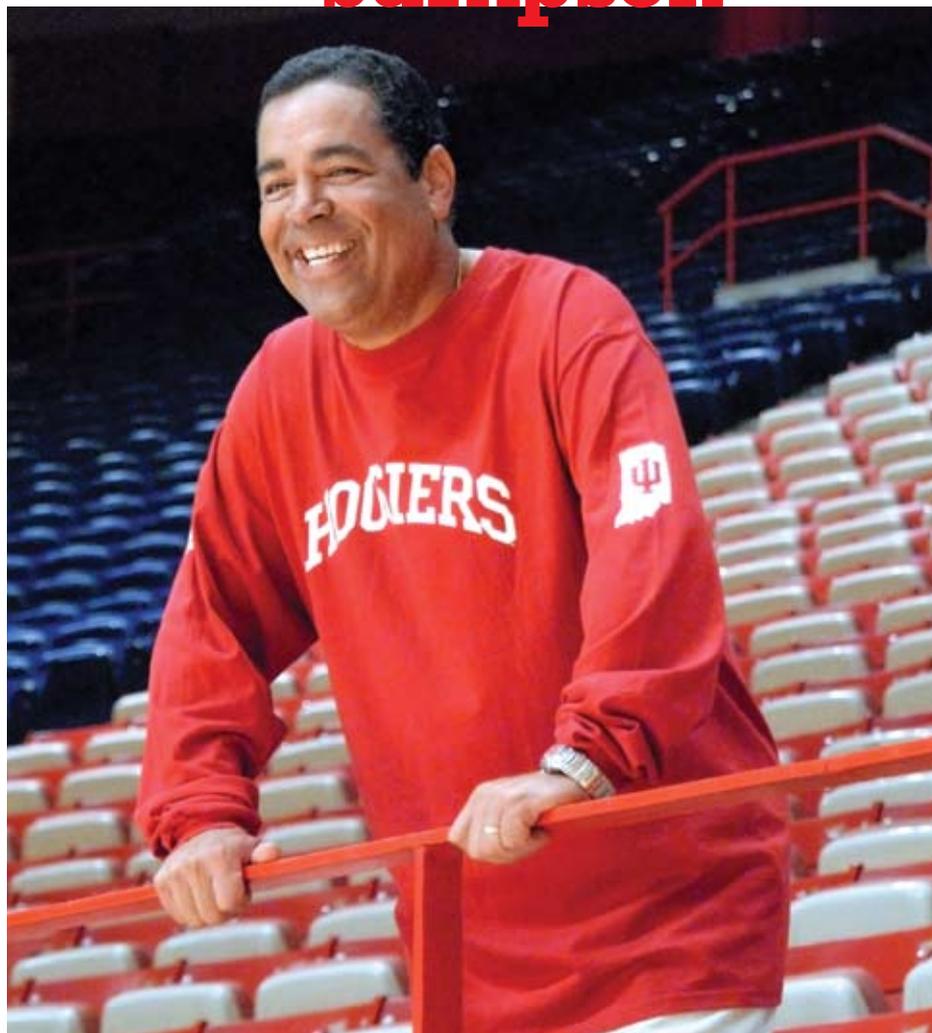
After an extensive and highly publicized search, Kelvin Sampson was hired by Indiana University to be the head basketball coach on March 29, 2006. After the tumultuous six-year reign of Mike Davis, and the lingering shadow of legendary coach Bob Knight, athletic director Rick Greenspan tapped Sampson, looking for a proven winner and stability for the program. The two-time national coach of the year has one of the best winning percentages in Division One basketball and clearly relishes the challenge. Sampson and his wife, Karen, have spent the past six months getting to know Bloomington, the Hoosiers rabid fans, and preparing for the upcoming season.

PIZZO What made you decide to be a coach?

SAMPSON I was a son of a coach, but when I was younger I didn't understand all that coaching was. It was just another job. But as I got older I realized how empowering a position it is. You have the ability to influence a young man's life.

PIZZO Did you prepare for coaching as an undergraduate?

SAMPSON Actually, at Pembroke State in North Carolina, I was a social studies major. I became really interested in law, especially constitutional law. I was fascinated with Thurgood Marshall and his role in Brown vs. Board of Education. I read everything I could about him. I still do. In fact, the best book I have ever read in my life is his autobiography. I even took the LSATs. Meanwhile, to make money, I took a job in the town recreation department,



and they had a Saturday morning program for kids. I coached a sixth grade little girls' team, and I got addicted. I loved coaching those little kids. That was the start.

PIZZO Your father is in the North Carolina Coaches Hall of Fame. What was the most important thing you learned from him?

SAMPSON Some things you store in your memory, and they don't come out until much later. After I became a coach, that's when having played for my dad really helped me. He never had great teams, I mean, I was one of his best players. What does that say about

his talent level? But I learned from him about making the most of what you have. When I started, I didn't get good jobs. I made them good jobs. At my first, Montana Tech, every student needed a minimum of 30 credits in math. That really limited the kinds of kids who could come there. My first year, our record was 4 and 23. We had only six players most of the season. The next year we were 23 and 4, and my last three years there we won three straight conference championships. I had to learn how to do more with less. Take 50 cents and make it five dollars. I learned it from him. And that's probably the greatest lesson that anyone can give you.

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PIZZO On an ESPN special about Oklahoma basketball a couple of years ago, the commentator said, “Kelvin Sampson has a chip on his shoulder and he imparts that attitude to his team. That’s one of the reasons he’s successful.” Do you think that commentator’s assessment is accurate?

SAMPSON Yeah, I’ve always had a chip, and early on I would use it the wrong way. I’ve had to learn to let that chip be positive. It has helped me teach my kids about motivation and how and why you should use your hours in a day the right way—what should motivate you. I talk to them about their backgrounds and about how my own background shaped me. I recall things like being with my dad and sitting in the colored-only balcony of the movie house. Remember, I’m the son of a coach who coached during segregation, and back then, there were Indian schools, colored schools, and white schools.

When I first went to Michigan State for graduate work in kinesiology I had never been on an airplane. In my first class they asked us to stand and introduce ourselves and state our undergraduate schools. There were students from Notre Dame, Boston College, Michigan, Michigan State. And then I stood up, a little Native-American kid from a country town in North Carolina. I was the only minority in the class, among all these powerful kids with great backgrounds, from these powerful schools, and I said I graduated from Pembroke State. I could see everyone in the room look at me like, “What did he say? Where is that?” I realized right there that I wanted to show those kids. And I did. If you know how to use that chip as a positive it can help you. If you let your chip be negative you never move forward.

“What is the worst thing that can happen to me at Indiana? They fire me? Are you kidding me? That’s the worst thing that can happen? Look at what I’ve been lucky enough to accomplish with this life that I’ve been given. And they think this is pressure?”

PIZZO How do you deal with parents of your athletes who are not happy with the number of minutes their son plays?

SAMPSON I remember what my father told me: It’s not personal, they don’t hate you, they hate the fact that you’re not playing their son.



Coach Sampson and interviewer Angelo Pizzo talk about life, luck, and basketball.

They don’t care whether the team wins; they just care whether their son plays. The main thing is, if you start listening to those people sitting up there behind you, pretty soon you’ll be sitting with them.

PIZZO The Indiana job is such a high profile, under-the-microscope job. How will you deal with the pressure and scrutiny?

SAMPSON I’m 50 years old, a Native American kid from a really small town in North Carolina. Nobody from where I come from does things like this. I mean, how lucky did I get, just to have the opportunities I’ve been given, starting with going to UNC Pembroke. When I was a head coach at an NAI school, to

keep me there, they also made me the athletic director. I was 26 years old, an athletic director and head basketball coach. By the time I was 31 I had a Division One team in the national top ten. I coached at Oklahoma for 12 years. Now I’m the coach at Indiana. I’ve done things I never dreamed of and they’re telling me

that this is pressure. I’ve been to Iraq twice. I coached soldiers an hour and a half away from the shelling. Talk about pressure or stress. What is the worst thing that can happen to me at Indiana? They fire me? Are you kidding me? That’s the worst thing that can happen? Look at what I’ve been lucky enough to accomplish with this life that I’ve been given. You think this is pressure?

PIZZO You had a great run at Oklahoma, averaging 25 wins over your last years there, and you had the the fourth-ranked recruiting class coming in. Why did you come to Indiana?

SAMPSON For the future. That’s why I came here—because of what Indiana can be. Now, when I go around, the first thing fans want to talk about is our tradition: the 1975 and the 1976 teams. The banners. The tradition is second to none, right up there with UCLA and North Carolina. And that’s a major part of what makes this job special. But I’m telling my players and our fans that we want to prepare for and live in the future. That’s why we have to build new facilities. That is really critical to the success of Indiana basketball in the next ten years.

PIZZO What do you think about Bloomington?

SAMPSON I love this place. What struck me right away was the beauty of the area. I love driving through Nashville. I look for reasons to

go to Columbus just so I can drive on 46. I can't wait for the fall.

PIZZO In the short time you've been here can you say how the Indiana job is different from the Oklahoma job?

SAMPSON In Oklahoma, we were always successful. I've noticed that people appreciate success, but they get bored with it. They tend to take it for granted. We averaged 25 wins for ten years, won four Big 12 championships, got to Elite 8's, Final Fours, but after the season I'd do a couple of interviews and then it was on to football. Football became the main way of life there. Since I've come to Indiana I've done more interviews in the months of June and July than I did in the last five or six years in Oklahoma. And the number of speaking requests I get is incredible. I got a request in July to go to Batesville to speak at Huber's Farm. You might think, *Huber's Farm?* Who's going to be there?

Well, it was the most amazing thing. There were over 600 people in this building and they tell me they turned away 175 more. In the middle of July! That blew me away. It was a defining moment and it started hitting me then how this job is different. And it motivates me, because I really want to win for them. People have such a passion for basketball here. It makes you work hard, makes you want to do things the right way, have high standards, recruit kids who are going to graduate and go into the community representing Indiana basketball.

PIZZO There was some criticism of Mike Davis for not connecting to Indiana's tradition and not including former players in the program. What is your take on bringing former players back?

SAMPSON We had a camp last Saturday and I asked Damon Bailey and Greg Graham to come over and speak to our kids. Both of them were unbelievable. They were articulate, they shared stories, and they shared memories. Talked about what it was like being at Indiana. I did it for the campers. I think I got more out of it than anybody! I've talked to Kent Bentson, Scott May—they're the stars, they're the history and tradition. I'm not a star. I'm just a role player.

PIZZO So many people are interested in you and the team and would love to talk to you. When you're out in public and people try to engage you in conversation are you open to it or do you prefer your privacy?



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SAMPSON I go to the grocery store a lot because I'm addicted to cereal, to Frosted Flakes. I like Honey Smacks. I like Raisin Bran, but I have to be in a Raisin Bran mood. So I'm there and people say to me, "Coach, I hate to bother you." I tell them, "You're not bothering me. I'm the coach of your school." If they want to ask me about the team, if they want an autograph, I'll tell them about the team, I'll give them an autograph. If I said no, there could be that one kid with this memory for the rest of his life about me turning him down. I don't turn down anybody for an autograph.

PIZZO How would you describe your wife?

SAMPSON Karen's more social than I am. The people of Bloomington are going to develop a real appreciation for her. They might get to the point where they want me to leave, but they're going to love her. Karen is just a lovable, caring, great person. She's never met a stranger. She is the most outgoing, people person I've ever been around. She's a head coach's wife who a lot of other head coaches like to call and talk to. And she loves basketball, and has ever since I've known her, which is back in high school.

PIZZO How has recruiting changed in the last ten years?

SAMPSON There are too many people involved. It really comes down to the fact that you're no longer recruiting just a kid. The high school coach has really been taken out of it because of the way the NCAA has limited contacts. The people you have the most contact with are the summer people. Some are good; some are bad; you just can't throw a blanket on either one. But the way the kids are treated has made it tougher on the coaches. For example, they've not been held accountable for a lot of the things they've done. And the foundation of my program always has been, and always will be, discipline. We're going the play the right way. We're not going to negotiate it. We're not going to build a campfire, hold hands, and sing Kumbaya, and decide whether we're going to play hard tomorrow. Summer

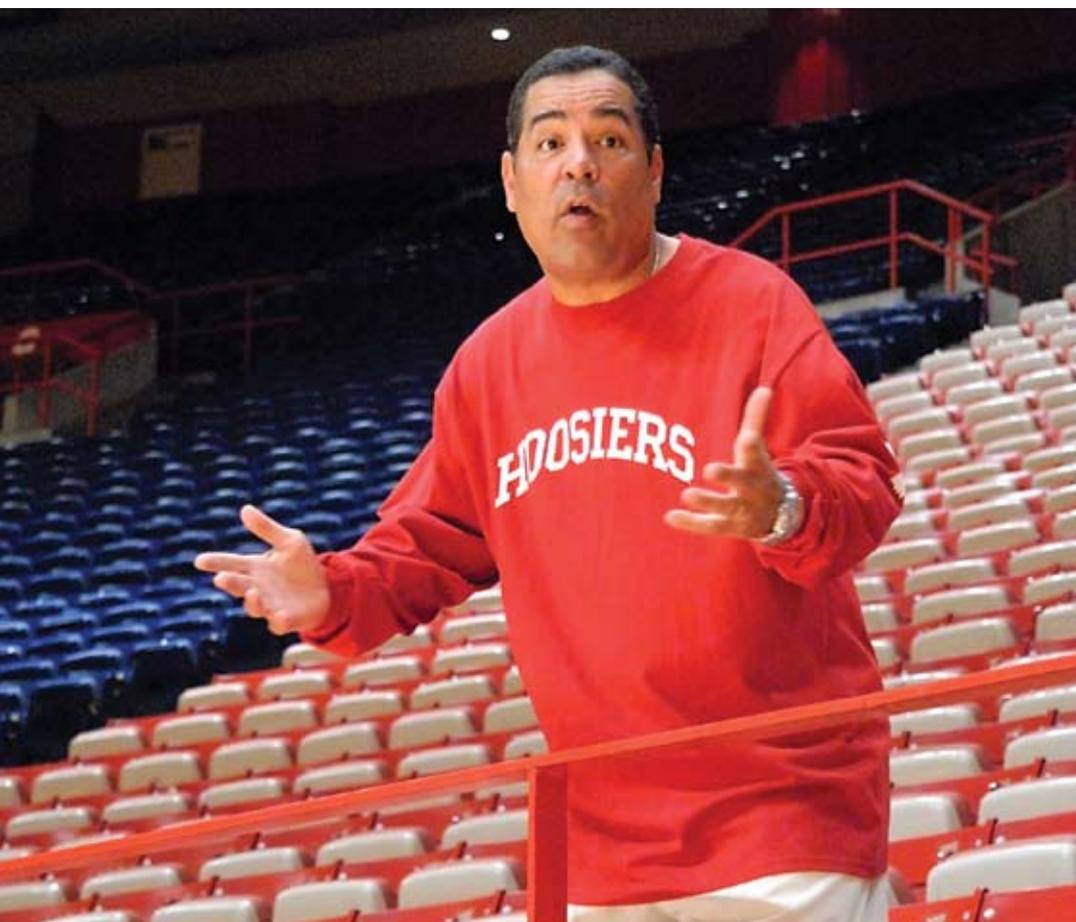
"We're going the play the right way. We're not going to negotiate it. We're not going to build a campfire hold hands, and sing Kumbaya, and decide whether we're going to play hard tomorrow."

basketball has made our jobs a lot harder.

PIZZO There seems to be an arms race of sorts. Promising high school kids are being offered scholarships as early as their freshman year. How has this trend affected coaches and the players?

SAMPSON Usually it makes it harder to coach. Sometimes it gets to the point where you recruit a kid and then you have to *de*-recruit him. You have to bring him back down to earth and tell him this is not all about him. He doesn't get to practice when he wants. We're not going to play games every day. We're going to have a system that's a means to an end. There's going to be a purpose to what we do.

PIZZO Basketball has become a popular international sport. Recently, Argentina and Greece beat the best the NBA has to offer. What's your take on that?



SAMPSON Well, for one, they don't have any NCAA rules. Their coaches are teaching their kids from an early age, year round. We can't do that. I'm not allowed to coach the kids here in the summer and I can coach them for only a limited time until the official practices start. The good high school players here fly around the country playing games, never practicing, never learning, just playing. The difference between college and summer basketball is preparation, practicing for a purpose. When we finally get that kid here, we have a lot to teach him.

PIZZO Young athletes in this country are asked to specialize earlier and earlier. Is this good or bad?

SAMPSON I like multiple sports players, but kids do have a better chance of scholarships if they specialize earlier. They get noticed. In the last 20 years, it's all changed. The competition has increased, and early specialization is one of the reasons Lithuania is so good, and why Argentina and Greece kick our butt. Those kids start playing together at 14. You watch those teams and they're fundamentally better than us; but it's not about playing year round, it's about being taught. That's what

I wish we could do better. It's amazing how everybody wants progress but they don't want change. You can't have progress without change. And the change for us is what's occurring now with basketball in the US. Look what Jerry Colangelo is doing with Mike Krzyzewski. Instead of taking the best players from the NBA and just showing up, they're preparing for the Olympics now, by putting this team together for 2008. Finally, we're having a program instead of just a team.

PIZZO *The inevitable question —how do you think Indiana is going to do this year?*

SAMPSON For me, it's a little like a blind date. The thing that I'm optimistic about is that I think you're as good as your best player. I think we have a really good best player in D.J. White. And I love the way Earl Callaway finished last year. There are three people in my system that can never have a bad practice: the head coach, the point guard, and the best player. I hold those three people accountable every day. Now the people in between—Lance Stemler, Mike White, A.J. Ratliff, Rod Wilmont, Ben Allen, Eric Suhr—those guys will determine our season.

PIZZO *Do you think they're going to have a difficult time adjusting to your coaching style and your philosophies?*

SAMPSON No. I'm a coach. This is what I do.

PIZZO *Have you ever thought about coaching in the NBA?*

SAMPSON I'd be lying if I said I haven't. But bottom line is I'd rather be playing for an NCAA championship than an NBA championship. I love college towns. The atmosphere in the college arena is just more exciting, more alive: the bands, the cheerleaders... even the popcorn smells better. And it's natural, real, not like in the NBA, where it's more artificial, more driven by technology. I love coaching in college because the name on the front of the jersey is more important than the name on the back.

PIZZO *Is it your wish that the Indiana job be your last?*

SAMPSON Absolutely. ✨

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