Coach leaves security for UT fame

Associated Press

DALLAS — Folksy Abe Lemons left a secure job that included more money than he had ever made in his life, a car, liberal expense account, country club membership and a hunting lease.

He accepted on Tuesday a new job as head basketball coach at the University of Texas at Austin — one that is sure to make his blood pressure rise.

Why did he do it?

That was one of the first questions after Lemons abandoned the athletic directorship and head basketball coaching job at Pan American University at Edinburg in the sunny Lower Rio Grande Valley to take Leon Black's position at the University of Texas.

Lemons, looked upon by many as a second Will Rogers because of his quick one-liners, spent 18 years at Oklahoma City University and left making — at best — $17,000 - $18,000 a year.

Always a winner at the independent Oklahoma school, Lemons found he could win at Pan American — only seven defeats in two years — and get paid $32,000 a year. He also got the benefits that doubled his former OCU salary, putting him somewhere in the $50,000-a-year bracket.

But Lemons fretted over the isolation of the school on the Mexican

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border and also saw Texas' downtrodden program as a challenge.

"He got tired of the restrictive coverage," a close friend said. "He would tell a joke and people wouldn't understand what he meant. After a game he had virtually nobody interview him but his wife. He'll have a field day in Austin. He has been missing the publicity and his friends."

Lemons pouted not too privately over his team being ignored in the NCAA playoffs although the school had a 20-4 record and the nation's leading scorer in Marshall Rogers.

Enter persuasive Darrell Royal, the athletic director and head football coach at Texas, who travels first class. Lemons was in New York Saturday as a guest analyst for an NCAA tripleheader basketball playoff. Royal reached Lemons shortly before the Notre Dame-Cincinnati game and invited him to Austin.

It didn't take Royal long once he had his mind made up on his man. Lemons' bank account won't be suffereing going to Texas. In fact, aside from Eddie Sutton at Arkansas, Lemons will be at the head of the financial class in the Southwest Conference basketball ranks.

Lemons has an awesome task replacing Black although Texas is recognized as one of the biggest coaching plums in America. The school has been going down hill in basketball the last several years. What Royal is counting on besides Lemons' coaching ability is his uncanny recruiting ability.

Lemons will bring a sense of humor to the league. He once left a team on the court at half-time in Madison Square Garden to scrimmage "shirts and skins" after a miserable first half.

"We were playing so bad we even had trouble beating the other," he said after the game.

Now, he says he will be coming for the first time at a school with its own song.

"Up to now I've been just coming," he said.

Now, Royal has brought to Texas a man who dances a merry jig with cracker barrel humor and a record.

And Abe likes country music. Darrell.

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