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Olson: AD told him to be mum

Coach says he's fit and ready to tackle rigors of coaching

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Lute Olson said Tuesday at a regionally televised news conference that University of Arizona Athletic Director Jim Livengood told him to remain silent during his medical leave of absence, which Olson said began Dec. 7.

In addition, the coach said he provided UA with a guarantee that his condition is resolved and he is fit for work.

"Do I look like I have a condition?" Olson asked reporters. "Mr. Livengood said, 'Are you sure that you're ready to face this job and this stress?' and I said, 'Absolutely.' "

The Hall-of-Fame coach said his family doctor told him, "You're ready for whatever you want to do" before his announcement March 10 that he would return to coaching.

Afterward, Olson's physician, Dr. Steven D. Knope, released through the UA athletic department a statement saying, "I have examined Lute and cleared him to return to any and all coaching responsibilities as of March 24."

Olson, 73, went on temporary leave Nov. 4 and made it permanent in December, when he said it became clear he would not be able to return by January.

"I had talked with (UA President Robert) Dr. Shelton and Jim Livengood because they felt there had to be sort of a timetable, because it couldn't be a case where suddenly I came back in February or something," Olson said.

Olson said he realized in December he would not be physically well enough to return by January, the cutoff Livengood and Shelton gave, and went on leave using provisions of the Family and Medical Leave Act at that time.

The act is a 1993 federal law providing certain employees up to 12 work weeks of job-protected leave for serious health conditions or to care for newborn children, newly placed adopted or foster child or an immediate family member with a serious health condition.

Olson said last week the reason for his seasonlong absence was "stress and anxiety."

The act requires employees provide documentation from a medical facility or a practitioner substantiating the medical leave, but each employer determines what documentation is needed for that employee to return to work, said Marcia Chatalas, UA director of human resources.

"We don't necessarily require a doctor's certification but in cases where the leave is for the individual's own medical condition, we do advise departments obtain some kind of certification from the health care provider saying the person can return to work," she said.

Olson said Tuesday he would have liked to speak publicly about his leave before now, but thought he was prohibited.

"That's what I was told," he said, explaining Livengood and Rocky LaRose, senior associate director of athletics, told him that. The act restricts employers from speaking about an employee's reason for leave, but has no such proscriptions on the employee.

"I think it was a misinterpretation," Livengood said Tuesday afternoon. "Rocky and I told him we couldn't talk under the law and maybe he took that to mean he couldn't."

Olson said he thought UA administrators handled circumstances surrounding his leave "very professionally . . . and they protected my personal issues."

The only thing Olson would have changed about the situation, he said, was the news release announcing his temporary leave Nov. 4.

"I worked on a statement that was going to indicate it was medically related but not a life-threatening situation . . . and unfortunately, that was not what came out," he said.

Gordon C. James, who runs the Phoenix- and Washington, D.C.-based firm that released the statement, attended the news conference and said afterward, "Anyone who was quoted was consulted," he said. "The final version was approved by everybody."

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