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Special treatment for Lute Olson? It's unclear how the coach will be paid for all 5 months' leave

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University of Arizona men's basketball coach Lute Olson's paid leave of absence is set to end at the conclusion of this year's basketball season, a UA official said.

But neither Olson nor UA will say if the Hall of Fame coach will return then or how he will be paid if he remains on leave.

The season could end as early as mid-March with the conclusion of Pac-10 play or as late as April 7, the championship game of the NCAA Tournament in San Antonio, said UA athletic director Jim Livengood.

"From our perspective, Lute is on an approved leave of absence through the end of the season," Livengood said, adding that he and Olson will talk in the coming months about extending the leave if Olson so desires.

The issue raises the question of whether Olson is receiving preferential treatment allowing him to take nearly five months' paid leave.

It's impossible to say, given the records released by the University of Arizona.

However, records requests and interviews with UA human resources administrators show other high-level appointed personnel could not receive five months' paid leave without using sick leave.

If Olson is using accrued vacation days, the most he - or any long-term appointed employee - could have available is 55 days, according to UA paid-leave policy. (See box at left.)

Olson began his paid leave Nov. 4, Livengood said, meaning the coach will likely run out of vacation days around the end of this month, when accounting for paid holidays during that time.

Beyond that, the only other options for paid leave, according to UA Human Resources Director Marcia Chatalas, are sick leave, bereavement leave or sabbatical leave.

Olson's contract contains no special provisions for paid leave beyond what UA vacation policy provides, and according to that policy, his vacation time will run out before the end of this month. He is paid a base salary of nearly \$738,000 from the athletic department budget, which receives no state tax money.

The coach does not qualify for sabbatical leave because he is not a tenured faculty member, and bereavement leave is no more than three days, according to UA policy.

Olson could use sick pay during a leave of absence if he or a family member is ill. University officials refuse to say if illness is involved.

However, when asked if the coach would have to use sick days for time off once he reached the maximum allowed vacation days near the end of January, Livengood said, "Exactly."

He added that as Olson's direct supervisor, he could authorize leave beyond vacation time "based on our policy."

"Sick leave has to be used under that policy, but I can't comment further because that is personnel information," Livengood said.

According to UA policies, sick leave can be used only when employees "are unable to perform their duties because of illness or injury, or because they must be absent from work for the purpose of obtaining health-related services not available after regular working hours."

Sick leave also can be used when there is a serious illness or communicable disease within the employee's immediate family or household, or in situations where care for an ill family member is the primary responsibility of the employee, the policy states.

Employees who want to use sick leave must fill out a form accounting for why they need to take it, Livengood said. But there is no form required for employees to use paid vacation time, also called "paid annual leave."

Livengood said privacy concerns prevented him from saying whether Olson filled out that form "because that is part of his personnel file, which is private."

Though state law does not prohibit the release of personnel records, the UA has refused to provide the Citizen with Olson's Dec. 6 leave request, saying that doing so "would reveal personal and private information disclosed by the employee to support his leave request." The law allows for rare exceptions if the the agency can show that the information released would harm the agency or violate a person's right to privacy.

University officials released Olson's payroll records, but blacked out parts so the Citizen could not compute how much vacation time or sick leave Olson might be entitled to under UA policy.

If Olson has not used any sick leave prior to his current leave of absence, he would have 288 sick days built up over his 24-year tenure at UA, allowing him more than a year of paid time off.

But the coach has been adamant that his leave is not health-related, something he reiterated Friday in a phone interview with a Citizen sportswriter.

"I'm doing fine; doing well . . . I plan on being back next year," Olson said.

He said he still intends to coach the Wildcats and that he's watching their games on television, but that to return this season "would be disruptive" to the team.

In a Nov. 4 news release written by the Gordon C. James Public Relations firm in Phoenix, Olson said the reason behind his leave of absence request was not "a health scare, but rather a personal matter that needs my undivided attention."

On Dec. 6, he filed for divorce from his wife of four years, the former Christine Toretta; her response was that she was committed to the marriage and would "support my husband through this difficult time in his life."

Pima County Superior Court Judge Sarah Simmons assigned the case to conciliation court Jan. 7, granting the

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Jan. 4 petition of Christine Olson that divorce proceedings be postponed while the couple utilize "the services of the Court of Conciliation for marital counseling."

Olson took about two weeks off from coaching the Wildcats when his wife of 47 years, Bobbi, died in January 2001.

LUTE OLSON TIMELINE

April 21, 2007 - The Citizen reports that Lute Olson's longtime assistant, Jim Rosborough, won't be returning. "Roz" is asked to stay with the basketball program in an administrative role, but declines, eventually accepting a position in the athletic department under athletic director Jim Livengood.

May 1 - Kevin O'Neill is hired to replace Rosborough at \$375,000 per year, making him the highest paid assistant coach in college basketball.

Nov. 3 - After a home football game against UCLA, Olson informs Livengood that he needs a leave of absence.

Nov. 4 - Livengood holds a news conference to announce Olson's leave of absence and introduce O'Neill as interim head coach.

Nov. 26 - Olson returns to McKale for a team practice and attends several practices over the next week and a half as an observer.

Dec. 6 - Olson announces late in the evening that his leave of absence will extend all season and that he will return to coach "next year." He ceases going to practice.

Court records reveal that Olson filed for divorce from Christine Toretta Olson. He says their marriage is "irretrievably broken." Through her spokesperson, Christine Olson says she is "personally devastated," but pledges to support Olson "through this difficult time in his life."

Dec. 18 - UA announces that O'Neill will be the head coach when Olson decides to retire.

Jan. 4 - Christine Olson files a petition in Pima County Superior Court contesting the divorce and asking the case be remanded to conciliation court so she and Olson can "utilize the services of the Court of Conciliation for marital counseling."

Jan. 7 - Judge Sarah R. Simmons grants Christine Olson's petition and postpones the divorce case for 60 days.

Jan. 11 - Lute Olson shows up unannounced at McKale to work out in the weight room. He gives brief interviews to the media and says he is "doing well."

WHAT UA POLICY SAYS

According to the University of Arizona Handbook for Appointed Personnel, full-time appointed personnel earn 22 vacation days (annual leave) per year.

If unused during one fiscal year, these days may be carried over to the next fiscal year, and a somewhat complicated formula ensues whereby days are taken away if too many accrue, making it impossible for any employee to ever have more than 55 days - or 440 hours - of vacation time on the books, according to Human Resources Director Marcia Chatalas.

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"There might be instances where someone - and I couldn't tell you this if it has happened - where someone might get an exception (to the 55 day paid vacation limit), but in general, the most people would have available on the books is 440 hours," Chatalas explained.

That adds up to about 11 weeks. UA men's basketball coach Lute Olson announced his leave of absence Nov. 4 and on Dec. 6 said it would extend through the "remainder of the current basketball season."

Olson should reach the end of the maximum accrual allowed of 55 days next week, accounting for holidays and the continued accrual of sick time.

Appointed personnel at UA accrue one day of paid sick leave per month. Sick leave is allowed to accrue indefinitely.

Caption: Lute Olson's paid leave as University of Arizona men's basketball coach will stop at the end of this season, which could be as soon as mid-March, UA officials said last week. Lute Olson.
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