

Excerpted from *An Odyssey to a National Championship* by Mick Holien and Dave Guffey

The University of Montana's glory days in football had been few and far between, when an unlikely savior who had toiled in the college coaching ranks for 16 years took over the reigns.

It was in December of 1985 when Don Read, a man who had spent his entire college coaching career in the state of Oregon, was named the 30th head mentor in Montana history. The appointment was made by former Athletic Director Harley Lewis.

Read took over a program that had two winning seasons in the previous 14 years. The Grizzlies had been playing their home games in Dornblaser "Stadium," a temporary facility, since the 1968 season.

In somewhat of an ironic twist, Lewis had wanted to hire Read earlier back in 1980 after coach Gene Carlson had been released. But, a finalist at the time, pulled out contention for the position, citing personal reasons.

Instead of Read, Larry Donovan, an assistant coach at the University of Kansas, was tabbed for the job. Donovan won 25 games and a Big Sky Conference title (1982) in his six seasons at Montana, from 1980-85. The Grizzlies were a disappointing 5-16-1 in Donovan's final two years, winning two conference games during that time.

Donovan's last season, in 1985, season ticket sales had been the second-lowest in 20 years, and Montana averaged 5,006 fans in five home games. The lack of success those last couple of years carried over to individual honors as well. Following the 1984 and 1985 seasons, the Grizzlies had only one player selected first team all-conference.



Read started in the college ranks at Portland State in 1968. He then moved in to the University of Oregon; the next stop was Oregon Tech, and then back to PSU. He had a few banner years during his stints at PSU and Oregon Tech, but was only given three seasons to rejuvenate the Ducks' program.

Why did Read leave his comfort zone?

"We (Don and his former wife, Lois) were very impressed with the potential in the state, the interest in the university, who the Grizzlies played, their personnel, their administration, and so on," Read said. "It all lent itself, in our opinion, to success."

"Number one was the challenge [of starting a winning program at Montana], and that was followed by the opportunity to succeed, the interest level being what it was, as well as the coming of the stadium," Read said. "Those were all huge factors."

Positive things came even faster than Coach Read or win-hungry Grizzly fans could have possibly dreamed.

In Read's inaugural season at Montana in 1986, the Grizzlies doubled their win total from the previous two seasons. The Grizzlies went on to register 10 straight victorious seasons in the Don Read Era.

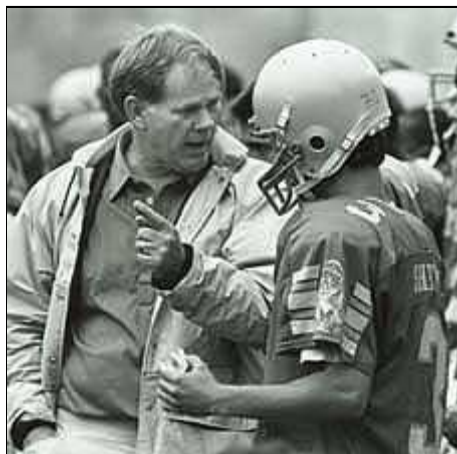
Perhaps just as significant, at least to Montanans, was the fact

that Read's Grizzly teams had unprecedented success over their intrastate rival, the Montana State Bobcats, registering 10 consecutive victories.

It was just nine days before Christmas of 1985, when the 50-year-old Don Read came to UM, bringing with him his pass-oriented ways and father-like qualities.

Read had promised Grizzly fans that his teams would pass the ball first, pass the ball second, and then pass the ball some more. They weren't disappointed when UM 6-4 team in '86 established a single-season passing record with 3,056 yards.

He lived up to his pass-first philosophy, and Montana's offense had unparalleled success in Read's decade at Montana. In the 121 games that he coached at UM, the Grizzlies broke or tied 40 single-game and single-season records. From 1986 to 1995, Montana scored 10 or more points in 113 games.



In his final three seasons in 1993, 1994, and 1995, the Grizzlies were 34-7. He was named the Big Sky Coach of the Year in 1989, 1993, and 1995. During his stint at Montana, Read's teams advanced to the Division I-AA playoffs five times: 1988, 1989, 1993, 1994, and 1995, culminated that continued success by winning the national championship in '95.

Read surprised and disappointed Montana fans everywhere and shocked a lot more when he retired in the spring of 1996. He was as popular and loved in Missoula and around the state of Montana as any coach in school history.

Coach Read and his Grizzlies gave their fans numerous memorable moments during Read's decade at Montana, but he saved the best for last, in what turned out to be his final season in "Grizzlyville."

Read Coaching Timeline

Year	School	Overall	Conference/Place	NCAA Playoffs
1986	Montana	6-4	4-4	----
1987	Montana	6-5	5-3	----
1988	Montana	8-4	6-2	----
1989	Montana	11-3	7-1/2nd	2-1
1990	Montana	7-4	4-4	----
1991	Montana	7-4	6-2/2nd	----
1992	Montana	6-5	4-3	----
1993	Montana	10-2	7-0/1st	0-1
1994	Montana	11-3	5-2/2nd	2-1
1995	Montana	13-2	6-1/1st	4-0 (National Champions)
Montana Totals (10 years)		85-36 (.702)	54-22 (.711)	8-3 (.727)