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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Mr. Barnhardt was the first quarterback for the USF football team.

Background

Mr. Barnhardt was born and raised in Lake Wales, Florida, where he graduated from high school in 1994. After receiving his diploma, he was drafted by the Boston Red Sox to play professional baseball for a year. After a year in the major leagues, he enrolled at the University of South Carolina, where he spent two years before transferring to the University of South Florida.

High school athletics

Barnhardt was always involved in athletics, and “grew up playing almost anything.” He played both football and baseball in high school, and after graduation received opportunities in both sports. He played quarterback on the football team, and both catcher and shortstop in baseball. Asked whether he had a preference for either sport, Mr. Barnhardt replies, “It depends on what season it is.”

Professional baseball

He remembers that he “always had aspirations” for playing baseball professionally, “and it worked it pretty nicely [having] the opportunity to do that.” After a year with the Red Sox, Barnhardt chose to stop playing so that he could go back to school.

Boston Red Sox

His first season with the Boston Red Sox, Barnhardt recalls, “was a learning experience.” Though he enjoyed it, he began to miss football and school and felt that it was “not the right time in [his] life” to dedicate himself to professional baseball. “[I] just really looked forward to getting back in that groove.”

University of South Carolina

As a student-athlete at South Carolina, Barnhardt did not get as many opportunities to start on the football team as he would have liked, so he “had to look elsewhere.”

High school graduation

As a high school graduate, Barnhardt had received an offer from Coach Vinnie Cardieri to play baseball at South Florida, but he chose instead to play professionally with the Red Sox. Interestingly, current USF football coach Jim Leavitt was still at Kansas State University where he attempted to recruit Barnhardt for the football team. Having a prior relationship with the coaches and the physical proximity to Tampa induced Barnhardt to enroll at South Florida. “The rest is history.”

Enrollment at USF

Because he lived so close to Tampa, Mr. Barnhardt had already been to the USF campus on several occasions before deciding to enroll. “I thought it was a neat place – I’ve always liked Tampa.” The campus, he recalls, “was a little bit different.” His first semester, he lived across Fletcher Avenue in Fontana Hall, then moved into a nearby apartment with other players.

USF Football

The football program did extremely well in its first year, Barnhardt recalls. “I think down here football is important. There was a lot of excitement.” With all of the publicization and community support, nearly 50,000 tickets were sold for the first game, among them a number of season tickets. “Having that many people at [the] first game certainly said a lot about the interest and the enthusiasm of the area – plus there [were] good people backing it.”

First football game

The first game, Barnhardt recalls, “Was lot of fun ... Everything clicked. [It was] a perfect day. It didn’t rain – It was just beautiful. [There was a] huge crowd, and everybody was so excited. It [was] certainly unforgettable.”

Tampa/Raymond James stadiums

The team played its games the first year in the old Tampa Stadium, home of the NFL’s Tampa Bay Buccaneers. After it was torn down, they began playing at the new Raymond James Stadium.

Academics

As a student at USF, Mr. Barnhardt was studying marketing, which, he admits, “has nothing to do with what I am doing right now.” His schedule was consistently “pretty busy” as he juggled athletics and academics.

Coaches and teammates

As a football player, Barnhardt developed “very close” relationships with his fellow teammates, one of whom currently coaches with him in Lake Wales. The coaches he had at USF, he recalls, were “very good guys ... They were honest and fair ... There’s a lot to be said about that group of coaches – They were outstanding people ... They taught me a lot.” To this day, he continues to stay in touch with his coaches from the University of South Florida.

Team traditions

Among the team's traditions, before home games, players would all meet together at Fontana Hall for the pre-game meal. For road games, a plane would be chartered, carrying only the players, coaches, parents, and boosters. The fact that many of the players lived together also helped to build and galvanize strong relationships. Holding team meetings in the trailers which housed the football offices, he remembers, "was a tradition that a lot of people kind of joked about."

Student reactions to the football program

In regards to the student reactions, Barnhardt notes, "I think they were really happy ... they always supported us ... The football team gives them ... a better sense of identity ... something to rally around."

College graduation

Mr. Barnhardt graduated in December 1998 after playing football at USF for two years. After that, he knew that he wanted to coach, but did not have any idea what opportunities might be available. He accepted a position as head coach of the baseball team at Lake Wales High School where he worked for several years before moving to a coaching position on the football team where he currently works.

Lessons learned

Being a part of the football team at USF, Barnhardt reflects, "certainly paid dividends for me. [It] taught me leadership and responsibility – all things that we try to preach to our players now."

Lasting impressions

"I think [USF] is the best place in the world to go to school. The best place to play football ... I am very proud of it – proud of my experiences and thankful to the Lord that I did that and He gave me that chance."

End of Interview