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USF Florida Studies Center
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Early interest in sports

He was born in Texas, and his dad was in the Air Force, “So we moved all over the world.” They came to St. Petersburg when Coach Leavitt was in the third grade, and remained there through his high-school graduation. He first began playing flag-football in fourth grade, and ended up playing quarterback in high school. Following graduation, he was offered an athletic scholarship to the University of Missouri, where he played football (defensive back) and baseball (outfield) for four years (1974-1977) while completing his master’s degree in counseling. “I just loved playing ... I was very competitive ... and I worked very hard at it.”

Early coaching experiences

He coached at the University of Dubuque in Iowa for two years, “Where I probably learned more about coaching than anywhere else.” He then moved on to Morningside College where he served for six years as an assistant football coach and psychology teacher. He went on to the University of Iowa where he began a Ph.D. in sports psychology. While working on his dissertation, Bill Snyder at Kansas State University called and offered Leavitt a job. He left his studies at Iowa behind and took the opportunity to coach a division one team at Kansas State, where he spent the next six years. When he made the move to Kansas State University, Leavitt realized that his future was in coaching. Though the school had one of the worst football programs in NCAA history, by the time Leavitt left, the defense was ranked first in the country, and seventh nationally in the AP poll.

Move to USF

He was then offered a job at the University of South Florida, which he gladly accepted. “To be able to come home ... to do what I love ... most people in life never have that opportunity.” They started off in a trailer with very few resources, yet he recalls the experience was “so exciting.” He was responsible for building the program from the ground-up, which included hiring an entire staff.

Leavitt first heard of the position from head baseball coach Eddie Cardieri, a long-time friend of his. He wanted to be a head coach “in the worst way,” and would only leave Kansas State if such a position were offered to him. The position at USF was particularly appealing to him because not only was it a brand new program, but it gave him the opportunity to come back to where he had grown up. “What a great challenge – to start football from scratch.”

First season at USF

They practiced for one year, and had their very first scrimmage after only nine days of practice. To his surprise, 5,000 spectators came out to witness the unveiling of the first USF football team. The very first year of the football program, 20,000 season tickets were sold. After one year, the opening game was held against Kentucky Western in front of 50,000 fans. He recalls the kicker coming up to him before the game saying that they had forgotten the tees. Because they were playing at Tampa Stadium, he asked former Buccaneer Lee Roy Selmon if he knew where the kicking tees were kept in the stadium. After scurrying around for some time, the tees were eventually found, much to the relief of Coach Leavitt. After a year of preparation, the Bulls won their first game. “Everything went so well ... it was an incredible night ... I was just like on clouds ... it really meant a lot to me.” The team completed their first season with a record of 5-6. “We didn’t have a winning season, but I didn’t know if we could win one game, to be honest.”

Over the course of the following years, the team continued to improve, and was nationally ranked for two consecutive years in division 1-AA football. The team then advanced to division 1-A football, where they have played for the past several years with a winning record of 27-9. “I’m just so proud of how this community has embraced this football program.”

What he is most proud of is “the fact that I really believe we have great discipline in our program ... that our players are focused on their education ... we care more about them than [just] what’s happening on the football field.” He celebrates a high academic success rate among his players, something that he believes in very strongly.

Academic experiences

His parents always stressed the importance of education, and Leavitt recalls being very competitive in his classes from an early age. When he went to Missouri, “I was very sensitive about being labeled a ‘dumb jock’ ... that was offensive to me.” Because he loved being around people, he always suspected that he would end up going into counseling. Eventually, he combined his two passions and decided to study sports psychology. While serving as both a coach and an instructor during the academic semesters, he was taking six to nine credit hours of coursework each summer for his Ph.D. After some time, he chose to resign from his position in order to pursue his doctorate degree at the University of Iowa. After finishing his coursework, he began writing his dissertation on “intrinsic versus extrinsic religious orientation as it relates to stress and burnout among division-one football coaches.” He recalls, “I didn’t know where it was going to take me ... but I loved going to school.”

Coaching style

He believes it is important for coaches to maintain close relationships with the athletes, a conclusion he drew after spending a number of years coaching at a small college level. He also stresses the importance of the university in the overall success of athletic programs, from the administration and faculty to the local community. “Football ... Can be a tremendous asset to a university, especially if things are done in the right way.” He attributes most of his current coaching style to those experiences at the University of Dubuque and Morningside College. “Young people ... want to work hard, and they want responsibility ... but they want to be loved, and cared for – that’s really got to be a part of your life. If you don’t have this care for young people, they’re not going to work.” He asserts that in order to be a good leader, one must be a good servant.

Initial years at USF

Though he began the program with very limited resources, Leavitt feels the university administration and community has been extremely supportive in the team’s development. “I feel pretty fortunate ... it’s kind of an honor to be here.” There was not any recruiting done before Leavitt’s arrival at USF, something which presented particular challenges to the new head coach. “To be quite honest with you, it wasn’t a hard sell ... we got some great guys.” Because resources were limited and early salaries low, Leavitt found coaches who shared his dream and vision for the future of the football program at USF.

Leavitt asserts that Paul Griffin was instrumental in establishing a successful football program at USF. Serving as athletic director at the time, he established many of the early foundations for USF football, and was responsible for hiring both Coach Leavitt and Lee Roy Selmon, contributing greatly to the credibility of the program.

Athletic conferences

Though the team started off in Division 1-AA, from day one Coach Leavitt had his sights set on Division 1-A. In 2003, the team entered Conference USA, something Leavitt celebrated as “really an incredible feat.” The team has recently been approved to enter the Big East in 2005, where USF will gain a great deal more national exposure while providing stronger financial support.

Successful players

Leavitt has seen some of his players go on to play football professionally. “I just coach these guys ... they put in the hard work [and] effort ... the credit is to those guys.” Among those early players drafted into the NFL were Kenyatta Jones, Anthony Henry, and Bill Grammatica, some of whom went on to win Super Bowl rings, an achievement which Leavitt jokingly asserts, “gave us a million dollars worth of worldwide advertising.”

Personal influences

When asked what coaches he looks up to, Coach Leavitt replies, “All of them!” The ones that have most influenced him personally are Don Birmingham from the University of Dubuque, Bill Snyder, and Bob Stoops, among others.

Leavitt feels he is extremely fortunate to be coaching here at USF. He feels humbled by other job offers, and believes they are indicative of the overall success of the football program at the university. “South Florida has done wonderful things for me ... No matter what happens in the future, it’s history now ... I really have no desire to be anywhere else ... My dream is to see this program continue to grow and flourish ... My heart is here.”

End of Interview