

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Project

O.H. 2206

Nick Roberts

Interviewed

By

William P. Bundy

On

July 25, 2004

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INTERVIEWER: William P. Bundy

SUBJECT: YSU Project

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P: This is an interview with Nick Roberts for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on YSU Project, by William P. Bundy, at Jackson-Milton High School, on July 25, 2004.

B: Alright Nick, we're going to start off this interview process with some general family history questions. Can you tell me where and when you were born?

R: I was born in Warren, Ohio, in April of 1981.

B: Do you have any siblings?

R: Yes, I have one older brother and one younger sister?

B: Did both of your siblings attend college?

R: Yes, my brother attended Youngstown State, and my sister is currently attending Ohio State.

B: Could you tell me about your relationship with them and tell me what they're doing now?

R: I have a lot better relationship with my brother. He got me into Youngstown and got me playing football because he was already up there and he knew all the players. My sister is four years younger than I, so I don't really have that great of a relationship with her. I talk to her a lot more now than I did when she was growing up; it was more me and my brother that grew up together. He's only a year older than me so we did everything together, went everywhere together. Right now he just graduated from Clarion University in Pennsylvania, he's working full time at Akron, so I don't see him too much, but we still talk a couple of times a week and we're definitely close, you can definitely tell we grew up together. We get sick of each other when we're around each other, but...

B: It's a good relationship.

R: Right.

B: Can you give me your parents' names and occupations?

R: My dad's name is Nick Roberts Sr. and my mom is Jody Roberts. My mom has been teaching for 17 years at John F. Kennedy High School in Warren. She's the Spanish teacher. My dad was a teacher and coach at Champion High School until 2001. He then retired, and now he's a principle at St. Patrick's in Kent. My dad was head football coach at Champion for sixteen years, and he was assistant coach ten years before that, so I really grew up around football and just grew up loving it and being around it.

B: Can you tell me where your parents attended college?

R: My dad went to Mt. Union and my mom went to Kent State.

B: How influential was your mother and father as far as your development?

R: I would say my mom was always there pushing me, but my dad definitely helped me. Physically my dad he didn't push me, but I always wanted to do it for him. I always wanted to get stronger, be faster, whatever. Grades, I never took school too seriously even when I got to college, but my mom from the day I went to kindergarten has been pushing me to do well. Mt mom graduated Cum Laude from Kent State, and always wanted me...my brother and sister have always done real well in school and I just kind of breezed through. But in my physical development, definitely my dad has definitely helped the most in that.

B: As far as your educational development you said how your mother stressed education. Was college something that you...did they set the expectation that you were always going to college?

R: I think in my household growing up...me and my brother and my sister all went to college. I think they always brought us up that we were going to go to college, and we needed to go to college to get a good job. If we were going to succeed in life just like they were, we had to go to college, you weren't going to do it unless you did. I mean

there was that pressure, but in me and my brother's case, we were both good athletes in high school and we had the opportunity to play sports in college, so we weren't just going to college for school, we could say that we were going there to play football and go to school. And my sister was like my mother, a 4.0 student, so she went...we always knew she was going to go, she was real smart, she definitely has the smarts in the family.

B: Now I'm going to ask you basic questions, neighborhood questions, high school, elementary school. Where did you grow up? Where did you live?

R: I grew up in Newton Falls, Ohio. I went to Catholic school at St. Mary and Joseph's from kindergarten through fourth grade. And then after fourth grade, my brother left after fourth grade, then when I got to fourth grade I left and we both went to public school and attended Newton Falls public schools until the middle of my sophomore year of high school and my brother's junior year of high school. We transferred to Champion to play with my father because we had been playing against him, and we had grown up going to Champion football games. We really wanted to play for Champion so we transferred to Champion. So I went to Champion for my last two-and-a-half years of high school, and I graduated from there in 1999.

B: Who were the most influential teachers that you had K through 12?

R: Definitely my fourth grade teacher Miss. Smith. She died probably my ninth grade year. She was one teacher that was able to get me to go to my academic potential, it was one of my only years that I received all A's. Really she knew how to push me and get the best out of me.

B: High school-wise was there any teacher there that kind of influenced you?

R: I would say my dad, if anyone. When I came to Champion, my dad knew all the teachers so I couldn't really jack around like I did before and maybe be a little better both on the football field and in the school just because my dad was watching over my back.

B: Did you have a favorite teacher?

R: Not in high school, definitely not in high school.

B: Did you have any favorite subjects?

R: No, I really did not like school. I would look forward to going to gym class. School was hard for me to get through. It was hard for me to sit through a regular school day. And it's still hard in college you know, sitting there and going to class when you could just go skip and sit and talk with your friends.

B: Did you have a least favorite teacher?

R: Let me give you an all-timer. There's a couple.

B: Well, throw them all in there. And give me a reason why those individuals...you didn't care for them.

R: When I would have to say the one person I didn't care for would have been – it wasn't a teacher it was a coach, it was my football coach at Newton Falls. And there was a reason that you know, me and my brother really didn't like him. The way I look at it now he had a lot of pressure because my dad was coaching too and he always had to watch what he said around us. Really me and my brother disliked him. We had to leave our high school and decided to start brand-new at a new high school and left all our friends. We didn't know anyone when we went to Champion. Really there was a lot of bad blood between us and the football coach from Newton Falls for a long time. But I think now when I look back on it I think that we were in the wrong, that, you know, we were just young and needed someone to be mad at, and instead of a five minute drive to school we had a half-hour drive to school, had our dad watching over our back instead of being able to do whatever we wanted.

B: What sports did you participate in?

R: In junior high I did everything, football, basketball, and track, then once I got past my freshman year just football and track.

B: Did you participate in any other extracurricular activities?

R: Yea, we had a weight-lifting team at Champion. I was on student council at Champion and Newton Falls. That was about it.

B: Which one was your favorite sport and why?

R: I succeeded more in track all until probably my sophomore year in college. I succeeded more in track, track was my better sport. But always loved football, I always loved playing football since I can remember. I was begging my dad to take me to the games, I was six years old wanting to wake up at six in the morning to go with my dad just so I could watch the guys practice.

B: Can you give me a list of some of the awards and recognitions that you received throughout your high school years? Athletics, academics, anything.

R: In high school I hold the county record still in the shot put. I was a two-time state qualifier my junior year, I finished fourth, my senior year I finished fifth. I hold the school record and county record in the shot put. Football I was honorable mention all-state two years. I was all-league and first team all Northeast Ohio both years at Champion.

B: Now you've wrapped up your career, you've graduated high school, you've obviously went through some adversity changing schools, changing academic standards and everything else. When you were leaving, did you feel that academically you were

prepared for the rigors of playing collegiate football and having the pressure of collegiate academics?

R: When I first got to Youngstown I was not prepared for anything. When I look back on it now those first couple months were the hardest months of my life. I mean getting through football camp, getting through the season, plus school, having to go, getting passing grades, plus I was out of shape, I still hadn't reached my physical potential yet, I was a little over weight. Things were not good; things were not going good for me. Plus I was doing two sports in college, and it just wasn't fun. I was doing football and track, I had no free time. So really actually I take that back, the whole first year was just stressful. After my first year I really didn't want to – I didn't know if I wanted to do anything because I was (inaudible) in football, and in track we had traveled so much and it was just so hectic with football and track in the winter plus school. I was so burned out by the time summer came that I really wanted to be done with school.

B: What were some of things that did? I mean like you said you were basically just trying to keep your head above water.

R: Well a normal day during the winter would be six a.m. workouts, school eight to three, and then I have track practice at night three to six. Six days every day, come home dead tired, having a full load of classes and homework. It was really tough. That first year was tough.

B: Academic-wise did you find yourself becoming more disciplined? How did you learn?

R: Academic-wise I think I learned the ropes. I learned how to get by. I got my B's here and my C's there, I stayed at a 2.5. I was never one of the guys that was in trouble. I wouldn't have to worry about being eligible, I wasn't that guy. But I wasn't the guy that coach would say, "Look at how good he's doing in class." I was right there in the middle, they never had to worry about me failing classes, but they knew I wasn't going to come and get a 4.0 or anything like that. They knew I was smart and I could get through what I needed to.

B: The expectations that were upon you as far as getting football, track, and academics, did you think it was going to be that tough?

R: The time consuming I did not prepare myself. It was so time consuming, just playing one sport is a full load, trying to go to school and playing one sport, but doing do sports – and they way we travel with track is you're gone the whole weekend, and then you come back Sunday night and Monday morning it's six a.m. workouts for football. School all day again, track all night, and it's just back to the same old routine, and there's no break. I was so burned out by the end of it. But after I got through that first year I knew I could do anything because it was the hardest thing I put myself through in my entire life, and I look back on it now and say, "Wow, I'm glad I did that." I wish I would have done it a couple more years because it kept me focused. It was hard, I hated every second of it, but it really pushed me.

B: Giving advice to somebody, you're coaching a kid that wants to play at Youngstown State or wants to go to another university and he asks you what are some tips that Nick Roberts could give to a kid about how to better prepare yourself. Like you said you felt you were ill-prepared because you really didn't know what the demands were. How would you advise someone that would be going into your shoes, who would be that freshman? Is there anything that you would tell them academically? How to use his time?

R: Academically you've got to get everything done. You've got to give yourself enough time. You've got to teach yourself to get up early, there's no more sleeping in until 11:00 in the morning, those days are gone. You've got to teach yourself to get up and get things done. And football really helped me do that, because with football you've got to get up at six o'clock in the morning, okay. I've got to go, "Hey, I've got a test at eight, okay, I've got to get up at six and study." "I've got to get this paper done, I've got to get up early and do it." I always was able to use my work ethic in sports to get through in my academics, and I would say to use that because obviously if you're going to play at a university, you have a good work ethic and there's something special about you. So use what you do on the field and translate that into the classroom to help yourself get by. And just good time management. Your first year is going to be hard. You've got to learn and go to class, that would be the thing I'd tell them, go to class and you'll be alright.

B: What were your reasoning for choosing Youngstown State University?

R: Scholarship, strait up. And my brother was there and I knew a lot of guys on the team.

B: Did you have the opportunity to play for other universities?

R: Yes, some of the division 2 schools like Clarion, Slippery Rock, but Youngstown was really the only place that I was going because I knew I could do both sports at Youngstown. I knew the track coach real well. I had already played one year of football there so I knew the football end of it too. So I wasn't really scared. That's why I say my brother really helped me because he was the one that really got his feet wet first, and then it was easy for me to come in.

B: You said you received a scholarship, correct?

R: Yes.

B: Was that an athletic scholarship?

R: Yea, it was a track scholarship.

B: What was your major? Did you originally go in there saying, "I'm going to be this?" Did you change it multiple times?

R: Well, I went in undecided and I think in the back of my mind I always wanted to be a teacher like my parents, I had seen what my parents were doing. But I just never had the

academic success, and I ended up just staying undecided until I had to declare a major. I had taken so many sociology classes that I just declared Sociology my major, and it wasn't really any thinking into it, just staying eligible and then having declared.

B: Who was your most memorable instructor that you had there? Or instructors? Or favorite class?

R: You know I don't know that I really had a favorite teacher. To be honest with you, 99% of my teachers at Youngstown I could not tell you their names. It was really for me my academics was just getting by. Just to learn what I had to do for the test, and I didn't care what the teacher's name was. The teacher didn't care what my name was. I mean there's a few teachers there that I got along with personally. A Geology teacher, I'm not sure what his name is. There were a few teachers that I would know and I would wave to, "Hi, how you doing?" But I mean for the most part I didn't know who they were; they didn't know who I was. I'd sit in the back of the class and get my B or C and walk out.

B: Did you have a favorite class?

R: No. Not at all. I didn't enjoy going to any of them. I'd wake up every morning and say, "Yea, I can't wait until I get through this class." It was just get through it and get to practice, and get back home so I can lay down.

B: What was your housing situation there since you were under scholarship?

R: My first year there I was only on academic scholarship. So I had to provide my own housing, I lived in the dorms my first quarter, and then one of my good friends, Jeff Ryan, was moving into a house with my brother, and they needed another roommate. Since I was only on academic scholarship I was able to do whatever I wanted with my housing, so I moved off campus my second quarter at the University. Now six years later I say I've been living on my own for six years now, and I'm glad I moved out of the dorms early because I would have had a lot more trouble in school if I was living in the dorms. At least living in a house you get some privacy; you get some time to yourself.

B: Why do you think you would have had problem in the dorms?

R: Well, the first quarter I was in the dorms, the way dorm life is; staying up until four in the morning every night, and just the way my workload was in the winter, there was no way I would have got through it. There was no way; the temptations just through everyday college life would have just swallowed me up.

B: What drove you to pursue athletics beyond high school?

R: Definitely my dad. I feel when I went there, when I went to Champion, I think when I left I felt like I really disappointed him. He would never say that, he would never even come anywhere near saying that, but in my own mind I feel like I disappointed him. And

every day I was there and every play I played at Youngstown I was doing it to prove to him that I was a good football player, for him to say, "Hey that's my son out there."

B: You were driven by your father then; you wanted to make him proud.

R: He would never say anything, he would never do that. He would never call the coaches if I wasn't playing. He just wouldn't do that. He would let me go on my own, but that was my driving force. I had disappointed my father once and I did not want to do it again.

B: Did you feel that there was a lot of people out there doubting you, and saying, "Could you play at this level?"

R: Yea, there was definitely a lot of people saying, "Hey, Nick Roberts, he can't play at Youngstown State." There was a lot of people that didn't like that me and my brother left, there was a lot of people doubting me. And it was rough those first eighteen months I was there, they were right, hey, I wasn't playing, they were right, I couldn't make it, but I just stuck with it and I look back and I'm so glad that I did because every other day I'd call home wanting to quit, wanting to come home, talking to my mom or dad, and they'd always be, "Nick, come on, things will be alright tomorrow." And you know I can't even imagine how many times I called home. If I had a quarter for every time I called home wanting to quit, especially that first year when I was doing track and football, I didn't want to do it, and I'm glad that my parents were there not really push me but to be there to support me and help me get through my hard times.

B: They gave you the guidance.

R: Yes, definitely, they guided me through because they knew that I really wanted to be there, and they knew I needed to be there because who knows where I'd be right now if I didn't go to Youngstown. I say that a lot, I don't know where I'd be right now if I didn't go to Youngstown.

B: What were some of your expectations when you came on to the team?

R: When I first got to Youngstown all I wanted to do was be a backup. Get in the program; be in the two deep, that was it. The first year-and-a-half I worked unbelievably hard just to be the backup center my second year at Youngstown. I mean it was the hardest year-and-a-half of my life, and then finally I was like, "Okay, I did it, I'm the backup center at Youngstown, alright I'm in the too deep, I go out there and take snaps with the second quarter back. I'm playing for Jim Tressel; I'm traveling, getting to go on all these away trips, all the conference games. I'm one of the fifty-three guys they picked." It made me feel really good. That season I didn't play at all the first seven games and I was fine and dandy with that. I was sitting back and I was fine, "Hey, I'm the backup center," that's fine. Then all of a sudden the center gets hurt midway through the seventh game when we were already up 27-nothing. I came in and I got my first taste of real college football, my first time I played in over two years since my senior year in high

school. And then I finally go that desire and that drive that I finally wanted to be out there. Before it was okay, I walked on, I gave up my track scholarship to play football, I made it, I was the backup center, I did it, they trusted me, I went in, and then once I finally got in there and played, I didn't want to come out. The next game I started, played all eighty-three plays, was the O-liner of the week, got my name in the paper, and that day all those people were wrong. Everyone that said "Nick Roberts can't play at Youngstown," they were wrong. From then on out that was it. There was two games left, I didn't play the last two games, and I was only on the field goal teams for the playoff game. And I was really disappointed, I really had gotten that drive back to say, "Hey, I want to get out there, I want to play, I'm pissed off I'm not out there." It's not okay to be standing on the sidelines, it's not okay to be average, and right there I knew I had to give everything I had, *plus*, just to have a chance to be out there.

B: Once you proved yourself and got the taste you knew that was it.

R: Right, exactly.

B: What were your first impressions of the coach, the facility, and the team overall when you got there?

R: Well, my first year was 1999 and we went to the National Championship game, so I mean my impressions of Jim Tressel have never changed, he's an unbelievable head coach, a standup person, just a great person. The facilities I thought were unbelievable because I came from Champion at a field that holds two-thousand and the weight room was about twenty square-feet. You get to Youngstown: beautiful weight room, beautiful facilities, huge lockers, I mean really, and still to this day we have the best facilities in the whole gateway conference. So I think from everything from our equipment guys on was top-notch at Youngstown.

B: As far when you get there and your first impressions with the team, you said you knew a lot of the guys because of your brother playing there...

R: I think if my brother wasn't there it would have been so much harder. I knew exactly what to expect from him, he was the one that went there first, and it made it so much easier on me. There was no way I would have ever played football if it wasn't for my brother. He never really succeeded at Youngstown. He went to Youngstown for three years and finished his last two at Clarion playing football, but you know, I wish I could tell him that he helped me out so much to just get me in there, just that he got me in there and helped me out so much because I never would have made it on my own.

B: I think that's huge being able to...because that's one huge element that you take away from, having to get to know all these people, and them having to get to know you.

R: They knew Chris Roberts' brother, okay; I know with most of the guys it was okay, I wasn't scared. All the other freshman, boy...a few other guys in my freshman class had brothers on the team too, so there was a few of us that were alright. At that point I really

didn't have a cocky attitude, so I was scared; it was still scary going away for the first night and stuff. I'll never forget that first night. I was in the dorms by the freshman camp, (long sigh)...

B: Scary.

R: Yea.

B: Now you had your brother there and you knew some of the guys. Did you have teammates besides your brother that you really looked up to and kind of took you under their wing and you felt that they weren't there to mess around with you but they were there to make you better?

R: Oh, definitely, those O-linemen in '99, there was five senior O-linemen my first year so I knew I was getting red-shirted, but still those guys, Frank Rutherford, Ian Shirey, John Longano, but definitely I think Frank Rutherford taught me how to be mean. I was always walking around with a smile on my face and just happy to be there, and you just watch guys like Frank work, and they're out there trying to kill guys, and I could never get that concept, I never understood that concept until then. This isn't no play-z, you've got to be tough, you've got to want to do it, and I think really I got my first taste of it watching those guys work and watching those guys make it all the way to the National Championship game. Watching Frank go through injuries, everything, and never come out, just keep hitting and keep going. And I still tell Frank to this day, he's a Youngstown police officer, I tell him, "Hey you're the one that taught me how to be tough." I had never seen before until him, and before that I was the tough guy, I was the big guy on the team, and when I got to Youngstown I was now a little fish in a big pond instead of a big fish in a little pond.

B: When these guys kind of took you under their wings, did you find yourself, once you made your breakthrough, did you find yourself wanting to make that same impression back on the younger guys?

R: Yea, definitely. Once I quit worrying about myself, which was about midway through my sophomore year, I really started thinking a lot about who got me to this point, how did I get to this point? It was great when the older guys would help me through the drills and stuff, and I'd try to do that everyday I was there, I never picked on the younger guys, I hated it when people would do that. I tried to help them out as much I could, tried to be their friends, hang out with them, because I would know they loved it because I loved it when the guys would do that, when they included me and stuff, it made me feel like I was wanted. When it's your first year up there it's hard, you want to go home to your high school where you're from, you don't want to be with a bunch of guys that you don't know, that don't care about you. You want to know that they care about you, and I can honestly say I did try to do that, I tried to become friends with the younger guys, make it easier on them, the transition, because I knew it was hard for them.

B: You stated already that your head coach when you first went to the University was coach Tressel, correct?

R: Correct.

B: Obviously you sat down and met with him getting ready to choose YSU, and you got the track scholarship, and stuff like that. What expectations did Tressel say to you?

R: I don't know that it was so much Tressel as my position coach. John Klacik was my offensive line coach for four of the five years that I played at Youngstown. In college it doesn't matter really...it's your position coach who works with you the most, who decides if you're going to play, and really Coach Klacik, he sat me down from day one and said, "Nick, you can play here, but you've got to lose weight, you're too big, you can't do it." No one ever forced me to make that decision, to say, "Hey, do I want this bad enough that I'm going to sacrifice myself and my body and make myself a player?" And you know, I never even heard that until I got to Youngstown, and that's why that first year was so hard because they were pushing me so hard to lose weight, learn all the plays, do this, do that, and I still had to prove it to myself, it would have been a lot easier if I had the confidence in myself, but I didn't have the confidence in myself. I didn't know if I could play, I wasn't sure, I didn't know. I didn't know until that first game I got in there, and then once I knew that I could do it, then I finally got that desire and wanted to be out there. I could definitely say that our wide receiver coach, who also played wide receiver at Youngstown, Trent Boykin, he said, "Youngstown's a great place to grow up, you become a man in there. You learn a lot about yourself." Really I think I learned more about myself, and I'm so glad I went through it. It was hard, yea, there was a lot of nights that I wanted to go home and cry, a lot of times I cried to my parents, yea, but I'm glad I made it through it because it made me a better person.

B: Kind of describe to me Coach Tressel's philosophy on structure, discipline, tradition, education, all of those types of things that he instilled upon you.

R: Well, Coach Tressel everyday would just stress the simple things, discipline, everyday teaching us about the guys that had played there before us. All we'd hear about was the National Champion teams before us, the tradition they had left, the values, how they did it, what they had done. Everyday he would just kind of find little ways to say it to you, Are you working hard enough? Are you reaching your full potential? Are you doing this? Are you doing that? He just had little ways of saying it to make you want to be a better player, to make you want to prove yourself to everybody that's ever played at Youngstown State, that's ever put on a Youngstown State jersey, saying, "Hey, this is all one family, an we're all together here, once you put on that jersey you're family for life." Even if you haven't played in twenty years, you can come back and say, "Hey, yea, I know what they're doing, let's get going." I have something to prove. When I'm out there on that field I'm not just playing for myself or my family, I'm playing for every guy that ever played out there, and he (Tressel) really instilled those traditions on us, definitely.

B: Coach Tressel is kind of famous for stressing character and integrity, how are some of the ways that he did that? I know he has a book like a winner's manual. Is that what it was called?

R: Well, first thing is he brings in good people. He knows the right kind of people to bring in. He doesn't bring in these young freshman to a bad environments, he brings them in with older guys that are well-disciplined, and when you're a freshman you room with a senior your first camp, so you've got an older guy that's been through everything, that's on his way out, that's trying to leave everything with you. I think that's one of the greatest things they do there is letting the seniors room with the freshman. That's just like when I was a fourth year junior and I was rooming with a freshman, I tried to be as good of a friend to him as I could. I talked to him at night, even if I wanted to call my girlfriend, I wouldn't, I'd sit there and talk with him, make sure he was alright. I'd see him in the corner calling his parents, and I know what he was feeling, and I just tried to help him out as much as I could because I was in his shoes, I was the same way, everybody is, we all go through the same things. Coach Tressel knew that, he had seen it for fifteen years and everyone goes through the same thing, it don't matter if you're white, black, orange, whatever, you're away from home for the first time, it doesn't matter if home's twenty miles away or two hundred miles away, you're going to be sad, you're going to miss it, you're going to want to go back there, but you've go to learn to love the people that you're with because those are the people that are most important are the people that are with you now, not the people that you left at home.

B: Did you agree with all of Coach Tressel's philosophies? The way he implemented them?

R: Yea, I mean, Coach Tressel, everything when he talked was golden to me. I was really nervous around him, but he was a great coach, he really put himself on a pedestal in front of us, he was just a great person. You were playing for a living legend, alrighty, and you wanted to go out there and do good because you knew Coach Tressel had already seen it done better before, and he was looking for that, so everyday that you were out there on that field you know you were trying to prove something to someone.

B: You went through a transition where you went from Coach Tressel to Coach Heacock.

R: Right.

B: Can you kind of tell me how that shake up all occurred? First your reaction to Coach Tressel being named Ohio State coach, and then that little brief period before Heacock was named. What was your feeling and what do you think the team was thinking?

R: I remember everyday I'd be reading on the Internet seeing if Tressel was in the running for the Ohio State job, and I remember telling everyone, "Hey, he's going to get this job." And I remember we came back to school, we had one meeting with Coach Tressel, and he said, "Yes, I'm interviewing for this job," but he said all it had to do with was Youngstown, he kept the emphasis on Youngstown, kept it off himself. And you

know I had night class the next night, and I got home from night class and there was about twenty messages on our phone. They were all these reporters calling our house because I was living with our quarterback, Jeff Ryan, and it was just crazy, it was like a media blitz, it was just unbelievable, people couldn't believe that he left, couldn't believe that he got the Ohio State job, it was a crazy couple of days, it was just hectic. And we kind of knew because Coach Heacock had come back the year before, and everyone wanting everything to stay the same, we didn't want anyone changing anything. So Jeff Ryan got a group of guys together and went to the President and said, "Hey, we want Coach Heacock as our head coach, we don't want some new guy coming in here shaking things up, things are fine, we're going to the playoffs, going to National Championships, lets keep things the same." Plus it helped that Coach Tressel hand picked Coach Heacock to stay, and everything Coach Tressel said at that point was golden, so the minute we found out Coach Tressel wrote President Sweet a letter saying Heacock should get the job, we knew Coach Heacock was going to be our coach.

B: Was there any resentment to him leaving?

R: Not at all. There's not one guy on that Youngstown State team that wouldn't leave to go play on the Ohio State team. That's how it is playing at Youngstown State. You're not the number one team in the state; it ain't like playing at Montana or something like that where Montana is a 1-AA school but there the number one college you go see. At Youngstown there's always Ohio State, there's always going home and seeing what Ohio State did, even if we had a huge Gateway win, hey, let's go and see what Ohio State did. There's always Ohio State. It was all the stars that you had played against in high school that were just the guys that you looked up to and they were at Ohio State, it was where you wanted to be. So when Tress got that job there was no way you could complain, because there was not one guy on that team that would turn down Ohio State for Youngstown State, not one guy.

B: I've talked to a lot of other people and they said they were happy for Tressel. A lot of the ex-players felt that they too were somehow responsible for helping him get there.

R: Exactly, that's the way the team – I never really got an outside opinion, everyone wanted to know about our new coach, but I mean I never heard anyone say, "I can't believe Tressel left Youngstown State to go to Ohio State." I mean it was a no-brainer, a step-up that you had to make that you couldn't turn down, an opportunity of a lifetime that you would never pass up, you know, Ohio State.

B: When that whole media blitz with Coach Tressel died out, Coach Heacock was named as the new football coach. Obviously you had to sit everybody down and he went across the thing, what was your general feeling when Heacock came in?

R: I thought everything was fine. Coach Heacock was our defensive coordinator so I had no contact with him at all. I thought he was going to step in right where Tressel was and lead us right back to the National Championship, you know? There was no reason to

think any other way, he had had a great defense the year before with us, all the defensive guys respected him, and there was just no reason not to think any other way.

B: Did anything technically change? Did all the traditions stay the same?

R: Almost to a T everything stayed the same. Major changes? There were none. Minor things here and there, yea, but we still did everything the same, from pre-game meal to pre-game warm-ups, everything was the same. From two-a-days to practice during the season, everything stayed the same.

B: What were some of the basic traditions that you had at Youngstown State? I know that you had like some traditional things that you do from the beginning of camp, like you said seniors rooming with freshman. What are some of the other traditions?

R: Senior speeches in camp, every night one senior will talk during camp. We'd do the hive before the game, we called it the hive, and that was the biggest tradition, coming out of the field together, leaving the field together, even if it was half-time, meeting at the fifty yard line, leaving the field together. Other than that all the other traditions were pretty much all the older guys trying to keep it the same from when they were younger, and what the older guys had taught them. So it was pretty much just everything passed on down the line, just passing things down.

B: Now we're going to talk about a typical practice day under both coached because you said basically not a whole lot had changed.

R: Practice-wise it all stayed the same.

B: What would a normal practice day be like?

R: Two-a-days or during school?

B: Let's say two-a-days.

R: Two-a-days they'd wake us up at six, we'd meet down at the cafeteria about 6:15, eat, be in meetings half-dressed at 7:25, meetings from 7:25 to 8:25, out on the field from 8:30 to 10:30, back in meetings 10:30 to 11:30, 11:30 to 2:30 was lunch, and then rest in the dorms, 2:30 back in meetings half-dressed. Second practice was always down on the grass field at 3:30 to 5:30, and then we always during the hard – like you had your acclamation days, that first week really it was always dinner back at the cafeteria, but that second week when it was all two-days and all hitting, we would always get catered, they would have people come in and cater the dinners for us at camp. That's how we ran our two-a-days, everyday was pretty much the same. During school you'd schedule your classes between 8 and 2 and then you're in meetings at 2:05 half-dressed, on the field at 3:15, off the field at 5:30, meetings until 6:30, and get home around 7. It was pretty much 2 to 7 by the time you got there.

B: What were your easy days and what were your work days?

R: Work days were Tuesday and Wednesday, they were the only days we wore full pads. Thursday they cut a half-an-hour off practice and there was no meetings after. Fridays was just an hour in shorts and t-shirts and helmets, and if we were traveling we would also travel on Fridays. Saturday was game day, and then Sunday we would practice, it would be just helmets and shoulder pads, and we'd just walk through for an hour, and then Mondays were always our day off, because NCAA you have to have a day off.

B: Did you have a favorite thing about practice?

R: You know, when I was out there I always tried to treat it as a business-like thing where I was out just to go out there and get the job done. I really didn't like or dislike it. There were things that were hard and there were easier things, but it wasn't like, "I like this and don't like that," it was more, "This is harder, this is easier." That's basically how things broke down. It don't matter what you like it's what's good for the team.

B: What was your racial kind of break up of the team? If you were to say 50%, 40%...

R: I would say it was probably very close to 50-50 if not 60% white, 40% black at the most. I mean, it wasn't hard because you were all the same type of people, you were all football players, and all football players basically have the same mentality. So it was easy to get along. You never really looked at things as black and white, but when we'd go eat at the cafeteria all the white guys would sit on the left side, all the black guys would sit on the right side. That was just how it was, you go in and you hung out with all the white guys, all the black guys hung out with each other. Everyone was friends, yea, you'd see everybody and say "Hi," but there was some separation I would say, but everyone got along with everyone. You were family if you were on the team.

B: What were some of the hangouts? Did you guys have a hangout place?

R: Well, everyone didn't hang out at the same place. The older guys didn't like going out with the younger guys, because you know, once you get older, once its your fourth or fifth year, you get sick of going out, going to the bars because you've been doing it for so long. But everyone when I first got there was going to Ernie McDougal's, and then Jay Jay's was the hangout, then it was Pal Joey's, then I don't even know, now I'm the old guy and I don't even know where all the young people hang out. I couldn't even tell you.

B: Obviously you were in a conference in that time period because you ran from '98 to 2002?

R: '97 until 2000.

B: What was the name of the conference?

R: We're still in the Gateway Football Conference. The makeup from '99 until 2001 was Northern Iowa, Illinois State, Western Illinois, Southern Illinois, Southwest Missouri State, Indiana State, and Youngstown State. Then we added Western Kentucky in 2001. We were the A Teams.

B: Who were the big rivalries that you had?

R: Western Illinois, Northern Iowa, Western Kentucky...and Illinois State really were the four. Indiana State and Southwestern Missouri were always the lower echelon teams and really it was a battle between the other five to see who beat who and what happened.

B: Were there any other rival games?

R: Kent. Playing Kent State was definitely a huge rivalry. When played them my second year it was like a playoff game for us. We were going out there with chips on our shoulders; everyone had something to prove because it was a D One school. We went out and beat them in 2000, and then they beat us in 2003, we were supposed to play them in 2002 and they dropped us and then we went up there again in 2003 and they beat us.

B: Did rivalry games like the Kent game, did the coaches treat every week as being the same?

R: Well, I think just Gateway games. Conference games you came out and you knew it was going to be a tough day, everyone can play, there ain't going to be a guy out there that doesn't know how to play, that doesn't deserve to be out there, If you're playing in the Gateway Football Conference, you can hit, you can play, you're strong, you're big, you're fast, you're going to have a battle every week no matter who it is, you're not going to have a playoff, you're not going to have a series off, you have to come out and bring it every time, and that's what they tried to stress to us really.

B: Fan-wise, as far as like student support and stuff like that, did you see students or teachers make any difference about any particular game? Or more so when playoffs came around?

R: Not really. More in the playoffs. It was definitely regular season, and then when the playoffs rolled around I had never seen anything like it. My first year up there we were going to practice, we had made the playoffs, there must have been a five-hour line of people waiting to get tickets. I had never seen anything like it, it was amazing.

B: What would you say about the fan support as far as Youngstown State is concerned?

R: It was great. It was unbelievable, I loved it. It was great when 20,000 people knew your name. When they came out and they filled that stadium, we thought there was no way that stadium was going to be full, and people were standing along the sides, it got so loud, it sends tingles down your spine when you think about it.

B: So obviously attendance was fantastic around that time.

R: Oh yea, definitely. Even up until 2002 we were still averaging over 18,000 people a game I believe.

B: You alluded earlier that when you finally got in was it your red-shirt freshman year?

R: Yes.

B: Describe your first play. Do you remember what the first play was? Can you kind of remember that?

R: I remember what was going on. I remember all the guys were out there joking around and laughing when I came in, I was like, "Well, that's what you guys always did," because it was a Gateway game, but we were playing Indiana State, we were already up 28-nothing, and they were really taking it like it was laid back by the time I got in there. We thought, "I have to play," but in everyone's minds the game was already over, we ended up winning 42-nothing, so it really wasn't that important. The Hostrey game is the one I really remember because I started the game, I played the whole game, and I could pretty much tell you every play, I just wanted to get out there really, that was the main thing.

B: What was your favorite game? Or your best playing experience? Did you have a favorite play? Playing experience? Favorite game?

R: My third year, playing Western Illinois, we were ranked second, they were ranked sixth, 19,000 at Youngstown, it was the week after 9/11, and we had had the Toledo game cancelled, we were supposed to play in front of 35,000 people up in Toledo and it got cancelled. Western Illinois wouldn't even fly up here, they voted to take a twelve hour bus ride instead of flying up here. They were ranked sixth, we were ranked second, it was the first big game I had ever played in, first conference game, and we beat them 41-7. I was the offensive lineman of the week, and that was the first time my teammates looked at me and said, "He's one of us." Finally I was there, I had finally did it. The year before was kind of like, "Okay he came in for one game and played," but now, hey, I'm a starter every week, and for the big games I can step it up, my teammates know that when it comes down to it I can do it, I get the job done. That's really when things changed for me, when I started 23 games in a row. I had a different attitude my first two years where I was happy just sitting back, to where it was getting out there and you're now one of the guys expected to get the job done, and you're one of the guys that there shouldn't be any problems coming from, let the younger guys take up coaches yelling, you don't get yelled at, you do things right all the time.

B: Do you feel like you became a leader after that game?

R: Yea, I think now after the Southern Illinois game – it was a TV game, and the announcers just went crazy on me, calling me the road-grater, showing highlights of me.

After that game, you know, it was like everyone knew I was...it just totally changed everything. And then I validated it in the last game playing against Marshal on TV again, I just had another great game, "Hey, there's Nick Roberts," and I knew my parents were at home watching on TV with smiles across their faces. And that's really what makes me happy is they were able to sit there, and all their friends, and all the doubters, I put in on the line, turn on the TV, there he is, Nick Roberts, walk on, now he's the best, he's as good as they come. That made me feel good, I could have been done then. At the end of my third year I had done everything I wanted, I was offensive lineman of the week four times, it was just unbelievable how things went that year. It was just like...I could never go back and have things go that same way, it was just like things just like magically fell in place. Things didn't work out the way we wanted, we were 8 and 2, we had to go down and beat Marshal and we ended up losing to them, we played a great game, but we went 8 and 3, and didn't make the playoffs, so all that didn't matter, because at Youngstown, if you don't make the playoffs, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if you say you think you should have been there. We should have been 9 and 2, then you would have been in.

B: You spoke earlier of the cancellation of the Toledo game due to the 9/11 events. I kind of want this to be a school-related question and an athletic-related question. School-wise, where were you when heard of the events of September 11?

R: I know exactly where I was. I had hurt my back, and once you're injured you have to go to the training center every day. So when I was sitting in there – it was the first day there was ever a TV on, I was like, "Why is there a TV on in here?" Coach Dan never had a TV on in there. I go in there - I had class at 10:00, so I'd usually go in there about 9:15, I go in there at 9:15 and I go, "what is going on?" I see smoke coming out of a building like, "Wow, what is this?" Someone said, "There was a plane that flew in." I walk over to the academic center, I walk back, and another plane had struck the other building. I go to class at 10:00, I get out at 10:50 and the buildings had fallen down. Then we were sitting down on campus, and they cancelled school, from noon on classes were cancelled. And the whole football team we were just sitting in the coaches' offices watching this on TV like this is the most unbelievable thing. No one knew what to do, there were people wondering what was going on. And then they closed school, we didn't practice that day. The next day there was school, we practiced, and the NFL, Major League Baseball, College Football, everyone was deciding should we play this week? Should we not play? And the as far as we knew the game was on, Thursday we go out to practice and the game was still on, and then our athletic director we see walking out midway through the practice on Thursday and coach called us in and said the whole of college football called off this weekend. That's when everyone called off. So it was...the words can't describe...it was just...

B: Could you even focus?

R: No, definitely not. Football was the furthest thing from anyone's mind. I'm sure that Toledo was thinking the same way, you know, Youngstown, Toledo let's see these guys play. But after that even the next game football was not on your minds, everything was about America, and there were guys going to the airport because people were stuck at the

Youngstown Airport, they were going up there to help feed them and stuff. It was...football was the furthest thing from anyone's mind, coaches, players, I think across the nation it was universal. Everyone was just devastated by that.

B: How did your coaches feel? Did they try to focus you? Try to talk about the importance of the issue?

R: Yea, Coach Heacock was like, "This isn't great, but you guys shouldn't just sit down and watch this stuff all night it's just going to make you feel worse and worse." When we had a team meeting he was like, "Does anyone have anything to say?" The whole team said a prayer, what else can you do? Everyone wanted to watch TV and see what was going on. No one cared about who we were playing, or how we were going to block this play, for a couple days all they wanted to know was what happened, who did it, what are we going to do? I remember going to try to get gas after practice and there was just lines of cars, there was an hour wait to try to get gas, and everyone was saying, "It's going up to \$5.00 a gallon, you're not going to be able to get gas." Like a panic almost. People were sitting, waiting, trying to get gas, it was crazy. That night everyone was waiting to watch the President speak that night. Probably around the twelfth or thirteenth things started getting back to normal then. But still to this day I can tell you everything that happened, it was just one of those things, just like when Kennedy was shot, that you remember. People can say what they were doing, tell you what happened. I'll be able to tell you that when I'm 70, hopefully.

B: But you can't tell me what you were doing yesterday.

R: No. (Laughter)

B: We talked about your best experience, being on TV at Marshall, and validating all your hard work, your dedication to both your family and your teammates, and showing the doubters. Did you have a worst playing experience out there?

R: No, every time I was out there it was...I was still out there with the big guys, it was my first year there, I was like, "I can't believe I'm out here." And I tried to take that attitude every time I was out there, you know, every time 110%, you're playing for Youngstown State, you shouldn't even have been playing in high school and you're playing for Youngstown State? Let's do something, show it. So I always tried to work hard, and I never took plays off.

B: I know you've had some injuries. To what extent did these injuries impact your playing career?

R: Well, in 2001, which should have been my red-shirt sophomore year, I sat out all of two-a-days, the whole camp, with a herniated disk. And game week came along and coach was like, "Are you going to be back or what?" And I knew that I had a starting position waiting for me, and I couldn't believe what was happening. And you know, I just said, "Screw it, I'm going, I'm playing." And I just played through it and by week six,

seven, eight, it got better, you know, it didn't hurt. Then my senior year I got my second herniated disk, and there was just no way I was going to be able to play through it like the first one, I had epidurals done, and just couldn't get anything to help, and I ended up just having to sit out my fifth year.

B: Any of these injuries still bother you today?

R: Oh yea, my back is...I feel it every day. It reminds me of at least I did something when I was younger.

B: What awards and recognitions or accomplishments did you receive both as an individual and as a team-member at Youngstown State?

R: Well, in my red-shirt sophomore year I was the offensive lineman of the week four times. My fourth year there I was offensive lineman of the week twice, and I was named to the Second Team All-Gateway, and before the season I was named to Pre-Season First Team All-American, which really just blew my mind. That was definitely the biggest honor I ever had, I opened up a magazine and I couldn't believe my name was there, I was an All. Making All-Conference, to say that I was on the All-Conference Team, hey, you know, the players that play in the Gateway Conference, that makes me proud. I was also offensive player of the game once my junior year, which is really an accomplishment that offensive linemen really don't get. So that was nice, they give you a real nice plaque for that. They don't give you much for making o-lineman of the week, but, I got a real nice plaque for that, and making All-Conference. Definitely making All-Conference I think is the one that's going to stick, it's the one that's going to be in there that they'll never be able to take away. I made it, I proved I was one of the best out there, and everyone saw it, which made me feel good.

B: Describe to me your coach's impact. You said your o-line coach was who?

R: John Klacik.

B: And then you had two head coaches, Tressel and Coach Heacock. Describe how these individuals made an impact or influenced your life. Stuff that - right now you're a football coach at Jackson-Milton, was there anything that these three individuals imparted on you?

R: Yea, definitely Coach Klacik more than anyone because I worked with him and he was the one that gave me a chance, and I wouldn't be where I was today without him. He pushed me farther than anyone had ever tried to push me before, and I'm glad he did. He was the one that made me get in shape, lose weight, get ready, get stronger. It was him pushing me, mentally, physically, every way to be the best football player that I could be. So I didn't know how to do that before I go there, and you really have to...you need someone there to do it for you, to push you, because you can't do it on your own.

B: Do you have any regrets for choosing Youngstown State University?

R: None. Not at all.

B: What was the best thing that you got out of being a student athlete at Youngstown State when it's all said and done?

R: Well, definitely the recognition, I mean I loved everyone knowing who I was, I mean, you know, a lot of people knew me just because my dad was the head coach in high school, but making it on the college level at Youngstown and being a local guy, there's nothing better than that. The people around here take care of you, it's a great feeling. I was also honored with the Rudy Scholarship too. Since I came as a track scholarship I was technically a walk-on, I was given that award also my last two years on the team.

B: When are you going to graduate?

R: Spring of 2005 I will be completely finished. I'll have a Sociology major, A Gerontology minor, and I also plan on getting my Certificate of Gerontology also.

B: What's in your future plan right now?

R: Right now I'm coaching at Jackson-Milton, love being around football, I love being around the game, I love trying to teach what people have taught me, and teach it on to the next generation of kids. After that as soon as I get my degree hopefully I can get a job where I can coach football. Some people aren't lucky enough to be able to do that, but I hope that I can find a job that allows me to schedule to be able to be with my family and to be able to still be a coach.

B: It's been a fascinating interview. I've asked you a multitude of questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experience at Youngstown State University State? Something that I didn't ask you?

R: Just that for anything, Youngstown State did more for me than a lot of people. I got more out of Youngstown State than just the education, or just playing football, because it turned me into a better person. I can honestly say that I am a better person leaving Youngstown than I was walking in. I wasn't mature. I couldn't take care of myself, now I know how to live on my own, tie a tie, all that stuff. I grew up at Youngstown, and really it's a great place to be, and I just think everyone should know that.

B: Good deal. Thank you very much Mr. Roberts.

R: Thank you.