

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown State University

Personal Experience

O.H 1891

JIM TRESSEL

Interviewed

by

Angela Pollock

on

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P This is an interview with Jim Tressel for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Youngstown State University, by Angela Pollock, on November 7, 1997, in Coach Tressel's office in Stambaugh Stadium, at 10 00 a m

Could you just give me some background information and things about your childhood?

T Well, I grew up in a collegiate atmosphere My father was the head coach at Baldwin Wallace College from 1958 until his death in 1981. And our house happened to be next door to the stadium And at those small schools, most of the faculty live on campus It just so happened that the football coach and the athletic director live next to the stadium So I grew up watching college kids all the time. And on the other side of our house was one of the fraternity houses [Laughter], so I got both ends of the spectrum there

P You learned all about college life, then

T That is right I knew it, the whole thing I had two older brothers who are both in education My oldest brother is the head coach and athletic director at Hamline University, which is a Division III school in St. Paul, Minnesota And my next brother -- I am the youngest -- is the middle school teacher and swim coach in Berea, Ohio, which is where Baldwin Wallace is So education has always been first and foremost, and athletics has always been part of the deal And as far as experiences that have affected me, I just think when you have college kids and role models around you your whole life, you learn a lot of what you might want to do, and maybe some of what you might not want to do And I think you also learn a lot about the impact of a college on kids lives and on the community I think those things have helped give me the background to try to do a job in those areas as I have become an adult

P So you grew up kind of knowing that you wanted to be a football coach?

T You know, I did not know for sure, but as I got a little older and started having to make some decisions, you know, I started thinking about what I would like to do. And I had seen that my dad loved going to work in the morning, enjoyed the heck out of it, and I thought, well, this looks like something that might be fun. Maybe I have got a head start because I have known something about it I think I decided for sure when I made a collegiate decision I was kind of wavering between the military academies and going to Baldwin Wallace You know, when you go to the academies, it is engineering and all that stuff

P I went to the Naval Academy

T Oh, did you? I almost went there So, you know, you kind of decide which way

you want to go at that point I decided I wanted to go into education, and Baldwin Wallace was a very good education school I think at that point I made that decision You asked the question, what made you decide? I think it was my teachers and coaches when I was growing up And then also having a chance to watch it first hand in my own home

P You came here to YSU in 1986. What most influenced your decision to come here? You were at Ohio State before, right?

T Right I was the assistant coach there and every assistant coach wants to be a head coach and when the head coaching job became vacant, I called right away, but they had a whole list of people that they were interested in Oh, maybe two or three weeks later that list dwindled to whatever, and I did have the chance to interview And I knew that I wanted to be here because I wanted to live in northeast Ohio This is where my family and friends are I had always known the tradition of Youngstown State because I had coached at Akron for four years, and that was a big rival at that time Then, really, once I got here and saw the facilities and the campus -- I only knew Youngstown State from coming into town and playing at Rayen, or coming into town and playing at Austintown. I did not know anything about the campus. When I came here on my interview and saw the campus -- not that I had any doubts -- I guess my enthusiasm was greater at that point.

P There are constantly changes going on here at YSU Which ones have you seen, and do you think they are more positive or negative? How do you feel about them?

T Well, I think public institutions in particular have had to fight some tough battles in the last ten years or so Funding is down. We have needed to make the transition from what was basically a commuter situation, where there was plenty of population, and so you are always going to have enough customers, if you will -- students -- to a situation where population is down We needed to make the transition into being a little more diverse We will always have a solid commuter group because we are an urban situation, but we needed to go to the next level I feel, probably, better about some of our impact on that

Everyone talks about the championships and that, but in the mid 1980's, we really were fighting hard to get some dorms built Administratively, that was not an interest So, athletically, we really kind of pushed it pretty hard through the help of Mr Lyden, who Lyden House is named after now It was at first going to be an athletic building because, institutionally, there was not any interest Then once they saw that we could raise some funds for an athletic building, they thought, well, maybe that would be good for everyone. So Lyden House really was, the impetus behind it was athletics, which I do not know that we knew in 1986 and 1987, how important that was going to be

Really, if you go way back in history -- since we are talking history here --

Kilcawley House, really the reason behind that was if we were going to have intercollegiate athletic teams at the level we aspired, we were going to have to have somewhere for out of town kids to live, because you are going to have to have some of those. So really, the impetus behind Kilcawley House was athletics when that was built. The impetus for Lyden House was really Joe Malmisur, who was our athletic director at that time, and Bill Lyden. They are both kind of hard nosed, do not take no for an answer, kind of guys. They are the ones that got that going. And then you see what happened quickly after that was Wick House and Weller House and then, of course, Cafaro House. I think if we look down the road we are going to need to be a much more residential campus to seek the excellence that we all have.

P. Recruiting is a big part of your job. How do you sell YSU to future athletes?

T. I think the first thing you have to do in recruiting is create relationships, and our coaches spend hours and hours on the phone with prospects. After we have evaluated them as to their academic transcripts and their football and video and so forth, we have to create relationships. You have to convince them to come see the place. Most people, when they come to visit -- whether they end up coming here to go to school or not -- totally change their perception of what they think Youngstown State is. So not only is our recruiting important in the people that do choose to come to YSU, but I think the word spreads even to those who do not come here, when they are in conversation with other people back home, whatever. They all say, "Well, you ought to see that place. That is really a lot different than I thought it was." So creating relationships is number one.

And really, the biggest thing that sells future athletes is that current students are the key to future students. I am sure the university will find the same thing as they get more into the recruiting world, they are finding out now that the students do not just sign up, you have to recruit them. And so when a player comes on campus to visit our campus, really whether or not he signs here -- or she, if it is a woman's sport, I guess I think, a lot of times mostly from a football perspective -- a lot of it has to do with the kids coming when they are with our current athletes they ask them the point blank questions. Are you treated fairly? Do you like it? What do you like, what do you not like? How is the faculty? How is the help? Is there tutoring? Is the library good? You know, all those kind of things. So the way you sell YSU is through the students.

P. Recently, the team joined the Gateway Conference. We all know that that was important to YSU. In what ways will it affect the program and its future?

T. Well, we felt that being in a conference for having a little bit more continuity in our scheduling. We got to the point where we had been independent since 1988. We were in the Ohio Valley Conference when I first got here. Then when Akron left, we were the only Ohio team, so they asked us to leave. We really did not want to leave. So we were independent for ten seasons -- or, I guess, nine

seasons -- which we could get some continuity in scheduling before we had had some success. But after we had had some success, no one wanted to play an independent game against a good team. And so it got to the point where we just could not schedule it all. That was the primary thing.

I think the secondary thing is that, you know, whenever you are in a league, there are a lot of other neat things that go along with it for the kids, like having a chance to be All Gateway, All Academic Gateway, Newcomer Gateway, Gateway Player of the Week -- all the neat things that, you know, the kids enjoy trying to accomplish and so forth. And in the larger realm of things, we have always considered the whole nation to be our conference, because our number one goal is to be national champions. But the Gateway Conference provides you an avenue to get into the play-off's, which is an automatic bid if you would happen to win the Gateway Conference. As we go into these last two weeks, if we would win the last two games, we would get an automatic bid into the play-off's. Once you get into the play-off's, you have a chance to reach your number one goal.

P Your career has been particularly eventful here at YSU. What has been the highlight of it, and what kind of obstacles have you experienced on the road to success?

T Oh, gosh, you know highlights -- the obvious ones -- most people see the championships and those kind of things. But some of the little stuff along the way that no one sees, you know, and some of the progress that the kids make, and you see them now, ten years later, and they are out in the world doing good things for the world. I think those are things that it is all about.

Probably, though, if I had to say what would be the highlight that I cherish the most, it would be, I think our whole community has, through the window of athletics, seen a lot of positive things. Ten or eleven or twelve years ago, I guess, when I got here, the one thing that worried me was that the area did not have a good self-image, of itself or of its school. And I think that athletics has given people a chance to look at the university a little closer, get excited about it, and then really find out there is not just a great athletic program there, but we have great academic offerings, we have a great faculty, a great physical plant and all those things. Until you get someone to look you are not going to see that. And I think athletics has opened the window to people to look at the university and I think that has probably been the highlight of what we have contributed to the cause.

As far as obstacles, you know, there is not obstacle that we have experienced that no one else does. Sometimes you fumble the football. Sometimes negative things happen.

P You passed when you should have run. [Laughter]

T Yeah, sure. You know, or something happens on campus that is not what you

wished it would be. You know, you just have to pick up and go. But there has nothing of what I would call a great obstacle that we could not over-come.

P You hold two positions here. You are the athletic director and football coach. Are there any particular advantages or disadvantages to having both positions?

T. Well, I think the advantage is I get to work with all the athletes and all the coaches. Sometimes you get in your own little world and you do not understand and you are not aware of the needs of others. Being with all the other athletes and seeing their needs and so forth gives me a better perspective as to where does the football program fit in this puzzle. The disadvantage is time, it is just tough to get everything done. But for the moment, we felt that is what we needed.

When Joe Malmisur retired four years ago, we had so many projects underway that we did not think that the transition that normally occurs when you change at the top would be very helpful. Just, a lot of times, someone new comes in at the top and it takes two years for them to understand, you know, the nuances and progress slows. Even though maybe progress will speed up, we had things that were right in the midst, you know, like the expanding of the stadium, the conference affiliation, the adding of women's sports, the meeting of our gender equity challenges. All the rest of the athletic administration was going to be here, and they can carry the ball. So we just felt like we needed to keep things going in the direction they were going.

P Specifically in YSU athletics, do you see any changes occurring?

T Well, I think we will continue to improve. Our athletics have improved, I think, dramatically over the years, especially in the women's area because of the emphasis we have put there. I foresee the addition of one more women's sport, perhaps crew, perhaps field hockey -- I would say those would be the two biggest chances. I would hope what I see in the future for athletics is that we continue to do our part. You know, everyone has got their part on campus, and hopefully we will do our part, and keep doing it better, so that the whole place rises up.

P You refer a lot to the football family, and you are very much involved in the well-fare of all your players. What is most important to you in your role as head of this family?

T. Well, I think the first thing, and most important thing, is that each person within the family has to know that I care. And I do not just care that they hold on to the football, but I care that everything around them is headed in the right direction, and that I am available there when they have needs. If that starts as the foundation of the family, that there is care and concern and genuine interest in their long-term well-being, then anything we want to accomplish can happen.

P As far as community service, you involve the players in that. Why do you feel that that is important to them and YSU?

T Well, it is in some ways selfish, and in some ways unselfish. Everyone wants big crowds, and I told the players way back in 1986 that there is really two ways that you can get people to want to come see you play. One, is win, everyone wants to see a winner. But, two, is to make sure that they know you are a part of them. It is a two way street. We cannot just expect them to come and see us if we do not have a little give and take. And there are a lot of youngsters, especially, out there who would benefit by the interaction with our student athletes. And, really, our whole athletic department now does, in my mind, a grand job of community service.

And the neat thing in this community is there is an older population. And the older population, I think, gets something from the vibrance. [Interruption from telephone, and tape stops.] I see the older community enjoys when our kids go up to Park Vista or to nursing homes, to see the vibrance of the youth and so forth. It picks that group up, too. And it is amazing how many fans we have that do not get to the stadium, but they are listening on the radio, they are rooting for us. They have adopted us as their team and so forth, and our guys feel that. That is something that is maybe not touchable, but they feel it.

And I just think it is right. This university is the greatest thing that this area has. Athletics has got a great opportunity to be very visible. People like athletics. And to do it the right way, and to give while we are doing it, I think, will then build good habits for when our kids graduate and they go out and live wherever they live. We need people to be part of the community, and not just worry about my paycheck and my house and my little world, but the whole picture. So I think it teaches good lessons there as well.

P Every year you give motivational quotes to the team, and you set goals, big and small. Could you explain some of the quotes, and their impact on the team and motivation? Just as a side note, a lot of the quotes that you use, I actually use them, too. They are important to the rest of us, too.

T I think it is important to step back and think about the big picture, and to think about, you know, what are we learning while we are going through these battles in athletics because we are going to have battles in life later on. Everything we do we try to tie together with the big picture, that it is not simply football, but it is good training ground, good learning ground.

I have never invented a quote. Someone said it before. That is why I get interested when people say, "Well, who said that?" I say, "Well, I do not know who said it most recently, but I am sure someone has been saying this for centuries." What we try to do is really do a good job of assessing where are we and what is going on, and what could speak to us. A lot of times, I really enjoy reading -- I am a slow reader, but I enjoy reading -- because many times, as I read, I stop and think about, well, where does that fit?

And so, whenever we use quotes or we think about things and talk about them with the team, they are in relation. Okay, here is where we are. You can usually get kids attention in regards to their immediate things, like here is where we are in football. Think about this thought. This thought is also going to apply to you ten years from now, because you are going to be in a similar situation. It will not be a football game, but it will be something else. So that is how we do it, and as far as its impact on the team, it is like anything else. If you are listening, things impact you, and if you are not listening, they do not.

Some people say quotes just to say quotes. I do not think that that is effective. We try to really teach why. I have heard people say, "Kids these days want to know why." I think kids all days want to know why. Now we, maybe, thirty years ago did not ask why as often, but we did want to know why. And I think when they do know why, then you really have a chance to grow, and that is important.

P Last question. You will be a tough act to follow when the time comes. [Laughter] Do you have any words of wisdom for a successor?

T No, other than this is a great place and, you know, every coach that has ever been here -- there have been four of us now -- every coach has had a winning record. There are good people here, they like athletics. And when you are at a place that likes athletics, that is a good break for you. Probably, if I had to say what is the best thing we did in terms of moving forward from our people we succeeded, do not ever forget what the people that succeeded you did, because for us to pretend that we were the first coaching staff that ever did anything here would be a mistake. Because there was a lot of people who have dressed at the YMCA and gotten a bus and went ten miles and practiced in Liberty, and did not have a stadium. You know, all the things that we have, they made it possible. Now we have the best stadium in the country and all those kinds of things because someone else did it. And I think that is important for leadership.

And I think that is important that you do not forget those who came before you. Maybe sometimes in our country we do that. I asked one of the kids Tuesday -- one of the freshmen, I always ask the freshmen questions in front of the team -- I asked one of the kids to talk to us about Veteran's Day. This was Tuesday's practice. He could not comprehend that. The kid has never touched it. Many times, on the various holidays, we have them write little essays about it, just so they understand. You know, Labor Day -- why are we here practicing here today? Everyone else is out having picnics. Are you only supposed to have picnics? I do not think you could ever forget those that came before you. Not that they need to enshrine us, because we are just one of many coaches that have been here. But I do not think you can forget the past. It is a good historical answer, too.

P That was a very good answer to end with
End of Interview