

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of Youngstown College

Coaching Experiences

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JOHN R. MCPHEE

Interviewed

by

James C. Dunn

on

March 18, 1974

JOHN R. MCPHEE

John R. McPhee was born in Youngstown on April 7, 1907, the son of Angus J. and Anna L. McPhee. He received his education at Shehy Street School and then at Cleveland East High School. He attended Oberlin College, Grove City College, and Youngstown College, where he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1930.

In the fall of 1930, Mr. McPhee began his coaching career with Youngstown College in conjunction with the YMCA. He succeeded Al Fairfield as head basketball coach. He was subsequently replaced in 1935 by Ray Sweeney. Presently, he is a consultant with the Ironsides Company, a position he has held since 1944.

The many honors and offices Mr. McPhee has held indicate his participation in both the coaching and officiating ends of athletics. Some of these include Past President of the Ohio Football Association, officiated at the 1948 Rose Bowl, Curbstone Coaches Hall of Fame, 1969, and recipient of the James A. Henderson Sportsman Trophy, 1948. In addition, he is a member of the Youngstown Club, Tippecanoe Country Club, YMCA, Ohio Senior Golf Association, and Four Square Club.

Mr. McPhee currently resides at 23 Botsford Road in Poland, Ohio. His wife is the former Mary Reesch, whom he married in 1932. He is a member of the Martin Luther Lutheran Church and his hobbies include golf, fishing, and working with youth.

DONNA DEBLASIO
June 28, 1977

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN R. MCPHEE
INTERVIEWER: James C. Dunn
SUBJECT: Coaching Experiences
DATE: March 18, 1974

D: This is an interview with John McPhee for the Youngstown State University Oral History program by James Dunn at Mr. McPhee's home on March 18, 1974, at 4:15 p.m.

To begin this interview, Mr. McPhee, what was your family and educational background prior to your association with Youngstown College?

M: Jamie, that's a long time ago, back in 1907. I was born to Anna L. and Angus J. McPhee at 121 South Forest Avenue in Youngstown, Ohio, and I had two older brothers, Harry and Hugh. I attended Shehy Street School, went to high school at Cleveland East, to Oberlin College, then to Grove City College and to Youngstown College where I graduated with an A.B. degree in 1930. I believe that was the first graduating class of the day liberal arts college.

D: When did you first get involved with Youngstown College and what were the circumstances surrounding that involvement?

M: From 1928 to early 1930, I worked at the Youngstown Sheet and Tube learning the steel business. Along came what is called the famous Crash of 1929. I was offered a job at the YMCA teaching physical education. Also, at that time, Mr. Al Fairfield, who had been basketball coach at Youngstown College for the previous two years, was resigning and they offered me the job of coaching basketball as well as

teaching physical education and hygiene at the College. So, I started in the fall of 1930--the combination job with the College and the YMCA.

D: What was Youngstown College like when you began your association?

M: They had one building; it was an old residence on Wick Avenue near Lincoln and was used by the College. I believe the new building on the corner of Lincoln and Wick Avenues was built in 1931. In 1930, Homer Nearpass was referred to as the Director of the College. We probably had about 150 to 175 students in the day liberal arts college. The evening liberal arts college was much larger. At the same time, they had a law college, a business administration college, and also a night high school. We were pretty well limited to the area of the old building in 1930--the old residence building--and also some space down at the YMCA

D: What were your duties at the time of your employment?

M: Well, as to those duties with the College: I was teaching physical education and the physical education program in those days consisted of two periods --two one-hour periods a week at the YMCA. Our program there consisted of calisthenics, games, swimming, et cetera. The other hour was a lecture on what we called, in those days, a hygiene course, which we held up at the College.

D: What were the circumstances concerning your selection as the head basketball coach?

M: As I previously stated, Al Fairfield had been basketball coach for the previous two years and he resigned because of the heavy load of physical education at the YMCA, so I was named basketball coach and from his squad I inherited one player.

When we think back to those days, we must remember that those were the days of the Depression. A number of young fellows didn't go to college. Of those who did, many had to work part-time, if they could find a job. So we were very limited as to the material at the College at the time.

D: Would you mind if I asked for all the duties that you had at the College at the time, and could you

give us an estimate of the salary you were making for the duties you performed?

M: Well, I'd like to answer that question in this manner. The YMCA received a small amount of the students' tuition fee which, I believe, was in the neighborhood of six or eight dollars per year. For my duties of teaching the hygiene course and coaching basketball, I was paid three hundred dollars a year.

D: What was the purpose of the sports program at the time of your appointment as the head basketball coach?

M: The only sport we had then was basketball. We had a lad in school at the time by the name of Bert Lyden who was very much interested in fencing, so we had a fencing team plus our basketball team. Then in the fall of 1933, we introduced an intramural program. In that program, we had touch football, basketball, volleyball, softball; there were tournaments in table tennis, foul shooting and punting, et cetera. From that type of program, we got a good response from our student body. I might add that this type of program was controlled by what we called the Intramural Board, which was then made up of ten students.

D: Were you in charge of directing the intramural program? Did that go along with your duties?

M: That was my responsibility, but fortunately the College allowed some help. The older fellows like Lou Gambrel, Ed Humphrey and Bill Lackey got part of their tuition paid by handling these sports at the time.

D: What was the attitude of the administration toward the early sports program?

M: I started under Mr. Nearpass and I would say that he gave us a lot of help. Then along came Dr. Howard Jones. Howard Jones had been an athlete up at Hiram College and had been active in their athletic program before coming to Youngstown. He helped in every way that was possible. You've got to keep in mind that, at that time, athletic scholarships were not floating around. We would try to help any boy who came to school, we would

try to get a job for him and help him so that he could get an education.

D: What type of budget were you allocated for the basketball program?

M: Well, I honestly think, looking over our entire athletic program, we were allotted something like one thousand dollars so you can see how closely we had to work. But I am sure that we exceeded the budget at times and that Dr. Jones found some money some place to help us out under those conditions.

D: Do you have any recollection as to the number of games that you played in a season or the type of teams that you played?

M: We played, roughly, about fifteen games a season and we played schools like Westminster, Geneva College, Grove City, Allegheny, St. Vincent, Waynesburg, Carnegie Tech, Oberlin, and then we took the team east and played Upsala, down at Newark, New Jersey. We had a very hard schedule for a school of our size. We played Fenn College, which is now Cleveland State University. But back in those days, teams like Geneva, Grove City, Allegheny, Waynesburg, and St. Vincent had some great ball clubs.

D: What type of practice facilities did you have at your disposal?

M: We used what was called the upper gym at the YMCA for practicing. We played our home basketball games on the lower gym floor at the YMCA where they put up wooden bleachers. I think the gym could hold something like three or four hundred fans.

D: What was the attitude of the faculty members toward the sports program at this time?

M: It was fine. We had wonderful cooperation from the faculty. Our faculty manager was Dr. Castle Foard who served in that capacity for ten or twelve years. He was a very wonderful person with his help.

D: In reality, you didn't run into people on the faculty who perhaps were anti-sportsminded?

M: No, we had a very small faculty, probably twelve or fifteen instructors and we were more like a family. We knew each; we would have parties together. There was a very close relationship and we understood each other's problems.

D: What was the average number of individuals that you had involved in the basketball program?

M: Counting our varsity squad and our reserve squad, after the first year, around twenty or twenty-five boys were in our basketball program. There were probably six or eight in the fencing program when it started. There were approximately sixty or seventy in the intramural program in 1933.

D: Did you have any assistants in the basketball program?

M: The only assistants I had in the basketball program were local fellows whom I knew and who volunteered. The volunteers had no official capacity with the College.

D: How did you travel to your away games?

M: I usually drove one car and we had a very good citizen here in Youngstown, Clarence Thombs, whose father owned the Chrysler-Plymouth agency at the corner of Market and Front Street and he would furnish a car or two. We were a pretty aristocratic ball club in those days; we rode in Chrysler sedans.

D: What was the student interest like in the sports program?

M: The interest was very low, I would say, because many of the students came from outlying areas such as Hubbard, Niles, Girard, and places away from Youngstown and would go home at the end of the day. We did have a fair following. Of about three hundred spectators, maybe half would be townspeople who were interested in basketball. So, half our crowd would be students and half would be people from the town.

D: Do you think that the beginning of the sports program might have been used as a tool to interest area townspeople to support the young college?

- M: We did not go on any recruiting program until about 1933 and then we visited some of the high schools in the Youngstown area and tried to interest boys who were good basketball players to come to Youngstown College. We did get some but not too many. Some of the people who used to come to all of our basketball games were also very staunch supporters of Youngstown College, such as old Ernie Travis, Tommy Pemberton, and others.
- D: Do you think that it played a part in the fund raising for the College?
- M: Eventually, yes, but not in those days because there wasn't that much money floating around.
- D: Could you give me any idea as to what the tuition was for a student attending the College during the Depression?
- M: The cost was \$75 per semester.
- D: How would you measure the success of the sports program during your tenure at Youngstown College?
- M: It depends on what you mean by success. I would say that the boys on the squad had a lot of fun. Those who followed the games enjoyed some good basketball, but we didn't have the crowd following and we didn't have that "Hip-Hip-Hurrah" stuff at that time that's in the colleges today. But I would say, overall, we enjoyed what program we had. It was very limited.
- D: What would you say would be "success"? How would you judge the success aspect of it? Today I think the standard is that winning is the epitome of success.
- M: My life has taken me through as a player, coach, and official. I would say that the success of a program within a college is getting participation by the student body. The more you have participating, the more successful your program. I realize that not everyone can play varsity sports, but you must have a strong intramural program to have their interest in sports. Once in a while, you reach down in your intramural program and you pick out a boy who is a real star and will go up the ladder and be a very successful athlete.

The other part of success is getting the student body to support the teams. I think that Youngstown is coming along and it's a matter of time. I think they've been handicapped until recently. They never had their own gymnasium for home games, they still do not have their own football stadium, nor do they have what can be called their own baseball field. They play on the city ball parks in Youngstown; they couldn't play on any better fields, but they're still not a part of the College.

I think that as long as you have your athletic program away from the University, you're not going to get that following. I think with the introduction of the Beeghly Center that the sports will pick up. Another thing that might hurt Youngstown a little bit are the great numbers of students who come from the outlying areas. Once they go home, they don't want to come back. But Youngstown has made big strides since 1930.

D: What would you consider the highlight of your coaching career?

M: That's a tough one. The two games I enjoyed the most during my career were the nights we beat Oberlin, the college which I had attended and the night we beat Grove City, also a college which I attended. Beating both of my old coaches was very much the highlight of coaching for me.

D: Can you remember the scores of those games?

M: No, I don't remember those, but probably one or two points difference. This is hard for anyone to believe today. In those days, the scores would run in the twenties, maybe occasionally into the thirties, rarely into the forties, never into the fifties. The scores were low.

When we played somebody on the YMCA floor, each team seemed to have seven men on the floor instead of five because of the balcony--the corners were cut off; you couldn't shoot from the corners.

D: What do you feel is the role of athletics in the school?

M: I feel that athletics can contribute a lot. First, if the player gives what he should and listens to

what he is taught, he's learning a lesson which applies to life--he's learning competition. As for the school itself, a good athletic team is good publicity and I think this has been proven when you take a look at some of the schools around the country today like Ohio State, Notre Dame, Michigan, Marquette, and others. I feel they attract part of their student body because they have good athletic teams.

D: Did you play any part in the selection of your successor?

M: No, sir, I didn't. Ray Sweeney was selected to succeed me. Ray Sweeney had played for Westminster College and was a very good basketball player and a very fine gentleman

D: Do you remember what year it was that he replaced you?

M: He replaced me in September of 1935.

D: How would you evaluate the growth of the sports program in relation to the growth of the college?

M: I think that Youngstown has made some great strides with their athletic program, but again I go back to the point that they don't have their own stadium. They don't have their own baseball field. I think a good boost for them was when they got the Beeghly Center. I am a great believer that the college sports should be played on the campus. It should be a campus activity and I can hardly wait until they get a stadium at Youngstown.

D: How would you compare the student athlete of your day with today's?

M: We had some great ones back then, but the lads today in my book, as I watch games live and on TV, are much larger, much faster, have more mobility. In comparing a basketball player of today with a basketball player of my time, I think they're better shots than they were in the days of 1930, in that we felt the only time you lifted your feet was when you went in for a lay-up. The rest of your shots were made with the feet on the floor and then follow through and none of these flying shots like they're making today which are thrillers.

D: What do you consider to be the future of sports at Youngstown?

M: I think that Youngstown has a tremendous future. I think your basketball program is going to get better, your baseball program is going to get better, and when you get your stadium up near the campus, which I understand is part of their thinking, I think you're going to get a lot of participation--fan participation. I hope they leave some parking space so they can get the cars in and the fans will not have to walk two miles to the ball game.

D: Do you think there remains any deficiencies in the sports program that existed during your tenure as a coach?

M: They did not have enough money to conduct their program properly. For example, take football. I know Youngstown has always bought good equipment because Willard Webster, Dike Beede, and Ray Dempsey, saw to that and I know that Dom [Rosselli] has good equipment for basketball and baseball, but you've got to go a little bit further to protect those boys. You want to see they're fed right; you want them clothed properly because when they go out to play other schools, they are representing Youngstown. Therefore, you want the boys dressed with a coat, a tie, and you don't want them looking like bums.

D: Why do you feel that Youngstown's sports program has failed to reach the major college status?

M: Well, I can tell you what happened to me one time. I was talking to the coach of a well-know small school and I said to him, "Why don't you play Youngstown in football?" He said, "Why should we play them? We have everything to lose and nothing to gain." To me, that's a poor alibi and that has been the attitude of a number of schools.

I'm glad to see Youngstown playing Pitt, which is a step up the line. I hope they get more of that type of team to play. They have to start in basketball and if they develop their football program more and more, I'm sure that they might tie up with one of those teams. Their attitude is: "Why should I play you? I've got everything to lose, nothing to gain. I can't get my boys up for the game. You

beat me, you get all the publicity, we are downrated." I think this is the attitude that exists in the larger schools today.

D: Do you think the future is brighter for Youngstown because of the increased enrollment? It is up to about thirteen thousand now. They might be able to reach that status

M: I think it's coming and I think that Youngstown would be ahead if they could get into a league. I'm just taking some college names off the top of my head as I mention it. If they could get into a league like the Mid-American Conference, that would be a tremendous boost. I know it's almost impossible to get into that league, but there might be a league organized with schools of Youngstown's size.

I think that Youngstown is far superior athletic-wise to the President's Conference, which is Hiram, Allegheny, and others. Today the athletic programs in those schools have gone down compared to what they were in the old days, but I think Youngstown has to get into a league. You have to have a ball club like Pitt, Army, Navy, Notre Dame, and that type of school for the independents to get any recognition. You have to have a really good ball club.

D: Have you ever considered reentering the coaching ranks? Have you ever had second thoughts?

M: No, I can tell you in a little humorous way. I look at some of the coaches that I've had over the years when I was officiating and some of the coaches who were coaching when I was coaching. They're all gray-haired, they're all getting pretty feeble and I always tell them that I got out of the coaching game and went over to officiating and I've enjoyed a long life because of it.

One of the great stories of my life--Fritz Crisler, who was coaching at Michigan, said to me one time after a ball game, "You know, you wanted to keep your hand in football, you were smart. You went to officiating. You go out on a Saturday afternoon for two and one-half hours, your work is through, you get a lot of booing, you may get some criticism from the coach. But you go home, your phone doesn't ring [with someone] asking you why you didn't use

this boy, why did you use this play, and you don't have your sleep disturbed until the next Saturday." I'm glad I went the other way rather than stay in coaching.

D: Do you feel that Youngstown may develop, like many other universities, an over-emphasis of their sports program and their recruitment and so forth?

M: My only answer on that is this: I hope they don't go overboard. I hope that Youngstown follows a policy of sound recruiting and will recruit a boy not only because of his athletic ability, but also for what that boy can contribute to the University and for what the University can do to elevate that boy. I hope they never get to the position where they have a football squad at Youngstown with sixty-six players and they use only twenty-two of them because the other forty-four boys could have played for some other school. There's a danger there and I like to see them use the boys and keep the recruitment program in bounds where they get the use of the boy himself and the boy gets something out of it.

D: You've pointed out what your duties were at the outset of your employment at Youngstown College, but did they increase each year?

M: No, you must remember that this was during the Depression and anybody who had a job was very fortunate in those days. Anybody who made a hundred dollars a month was lucky. Now that would bring a smile to your face, but a hundred dollars a month in those days was a lot of money. You had it coming every month and you could buy enough groceries with five dollars to last you a week. Those were the real days of the Depression when I was at Youngstown.

END OF INTERVIEW