

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University
John Papa Interview
April 27, 2023
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
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MJ: Alright, it is April 27th, 2023, and I am doing a Rock Voice's Oral History interview with John Papa. Hi!

JP: Hello!

MJ: Now, first of all, could I get some biographical information, which is like your full name, date of birth, where you're from, things like that.

JP: Okay. John Patrick Papa. I'm from--originally from Monroeville, Pennsylvania; graduated Gateway High School [in] 1975. And then was a freshman here at The Rock in 1975; graduated here in 1979. Came back for [a] graduate assistantship in 1984; was hired here to coach track and field part time in 1985, and then over the next couple of years became head of men's and women's track and cross country here at The Rock.

MJ: All right. And . . . let's see, what was your degree in originally?

JP: Good question. Elementary Education. I taught elementary school for four and a half years. Yep.

MJ: And let's see, so you were here--so it seems like you were here during the state college era when you were a student?

JP: Right.

MJ: And the university era when you were a coach. So how did that change?

JP: Yeah, I don't know that, you know, from the outside it made any difference. I mean, I guess internally there were some differences, but I never really saw them, or it never affected me really.

MJ: And did the department you were hired into change while you were here. And if so, how?

JP: Yeah, when I first started--actually, I worked half time in Admissions and the other half coaching. Because coaching wasn't considered a full time job. Kind of like in high school where you have the teacher that coaches after school. That's kinda how Athletics was here at The Rock. But it started changing in the mid-80s where, you know, with the unionization of the coaches and everything, soon after gradually all coaches were just coaches, but there were still a few that coached and taught some. But I think right now, I don't think there's any coaches that are teachers as well.

MJ: How long did you work in Admissions?

JP: I think about a year? Dave Collins was the director. Elliott Baker, you might have heard that name, Elliott was in the office with me there. So, it was--it was fun.

MJ: All right. And then the rest, you were just coaching?

JP: That's right.

MJ: All right. And what buildings did you work out of?

JP: The Morrow Field House is where all the athletic activity for me took place.

MJ: Okay. And so, your first impressions, what was it like here when you arrived as a student?

JP: Well, you know, I didn't know anything about college when I got here, so this was the only thing I knew. So, I didn't have anything to compare it to. But as I, you know--after graduation and getting to know more about other schools and other opportunities that other people had, and the people that I knew, obviously, mostly were Slippery Rock people, but it seemed like Slippery Rock had that pride to it. People were proud of having been here, having come to school here, of, you know---most people thought it was a great place and a great place to be. And I didn't get the same vibe, or I didn't get the same feeling when other people talked about their universities, they, you know--it was just a university, just a place. But Slippery Rock was always more than just a place. It was kind of a special place for the people that came here.

MJ: What was it like coming back to coach?

JP: Yeah, it was exciting! I remember as a teacher, knowing that I was going to take that graduate assistantship, I was very excited to get back because I always loved Slippery Rock and just being here felt like home. And people always say this, "People are real friendly at Slippery Rock," and it's true. You just walk around campus and you'll see there's always someone there that's going to say "Hi" to you or, you know, you drop something, someone's going to help you pick it up, all that kind of stuff. So, I was excited about coming back, and I coached high school track and taught elementary school and then having the opportunity, you know, my graduate assistantship, part of it was track coach and part of it was also in the Athletic--or the Physical Education Department. So being back in this atmosphere was exciting and I was happy to be here.

MJ: All right. And what changes have you witnessed in that time? And are they for the better or worse?

JP: Well, I mean, you know, every university kind of reflects society, right? Wouldn't you say? And there are some things that have happened over the decades that are for--not necessarily for the better. But I would say--and I always tell everybody that, you know, that ever asks me about Slippery Rock, we changed quite a bit over the years, but we--in my opinion, we just got better and better and better. You know, so many great things happened here. There were changes. But I would say almost in every instance, it was for the better. The university grew. And I mean, right now we're very strong. And it wasn't an accident. It was planned. It was, you know, good people

made it happen. So, yeah, I think we've changed for the better and hopefully we continue to do so.

MJ: Any specific changes for the better you can think of?

JP: Well, I mean, the new majors. I mean, the Engineering, you know, the health fields. Like with the graduate stuff with the Physical Therapy, Physician's Assistant and then Athletic Training and everything. You know, those fields have set us apart, in my opinion. Because I know in recruiting, I was talking to the people, and I could see who wanted what and what was most popular. 'Cause I talked to a lot of people, you know? I would recruit over a hundred people a year or, talk to anyway, to try to convince them to come to Slippery Rock. And whenever we instituted Physical Therapy, Physician's Assistant, Engineering, people--the students were--the high school students were excited about those majors. And that, I think, set us apart. Even during all that, we still kept our strong majors like our education areas and, you know, Physical Education and Elementary Ed. And the Business Management, Marketing, Financing. And, you know, just all the other majors as well. You know, we were--it was an easy sell. Slippery Rock is an easy sell, for sure.

MJ: I agree. Now, what other campus activities did you participate in? Like if you were in committees, things like that?

JP: Well, I'll tell you what, due to the fact that I was, you know, our teams were competing all year long--cross-country, indoor, outdoor track--we were very busy. I mean, I honestly didn't have time, you know, unlike some of the other coaches [who] would compete in only two to three months a year, and then the rest of the year was for whatever. We were competing all year long. We didn't have that down time for other stuff. So, you know . . . in order to keep my sanity, I didn't extend myself in other areas that I would've had I had the time. So, the very long answer is there wasn't much else other than track and cross country that I got involved in when I was coaching.

MJ: All right. That's fair. Now, what would you consider your accomplishments at Slippery Rock? Both as a student and as a coach. Because I've seen old *Rockets* from when you were a student--

JP: Yeah, yeah.

MJ: Decathlons and things like that.

JP: Running. Yeah, yeah. Well, I mean, you know, we all measure success differently. I know that I had a lot of success in terms of being a conference champion, All-American as an athlete and all that kind of stuff. And then, you know, as a coach winning a whole bunch of championships and whatever . . . that's one way to measure it. But I always had a different opinion of that. 'Cause I've seen people win and do great things in that regard without putting in the effort, without doing the work. So, I always thought, you know, the hard work, working hard, developing those habits, those life skills was definitely more important. It's hard to see that when you're right on top of it. But fortunately . . . for myself I was able to realize that.

And I know when I graduated from Slippery Rock University, as a teacher, I mean, I used all the skills that I learned as an athlete, you know, hard work, endless hours. An *I can do it* attitude, and all the other things that make you successful in anything you do. I learned in Athletics. And then as a coach, I tried to teach that to the athletes so that . . . *we won, yeah, that was great*. But I think many of the athletes carried a lot of those life skills to this day and have helped them be successful in other endeavors other than track.

MJ: All right, quick aside, what does it mean to be an All-American athlete? I saw that term thrown around a lot.

JP: Yeah, in our sport: track and field . . . when I was an athlete, the top six that qualify for the national championships, you go there, and you finish in top six [then] you were named All-American. Okay? So, it was hard. It was, you know, it was a narrow [laughs] narrow thing. There weren't many All-Americans, over the years. And over the years in society as well as, you know, through the NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] and everything, even though the NCAA doesn't actually award All-Americans, it's the coaches associations in each sport that actually does it. So there is no [such] thing as an NCAA All-American, even though people will tie those two together, there is not such a thing.

So, the coaches over the years, like now for example, the top eight are first team All-American and then the next four are considered second team All-American. So, it's twelve now where it used to be six. You have twelve people now that can claim to be All-American, whereas it used to be six. So, in a reflection of society, there's a lot more awards now than there used to be. There's a lot more like, for example, our Sports Promotion Department, okay, or Athletic Communications they're called, you know, if you look at the websites and the constant accolades and the constant positive news that rolls out of those offices, it was never like that before.

And also when I first started coaching, there was no Coach of the Year Award. Okay? And then when the PSAC [Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference] first instituted it, you know, the track coaches said, "Nah, we're not in it for awards." So for a long time, the track coaches were the last coaches to get involved with the Coach of the Year Award. As a matter of fact, the PSAC mandated that there will be a Coach of the Year Award for track, and initially there wasn't for several years.

MJ: When did that get instituted?

JP: I--you know, I don't know. I'd be guessing so I'd rather not do that. (12:36)

MJ: All right. Now, what were your best and worst moments as a student athlete?

JP: As a student athlete? I mean, you know, we won the national championships my senior year. I finished second, myself, in the decathlon at that championships. And that was great. I mean, that was neat. But since at the national championships, there were only about a dozen of us--our team--there . . . our conference championships that we won as a team when there'd be forty, fifty guys at the meet, it was more of a team thing rather than just a handful of guys. So, I always

liked the conference championships. We called it the state championships when I was an athlete, but that was always our highlight.

As far as the bad times, I don't--I really can't pinpoint anything in particular. I know--well, for me, I know as the years went on, you know, I'm not really . . . I don't do really well with technology. So [laughs] every year there was more and more that I was expected to do on a computer. And every year there was another layer of something I didn't really understand what it was or how to do it. Fortunately, my assistant, Bill Jordan and then Meghan Shattuck when she was with me and then just lately, in the last couple of years, Tabitha Bemis, they would pitch in and set me up and get me going. But I do recall quite a bit of frustration with trying to get those things done and just not knowing how to do it, or not remembering, or couldn't figure it out or whatever. I was not one--I learned how to type on a typewriter. *Tick, tick, tick*. You know, it wasn't even electric, it was just a little hand thing. So things changed quite a bit. And I wasn't, for whatever reason, able to keep up with it.

MJ: As a student, didn't you get bits of pole vault stuck in your arm at a meet once?

JP: I did! I don't know--how did you know that?

MJ: *The Rocket*.

JP: Oh, was it in *The Rocket*? I didn't know that. I guess I didn't read it. But yeah, my . . . freshman year at PSAC Championships, I was pole vaulting as part of the decathlon and my pole broke and pieces of the fiberglass went into my elbow, you know, and just various--in here [points to arm]. And this was at Bloomsburg University and the Bloomsburg hospital is, you know, right there, I mean, it was probably less than a mile from campus. So I remember going--one of the coaches took me or one of the . . . somebody took me, might have been the manager or whatever. Went there, they took out the, you know, those pieces and bandaged me up and everything. And I went back to the meet and I . . . the event after the pole vault is the javelin. So I threw the javelin because it was--I'm left-handed--it was my right elbow that was messed up. And then ran the 1500, which was the last event, and I ended up third that day.

MJ: Oh. [Laughs].

JP: So, it was pretty neat. But hey, one thing that you asked about what was different, when I was on the track team, the men's and women's track teams were totally separate. There were different coaches; we practiced at different times. We didn't--I know today pretty much all--many track teams, or most, they're combined. They have a lot of the same coaches, they practice at the same times, they travel to the meets together, they go to the same meets or whatever. But back then we didn't. We didn't--and it wasn't just us. It was just--that was the way it was in track. When we had our conference championships, it was just men. There were no women there and all of our meets were men only. Even the NCAA National Championships. It was men only. I don't believe there was an NCAA Women's Track Championship in 1979. I didn't know what that year was when they started NCAA championships for women. But I was before all that.

MJ: All right. And then what were your best and worst moments as a coach?

JP: You know, coaches obviously winning is great and fun and getting--watching athletes do having their personal best. We call them p-r's, personal records. Having athletes set the high goals and work hard to reach them and everything like that. And, you know we were, I mean, I got a lot of enjoyment and a lot of pride and [was] proud of the athletes that were able to accomplish things.

And worst? Again, it's [pause] I tried to always focus on the positive and the good stuff, so I can't really think of a worst. But if I do, I'll tell you.

MJ: All right. Awesome. So when you came to campus as a coach who were like the leaders there? The people who've been there forever?

JP: Well, Bill Lennox was the Director of Athletics. And Bill Lennox, when I was an athlete here was the track coach. So he was track coach and then a few years later became Director of Athletics. So he's the reason I came back. He invited me, "Hey, we have this graduate assistantship. I want you to consider coming back and taking it." And he said that *Hopefully as the years go on, we could work you into the coaching staff* and all that. So, I thought that was a good idea and--but I, as an elementary ed. teacher, I really enjoyed that, too. It was a great challenge, and I had a lot of fun doing it. But coaching was like, *Yeah, that would be awesome*. So Bill Lennox was the guy. He was my main influence here at the Rock.

MJ: All right, and then other people who influenced you and were significant, and why?

JP: While here at Slippery Rock?

MJ: Yes.

JP: Well . . . that's a good question.

MJ: Also, if you had any interactions with like deans, administration, things like that.

JP: Yeah, okay. Good question. [Pause] President Smith. . . .

MJ: Which one?

JP: Which one? They both had the same first name, right?

MJ: I think it was G. Warren and then Robert.

JP: Oh Robert! Yeah, sorry, Robert.

MJ: You're good.

JP: But yeah, Robert, you know, he was around in the mid-80s, I believe, right? Yeah. And he was pro-athletics, and he was a guy that was around a lot. You got to know who he was. I know some of the presidents while I was here, I never really got to know, or got to see.

Well Dr. Aebersold when he was president, way back in the day. He was another--boy, he used to--he was [pause] he was a referee for football, I believe. And a coach here, I believe he was a

coach here and a Physical Education instructor back in the day. And I knew him. He was a really good guy, and you could count on him.

So yeah, there were a lot of other--Bob Watson. Do you remember the name? You know who Bob Watson is? They named the Watson Hall after him. He was a dean while I was here. Very supportive of me. You know, I'd see him quite a bit. And he wrote a couple [of] books about Slippery Rock. Right? Have you seen those?

MJ: Yeah.

JP: And I took some pictures--some of my pictures are in his book. If you take a look through it, not his first book but his second book. A lot of the athletic pictures I took and gave to him.

MJ: All right. And then any other people like you who were students at first and then came back as faculty?

JP: Yeah! Yeah. Ursula Payne, you know, Ursula from [the] Dance Department? She was on our team back in the day. Okay. There's a guy named Seth Jenny. He's with . . . Physical Therapy--or no, Exercise Science. *I'm sorry Seth*. But Seth is--was one of my athletes as well from back in the day. Kim Keeley! You know who Kim is? She's in the graduate level--well, actually, Athletic Training, it's only graduate level at this point. She's in Athletic Training and she was on the team as well back in, way back in the day. (21:55)

MJ: Yeah. All right, and then major events or activities that happened while you were here. I know--didn't you organize a decathlon or something like that with Bill Lennox?

JP: Well, we did. I mean, we've hosted the National Cross-Country Championships four times.

MJ: That's what I was thinking of.

JP: Twice here on our property . . . and then once at Cooper's Lake, and then once we were part of this like Olympic-style festival thing that was held in Pittsburgh. We hosted the cross-country championships down in Pittsburgh as part of Slippery Rock University. So we did that--we hosted the WPIAL [Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League] Cross-Country Championships for decades. And now with Bill Jordan, who's currently the coach, you know, a lot of the reason we got that event here about five years ago was because of his workings, and his communication, and his hard work.

We have the District Ten, which is up there in Erie and all that--all those schools, and the Slippery Rock High School is District Ten. But we host District Ten, track, and District Seven, which is what people track at our facility. Over the decades we've hosted, oh jeez, I don't want to say thousands, but I'll say very comfortably, say hundreds of indoor events at [Morrow] Field House, outdoor events at the Stadium [Mihalik-Thompson Stadium], Junior Olympic things and everything--camps, and everything. We've brought many, many thousands of people to Slippery Rock that had never been here before through the events that we have.

MJ: Nice. What about national events with local impact, or building projects? Because I know the campus kind of sprung up between the 70s and the 90s . . . Anything that impacted you?

JP: Well, I mean, the rec center [Robert N. Aebersold Student Recreation Center] was one more reason for people to come here. In recruiting, we walk students around. And after we got that rec center, that was one of the first places we took them, "Hey, check this out." And everyone, "Yeah, yeah." So I can't say this for sure, but . . . I'll bet you could find out a lot of students came here because of our rec center, for sure.

MJ: All right. And then other memorable events that you can think of . . . just throughout your time here?

JP: Well, I remember the rock group Kansas. Have you heard of them before? Maybe?

MJ: I think so?

JP: Well, they were very popular. They were one of the great bands, you know, back in the 70s when I was a student here. And I remember that they weren't scheduled to come here, except a couple of days before they had a cancelation, or something happened somewhere. And all of a sudden there were all these signs everywhere, "Kansas is coming" and the concert was done at the University Union, and we all went there.

And the neat thing about that is, the next album that--or record back then (we had records)--the next album that Kansas put out one of the guys in the band was wearing a Slippery Rock shirt in the, you know, where you put the record into the sleeve and then stick it into the album cover. So when you pull the sleeve out, you'll see the guys--their pictures. The one guy has a Slippery Rock shirt on.

MJ: Nice.

JP: So that was pretty cool. We were kind of--that made us a little bit more famous than we already were.

MJ: Yeah. How long has it been since you retired from here?

JP: I retired this past summer.

MJ: Okay, so what so far do you miss about being at Slip?

JP: Well, on my way here, I bet I saw five track athletes and . . . I just miss seeing the kids every day, because it's always fun. You know, we kept a positive environment, and we did the best we could to make it enjoyable. And so, I miss the athletes, just seeing them, talking to them and that kind of thing.

And I've been helping the track coaches. We have hosted a couple of outdoor track meets this spring, and I've been helping to set up and prepare the facility for the events and then working the events too. We are hosting--Slippery Rock Track and Field is hosting the PSAC Championships, second weekend of May. Coming up in less than a month. So, I'll be helping out with that and helping prepare for it. And then when the event's here, I'll be helping with whatever the coaches need me to do. I'll be here to do what I can.

I kind of--I see the coaches often and talk to them: text, and email, and all that kind of stuff. I'm still connected a little bit, but I'm not, you know, I don't try to impose my ideas or any of my stuff. They're running free. And they're doing great, by the way. Track's in a great place, and some great things are happening, and the future looks really bright for them.

MJ: All right. And last question, any words of wisdom for current or future people at the Rock?

JP: Well, I'll tell you what, time goes by quickly. I mean, the older you get, the more you realize that all those years went flying by and you don't remember *how* or *why* it happened. It's just--so enjoy your time here. . . . Because your college days, for a lot of people, they'll say those were the days that you had the most freedom and you . . . those kind of things. So enjoy your time here and get the most out of it. Ask questions, develop relationships, and . . . all those kind of things.

MJ: All right. And then--oh! I lied there is one more here. How would you like to be remembered?

JP: Well, I mean--I'd like to be remembered as, you know, a guy that worked hard. I mean--I gave my best, for decades. I've made a lot of sacrifices. . . . And so, working hard and giving my best effort. It didn't always work out 100%, but I always did my best.

MJ: All right. That's all I have for questions. Thank you very much.

JP: You got it.