

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University  
Bob DiSpirito Interview  
October 2, 2008  
Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania  
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SM: Today is October 2<sup>nd</sup> and I'm Sarah Meleski. As part of the Rock Voices Oral History Project we have Coach Bob DiSpirito with us. How are you today, Coach?

BD: I'm doing just fine, thank you.

SM: Well, why don't we start with a little biographical information?

BD: Okay, [pause] I'm going to read off some of the things I have right here on the paper; is that alright with you?

SM: Yes.

BD: I was born in 1928 in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. I went to the University of Rhode Island and Columbia University. I arrived here in 1968 as the head football coach and a teacher in Physical Education; I taught there for one year. But I had my master's degree in recreation and they wanted to start the Recreation Department, so from that time on I was in the development of the Recreation and Environmental Education Department [pause] from the very beginning until I retired.

I was the head football coach from 1968 till I had a heart attack in 1980. And then I just resumed teaching full-time until 1987 I believe; at [that] time Dr. Aebersold asked me to return to the head coaching job for one year. They were having some problems and [the] coach had resigned—Don Ault resigned—so the president asked me to take over and I did. It was kind of a fun thing, because as you look at the program and you see what is happening and things that you did and what you would do, but [you had] never said anything . . . . But all of a sudden, I was put in the position where I could change things, which I did.

So I came back to coaching for that one season, and was able to get my one hundredth win at Shippensburg. That's kind of a unique story there. Unbeknownst to me, Dr. Aebersold—who incidentally when he first arrived to Slippery Rock was one of my freshman football coaches and who rose to the rank of university president. Well, anyway, after the game we had a dinner at an alum's home, a big farm—a horse farm—and so we came in with the bus and we were going to have dinner there and the players would have a chance to ride some horses and that sort of thing. But as the bus stopped, Dr. Aebersold was there and he opened up his trunk, and as we all filed off, he had in these *little* containers—little small containers—champagne! And he was toasting my one-hundredth win. I thought that was kind of neat, for the president to do that. But we were

very close friends from the time he coached with me and my staff until he retired as president.

SM: So you were here for the state college, and then the university change?

BD: Yes, right, I went through them both. And it was fun watching the university because when we first got here there were only about 2800 students. Now we're comparing that with about 8400 students today. But we saw the growth, and there was a lot of growth at that time.

Dr. Watrel came in and that was the beginning of a lot of development—physical development—on campus. And at that time he was very interested in football. He was a football player himself at Syracuse University. So he was a big help to not just football, but to all athletics. And then all of a sudden, you know, we . . . we were very good. We had won three straight championships in a row, and we hadn't lost a ball game in three or four years at the college at home.

Basketball was very strong; baseball was strong; wrestling was very, very strong, and the spirit at this university was just outstanding, because the students could identify with us with pride—with the university—and that helped raise the morale of the entire student body, faculty, everybody else. So, it was a fun time to be here.

Again, I was hired into Physical Education and then, as I said, because of my advanced degree in recreation we started the Recreation Department. I worked at the field house, of course I worked in Old Main, and I worked in Spotts. Those are the three locations that I got involved in.

[Refers to the list of questions]. You're asking for the impressions of the college or university, and "what was it like when you first arrived here in Slippery Rock," and as I've said it was about 2800 students. There was very little progress at that time and then, of course, through the years and now [there] has been tremendous progress physically, as well as [the current] student enrollment of 8500. The physical plant and the way the town has finally grown . . . the town was very small.

When I was at Bucknell, that was a small town too: Lewisburg. But they were very progressive. *This* town was not very progressive at this time. I [was] an advisor to student government for at least fourteen years and all those years we were trying to get [pause] places . . . that a student could go to and have a drink and so forth, right in town. And there was never any license. The [town] fought it and fought it and fought it and then all of a sudden: it became a reality. But what I like about it is that there are three locations in Slippery Rock where you can have a drink—an alcoholic drink—but yet, they're all in restaurants and there's always good food at all the places, so it's not . . . it's not a bar. And I thought that was a good approach to it. So, I have seen the growth of the college and I've seen the growth of the town, and it's been good.

My activities here on campus [were] of course with the department, and [I] served on many college-wide committees. I was on the Recreation faculty and I helped enlarge and develop the Newman Center here. We built what you see presently as the Parish Center or Rock Catholic Center; I was part of that planned development. I came here as an assistant professor and I rose to rank of professor. And those were some of the accomplishments that I feel that I had, along with, of course, the three state championships that we won.

Also the building of the recreation center. I was given that job in my last nine years here at the university. Dr. Aebersold asked me to “run with it,” which I did. I went to many schools, videotaped [and] looked at their facilities. It took nine years of work but you have the reality of the Aebersold Recreation Center, which was very, very needed on this campus. And so that was, I felt, a part of my accomplishments. Along with, of course, my coaching and the Gail Rose building, which is—I don’t know if you know where the Gail Rose facility is. If you’ve been to a football game, its way up on the hill: that facility that’s up on the hill overlooking the football stadium.

It’s a great fundraiser because it costs people \$500 per season to go in there and watch games. And they can have wonderful meals up there, so it’s a great place to watch the game. So there have been . . . probably a couple hundred people up there, and at the price of \$500 it’s quite a good fundraiser, you know?

They were going to tear it down and Dr. Aebersold asked me what I thought about that. I said, “Before they tear it down, I’d like to know whether it’s stable or if we could do anything with it.” And then we had an evaluation: Buildings and Grounds came in, and they evaluated and they said, “No, its sound.” And so, Dr. Aebersold said, “What do you want to do?” I said, “Let me do some fundraising.” Which I did, and we raised about ten thousand dollars initially. We put a deck out there and painted the place and then since then the school has improved on it. But it’s a wonderful facility that no other school in the state conference has. So that makes it unique. It’s a great fundraiser.

[Next question]: “the best and worst moments while here at the university.” That’s a hard one, but I would say the successes and the failures of my students that I got involved with, both in the classroom as well as out on the football field. And [pause] how much joy it brings to a coach to see young men come in . . . with an “attitude” and that attitude is changed to a very positive attitude: from a negative to a positive. It’s the same with the students: being able to get them inspired or get them excited about the recreation program that I was involved with.

I was charged with trying to get the non-majors on campus to be interested in our department. So I would talk to maybe seven to nine-hundred students, trying to get them interested. Not only in our department, but [to] get into some kind of a major after the first year. In the first year, I think it’s a good idea to come in to general studies. A lot of schools—matter of fact, when I was at Bucknell, that’s the way it was. You came in to general studies for two years and then you majored in your junior and senior year. So you were able to get a grasp of college life and finally really decide where you would like to

go. It's hard as a freshman to come in and say, "I want to be this" and stay with it for four years. The majority of the students change their mind sometimes two and three times, which is fine, which is fine. So when you say the best and worst moments. . . . I lost football games, those were the bad moments. I won football games, those were the exciting moments. I think the basic one was dealing with the students.

It says here [refers to questions] "who were the leaders, presidents, deans, and so forth" when I was here at the university. You know, when I retired I remember one of the comments I made: I said I was kind of unique. I was unique in the sense that I survived seven presidents. It's usually just the opposite: usually a president survives seven football coaches! [Laughter]. But I survived seven presidents through all the time I was here.

We started out with Dr. Carter. At the first faculty meeting I ever went to, they called for his resignation. I said, "My Lord, what is happening here?" And they all tried to pick sides. I was new; I didn't know anybody, so I said, "I'm not for anybody really," [laughs] you know? But anyway, Dr. Carter was finally asked to resign and then next week he was given the position back, and the next week the position was taken away from him. It was a very, very hard time when I first got here in 1968. But anyway, we went through Dr. Carter, Dr. Watrel, Dr. Roberts, Dr. Reinhart, Dr. Aebersold, and Dr. Smith. Not the present Dr. Smith, Dr. Smith before him.

And it says [referring to the questions], who were some of the people who made the biggest impressions on me? There was a dean here, Dr. Meise, who was a wonderful, wonderful man. And I think Wilma Cavill, who is still teaching after fifty-some years.

SM: Fifty years, yeah.

BD: She is an amazing, amazing lady and a good teacher.

SM: I just got to interview her a couple weeks ago.

BD: Did you? She's a wonderful lady. You know, she *is* in the Health Department and does an excellent job there. But she was also president of the union when we were first forming our union. She's a strong lady, and she did a lot of good things for us. So I've always been a big fan of Wilma Cavill. And the day she decides to retire, I think it'll be a huge loss to the university.

"Who were other people who influenced you or were significant in your time?" Dr. Watrel obviously. He helped *all* the athletic programs and created an atmosphere at this university that was exciting. And I think it caused the growth of the college. It was really exciting. We were a small group, but we knew each other, and we did a lot socially. Now the [faculty's] gotten so big, it's not as social as it was when it was small. That was a lot of fun, to go through that. And of course the camaraderie that you develop with the coaching staff. I had five . . . six guys in my staff and I only lost one in all the time that I coached in fourteen years, and today we are still very good friends. So that was very, very exciting.

Major events while I was here: when they put the new football field in. We used to play here at the old Thompson Field. So we put [the new stadium] in, and then the building of the recreation center. [That] took nine years, and it was fun putting it all together because I worked at Old Main for five years. When I got out of coaching that's where my job was. And so again, I keep repeating to you: the enrollment growth has always been exciting, starting the recreation department was exciting and the successes of the football program were very, very exciting. These were all wonderful projects that I was involved with.

And also [as I said] developing and enlarging the Newman Center [pause] and at this date my daughter is the head of all the activities [there]. Diane Magliocca is my daughter, and she's the head of [the] activities at the Newman Center.

SM: What were some big memories that you have from being here? Besides your one-hundredth win.

BD: Oh gosh, I've got lots of memories. From the football aspect of it, we went to two bowl games. We were nationally ranked. We had an association with the University of Texas where at every [Slippery Rock] homecoming they gave me something. They gave me a hat one time, boots another time, tequila another time. And we would send our cheerleaders to the University of Texas for their homecoming, and they sent their cheerleaders for homecoming here. So it was a very exciting time. They had a boosters club at the University of Texas: a Slippery Rock boosters club. And their president came and visited here and we visited there. So we had a lot of fun; it was an exciting time for us.

"What if anything, what do you miss about Slippery Rock?" Being in touch with the faculty; being in touch with the students. I miss game days and football; I don't miss all the other stuff. We used to spend hours and hours and hours looking at films and developing strategies. And migraine headaches I don't miss at all, at all! [Laughter]. But, those were some of the real fun times.

And there were so many presidents that I had a close relationship with, alumni that I've had close relationships with, and it's been very gratifying, [a] very good life. And you know, when I look back . . . I was at the University of Bridgeport for seven years and then I went to Bucknell for a couple of years. And when this job opened up, the athletic director at Bucknell asked me if I would be interested in Slippery Rock. And I said, "I don't think so, I don't want to go to Arkansas." He said, "No, no, no, no, that's Little Rock. This is Slippery Rock" [laughs]. I had very little contact with this area [in] football. I was a New Englander. I dealt with, before that, Connecticut, Rhode Island, places like that. But [this sounded] exciting.

Anyway, we drove up here for the interview. And this is the truth, we drove in on a wintry day when the roads were covered with all kinds of sand, snow and filth, and all of that sort of stuff. It was just dirty-looking. And my wife and I said we probably ought to get something to eat before we go [to campus]. And the only place open was the Hot

Dog Shop. I said, “My Lord, it’s a whole town and the only place you can eat is a hot dog shop.” So, we went in there and this big, big man came over to me and he said, “You’re interviewing for the coaching job, huh?” And I said, “Well, how did you know that?” He said, “Well, you have a tie, a shirt, and a jacket on.” He said, “Most people don’t dress that way around here” [laughs]. I said, “Oh, really?” But anyway, I went in, did my interview and . . . got the job.

I didn’t know how long I was going to stay here, and it’s turned out to be, I’ve been here forever! [Laughs] Forty-one years now. But we had a lot to do. It was a great place to bring up my five children. We have a farm just a mile, mile and a half, outside of town here. I could be in my classroom in ten minutes. I was used to being at Columbia in New York City and, you know, transportation was awful. Connecticut was a busy, busy place. So, all of a sudden, this place where I could be in my classroom in ten minutes, you know. I could go and dress any way I wanted up at the farm, yet I was only a mile and a half from the school.

But, the only difference is that [as I’ve said] the school was much smaller; it was in a growing period; faculty were pulling together. We got to know one another because there weren’t that many faculty here. We did a lot socially. Once we got the program going . . . . In our first game here we got beat sixty-one to seven. Whooo! [Laughs] so . . . I said, “Boy, I don’t know if I’m going to be here long.” But anyway we developed the program here and it was a lot of fun and [we] made a lot of friends. We’ve stayed here. We’ve made our life here at the university.

SM: Do you have any words of wisdom for anybody who wants to come to Slippery Rock, or participate in the football program?

BD: There are all kinds of levels of football. There’s what they call Division III: small liberal arts colleges; Division II, which is us; Division I AA which is University of Rhode Island where I went to school, and then there’s Division I A which is Notre Dame and the big schools. And if a young man wants to play football enough, and doesn’t want to sit on the bench, then his best chances of succeeding are at a school like Division II, where the emphasis is academic, not football. When we first got here we didn’t have any scholarships at all; it was all work-study. If anybody wanted any extra money they had to go into a work-study program to earn it. And it’s changed a little bit now.

My advice to any student coming in is to make sure you—right away, number one [find] what you feel the school has to offer you academically. That’s got to be number one because ninety-nine percent of the young men that play here and young ladies that play in our athletic programs will not go to the professional ranks. So, therefore, you have to be in a situation where you’re going to have a lot of fun and enjoy it, but yet gain the experience and the education you need to go on with your life after your four or five years are up.

So it’s extremely important that you fit in. Visit the schools, make sure you fit in, feel comfortable with the student body. Meet some of the students here. Don’t just go around

with coaches or whoever is showing you around the university. Try to meet some of the students and find out what really goes on, because they're the ones who will tell you.

When I was recruiting here at the university, [prospective students] met with the coaches but after that they were assigned to students. We had cheerleaders, we had football players, we had basketball players. We asked basketball players to help the football program as we helped the basketball players. It was a real mutual trust and camaraderie and we wanted them to go with the students for the day, have lunch with them, and find out what this school was really all about.

And we tried to put them in with majors: if they were Exercise Science majors then that's who we would assign—a student from that area. It's important if you're going to spend the next four years here, which will probably dictate, for the most part, what your future's going to be all about. And as a football player, you want to go to a school where you can have some fun with it and get to play. It's no fun sitting on the bench. A lot of the schools, bigger schools, you might get to play one or two years, if you're fortunate. But then in this division you can play for four years and have fun with it. So it's important that you get as much as you can out of the situation.

SM: How do you want to be remembered at Slippery Rock?

BD: How do I want to be remembered? As someone who has made a difference.

SM: Do you feel that you've achieved that?

BD: Oh, sure. I just want to have made a difference, that's what it's all about. I helped develop the football program here. But I also helped build the recreation center, helped build the Newman Center [now Parish Center], worked on the church councils. I was responsible for developing the recreation center in town with my classes. So those are the accomplishments that I feel very proud of; it's made my time worthwhile.

If I want to be known for anything, I want people to think of me as someone who has made a difference.

SM: Well I don't think I have any other questions for you so I'd like to thank you for allowing me to interview you.

BD: You're welcome.

SM: Have a nice day.

BD: Thank you.