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Paul Griffin oral history interview by Andrew Huse, September 16, 2004

Paul Griffin (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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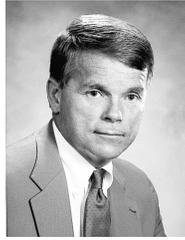
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Mr. Griffin came to USF in 1986, and served as the University's athletic director for fifteen years.

Background

Before coming to USF in 1986, Mr. Griffin had served for five years as athletic director at Jacksonville University. Because JU was affiliated with the same athletic conference as USF, he was able to establish professional connections and a familiarity with South Florida. In the spring of 1986, he was offered a position as athletic director at USF.

Initial impressions

Mr. Griffin marveled at the impressive amount of physical space and “room to grow” he found on the USF campus.

Priorities as athletic director

As the new athletic director, Griffin's first charge was to “stop the financial bleeding” of a department several million dollars in debt. “[My] primary mission was to reverse that trend and establish some positive financing ... while trying to maintain and build an ever-increasing competitive profile ... and at the same time work to build some competitive successes on the field.” In his first several years as athletic director, Griffin worked hard at controlling costs and increasing revenue in an effort to improve the condition of the program at USF and realize those goals.

Running a collegiate athletic program, Griffin admits, “is a big task at all universities, and at emerging universities such as South Florida it is an even greater challenge.” The first action he took was to do a program assessment in order to determine realistic objectives and set aside priorities for funding and expenditures. “We had to establish some priorities just like any other business entity ... and put a greater level of emphasis on those items, and attempt to grow the business in a reasonable fashion.”

At the time, Griffin recalls, they recognized that basketball was a “flagship sport” for South Florida and thus required a significant investment. At the same time, he notes,

there were deficiencies in other areas that required attention. While women's soccer was acknowledged as an emerging program, swimming was eventually dropped as a varsity sport.

Economic recovery

It was two or three years after Griffin's arrival that the program began to recover and establish some fiscal autonomy. By the time he left South Florida in 2001, in fact, the athletics department had accrued a \$5-\$6 million reserve through careful budgeting and substantial donations from university benefactors.

Football program

Serious talk about a football program, Griffin recalls, did not occur "until we had righted the financial ship" under President Borkowski, who engaged in a "major capital campaign" and pledged a "serious look" at the prospects of collegiate football at USF.

Early successes

His major successes in the early years at USF were the maintenance of competitive athletic programs in addition to fiscal recovery. In addition, they garnered significant support from the local community, which also contributed to the program's revenue. There was also a renewed effort to enhance the University's image in the local media: television, radio, and print. "I think it [is] important to note that those successes, quite factually and honestly, served as the foundation for the opportunity for college football to emerge [into] the successful program that it is today."

Climbing collegiate divisions

When Griffin came to the University in 1986, USF was classified a Division I-AAA school. When it got a football program, South Florida moved to I-AA and has since sought and gained membership in Conference USA as a Division I-A school, which evolved into membership in the Big East conference. "It was an interesting part of my career and one that I hold with a lot of fond memories and it was an effort that has proven to be very very fruitful and productive for the University and one that has the fingerprints of hundreds if not thousands of people who were ... employees, fans, friends, or benefactors of South Florida ... I was proud to be part of it but I was only one person with two hands."

Challenges

The challenges, Griffin asserts, "Were, are, and will always be the same, and that is, trying to maintain an economically viable program ... while maintaining academic respectability and a high-level of integrity." The economic pressures of collegiate sports, he explains, are a "substantial challenge" regardless of the competitiveness of the school.

Marvin Taylor controversy

Griffin's reaction to such circumstances, he explains, "Is that they be managed in an appropriate and effective and consistent manner ... and that case was." Though it may have been handled differently, Griffin defends the decisions that he made. "I think that one of the things that most of us that spend our lives in athletics understand is that the

world is filled with people who are really ... experts in hindsight ... At the time, those people ... made the decisions ... and handled it in the way that they saw was appropriate and consistent with the policies that were in place ... I don't spend a lot of time looking back at what ... could have been."

Transition into football

The move to college football, Griffin explains, did not happen overnight. Rather, it was "a project and a process that even today had a longer planning period than it had had a competitive history." Preparations involved understanding NCAA rules, economic issues, marketplace familiarity, and a number of other factors. It was a two-year process at that time just to get formal approval for the program from the Board of Regents. "We knew we were only going to have one chance, and so ... we had to be really prepared ... we were ... and as a result we received approval and ... South Florida's football program has established itself as probably the most successful launch of college football in the past fifty years - No program has emerged as quickly or as successfully."

"From the first day of consideration, we made it very public ... that our aspirations were to be a Division I-A program. And so we had a very clear direction, and a very clear objective, and a very clear place that we wanted to move to as quickly as the marketplace would allow us to do so ... It was that sense of purpose and direction that separated us from other programs."

Resistance

USF got the most resistance not from other state schools with established football programs such as Florida and Florida State, but from those that did not have football at all such as West Florida, North Florida, Florida Atlantic, and Florida International. The difficulties Central Florida had in developing a football program caused many state legislators and administrators to discourage USF from a similar endeavor. There was also concern over whether the local Tampa Bay market would support collegiate football.

Community reception of the football program

Getting a football program at USF was no easy task, particularly at a time when the local professional team, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, were not filling the stadium for their own games, leaving nearly 20,000 empty seats on a regular basis. "Was Tampa a market that would support college football" when the professional team received such modest support? "I think that what we relied on was the fact that there [was] a great passion for college football and ... [USF] had over 100,000 alumni in the Bay area [whom] had expressed interest in the program."

"Quite frankly, you don't know what's going to occur until you get into it ... I think it was a good decision at the time ... [and] an even better decision in retrospect."

Personal reflections on the first football game

"I've had a lot of great experiences," Griffin says in reflection of his career in athletics, but "no experience has or will ever match that of ... giving birth ... to a college football

program.” Kicking off in front of 50,000 excited spectators, Griffin remembers of the first game, was “a once in a lifetime experience ... it was very gratifying.”

Colleagues

Over the course of his tenure at USF, Griffin had the opportunity to work with a great number of people, including four different university presidents, a variety of vice-presidents, and “a lot of quality colleagues to draw from ... for guidance and advice.”

USF Presidents

Francis Borkowski was responsible for “initiating a series of discussions” about the football program, forming “a task force to assess the feasibility of college football,” hiring a team of professions, and rebuking resistance in Tallahassee.

“Betty Castor came on his heels ... and she picked up the ball, and ran with it and crossed the goal line ... She was especially effective in deflecting the bureaucratic interference in Tallahassee ... Without her ... it wouldn’t have been a reality either.”

Lee Roy Selmon

Selmon, Griffin recalls, was instrumental in bringing a sense of identity to the program in addition to generating funding and community support for USF football. “We positioned Lee Roy to be the identity of our team before we had a team.” As the team grew, Selmon’s role in the program evolved with it.

“[USF] has been and it is and it will always be a special part of my life, and I appreciated the opportunity to be there for fifteen years.”

End of Interview