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Kenneth Eriksen oral history interview by Danielle E. Riley, February 2, 2004

Kenneth S. Eriksen (Interviewee)

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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Decision to come to USF

Mr. Eriksen came to USF as a student in 1979. He is from New York and wanted to look into going to school in the warm weather. This was because he played baseball, and when spring training started, there was still snow “up to your elbows” in New York. He really liked the political science department here at USF. Latin American studies and Latin American politics really interested him and he considered becoming an international lawyer. The campus’s proximity to those areas of the world, Florida’s climate, and the proximity to beaches, were all great selling points. He had to choose between the University of Florida, Florida State, Miami and South Florida. Mr. Eriksen wanted to be in a “metropolitan situation” and wasn’t “too crazy about Miami,” so he chose USF.

While in high school, the baseball team scouted him, but he was not offered a scholarship. In his freshman year Mr. Eriksen made the team as a walk-on, he red-shirted for his first year, and played for four years after that.

First Impression of USF

During orientation two things stuck out in Mr. Eriksen’s mind, the heat and how nice the people were. It seemed that most out-of-state students lived in the dorms their first two years and a lot of the professors were from other states, so everyone was in a similar situation and got along really well. Once school started the academic intensity level was pretty high. Even though he had come from a pretty intense academic situation in high school on Long Island, this was still very difficult and a big challenge for Mr. Eriksen.

Impressions of Tampa

He’d been to Florida before because he had relatives in Ft. Lauderdale. He had never been to Tampa, although his father was stationed at MacDill Air Force Base in the 1950s and his father “spoke very highly of the area.” The odd thing for people coming to Florida from northern regions is that they have an impression of Ft. Lauderdale and Miami, but have little knowledge of the state’s west coast. He thought it would be the same but it was quite different. In Tampa, there was more of a southern culture, more southern accents than the Ft. Lauderdale/Miami area, and everything moved at a slower pace. This was “really conducive to getting away from the rat-race of New York” and

getting a good chance to combine studying and athletics. There were very few buildings at the time. There was one engineering building, the chemistry building. The Moffitt Cancer Research Center was not yet built.

Physical Layout of Campus

The library was the main building on the campus. It was rather large compared to other buildings. Dormitories were small, and the Sun Dome was still under construction at the time. Fowler and Fletcher Avenues were two-lane roads. Trees were the only things north of Fletcher Avenue past the apartment complexes. There were very few athletic facilities, just “fields with fences around them with crabgrass and ants everywhere.” The facilities the school has now are far superior to what was here then. At the time the Marshall Center was the University Center and it was half its present size, with no Special Events Center.

Demonstrations

He remembers coming to his Zeta Hall dormitory and going past the fountain. Students had always heard there were bomb shelters under there from the Cuban Missile Crisis. This was during the hostage crisis in Iran and there were demonstrations going on in that area pretty regularly. A professor named Bruce Williamson often spoke at rallies. He was either a Socialist or a Communist. Mr. Eriksen doesn't remember if Professor Williamson was a communist, or just mildly socialistic and trying to get the students to think. There were lots of demonstrations and Iranian students were being attacked regularly. As freshman they were watching the television often because they were worried about a war and everyone was a potential draftee. They all watched Ted Koppel on Nightline discuss the hostage crisis very attentively.

Hockey game—1980

The high point of the year was the U.S. hockey team beating the Russians in the Olympics. With all the political turmoil at the time, anything that would allow people to have pride in their country was welcome and everyone in the area took a lot of pride in the victory.

Living on campus

Mr. Eriksen lived in the Zeta dorm for his first two years at USF. It was a small community. Most of the people commuted, so dorm residents were a “family group that hung out.” There were less than 5,000 people in the dorms so it was like a big high school; everyone knew everyone else. They went out at the same time, ate at the same time, and went to parties at the same time. The drinking age was eighteen, which made it difficult to pick and choose when you would drink, especially as an athlete. The Empty Keg in the University Center had Friday night happy hour and professors and students would go there. He always tells people today that this was probably the figurative “end of the sixties” in that it was an end of being politically aware and active and being able to interact with all different age groups.

Baseball

Mr. Eriksen was contacted by some coaches about playing baseball at USF but wasn't offered a scholarship. He played from 1981 to 1984. Robin Roberts was the head coach at the time. Coach Roberts played for the Philadelphia Phillies and is in the Baseball Hall of Fame. In 1982, they became the first USF baseball team to go to the NCAA regional finals. Four of the nine starters on that team were walk-ons. This team played UF, FSU, and Miami six times a year and for them, the "breakthrough" was when they started to beat these teams consistently. Then they believed they could go far.

Would he have stayed here without baseball?

Once he got here and started living in the area he probably would have stayed. He has been here ever since so he obviously loves the area.

Highlights of student life

Finding out how hard the academics were and winding up an honor student was one of his highlights as a student. Other highlights include graduating with a degree in Political Science, playing on an NCAA program, meeting his wife, seeing the school grow (the growth was pretty spectacular even from 1979 to 1984) and seeing the basketball team get recognition.

Football at USF

This was also one of the first times that the students got together to try to start a football program. He remembers someone who sat outside Cooper Hall with a bucket trying to raise money for a football team. This was the start in interest in football because the students at the time were very interested in sports. There were a lot of students who went to Gainesville and Tallahassee to go and see UF and FSU games. It was nice to see the early efforts for a football team and now see the team help the University establish a national reputation.

Student support of baseball

Student support of baseball was high. When they were winning consistently in 1982 the team was filling the stadium and drawing 2,500 to 3,000 people to come and see some of the other big teams in the state. One of the turning points for them was going to the University of Florida (whose baseball team was nationally ranked), beating them in Gainesville and then beating them in the first round of the NCAA tournament. They lost to Miami, the eventual 1982 National Champions. This was a great experience for the school and after this the program was bigger. It was good to be part of a "breakthrough team." He was able to be a part of a similar experience as softball coach in 1996. Mr. Eriksen feels fortunate to have been a part of the athletic program for so long and see how some of the programs started and built up over time.

Graduation

His political science degree had an emphasis on Latin American politics and he did some graduate work in public administration. He still needs to write a thesis. The inability to finish the thesis is more a result of time constraints rather than effort. Mr. Eriksen was

named head coach and had two daughters in a short period of time. He feels as if he has accomplished a lot academically.

The move to coaching

He finished baseball in 1984 and was doing graduate work. The head softball coach knew Mr. Eriksen was giving hitting lessons to baseball players in the area. The softball team needed help with their hitting because they “were awful.” The team had good pitching, but they had just moved from slow-pitch to fast-pitch softball so their hitting was not very good. He started working with the team. He was “biased and almost male-chauvinistic when it came to women’s athletics.” Mr. Eriksen didn’t realize there were that many good athletes on the women’s teams. He started working with the players and worked for two years as graduate assistant. The assistant coach stepped down around 1988, so Mr. Eriksen took his position. In 1995-96 the head coach resigned and Mr. Eriksen “just happened to be in the right place at the right time. According to Coach Eriksen, “there is no honor greater than to be head coach at your alma mater, and things worked out real well.”

Differences in condition of equipment available to athletes now versus then

There is a “huge difference” in terms of things available to student athletes. When Mr. Eriksen went here, student athletes bought their own equipment. Now they don’t have to do that. The only thing that they have to bring now is “their toothbrush – because we provide everything in the world.” Back then they didn’t have locker rooms but now there is a new \$20 million athletic facility. Back then they didn’t have doctors and the entire training staff consisted of one graduate assistant. The guy who worked for the physical education program for intramurals was the head trainer. They had to travel by bus everywhere, long eighteen-hour bus rides with no air conditioning or heat. They stayed three in a room in hotels. Now they have two in a room and if the travel distance is outside of four hours by bus, they fly. Everything down to the playing conditions of the fields are “stellar compared to what they were.” Baseball players who dove in the outfield to catch a ball came up with sandspurs and ants all over themselves. Those who fell into the chain-link fence should have gotten a tetanus shot afterwards. Now the athletes have the things they need to perform. The support has increased and now they are getting more publicity, national attention and exposure.

Accomplishments of the softball team

They were members of the Atlantic Coast Conference with schools like Florida State, Virginia and Maryland. They won the conference three years in a row. They were “kicked out” and have since joined Conference USA. They went to the NCAA regionals in 1996, 1997, 1998, 2001, and 2003. He has been head coach for four of those trips and an assistant for one. They have had All-Americans from 1986 to the present. They have done so well as a team that Mr. Eriksen was asked to be a part of the coaching staff for the 2004 Olympic Team, which is a great honor for the team, the school, and the community.

Experiences as a student that aided his coaching

The teaching that the coaching staff did while Mr. Eriksen played baseball was very important. Robin Roberts was the head coach and Jeff Davis was the assistant coach. Jeff Davis was a player at USF and he was a great “buffer” between the players and the head coach. He is now the provost at St. Petersburg Jr. College. He gave them a lot of lessons in baseball and life. The assistant coaches could relate things from their experiences as players to “how you should act, how you should play the game, how you should treat other people.” A lot of things that he got from them he tries to pass on to the people who play for him now.

Future of athletics

They were always waiting for USF to “take-off” and he thought they were getting ready to do this for a long time. But, now that football is here they are past the initial stage. Everyone is exploring where the program can go. There is a new building for all the teams. The football team plays at Raymond James Stadium, and the school will be joining the Big East in two years. These developments “cannot be anything but great for this campus.” There are a lot of enthusiastic people who come to the games. Years ago there were more student athletes at the intramural fields cheering on fraternities than there were students cheering on the university teams. Now this is reversed and it keeps going that way. Mr. Eriksen hopes to stay on at USF until retirement. He believes that everything will just get better and better.

Advice for future students and coaches

“The opportunities are there to provide yourself with excellence.” Sometimes someone has to take it upon him or herself to become better. USF has come a long way because “we are blue-collar” and “we’re not going to sell you on USF with glitz and glamour, that’s not what we’re about, but if you want to roll up your sleeves and if you want to get to work, a lot of things around here can get done.” Mr. Eriksen believes that we “provide that opportunity.” The school does a good job of rewarding people who do more, and according to him, “you’re going to get more if you do more.” Many of the people that have been at USF for a while feel a connection with the other people on campus and there is a lot of loyalty to the University. “Betty Castor cultivated a lot of loyalty as a president” and Mr. Eriksen hopes that the president now and future presidents can do the same. They have always had a good open forum to discuss ideas and express opinions and this allows the school to grow.

He even met his wife here when she was a pre-med student. She graduated in 1983. She went to Miami and finished her schooling. She then returned to Tampa and did her residency through USF at Tampa General Hospital. They have made a home with two daughters. His oldest daughter even went through the Early Child Developmental Center and his youngest daughter is doing the same, so they all feel like part of the “Bulls family.”

End of Interview