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John Kiser oral history interview by Andrew Huse, August 24, 2004

John Kiser (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Mr. Kiser came to USF in 1970 as a student and basketball player.

Athletics

Though he attended USF as a basketball player, Mr. Kiser was “rather blessed,” excelling at both football and basketball during his high school years. While Purdue was offering him the opportunity to play football, USF took note of his basketball skills, making a trip to his home in Indiana to visit him. He and his head coach “talked about USF, and the challenges that were ahead for the university” since it was the first year of the basketball program at South Florida.

Goals for USF

When representatives from USF approach him, they talked about their goals for the basketball program. “They wanted to be Division I right away ... [they] had a wonderful program ... To do something that is brand new – starting a tradition – that intrigued me because I am pretty much a self starter ... To be part of history – that all intrigues me.”

Basketball

Asked why he chose basketball over football, he explains, “Well, I was about 6’3” at the time and probably 195 pounds ... When I went to Purdue, [I thought] this may not be for me!” His statistics as a high school basketball player were very high, “and those kind of stats got a lot of attention.” And, he jokingly remarks about his choice of sports, “I wanted to stay alive!”

First basketball season

Mr. Kiser was the first student to receive a basketball scholarship at the University of South Florida. He was also the first player on the basketball team to score a point in the history of the university (a free-throw shot). Then head coach Don Williams had laid out a plan in the very first year to get the team up to Division I status. “That’s what I wanted ... to be with something that was progressive, that I could grow with and be part of [the] history of the university. You don’t get those chances very often.”

After a visit from Coach Williams, Kiser and his family decided to make a trip from Indiana down to Tampa. “Once I got to the university they treated me very well ... There was a little gym on campus. They took me down to Curtis Hixon Convention Center – that’s where we played our home games.”

Initial impressions

The university at the time (1969), he recalls, was “rather impressive. Of course being in Florida when you’re from Indiana ... was very attractive ... It was a large school, but it was a small-school atmosphere on campus.”

Everything in the athletic department, Kiser reflects, “was done first class.”

Academics

After satisfying basic academic requirements his first two years, Kiser had initially hoped to enter the Physical Education department with aspirations of coaching. Instead, he chose to study the muscles of the human body, believing that might be a valuable asset in the future.

Sports at USF

In terms of collegiate athletics at USF in 1970, Kiser remembers, “The soccer program was awesome, basketball was brand new, [and] baseball was in the middle of the road.” Because the basketball team played off-campus, he does not believe they got the involvement and support initially that some of the other sports did. Often times, students would only make the trip to Curtis Hixon Hall for a game if the Bulls were playing more popular and well-known schools. “We didn’t have the following from the university. We had more of a following from the community at that stage ... Which was good at that point [because] you get people contributing to the growth of the program.”

Campus activism

Kiser also remembers the protests and demonstrations that characterized college campuses in the 1970s. “South Florida ... let us express ourselves pretty well ... it wasn’t where they came down hard on us ... [There was] never really anything of any magnitude where there was trouble.” Particularly after the incident at Kent State University, “there was a lot of sadness” among students at USF and all around the country.

Greek life

Outside of academics and athletics, Kiser joined the Sigma Nu fraternity. “I have to say that Sigma Nu taught me to become a better person once I got out of the university.” One of the biggest events among fraternity members was when all of the Greeks would congregate for the annual “big splash” weekend. “What it takes is somebody to take the first step, and that’s what Sigma Nu taught me ... It’s meant a lot to my life.”

Off-campus hangouts

Off-campus, Kiser remembers Master Pizza being a popular restaurant and social hangout. The basketball team also tended to congregate at DeSoto Hall where they all resided.

Closing remarks

“The thing about South Florida and what it means to me is, you know, they haven’t forgotten who I am ... and I offer my services back to [them].”

“Every morning you get up, you smile, you thank the Lord, and you go on. That’s what South Florida has done for me ... I still feel part of the university thirty-four years later.”

End of Interview