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Tommy Tonelli oral history interview by Danielle E. Riley, March 17, 2004

Tommy Tonelli (Interviewee)

Danielle E. Riley (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
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Current Position: Men's Basketball Coach and
Guidance Counselor at Wharton High School
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Mr. Tonelli played on the USF basketball team and served as the Assistant Coach in the 1980s.

Background

Mr. Tonelli recalls that as a child, he lived across the street from a park where he enjoyed playing basketball regularly. In the summers, he would attend athletic camps where he had the opportunity to play on various basketball teams. He played basketball as a high school student in Chicago, and received a number of scholarship offers upon his graduation, one of which was from Lee Rose, head coach at USF. The opportunity to play for Coach Rose was the primary reason Mr. Tonelli chose to attend South Florida.

Basketball camps at USF

He had an aunt and uncle who lived in Tampa, with whom Mr. Tonelli spent summer vacations as a child. One of the first basketball camps he ever attended was at the University of South Florida in 1972 under Coach Bill Gibson, an exceptionally dynamic leader who "really made the game fun." He remembers that Coach Gibson had pulled him aside one day at camp and asked that Tonelli come play for him at South Florida one day. "I was just kind of enamored with his enthusiasm as a coach, and just the thought of playing college basketball. I guess you could say it was kind of fate – or destiny – that it worked out that way."

Camp practices

Because the Sun Dome had not yet been built, the basketball teams played in the main gymnasium on campus. Outdoor courts behind the P.E. building were also utilized for basketball camp practices.

Commitment to basketball

He speculates that it was probably in high school that he really recognized his talent and considered that perhaps he had a future in basketball. "Some people began to ... really take notice of my ability, and I really dedicated myself and committed myself." From the

time he was in eighth grade all the way through high school, Mr. Tonelli worked as a ball boy for the Chicago Bulls basketball team. He partly attributes his success as a player to those experiences with the professional organization, recalling that, “It just really had an impression on me ... Just being around those guys, and being at the practices, and being in the locker room and hearing the coaches talk – you can’t put a value on what that did for me.”

High school basketball

As a high school player, he was a part of some very successful teams, though never winning a state championship. He modestly admits doing “pretty well” in his position as a point guard, where he was required to coordinate the offense and act as the coach on the floor. “So I guess coaching ... was in my blood.”

College recruitment

As a graduating high school player, Tonelli received some “excellent offers” to play at the college level from Big Ten schools such as the University of Iowa. USF held particular appeal because Mr. Tonelli remembered growing up watching Lee Rose as the head coach at Purdue University in Indiana. “Basically, my heart told me to go to the University of Iowa because that was one of my dreams to play in the Big Ten,” but he found an open starting position for him at USF under Coach Rose. “I felt like [USF] gave me the best opportunity to play and potentially start I the four years that I was going to be [there] as a player ... and it worked out.”

Enrollment at USF

He arrived at USF in the summer of 1982 to attend a freshman orientation, and he began classes in August of that year. Because of a mix-up in room assignments, Mr. Tonelli ended up lining off-campus as a freshman, and continued to do so throughout his years at the university.

Adjusting to college basketball

Playing at the college level “was a big adjustment” for Mr. Tonelli, who went through some “growing pains” as he acclimated himself to the new experiences.

Early impressions; social activities

Because his schedule was so consumed by academics and athletics, he did not have a great deal of free time to pursue social endeavors at the university. Over time, he did participate in occasional student activities through organizations such as the Student Ambassadors Club. “I distinctly remember how pleasant and enjoyable the weather was, for sure. Especially during the winter months, coming from Chicago.”

Practices

Generally, the basketball team practiced every afternoon from 2:30 to 5:00, though the schedule was always subject to revision. As a freshman, he had required study time at the library so that academics were not compromised by a student’s commitment to athletics.

USF teams

As a player at USF, “we had some excellent teams.” He particularly remembers playing alongside Charlie Bradley, “probably the most recognized player in South Florida history ... he was a real fantastic, dynamic player.” As an upperclassman, Mr. Tonelli was recognized with a Most Outstanding Senior Award as a result of his athletic and academic successes.

Graduate school at USF

Following graduation from USF with a degree in American Studies, his intention was to go on to law school at Stetson University in St. Petersburg. However, after Lee Rose left USF in 1986 for a job in the NBA, Mr. Tonelli was offered a graduate assistant position on the Bulls team. Though he was not certain which courses he wanted to take as a graduate student, “I knew that if coaching was something I wanted to do ... I better get some type of degree that would allow me to do that – possibly even at the high school level.” Thus, he chose to get his master’s degree in Guidance Counselor Education. A self-admitted “student of the game,” Mr. Tonelli greatly appreciated and enjoyed the opportunity to serve as a coach on the USF team. “I’d always dreamed and hoped to continue playing beyond the college level, but when that reality came to pass that my playing career was over, hey – coaching is the next best thing to playing ... I loved it.” Because he fell in love with coaching, he decided, “Law school can wait.” He spent two years as a graduate assistant while finishing his degree, then moved up to the position of part-time assistant coach in 1988. In 1990, Mr. Tonelli became a full-time assistant coach for the USF Bulls basketball team. He served in that position for six years, until 1996, when his head coach retired. Because the incoming coach brought his own staff with him, Mr. Tonelli’s coaching days at USF were abruptly ended.

High school coaching

From 1996-1997, Mr. Tonelli took an administrative position in the Athletic Department at USF under Coach Seth Greenberg. “It was very obvious to me that I missed coaching ... my passion was coaching, and I wanted to get back involved in it.” Because a brand new high school was opening up in the area at that time, Mr. Tonelli applied for a position as both head coach of the basketball team and guidance counselor. “My main responsibility at the high school ... is to be a guidance counselor, and coaching is just a supplement to my main duties and obligations.”

Continued connections to USF

As a local high school coach, Mr. Tonelli maintains “good relationships” with the coaching staffs at USF. “I’m definitely a South Florida basketball fan, and want to see them to well.”

Proudest accomplishments

“One of the things I’m probably most proud of is, as a player, in the four years that I was here [at USF], we never had a losing season. We always had, I think, very good teams. We played in two post-season tournaments ... and when I was an assistant coach I was fortunate enough to be part of some very good teams - The first team in the history of USF to make it to the NCAA tournament ... I feel like I’ve done some things to

contribute to their success - and been a part of it. But at the same time, South Florida gave me a lot of great opportunities.”

End of Interview