

Amazing Turn Around Programs

The University of Virginia

John Pinkman

4/19/08

Did you ever wonder *if* one coach could make a difference? Do you ever want to discover *why* a losing team turns around and suddenly begins to win?

Me too! I have always wondered how that happens; which came first the coach's desire or the school's desire? Did the coach have a dream that he was able to sell to the AD or did the AD have the need to find a coach to lead the program into elite status?

This is the 2nd in a series of several articles where we investigate amazing turn around programs. These are stories of great men. They see the mission clearly and take action. They define leadership. They are passionate about the success of others. All are teachers committed to creating developmental programs. And perhaps their greatest talent is that **people believe in them**. They have the ability to enlist other talented people in their vision.

During the winter of 2000 I received a number of frantic calls from parents at the University of Virginia. Rumors ran rampant that the UVA baseball program was going to be reduced to club status, along with many major reductions in the athletic program. The uproar echoed through the valleys of the Blue Ridge Mountains, resounding in the hallowed halls that Tom Jefferson built; a LHP in the class of 1819. Many alumni joined the debate. Some came with check books.

This was by no means a small issue in the eyes of the alumni, the current students, or the media. But as fast as it arose, it went away even faster. I wondered why.

According to UVA's AD Craig Littlepage, who was in the middle of the situation, this is what happened. The University conducted a long term (2020) appraisal to analyze the financial trends of a number of non revenue or low revenue sports. The subsequent report discussed three options relative to baseball: eliminate baseball, reduce the program to club status, or limp along as they were.

The UVA program had fallen on years of little success. Their field was horrible. The infield consisted of used football field turf with a big "40 yard" number in front of short stop. The bleachers were old butt killin' wood. You could actually pull splinters, trust me, I was there. The kind of stands that made you hold you child's hand extra tight as you found your seat and dare not drop your drink, for it was headed straight to the ground.

The task force report was accepted, but no action was taken or even considered to the extreme of eliminating baseball participation in the ACC.

Instead, the exact opposite happened. During 2001 the University decided that if UVA was to be a top ten institution they would need to make a commitment to specific sports as well as academics. The University was founded upon and to this day *“sustains the ideal of developing, through education, leaders who are well-prepared to help shape the future of the nation”* (a quote from their website).



All pictures courtesy of UVA Sports

UVA's Davenport Field

The Campus Governing Board and President John Casteen said they needed to step up and make a financial commitment for consistent athletic excellence. Specifically, baseball needed to be fully funded in scholarships, assess the current stadium and increase other operational funds that they would need to successfully compete in the ACC and across the nation. Some turn around! I'm sure many of you are moaning, "Damn wish that happened to us!"



In addition to Craig Littlepage's remarkable vision for the future, he has established a reputation for hiring extremely talented athletic leaders.

AD Craig Littlepage is an athletic visionary. He saw what was and what could be. He believed that UVA could develop a baseball program with a consistent commitment to players, competitive success and the Charlottesville community. The sum total of this effort would surely create a financially self sustaining program.

UVA has extremely loyal and active alumni. With a very healthy fundraising drive, UVA built a fantastic new stadium. It opened in the spring of 2002. Littlepage fully funded all 11.7 scholarships. Now he needed a new coach. After playing in the new stadium for one last year, 25 year veteran coach Dennis Womack announced his retirement.



“I knew after 10 minutes (with Brian) this guy was really special and I hoped we would be lucky enough to recruit him to UVA.”
UVA AD Craig Littlepage

Enter Brian O’Connor

In addition to Craig Littlepage’s remarkable vision for the future, he has established a reputation for hiring extremely talented athletic leaders.

Successfully in place at Notre Dame, Brian O’Connor was not looking for a new job. He was happy working with (at that time) Head Coach Paul Mainieri. He had been named Assistant Coach of the Year, just after the team’s return from the 2002 College World Series in Omaha.

UVA contacted him for an interview. “After my interview with Craig Littlepage I clearly saw the opportunity. The (UVA) baseball program was a sleeping giant in one of the top conferences in the nation. I knew from my recruiting at Notre Dame that Virginia was now producing outstanding high school ball players.”

“Players come to The University of Virginia because they want a great education as well as an opportunity to play ball in the ACC. There are not many coaching positions like this one anywhere in the country. All those rocks have been turned over,” said O’Connor.

“I went into the interview with a very detailed plan. I knew that if the program was to be as successful as the University wanted it to be, there had to be a long term commitment on both of our parts,” said Brian. “The Board of Visitors had already stepped up and built

a fantastic new stadium. In the interview they promised me that the program would continue to receive the financial support that I knew was necessary,” he continued.

Littlepage told me, “I knew after 10 minutes (with Brian) this guy was really special and I hoped we would be lucky enough to recruit him to UVA.”. There was only one interview. They both knew this was the right fit. Both were in complete alignment with vision, organization, and management plan.

Brian shared with me his five point plan. It is direct, simple, comprehensive, and a challenge to execute.

- 1. The Administration must devote the funds to the program**
- 2. We have to win right away**
- 3. Instill Championship Thinking**
- 4. Community Involvement**
- 5. Build Consistency**

Administration Commitment

Littlepage fulfilled his commitment to O’Connor. The administration devoted the necessary salaries to hire excellent experienced assistant coaches. The recruiting budget allowed them to get off buses and on to planes. “That allowed us to go see players on a moment’s notice. That is very helpful in the increasing competition to recruit the most talented players.” Brian noted.

They hired a Director of Baseball Operations. This permitted Coach O’Connor to concentrate his energy directly on field operations. This position manages responsibilities to which most coaches must devote a large chunk of time; such as scheduling, stadium, and summer camps. As a result, those responsibilities are executed with someone’s full attention, thus enhancing the overall program.

Need to Win Right Away

Now that’s an innovative concept! Who would hire a coach with a job description like, “*No pressure here, take your time, we will settle for a losing program.*” So exactly what was Brian’s insight?

The first words out of his mouth were, “Coach Womack left a great group of players in place here. Among others, Dennis recruited Brian Zimmerman, Joe Koshansky (*whom I trained in HS*) and Mark Reynolds. They are all in the majors now.” Brian studied the Cavaliers record. In the year prior to his taking the helm, the team lost 14 one-run games. He told me, “If we could win 50% of those games we would be in the NCAA Tournament.”

This program was to be built around defense and pitching. Next Coach O’Connor hired pitching specialist, Karl Kuhn. Karl and Brian met on the road scouting and became aware they had the same philosophies and a passion to make a difference. He wanted teachers. Brian was the pitching coach at Notre Dame. “Karl is a very technical coach. He

studies hours of video (*my kind of guy!*) and is constantly in the bull pens directly working one-on-one with the pitchers.”



Pitching Coach Karl Kuhn

After discussions with Karl, a finalist for College Pitching Coach of the Year, I discovered that he, like me, has spent a lot of time training with Tom House. My pitching program in Northern VA has sent many players to UVA over the years. I am confident that they will continue to develop in his care.

Brian had to wait awhile for his new offensive coach to fulfill his commitment to his previous coaching job with the Atlanta Braves. He said he didn't mind that because he knew Kevin McMullan was the best coach for the team. Quickly Kevin impacted the program not only as a coach but a recruiter, receiving national recognition. According to the UVA website: UVA's recruiting class was ranked 12th in the country in 2004, 10th in 2005 and eighth in 2006 and a top 10 class in 2007. In his first season with the Cavaliers, McMullan helped UVA to major increases in runs scored and bases on balls from the previous year. UVA finished in the Top 25 of several national polls en route to earning a No. 7 national ranking. In 2007, Virginia finished in the top three in the ACC, in team batting.

The volunteer coach, Kyle Werman, is an outstanding young man. Kyle trained with me for 4 years before walking on at Virginia. But walking on at an ACC school, well as you know, the odds were against him. As long as I have know Kyle, he did whatever he was asked, the total team player who grew into an outstanding leader, a real professional. He became the team's captain in his senior year, the true embodiment of a UVA Cavalier.

Championship Thinking

These are the exact words of Coach O'Connor: “We needed to convince this team that they could win.” **They needed to change the culture.** (Coincidentally, “Championship Thinking” is the name of Jim Meier's great webcast radio show out of Omaha. It is

devoted to leadership and the mental game. You should listen to these wonderful interviews Tuesday nights with the top people who influence the game.

www.jimmeier.com)

“Improvement requires change,” Jim Meier said recently. Brian began that change at UVA. Change is not easy, especially in baseball. Brian’s program was not centered around on-field tactical solutions. He and his staff needed to instill a culture of *self discipline, accountability, and commitment*.

Self discipline on and off the field, in and out of season, in the classroom and on the field; hard work and fundamentals in all areas of life. The coaches would not allow players to have a split personality, one for the campus another for competition.

Accountability is the structure of maturity and a necessity to survive in collegiate baseball. Specialties and specialists are needed in any organization that is focused on excellence. In the Cavaliers’ cases specialists were apparent at all levels - administrators, coaches, and student athletes. Accountability is another way of saying responsibility – displaying personal ability to successfully respond to a given task.

I specifically asked Brian how they instill accountability. He said “we don’t let small things slide and we create an environment of honor. We never let them forget that this is **their** team.” Accountability is also infectious; others catch it if the leadership develops an environment that understands failure while not accepting it. Players develop a culture of true friends. “True friends hold each other accountable on and off the field,” Brian counsels.

This environment can only be created by a united coaching staff of leaders that builds relationships that eliminates the social stigma of failure; leaders who also know that success requires personal risk. But most importantly, leaders who are aligned in the concept that you do not motivate players by exploiting personal or team failures.

UVA requires commitment. Tradition began at UVA as Thomas Jefferson was designing the campus. As you walk the campus you cannot avoid the penetrating grasp of the colonial history embedded in the academic village. Students do not attend UVA - they become part of it. Off the street UVA requires 1400 on the old scale SAT’s. These are very bright men and women. They enter school in the fall committed; committed to their education and their uniform. You have to really, really want it or you will simply not survive for four years.

Community Outreach

Brian told me that winning is necessary for the basis of community involvement. The University built the baseball palace; now they needed to fill it with fans. Winning brings the fans in, especially in turn around programs without a legacy of championships. They soon developed a loyal fan base as the team began to win. Repeat fans and bring friends and neighbors to games. Many programs have discovered paying fans largely come from the retirement community.

As the younger fans showed up, the baseball heroes grew. AD Littlepage cautioned that to make an impact in the Charlottesville community the “bottom line was the team had to continue to win and the team and coaches needed to be liked by the fans.” That led to an increase in summer camp attendance. The youngster began to relate to the players. Brian also reaches out to the community recreation and civic organizations by giving speeches at events.

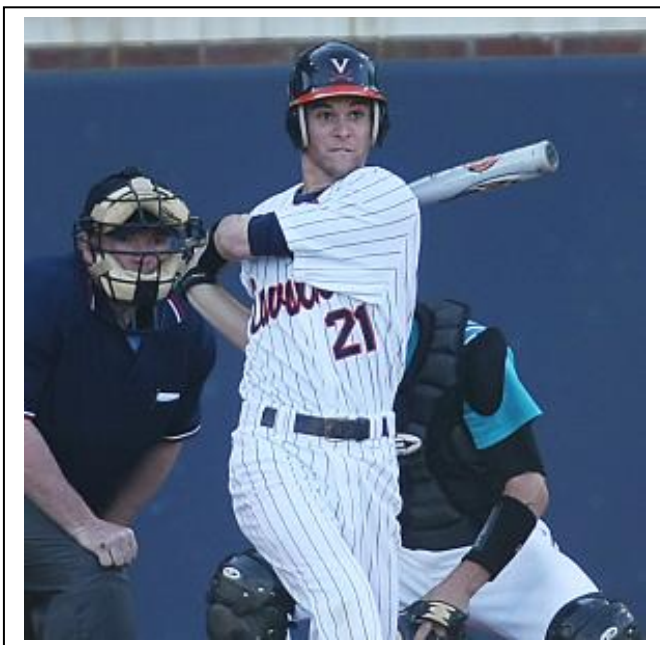
Craig Littlepage also credits the baseball program event staff with pioneering new programs to create a fan friendly environment. “They personally began to thank fans as they were leaving, ask for input, and were good listeners. The fans felt like they were part of the program. We are open to suggestions. Many of our stadium ideas came from fans,” Littlepage proudly said.

Consistency

As I listened to Brian O’Connor detail his plan it occurred to me that it could be interpreted as a formula. The first four parts added together will provide the answer for the fifth. Administrative Commitment, Need to Win Soon, Championship Thinking, and Community Outreach are individually important; all are integral in building Consistency.

O’Connor states that there are also several important keys to consistency. Maintaining his coaching staff is one. A smart corporate manager strives to keep people in the firm. To do that, staff needs to be challenged and succeed in their area of responsibility. Brian knows that too. He hires specialists and gives them the autonomy to do their job. As a result they truly feel that they have a decisive role in the team’s success.

Coach O’Connor’s plan worked. Quickly. His first year Virginia not only made it to the NCAA Regionals, they hosted the games. They have returned to post season play each year since. As predicted, the pitching staff excelled, ending each of the last four years in the top 15 D-I programs. The hitting came around in the third and fourth years.



UVA's Leading Hitter in 2008, Dan Grovatt

Consistency also requires depth. "It all comes back to development. (Reserve) players have to play during the year (to develop and gain experience). We can't wait till the end of the season. Kuhn limits pitch counts and trains young pitchers though the season and Brian goes deep into the bull pen during the week. O'Connor said it is unreasonable to expect championship miracles during post season play from inexperienced players.

"Expectations have changed here and I love it! The college, community, coaches, and most of all the players expect to win. Yes, we have won a lot of games in recent years, but now we have to win championships. The only way to do that is though consistency," Brian predicts.

See you in Omaha, Coach O'Connor!