

Turn Around Programs

The United States Naval Academy

Collegiate Baseball
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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 vision and the subsequent need to find a coach to lead the program into elite status?

This is the 3rd in a series of several articles where we investigate amazing turn around programs. These are stories of great men who clearly saw the mission and took 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.

This is the Story of Paul Kostacopoulos and the United States Naval Academy.

What are the positives for playing baseball for Navy?

- Full ride to everyone – a \$250,000 value
- Salary of some \$600 per month from day 1
- Degree from one of the top academic intuitions in the world
- Guaranteed job upon graduation and entrance into a large alumni association that will also secure professional positions for life
- Outstanding tradition and school spirit
- With only 4200 students, Navy ranks #2 of all DI schools in total number of DI sports next to Ohio State with 42,000+
- Perfect small college town next to the capital of the world, Washington DC
- Gorgeous campus on the Chesapeake Bay with the latest technology
- Brand new baseball stadium with the latest turf

There are, however, a few challenges:

- Extremely competitive entrance standards both physically and academically
- A 9 year commitment: 4 to the school and 5 to the Naval Service
- Must attend summer school, sorta like a camp, but not your daddy's camp
- Cannot date classmates or drink alcoholic beverages freshman year

- Must wear your hair short, no facial hair, and you will have to wear the same style clothes every day
- You are told when to eat, sleep, and wake
- Freshman hazing at any other university pales in comparison
- Orders outweigh opinions
- AND possibly the biggest challenge if you don't make your bed - you ARE punished. Your room must stay immaculate too!

OK Coach, go out and recruit a competitive DI roster and coaching staff!

Oh, did we also mention we want to win, often, and beat Army Always? This is so important at Annapolis that the signature “N” on the baseball hat bears a star when your class beats ARMY! Challenging job that few would want? Maybe.

Time For Change



Athletic Director Chet Gladchuk

Navy Baseball had fallen on several rough years. The facilities had deteriorated and the team had seen several coaching changes. There wasn't a losing environment; rather more like, we will probably not win. In any case, this was not acceptable to the Academy and in particular to Athletic Director Chet Gladchuk. According to Navy's website; "In his six years at the Naval Academy, Director of Athletics Chet Gladchuk has overseen a renaissance of Navy athletics. His administrative leadership in a number of areas has helped lead the program to one of the most successful periods in school history."

A Visionary AD Makes All the Difference

Well, this seems to be consistent. So far in our three articles detailing "Turn Arounds", visionary ADs have started the ball rolling to turn the programs around. It was no different at Navy. Gladchuk took the lead in redeveloping competitive athletics. First he obtained much more media coverage of events, bringing TV and many more radio stations to campus to cover games. Next he turned his attention to facilities and found

\$117 million to aid the cause. That funding was partially used for major renovations to the football stadium and a complete rebuild of the baseball stadium. Currently the “Yard” (Naval Academy campus) is a-buzz with construction of a new spectacular field house.

As we have seen in other great Athletic Directors, Chet Gladchuk knows how to hire people. Don’t take my word for it. Since he has been at Navy’s helm (just had to use that term), 35 different teams have won conference titles, while 23 teams have advanced to NCAA postseason play. A cheerleader too, Gladchuk has also worked tirelessly to bring back school spirit.

So I’m convinced that turnaround programs begin with Athletic Administrators with vision.

Gladchuk Needed a Unique Baseball Coach

Not everyone can coach at an Academy. The traditions and standards at mission-oriented universities are very different from those at other programs. First you have to become part of the environment. Athletics are as much a part of the Naval Academy as the Blue and Gold they wear. Each semester everyone is required to participate in some form of competition. As Admiral Higgons, who at the time of this interview was Director of the School of Ethics, told me, “Our primary mission is to train leaders. Athletics are essential to that training.”

There are few communities of scholars that have such a specific and public identity as the Naval Academy. The administrators, faculty, coaches, and trainers are all aligned in the mission of the Academy. That is non negotiable. Coaching at the Academy is a unique experience; it requires a unique man. The leadership values gained through ordinary athletic participation and extraordinary competition have equal priorities. The concept that more is gained in competition through the practice of honor and integrity is never sacrificed. The difficulty is that winning is very important to Naval and Marine Officers.

The process to recruit the new head coach was quiet and personal, leveraging contacts within collegiate baseball. Paul Kostacopoulos was recruited from the University of Maine. He previously was the head coach at Providence. A man totally aligned, comfortable, and successful in his role within the Naval Academy culture.

Academy Website Facts about Coach “Kosti”

Within his first two-plus years at Navy, head coach Paul Kostacopoulos has helped resurrect a baseball program that has won more than 60 percent of its games all-time.

Entering his 19th season as a head coach, Kostacopoulos owns a 571-373-3 (.605) career record. He has won more than 30 games in each of his last seven years and 11 times during his career; and posted a winning percentage of .500 or better in each of his last-nine campaigns and 15 times in his career.

Kostacopoulos' .619 winning percentage courtesy of his 67-41-1 record at Navy ranks third in program history among coaches with at least 50 wins, behind only legendary skippers Max Bishop (.669, 1937-61) and Joe Duff (.645, 1962-93). He reached the 50-win mark at Navy in just his 81st game with the Midshipmen, only four games more than Duff needed in being the quickest in school history. Under Kostacopoulos's direction, Navy has boasted back-to-back 30-win seasons for the first time in the program's 112-year history.

So How Did He Do It?

First he did **NOT** look at stats. “Yes I know that sounds strange. I did that before as a coach. I knew just being in the business the general state of the program. I wanted a clean state (mentally). When I first came here everyone on the Yard told me how bad the program was and what the team needed to do to improve.” Paul told me. The input that he found most valuable was the players’ performance at practice. We had to learn how to practice. All fall we practiced how to practice, from the smallest thing like running, to positions, to relays. We took the entire program from scratch,” he emphasized.

Kosti had to fundamentally redevelop the baseball culture. That was the big thing. “There was no point in looking beyond the fundamentals. The great thing about coaching that first year was we never looked past one day. We never put expectations on players other than make such we did the fundamental things right,” he recalled.

Navy was 26 and 72 in the two previous years before Paul came. In his first year he recalls the affection and admiration he had for a group of six seniors. Paul bought into the Academy philosophy quickly, he let leaders lead. “We never talked about the past, we just focused on doing the right things, the right way for the right reasons,” he said. Navy won 32 games that year.

Confusion Between Passion and Criticism

Kosti believes that there is confusion between passion and criticism in society. “Sometimes we talk too much. We need to get inside a player’s head and convince him that we (coaches) are just passionate.” That led us into a discussion about emotion.

Passion and emotions are often confused by coaches. Being passionate does not necessarily involve being one of the guys, motivational screaming or intimidating criticism. When players realize that a passion for coaching in a positive manner aligns with emotion and flows their way, they go with the flow. They may not get it right away or totally at that moment but they will give you cooperation. That cooperation grows rapidly into a confident and trusting culture. If they suspect that there is no content or personal commitment behind the emotion they will become an unyielding rock in that river flow you are calling a team. Players can be very good actors. You may not even notice their real intent, just the win loss record and wonder why.

Kosti firmly believes that coaches need to build personal relationships with players. As bright and talented are the players who come to Annapolis, they are all different people with varying skills. “How can we (Navy coaches) develop our players if we do not know their exact current skill base and their possible limitations? It is our job to take them a little beyond those limitations.”

Players appreciate honesty. They know that being positive and being critical can co-exist if you have a solid personal relationship. Paul and I talked about this story. I was watching my 10 year old grandson pitch in little league game recently. He struck out the first batter and walked the next 5, plus threw several wild pitches. Somehow they got the next 2 outs and the inning ended. As he walked off the field, the crowd applauded and they all yelled “good job Cameron, nice work”. Really? Do you think he was unaware of how badly he really did? “Good effort” may have been more appropriate.

Kosti comes alive in what was a truly enjoyable conversation, “that’s exactly what I’m taking about, if you fill a player’s head with how good he is and how good he will be, **just to motivate him**, and for whatever he reason fails.... you can’t bring him back from that! It’s just like you said a minute ago, coaching cannot eliminate criticism. If you do, your players will look at you and say, come on, he’s not telling me the truth and then you’ll lose them.”

Get to a Consistent Level of CompetencyAnd Just a Little Bit Further

“But getting back to my original point,” Paul continues, “I really believe that you will have a good season if you can get the players (as individuals) to a consistent level of competency and just a little bit further.” This was his plan at Providence College, at Maine, and now successfully managed at Navy.

Most of the great coaches I know believe in accountability. Kosti is no different and certainly the Honor Code is the heart of all Academy life. Accountability is a basic leadership component as well as a pathway for opening the doors to learning.

Turn Around Programs Start with Defense

Let’s direct the conversation to the field. I asked where he began to develop baseball skills. “We started with defense.” I can hear Gomer Pyle crystal clear.... **Surprise, Surprise, Surprise!** In each of the Turn Around articles, defense was the #1 priority.

Kosti has a theory that he says may not apply to the ACC or SEC, level but it works for him. Do the right things fundamentally, hustle and keep your head in the game and sooner or later someone will present you with an opportunity to win. “My disappointment this year is that we did not take advantage of that opportunity when presented.” Still they made it to the Patriot League Tournament’s Championship game and lost by only one run.

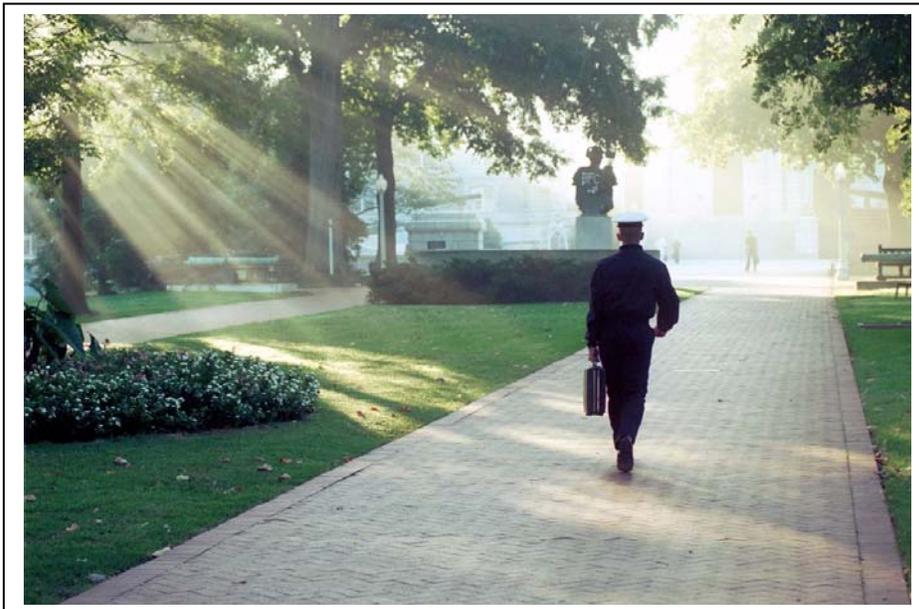
Navy Preparatory School

Under Paul, Navy Baseball has re-established enthusiasm for their baseball program at the Naval Prep School in Newport Rhode Island, which had been abandoned by the previous coaching staff. They recruit 5 to 7 high school players to send there for a year if the academic side of their application falls a bit short of gaining admission. Paul takes an active interest in that program, actually visiting during the year. The chances of admission the following year are very high. “We are only into this for the past two years that I have been here, but I really want to make this work.” Coach predicts.

Navy’s Future

What does the near future hold for Navy? “I feel so good about what we have done here in the past two years, being a part of the new facilities construction, and being a part of the Prep School Mission. But I really believe that there is a survival mode that you have to go through to get your program to be a legitimate program. I believe the next stage is a suffering stage. That’s when you know that you have done the right things to bring your program around, but you are still not good enough. I believe we are still in that stage. The next stage is success and when you reach that you have to work on sustaining it,” Coach counsels.

“But you have to consider that at Navy we cannot get Juco or transfer players, so these stages are going to take some time. And you can’t cheat one of them, they are all necessary to be a truly great program. This program is just starting!”



The Future Walks Past The Legendary Sculpture of Tecumseh

I can't think of a better place for the right ball player. "A forward thinking student athlete" as coach says. Walking the Yard will fill you with pride, anticipation of achievement, a mighty tradition and a heroic past, combined with the latest technology available. And a lastly, perhaps most important, a very personal thought deep in your soul...yet unspoken, "What could my life turn out to be if I could come here! If I were a Midshipman." **GO NAVY!**

You can hear a 40 minute interview with Coach Kosti by logging on to Jim Meier's great radio show www.ChampionshipThinkingCoach.com . There you will also find archived fantastic recent interviews with the greats from all areas in our college game.