

There's No Place Like Home

Part 2 of The University of New Orleans Hurricane Saga

Did your ever wonder if one coach could make a difference? Do you ever want to discover how and a losing team turns around and suddenly begins to win? Me too! We are devoting several articles to investigate just that.

These are stories of great men. They define leadership. They see the mission clearly and take action. They are passionate about the success of others. All are teachers, committed to the creating developmental programs. And perhaps their greatest talent people believe in them.

The first article in this series appeared in the January issue. Part I of the story describes the saga of survival of the University of New Orleans. If you have not read that as yet, find time to read Part 1, an epic struggle that challenged Coach Tom Walter and the UNO Privateers as Hurricane Katrina headed for, hit and destroyed much of the central gulf coast region. Follow Tom and his team as they became suddenly orphaned.

In part 2 of this article Tom Walter details the University of New Orleans' attempt to not only become more competitive but *survive* as a baseball program after the Katrina disaster. Baseball at this time in New Orleans was the least of anyone concern. As the UNO community returned to campus, they all had to reorganize basic life sustaining priorities. Sports paled in comparison to vivid memories of mass evacuation and visceral images of death, surrounded by the constant view of total devastation.

Coach Tom Walter was hired to turn around a legendary program that had fallen on rough times; not save the program from extinction. **30% of the students permanently left** the schools **along with 50% of New Orleans total population**, entire university **departments and majors were eliminated**, the team had to commute one hour each way to practice on a field, and you think you have problems?

Tom knew however that baseball, a major sport in the Sun Belt Conference and UNO, was exactly what the campus needed! With the strong cooperation and support of Jim Miller, Athletic Director Coach Walter set upon the renaissance of the school in the only way he could; creating pride and spirit through a winning team.

The Long Road Back

Leadership in a crisis is a special challenge. It differs from other forms of leadership. Crisis management must first acknowledge duty. Duty is general not chosen; it is thrust upon leaders. You either accept or reject the responsibility. You are measured by your ability to respond – you response-ability. You place the needs of the people you lead in front of you and your own in the background. Honor is most often a response to duty.

The mission, the duty, was thrust upon the team not in March when they returned to play on their home field but 5 months prior; in September as they fled town scattering across the south.

The baseball challenge was immense. Tom Walter started his first year with 14 players on the roster and a record of 20-39. To field a team he virtually recruited anyone who owned a glove on campus. They were helped with a few transfers. Amazingly (and for the first time in many years) they ended the season in the conference championship series; and went 2 and 2 in the series. Remarkable!

By the beginning of the second year Tom built the team to 35. Then Katrina hits. “We lost a few more, how could you blame them,” says an empathetic Walter. They are back down to 23 players in the spring following the hurricane; brings a new meaning to planning a pitching rotation. Building a record of 30-28 the Privateers again made the conference championship series.

We have all witnessed poor coaches, whip excellent teams into mediocrity. They not only make poor tactical decisions on field, but in a much more devastating blow, their definition of a tuff task master, depletes the need and want to win from each individual player. They fail to build strong relationships. That vacuum sucks the spirit right out of the team.

Imagine the countless counseling sessions the UNO coaches must have given players during that year. Faith in each other, hope for the future, a sense of duty to the school amid a true disaster, was instilled in each player as a mission; on and off the field.

A New UNO Baseball Culture Evolved

“First, we are a teaching program,” Tom said. “Some of the bigger schools get 4 good players at every position and the one that steps forward (and excels) is truly a great player. So they don’t have to develop a player as much as we do. Teaching our players to play better is a top priority. When you play better (and have personal success) you like the program better. Even the coaching staff picks up on that spirit. When a recruit visits our field and complains that we have no lights (due to hurricane damage), our coaches’ say.... ‘So what?! When you come here you will get better and we will win’.” Tom explains that “the players and coaches believed in two major factors that began to change the culture at UNO, a personal development program and a commitment to each other.”

“You have to get the kids to buy into your system. That’s not easy. You can’t force that... it has to come from the kid. It is also important to get your parents support as well. When the players catch that spirit they can turn the program around. They then sell it to new recruits.” Tom recruiting formula; “The assistant coach gets the players on campus, the head coach sells the parents and the players job is to sell the kid.”

“When a recruit visits UNO (now) we will always lose the ‘arms race’ if it’s all about facilities. Players will sell the (team) spirit and say directly things like, ‘you need to come here, coach won’t lie to you, you are gonna get better and you’re gonna play!’ ”

Last July Tom and I had lunch in a restaurant in an area close to the campus that had recently reopened. We sat, surrounded by community, in a neighborhood that a year ago was under 10 feet of water. We talked about how much community is important in college baseball. Business relates better to football, baseball is more centered locally on young children. Tom said, “Kids can easily relate to a baseball player, they are much more approachable.” Part of the turn around at UNO involved reaching out to both the campus community and the New Orleans community.

The campus used the springtime spirit to get behind the program in a, “We’re Back!” campaign. “Nothing pulls a campus together faster than a winning team” AD, Jim Miller told me. “As the Baseball team won more games the campus attitude changed. Players felt that and grew more confident, more responsible in a very mature way.” That spirit swept across the campus. Cohesive survivors teamed together. Baseball, springtime and a winning team provided a natural rebirth and a bright future.

The following year (this past year) what began slowly picked up momentum. The spirit thrived among the players. A stalwart core group had seen their record go from 20 and 39 to 30 and 28 with two conference appearances. The attitude was up beat going into the season.

The next big challenge for the team was in-state wins. There are very good baseball teams in Louisiana, 13 Division I teams. UNO had a horrible record of beating the big 3 major programs over the last 20 years. However, in the 2007 season they beat the national powerhouses, LSU Tulane and Lafayette. Now the community began to take note. “Out-going recruiting calls to in-state recruits that were previously unreturned, became incoming calls from players wanting to play for the program,” said the proud coach.

Media came too. Each game was broadcast on radio and 6 games were televised. The players went into the community too; building homes for Habitat for Humanity and volunteering time at facilities that feed the homeless.

What did UNO do on the baseball field to turn the program around?

One on One Time

Tom and his staff believe that one on one time is paramount for their program. “We spend all of the NCAA legal time limit we can.” That time accomplishes many things. Personal attention is what all of us hope for in life, don’t we. The 1 on 1 time, building relationships, is directed towards player’s specific needs. That time also presents an opportunity to have a two way conversation; yes I know that that’s redundant. Sometimes

coaches turn a conversation into a speech - me included. 1 on 1 gives you an opportunity to **LISTEN**. Granted it may take a while for players to open up.

“We help our guys get to the next level. The 1 on 1 time can be spent on hitting, defensive skills, video review, mental preparation - what ever that player needs,” Tom says. Tom believes it is essential to demonstrate to players that UNO coaches truly care about the players as individuals.

Coach Walter continues, “Once they buy into the idea we are helping them personally improve and then see the results (in the game), getting them to buy into the team concept is easy. When you try to get them to buy into the team concept first, it’s like putting the cart before the horse. When they experience that quality of personal coaching players are willing to compete for us and make personal sacrifices for the team.”

Time Management

Tom Shoulders the administrative load. “I want all of our coaches spending time on current and future players. We do most of our recruiting in the fall so that when springtime comes we can focus on player improvement. In the spring we create a development plan for each player; where is he now, where do we want him to be in 3 months, 6 months and next year. We all have to be on the same page of what he needs to get there.”

Teaching Professionals

“Step one is hiring coaches who are teachers.” They hired excellent instructors of the game. Bruce Peddie and Kirk Bullinger are well known for developing talent not just filling out line up cards. I feel the need to apologize to both of these coaches. You would need a movie to adequately tell the story of everyone’s contribution. Their efforts cannot be understated. Certainly there is a head coach and dozens of players and parents who recognize their valiant effort.

‘I am a teacher’ is probably the most abused term in coaching. There are many teachers who coach, that is true. But as soon as they get on the field they forget that the term to teach, means to educate and train. Instead of inspiring leaders, they become demanding managers focused only on the goal of winning the next game.

Bruce Peddie and Kurt Bullinger are teaching professionals. Players listen to them not because they have to, but because they just get better when they do. “You can’t forget Cue Ball,” Tom warns. Jason Veillion, a high energy fellow full of Privateer Spirit who comes by his nick name naturally, is in charge field management. You can imagine the difficulty of that task. “I’m so thankful to have Jason on board. His commitment to building a first class field allows the coaches to spend their time on baseball players and have confidence that the field is always in excellent shape.” Tom said with humor and a deep respect.

A Unique Field Approach

Now that I learned how the UNO Baseball culture was successfully implemented I was eager to know the baseball game strategy. I wanted to know what Tom Walter, the field commander, did in the ball park. I warned him that his competitors were likely to read this article. He said not to worry. "They are really smart coaches. They scout us well and already know what we do!"

While many schools recruit big powerful arms, skill players at SS and 2nd UNO must go in a different direction. "We put our money rate corner guys that are Big Boppers. We need then to hit the long ball. We are not (at UNO) going to get the highly recruited left hand pitcher or pitchers who dominate the 2-1 game." Even more difficult when you consider that Tulane is just across town and LSU is down-the-road-a-piece.

"We recruit starters who are control pitchers in the mid 80's, who throw strikes and who keep us in the game and then go to a very talented bullpen." Tom always wants top closers in the pen. Whereas many programs fill the bull pen with defaulted starters, they recruit closers. Tom said, "We realize our staff will give up 4 or 5 runs, but if we stay close and use our offense through six we can turn it over to our strength in the bullpen. So when we go to our pen late in the game our guys really believe they are going to win. Rather than taking your #1 out and having the players feel, 'OK now what are we going to do'."

"College baseball is an offensive game. Last year we were tops in the country at stolen bases and homeruns. An odd combination; don't you think," I don't like the sacrifice bunt. I'll do it in post season tournament games because those games are tight. But if you look at our stats in season we rarely bunt. I just don't like giving up an out. There are many other ways to move runners into scoring position and we build our team around that." he explains.

The future of baseball at the University of New Orleans is in capable, professional hands with Tom Walter and his coaches. The Chancellor and the athletic Director understand the contribution of their extraordinary efforts. They are firmly in his corner. The fact is, as Tom would insist that I write, there were countless stories of personal sacrifice from all corners of the campus. Baseball's struggle will continue to echo New Orleans' struggle in the attempt to rebuild.

Bricks and mortar, grass and dirt have been lost. They are indeed expensive to replace. It will take time. Where will they find the money? What they haven't lost, what to this day they passionately produce, all the reasons that a parent would entrust their child to the care and guidance of these extraordinary men and the program they rebuilt.

RESULTS

The 2007 Privateer squad became the first UNO team to win the Sun Belt Tournament since 1979. They reached the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2000. UNO finished the season 38-26 and went 1-2 at the NCAA Wichita Regional in Wichita, Kan.

The UNO Privateer spirit will live in the soul of these young people for the rest of their lives. They will no doubt stay close after graduation. They will in meet in 40 years to tell stories and reminisce about Tom Walter and their baseball team who turned disaster into success and how they beat their fiercest competitor - a wind named Katrina.

Look for our next article in this series of turn around baseball programs