

Amazing Turn Around Programs

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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 schools 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 1st in a series of several articles where we investigate amazing turn around programs. These are stories of great men. Young and not so young, 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.

Turning around a program generally raises the question - how did it get so bad? As I have said for many years in detailing the necessity for video analysis, don't provide a solution until you first have determined the problem. However, is not my intent in this series of articles to delve into what went wrong in the programs -- *Except in this article*. The unbelievable saga of what happened to the coaches and players at the University of New Orleans is very much "the story" and an amazing tale as well!

The University of New Orleans Coach Tom Walter

Many Years ago Tom Walter and I tried to build a baseball stadium and an academy for George Washington University. It was a good idea and location. For many uncontrollable reasons it did not happen. We now know it was a great location because the Washington Nationals' new stadium in DC is on the same spot!

Year after year Tom was frustrated with a lack of support from GW. They had no home field of their own and it became apparent that they would not, in spite of the fact that Tom had considerable alumni support. They would continue to use the same field as local high schools and Babe Ruth programs. They were also losing scholarships due to budget cut backs. Try recruiting with that. In spite of those BIG problems he accomplished great things at GW.

Tom was recruited by and accepted an offer from The University of New Orleans (UNO). The UNO program was legendary; but had fallen on hard times. UNO was the power house program in Louisiana in the 70's and 80's until LSU hired Skip Bertman who changed the baseball landscape in the south.

NOLA Bound



UNO Coach Tom Walter

Tom Walter moved his family and wife Kirsten, a native to “NOLA” (what locals call New Orleans), to what appeared to be a wonderful opportunity for his career and family. The UNO program had really fallen off. The team had only 14 players on the roster when he arrived. Tom had been hired in late 2004 and had little time to recruit; he certainly did not have quality recruiting time. That first season, they posted a depressing 20-36, with only 8 additional walk-ons and JUCO transfers. But the Privateers made the conference tournament (went 2 and 2) for the first time in many years. What began as a ‘let’s just hold it together season,’ ended on an optimistic note.

What takes place next would make a great script for a movie! It is important to pay attention to the day-to-day time line and put yourself in the moment.

A 4 Day Fall Begins

Monday, August 22, 2005 the players report. Tom had a large and what he considered to be a good recruiting class. Things are normal; his immediate plan is to build stability, hold team meetings, distribute workout assignments, and hand out class schedules. There are 38 players on the squad; 22 of which were first year players at UNO. I think we’d all agree that alone would have been a daunting task of personnel management.

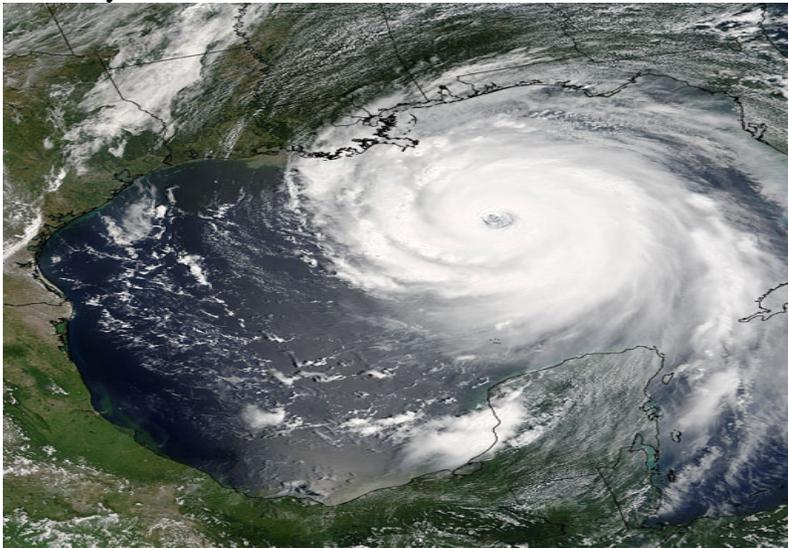
But something is in the wind...a big wind named Katrina. On **Friday** of that week they discover Katrina is most likely headed directly for New Orleans. They meet very early the next morning, **Saturday**, for physicals. Tom tells the team that Katrina will definitely hit them. . . . Soon. They must evacuate immediately.

He tells the team to pack lightly, just a gym bag, because they will back in a few days. Tom tells me of a widely held local theory that the Mississippi River throws so much cold water into the gulf that it creates a natural atmospheric barrier and historically deflects major storms to Texas or Florida. So he’s not quite sure if he should leave.

Saturday, August 27th, from his home just blocks away from campus, Tom checks by cell phone on players fleeing the storm. “Rick, this is Coach Walter, who are you with?” “Well, coach, there are three of us in the car.” “Who are they?” Tom asks. He hears the player yell, “guys what are your names?” Can you feel this? Players racing from the storm, so new to each other they don’t know each other’s names.

The Worst News Possible

Saturday night Tom and his coaches nervously await the final forecast of the exact path of Katrina. **Sunday** morning reveals the worst news. They too must leave - immediately. Being the good captain, Tom is last to abandon ship, taking his staff, wife, children, and 2 cats and heading for his sister’s house in Atlanta. By this time “NOLA” and all of southern Louisiana are in full evacuation mode, with both sides of all highways headed out of town. Most flee west on I-10. However, the normal 45 minute trip up to Baton Rouge takes 11 to 12 hours. In a bit of a break for the Walters & Co., the road east to Atlanta yields little traffic.



On **Monday, August 29th**, in the safety of his sister’s Georgia home, they watch Katrina strike the Gulf Coast at 6 am, miss NOLA and head off into Mississippi. With some major wind and rain damage, the University weathers the storm in good enough shape to reopen soon. Tom Walter is informed that classes will resume one week later on the following **Monday, Sept 6th**.

Where is Everyone?

Early **Tuesday** Tom gets on the cell phone and tries to contact players. Louisiana cell phones numbers don’t work due to a massive overload. This disastrous communication problem also happened in New York and Washington in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Tom and I both lived through that in Virginia and can report that the complete loss of all phone lines alone was scary. Tom doesn’t have land line numbers to reach the players. Coaches now regroup and try to reach the players by contacting their parents on land lines. Remember, there are 38 players. The baseball team is completely on its own, with absolutely no direction from the University at all. Tom is assuming responsibility for the players’ safety and well being. It is hard to do that when you don’t know where your

team has scattered. Plus he is sure the parents think the same. The situation is very awkward. Tom recalls that each conversation began with a very uncomfortable “Have you heard from your child recently? Please tell them to call us.”

The Levies Will Never Break



Levee breaches into a neighborhood close to UNO Campus



The flood waters rise up to the roofs

The optimism of **Monday** night turns into a nightmare **Tuesday** afternoon and for many months to come -- the levies broke. Residents of the city were told repeatedly the levies wouldn't fail. When they did, they were told that they hadn't. Most were informed by CNN. Tom and his wife go online and from satellite imagery, see their new home under water up to the second floor.



This home has several water lines of the relentless surge.
It also was a block away from Coach Walters home that was a total loss.

UNO had become an island. Most of the surrounding northern and eastern areas of city are 10 to 15 feet underwater from the collapse of the 20 foot levies and the surge of Lake Pontchartrain.



The darker area represents New Orleans land under water. UNO campus is in the circle along the banks of Lake Pontchartraine. Dotted lines show levees that failed.

“What do we do now?” Tom says. “I got hold of all the players and told them to go home from wherever they ended up. It was obvious that we were not going back any time soon.” **Wednesday**, 24 hours after the levies fail, Tom puts his family on a plane to his wife’s parents’ home in Michigan. “I told Kirsten to enroll the kids in school and find a job for herself. I didn’t know if I had a job left or if I’d be getting paid anymore,” Tom recalls. Like they’re in some time warp, the Walter kids began school in Michigan the next **Tuesday, September 6th**. Tom’s family had to stay in Michigan for the next 15 months.

Hello, Is Anybody Out There?

Tom tried for the next five days to reach anyone (AD, Chancellor) -- without success. Back at UNO the disaster becomes apparent. A week after Katrina hit, as anyone could understand, the organization of the University is in chaos. Administrators, just like everyone else, are trying to find a place to live and secure their families, let alone worry about sports.

Finally, a week later, **September 13th**, the AD told Tom campus will open again mid October. Tom was instructed to do whatever he could... but he was completely on his own. Tom contacts players and tells them the news. Meanwhile, the players are being recruited by other schools. Tom feverishly stays in contact with the players who by now are dispersed all across the country. As each day goes by that week, a few players leave the program. Under the circumstances Tom could understand and said he would never stand in someone’s way if they wanted to leave.

Dramatically, overnight UNO became an island campus. Surprisingly, the majority of the campus is dry. Critical campus buildings escape the huge flood. The Athletic Performance Center –APC Building, locally known as the “Chamber of Horrors” roof was blown off by high winds and destroyed by torrential rains, NOT rising flood waters. But the only way to get to the campus was by boat or chopper. Despite the predictions, no one was going back to UNO for a long time.

Looking For A Home

From Atlanta Tom begins to call other schools to see if they could house the team. Many want to help, but nothing seems to work out. “I’m flipping through my rolodex and I’m down to the ‘W’s’; I’m running out of options. This is the most stressful 4 days of my life. Several times each day I thought we had a deal and it looked like we were going to - Florida, Tennessee, NC, or DC, and none of them worked out.” Tom needed the players to quickly enroll and stay on track to graduate. I found it amazing that in the midst of this catastrophe Walter’s mind is on the players’ future, years down the road.

Coach Walters priorities were: 1) stay on course for graduation, 2) find a school where players could live on campus and walk to class, 3) a place where they could get their baseball work accomplished and have access to a weigh room etc., and 4) “a school with

little sex appeal -- Remember, I was going to have to re-recruit most of the team and convince them to stay with us.” Tom didn’t realize at that time how challenging that task would become.



NMSU Coach Rocky Ward

By **Thursday, Sept 8th** Tom has moved to his parents’ home in Virginia, **10 days after** the hurricane hit, remember the time line. That morning New Mexico State University head coach Rocky Ward (Gary Ward’s son) and Tom talk about the possibility of having the team move to his campus in Las Cruces. Neither coach has ever met each other. But Rocky volunteers, “Let me see what I can do.” Unbelievably, only a few hours later, Coach Ward calls Tom back and tells him NMSU will provide housing on campus - **FREE**. Next, they gave the team free tuition. The NCAA waived the extra benefits rule for athletes.



Now, How Do We Get Everyone to New Mexico?

Russ Ramsey, GW alum and a personal friend of mine and Tom’s, gets a call from Tom. At that time Russ was a partner in the huge investment firm of Friedman, Billings, and Ramsey (FBR). “How can I help?” he asks. Boldly, Tom asks how many passengers his jet holds. Russ responds, “Eighteen. When do you need it and what else do you need?” Tom tells Russ that the players have nothing... I mean – nothing. No underwear, clothes, notebooks, razors, bath supplies – nothing!

Tom and an assistant coach get on the plane just outside of DC. On the plane, Russ had placed goodie bags for all the players: socks, underwear, pencils, pens, powerbars, drinks,

shaving supplies, etc. Then Ramsey had Bed Bath and Beyond ship pillows, blankets, and sheets directly to the dorm at New Mexico State.

They take off in the jet to Baton Rouge to meet up with players who can get there. Walter picks up those players and heads for Las Cruces, New Mexico State's main campus. The rest of the players are given air travel from the nearest airport to their evacuated locations.

Saturday, September 10th, 48 hours after the first call from Rocky Ward, all players (30 are now left from the original 38) are in the NMS dorm! "General" Ward moved quicker than the entire FEMA force! Then they are immediately given semester meal cards.

Saturday afternoon they meet with the academic advisor. Tom just happened to have all the team's class schedules in his briefcase before the hurricane hit, and gives them to the advisor. That night she calls him and says she has arranged for the boys to be in class

Monday and books are waiting at the book store. NMSU assigns a big brother (tour guide and local expert) to each UNO player for the semester.

Attention WalMart Shoppers

Sunday morning players come to Coach Walter and say they really need to go a WalMart. OK. The team piles into the bus the university has provided and heads off to shop. Tom wonders what they'll want to buy. He waits in the front of the store check out lines trying to get a store discount on the team's purchases. Coach Walter has now officially become UNO's version of MASH star Radar O'Reilly. Soon he sees 30 baseball players carrying 10 TV's! Well, the folks in the checkout witness this and think there is a sudden blue light special sale on TVs. They race to the store manager to get their deal too. Sorry, not today!

Back to Baseball

The Privateers have no equipment - again nothing. Tom gets on the phone to Wilson, Puma, Under Armour, Demarini. Next he calls pro scout friend John Castleberry. "John, we need some help here. No one has a glove, spikes, or uniform." Puma sent each kid spikes, turf shoes, shorts, shirts, and back packs. Wilson sent bats, each player a glove, and batting gloves. Under Armour sent sliders, shorts, shirts - the whole setup. Two local car dealers gave the coaches cars. A local fitness club gave all the playas private memberships. The out pouring of help was unbelievable. "It's one thing to donate \$500 the Red Cross but when you can directly help someone face to face, that's very rewarding," Coach Walter explains.

Roughly two weeks later the Privateers are ready a hit the field. With everything brand new, from head to toe, bats to catchers gear, they were a great looking team. Tom couldn't help feel a bit awkward as his team practiced next to the NMSU Aggies. "Hey, what about us?"

Come to UNO. Your Official Visit is in New Mexico

As you may remember, most of the country thought New Orleans was under Marshall Law with armed National Guard troops battling street gangs even as late as that following

winter. As a result, they lost a few of the recruits they had signed the previous summer. Recruiting became somewhere between extremely difficult and bizarre. “I remember we were bringing prospects to visit us at the New Mexico State campus. We gave them a tour of NMSU Campus.... Watch our team practice, we have a field in New Orleans too. See that library over there... we have one just like it in New Orleans. There’s where we eat; we have a cafeteria in Louisiana, too.” Tom laughed.

Working together the two teams, coaches, and NMSU staff create a home environment for the Privateers. I’m sure it wasn’t easy during the following months. But the entire team finishes the fall semester; each completing at least 12 credit hours.

Homeward Bound

It’s now **January**, time to go back to New Orleans. Classes are supposed to begin **Jan. 15th**. **NOPE**, delayed **until Jan. 30th**. The team’s campus housing is not ready either. So they rent vans and it’s off to a hotel stay. Where? Mobile, Alabama. For **16 days** the team lived, practiced and enjoyed the fine dining opportunities at the Piccadilly Cafeteria, in Mobile, courtesy of FEMA.

They return to UNO campus at the **end of January** only to walk into the dorm and discover it is still not ready. Again, they must find a hotel.

Heaven or Hell

Now you can look at the next move from two *very different* perspectives: the coaches’ or the players’. The new hotel is slam in the middle of the French Quarter! *Dat sum ting- I guaranteeeee!* The nervous coaching staff felt as if they were absolutely sitting on a time bomb! After a brief personal visit to Bourbon St. in the Quarter this summer (I was with my wife), I can tell you it’s like a live Hustler magazine! Depending on your point of view it was Heaven or Hell for a **full week**.

If You Drain It - They Will Come

The UNO Chancellor agrees to spend \$400,000 on the field surface. But the field work is far from complete. For the next 2 months the team must travel across town to another field -- when they can physically get there. Uncluttered space is at a premium anywhere in the city. The Privateers’ home practice field becomes the blown apart campus tennis courts. Next the lights didn’t work and it wasn’t in the near future of repair, so the team had to play all day games, all season in the hot humid Gulf sun of New Orleans.

“When we returned to UNO we lost three more players. The team is down to 27 now. The kids took a look at the city and said ‘we just can’t handle this!’ I really couldn’t blame them.” Tom empathizes. Most all of NOLA’s eastern and northern neighborhoods are a visual nightmare. Today they estimate that over 50,000 homes are completely abandon. The city lost 250,000 citizens and UNO lost 6,000 of its 18,000 original students. Campus housing for many has become a vast oasis of trailers.



The above picture represents only a SMALL portion of the area directly over and behind the center field fence at UNO's Maestri Stadium

With the major loss of students and faculty the University had to eliminate many major areas of study. Many players came in to Tom's office **pictured below** with the news that the University had just dropped their major.



No Kidding-- Coach Walter's "Official Office"

The field is finally ready **March 20th** and they begin to play games at their home field. "We were really holding this together. We lost a few more players during the season. It was really hard for the players. They had to eat all meals off campus. Visits to the drug

store were off campus and the (temporary) dorm rooms were awful-just awful.” Tom recalls.

Sorry, I have to stop here. I have greatly surpassed my word count budget for this issue. This article is only half over and we really want to give the appropriate space to this once in a life time saga. The preceding article is accurate. I have worked very hard to correctly address the details of my interview and visit on the UNO campus with Tom Walter. This is true as it happened. The next issue of CB will describe the baseball issues that led to a remarkable turn around of the Privateers’ baseball program amid the devastation that to this day remains in 90% of the originally flooded neighborhoods that surround the campus for miles and miles. Stay tuned, for when we come back you’ll hear, as the famous line goes, ***“the rest of the story!”***