

Football field a good training ground for business

By Thomas Heath
Monday, November 23, 2009

I played four years of basketball in high school, but I rode the bench for all of that time. I have since convinced myself that the slog was worth it, even though it consumed thousands of hours and contributed to my being a bit of an academic underachiever. I learned teamwork, how to compete, and how to deal with disappointment (being a benchwarmer is no piece of cake).

These thoughts washed over me as I interviewed Greg Jones, a Washington entrepreneur who was captain of the Penn State football team in 1980 under coach Joe Paterno, who at 83 is still coaching.

Although he saw sports from a far different and more accomplished perspective than I did, I asked Jones what lessons he learned from football that have served him in business.

"It teaches you discipline," said Jones, 50. "If you go to practice every day for 2 1/2 hours, rain or shine, and you have to run your butt off and hit people every day and come out bruised, and get up the following day and the following day, it's not easy. It's just like business."

The lessons came both on the field and in the locker room. As captain, Jones reluctantly had to learn public speaking so he could address the team. He also had to approach Paterno as the representative for his 74 teammates.

On one occasion, "I had to go in there [to Paterno's office] and tell him we wanted to cut our shirts off at the waist," Jones said. "Joe thought we were crazy. But he listened, and as a good leader he said: 'If you win, we will do it your way. If not, we will go back to the old way.' I learned that if you are going to propose a change to the system, you better bring an ROI, return on investment. I say that to my staff members to this day: What's the ROI?"

Jones has used the teamwork, leadership, and interpersonal skills he refined at Penn State to make his way in business. He and two partners in 2007 acquired Bookkeeping Express, a McLean-based company that sells bookkeeping franchises across the country. Think of it as the H&R Block for small businesses in need of accounting services.

"There are more than 29 million small businesses in the U.S. with \$5 million in annual revenue or less," Jones said. "You couldn't pick a better target to go after."

Bookkeeping Express charges franchisees a \$30,000 initial fee, plus 8 percent of each franchisee's revenue. For that, Bookkeeping Express provides national advertising, a Web site, training, infrastructure, software, and help on how to find clients.

Bookkeeping Express is in 12 states and has 18 locations serving a total of 90 businesses. Jones said there are 111 more locations that have been sold and are being developed. The company has nine employees, expects to gross \$1 million by the end of the year, and will turn a small profit.

The company has a way to go, but Jones is accustomed to long odds.

He grew up in western Pennsylvania, where his father "climbed poles for Bell Telephone." Jones earned a scholarship to Penn State, where he started at nose guard.

A nose guard is the defensive player who is directly opposite the offensive player hiking the ball. It's a thankless, physical, exhausting job that typically involves going over, around or through a 300-pound blocker.

"You get smacked in the mouth and you are knocked down, in football or in business, and you have to get back up and have the guts do to it and continue to believe that you are right."

Although he wasn't drafted by the National Football League, Jones tried out for the Philadelphia Eagles after graduation in 1981 and came close to making the team. Jones used his Penn State alumni contacts to help land a management trainee job at Loews L'Enfant Plaza Hotel in Washington, but he left after three years to sell equipment for the telecommunications industry.

At first, it was humbling.

"You are a big-time jock and here I am walking out on the street, cold-calling for sales," he said. "They didn't care about me and football. Employers want you to produce. You've got to deliver the goods."

Jones later started a telecommunications consulting firm, which he and his partners sold at a modest profit. He fell in love with franchising about four years ago when he went to work for Fransmart, an Alexandria-based company that helps small businesses scale up into franchises. He worked with six or seven different concepts at Fransmart, learning as much as possible.

He and a partner own a pair of profitable Five Guys Burgers and Fries franchises in Florida and are working on opening three more. They also jointly own a few residential rental properties.

I asked Jones to list some of the most important business lessons he gleaned from playing football under Paterno. Among the answers: "respect the competition," "do not embarrass the organization" and "do not bring outside problems to your work, or to the field, because one problem will become two problems."

"For a kid who grew up in a very modest environment, Penn State opened the door to a bigger and better world, which I capitalized on," Jones said. "Football helped me grow up and mature, and learn to compete at a higher level. Flying around the country, beating and competing and ending up on top is a confidence builder."