

COACHING SPORTS—A LIFELONG AVOCATION

When I entered college, I had given up the idea that I could ever compete at the collegiate level in basketball or baseball. But the love for sports still coursed through my veins, so I found an outlet in coaching grade school sports. There was even a little pay in it and I found that I had a knack for teaching skills and motivating young athletes. My first gig was at Nativity Grade School right next to the Loras campus. I stepped into a situation where not many of the boys had played basketball before and I still recall the humiliation visited on us in the first game that we lost 43 to 6. Fueled by the desire for revenge or just to show my players that we could improve, I went back to stressing fundamentals and by the end of the season we were winning some games and came close to upsetting the team that had trounced us in that first game. I remember how proud all my players were walking off the court after that last contest having redeemed themselves in their own eyes.

The next two years, I would move to St. Columbkille's Grade School and Junior High, which was my home parish, where I coached football and basketball for two years. This provided some marvelous and exhilarating experiences as well some painful moments that still resonate with me 50 years later. The central figure among the players on both sports was Denny Conlon, an incredibly gifted athlete who would go on to hold Iowa state basketball tournament records for many years. I feel satisfaction that I was able to help him develop some special capabilities, such as by emphasizing drills to give him dexterity with his left hand.

Denny was also the star of the football team playing fullback and being our most potent weapon running sweeps around the right end where his speed and ability to out fake would be tacklers always allowed him to evade being brought down. That fullback sweep play was called "39" in our playbook. We were undefeated in the season with a formidable offense that also featured a seventh grader named Pat Barder at Quarterback, and Denny's cousin Tim Conlon at right half back. In the line, Donny Heller, Randy Nigg, Larry Gaspar and Tim Mayne were strong players.

In the last game of the season, we played St. Anthony's, also undefeated, for the league championship. They were leading 7 to 0, late in the fourth quarter, when we went on a final drive down the field, with Denny Conlon amassing large amounts of yardage on multiple carries on play 39. We got to the two yard line on fourth down. We had one last play on which to score a touchdown to tie the score and be co-champions. Everyone expected that Denny would get the ball and sweep around right end into the end zone for the score.

It was then that I outsmarted myself. I sent in a different play, a "43" which would have Pat Barder handing off to Tim Conlon going straight ahead between the guard and the tackle. I thought this "quick hitter" would catch the opposing line off guard. I can still see the re-play in

my head even today more than 50 years later: As Tim got the ball from Pat, he dove into the line to try to penetrate the goal line. Their defense was immovable. They stood him up and pushed him back, effectively winning the game.

Sometimes I get asked about looking back over the past 50 years, what if anything in life I might do differently. On my short list of responses, is that if I had it to do over, I would call a 39 run around end with Denny Conlon carrying the ball on that play. A few years ago in the Super Bowl, the Seattle Sea Hawks head coach Pete Carroll called a goal line play that ended up in an interception and a loss of the biggest game of the year. He was criticized for not going with his top runner carrying the ball, the play everyone expected. Someone quoted him as saying he would forget about the pain the next year. I drafted an op-ed for the Seattle paper with the title "Pete, the pain never goes away,"

At the same time I was coaching, I also held several other jobs during the school year. I worked at two jobs on campus to pay off my tuition and at the Post Office or selling Christmas trees during the holidays. My family again went through a very, very hard time. My Dad had lost his job on several occasions and as a result my Mom had terrible anxiety and mental problems. She was under psychiatric care and she was an alcoholic. Our home life disintegrated in a lot of ways. It was a struggle to have money to keep going and paying for school. At one point we just ran out of money and people were bringing food to our home. But somehow, we always found a way to keep going. But things had improved somewhat by my senior year of college in 1964, and I was figuring out where am I going from there and what would I do after Loras with my Bachelor of Arts degree in political science.