

A MEETING WITH "THE COACH"

by

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An interesting phenomena occurs when a true sports fan finds a team which he calls his own. At that moment they are immediately joined together in a bond whose strength is unmatched, one comparable to that in marriage. When the team wins, the fan wins, and when the team loses, the fan loses. The selected team has no say in the matter; it is instantaneously joined at the hip with the fan. This occurrence happened to me about third grade, when I watched a Notre Dame football game with my grandfather. I had seen college football games before, but had never seen this team. The Fighting Irish, with their golden helmets and that small man they called "the Coach," seemed to me to be the greatest football team on the face of the earth. Since that time Notre Dame has become like a religion for me. I know more about Notre Dame and its tradition in football than I know about my own high school or any college. Anything affiliated with Notre Dame University instantly finds favor with me, even their basketball team, which cannot seem to have a winning season. It does not matter, though, for the true fan stands by his team through the thick and the thin. That small man, the coach of the Notre Dame football team, in his first year in that position, would soon become part of the phenomenon, and one of the greatest men I have ever met.

Lou Holtz came to Notre Dame in 1985 and started with a rocky year that did not yield a trip to a bowl game. That would mark the only season in his ten-year career that the Fighting Irish would not see a major bowl game on January 1st or 2nd. In 1988, he took the Irish to an undefeated season and the National Championship. I still remember the Fiesta Bowl game from that year in which Notre Dame beat West Virginia, mainly because it completed an undefeated season and clinched the undisputed National Championship. Notre Dame, depending on their schedule, has either four or five home games a year, and I have watched Lou Holtz command his team to victory after victory. My senior year of high school I was a three-sport athlete and did quite well in football, guiding our team from the quarterback position to a sectional title. This accomplishment, along with promises of an excellent year in basketball and baseball, landed me an interview for a newspaper article for a paper in South Bend, the city in which Notre Dame is located. In this article, the reporter asked which person in the world I would meet if I had the chance. My choice, without hesitation, was "the Coach," Lou Holtz. This was the beginning of, quite possibly, one of the brightest days of my life. Unknown to me, my mother began to write Lou Holtz letters in which she explained my love for Notre Dame football. I have always dreamed of going to Notre Dame, and even took a class there my senior year with Dr. Mario Borelli, a Notre Dame mathematics professor, once a week, arranged by my high school math teacher, a Notre Dame alum. Getting accepted to Notre Dame, with Borelli as a reference, was only a technicality. Only one thing essentially kept me from attending the fine

university—money. Due to an enormous debt in hospital bills because of a rare heart condition that found my mother in the hospital at least once a year for ten years, I was unable to produce the needed finances to attend. Notre Dame costs a resident undergraduate over twenty thousand dollars a year, and the school does not offer school-based financial aid or university scholarships. This point was explained to Coach Holtz by my mother. She then asked if he might let my wish come true, and arrange to meet me at his convenience. Much to the surprise of my mother and me, he agreed. I was going to meet the head coach of the Notre Dame Fighting Irish football team, Lou Holtz.

Coach Holtz sent me a letter containing a phone number which I was to call in order to set up an appointment to meet him. This was harder to do than it seems, because the time that this was happening was the first week in December, 1993. Notre Dame was scheduled to play fifth-ranked Colorado in a major bowl on either January 1st or 2nd. This situation then called for the team to practice though the month of December, and Notre Dame was doing just that. They had practice everyday, along with the team meetings and film sessions that accompany regular season practice schedules. The secretary and I finally decided on a date and a time: Monday, December 20, after the team's morning practice from 9:00 a.m. to noon. I had almost two full weeks to prepare for this momentous meeting, and the time passed slowly. With every passing day, I know that my meeting with "the Coach" was drawing nearer.

The day arrived, and I was as nervous as I've ever been. I've played in many athletic contests, and many have been close, but I have never gotten nervous. A sense of confidence gained in years of practice has instilled in me a self-assurance in which I have never doubted my own abilities. This was not the case with my meeting with "the Coach." This was not something that could be practiced, and I was unsure how the meeting would progress. This caused me to be a bit uneasy. That day is the only day, to date, that I can remember being nervous. My high school authorized me to take a full day off of school, and I made sure to get plenty of sleep the night before. The Joyce Athletic and Convocation Center (JACC) at Notre Dame where Coach Holtz's office is located is only forty minutes from my house in Bremen, Indiana. He was to be in his office at 12:15 p.m., but I left at 11:00 a.m., not taking any chance of being late. I took along a program from the Army game that I had attended earlier that year, and a camera. At 11:50 a.m., my Chevrolet pulled into the JACC parking lot, and I quickly found the Notre Dame Football Office. With my knees shaking and my heart pounding, I went inside.

The sight of the Notre Dame varsity football office was one of the most amazing spectacles I have ever seen. The office was an amazing display of the tradition of Notre Dame football. Pictures hung on every wall, ones of historic players and games from the past. A signed picture of Joe Montana hung on the wall, along with a picture of the 1988 Fiesta Bowl Champions. Immediately to the right of the door was a large desk with a small, elderly lady sitting behind it who asked me what my business was for being there that day. I replied that I was meeting with Coach Holtz that afternoon. She picked up the phone and began to

speaking, obviously checking the validity of my claim with someone. Later I would find out that Coach Holtz has his own personal secretary who is in charge of all of his appointments. After the main office secretary confirmed that I was supposed to be there, she asked me to take a seat and told me that Coach Holtz would be finished with practice shortly. As I sat and waited, I checked out the entirety of the front office area. On the main desk lay a stack of team pictures that had been signed by the 1993 Notre Dame Fighting Irish football team. Behind the main desk was a larger room which held four more secretaries who were quite busy with their present work. I realized at that point that the amount of mail, phone calls, and promotional orders that must pass through that office in one day would bewilder a single secretary. Straight ahead through the front office door was a mirrored door, which behind it held the holy of all holies, the coach's offices. I had dreamed of this, a door holding back the innermost secrets and beauties of Notre Dame football, and I knew that I would soon behold this unseen splendor. After waiting for forty-five minutes, which only seemed like five, the time had arrived, and Coach Lou Holtz came walking up to the office door.

The first words he ever spoke to me will be in my memory forever: "Are you here to see me?" His voice was soft, as would be expected of a man in his late sixties, and his trademark lisp was quite evident in his speech. He was standing in front of me, just as I had seen on television for so many years. I mustered up the best "Yes!" I could, and stood up as a sign of politeness, almost reverence. He measured a full head shorter than me; Lou Holtz is a small man, but he is regarded as one of the greatest motivational speakers in the country by other coaches. To all Notre Dame fans, including myself, he is a David among Goliaths. He is "the Coach." "I need to get back to my office and change, but if you wait here for me, I will be right out." If I'll wait for him? I would swim the English Channel if Lou told me to. He then disappeared behind the mirrored door. My heart was going a mile a minute, and a look of disbelief settled on my face, as if I were a Catholic priest who had just met the Pope. The secretary, sensing my overwhelmed emotions, smiled and brought me back to Earth by saying, "You brought your camera, didn't you?" "Yes, Ma'am," I replied. This was a once in a lifetime chance and I was not about to miss this photo opportunity. I've played three sports a year since I entered high school: football, baseball, and basketball. In those four years, many pictures have been taken that included myself, along with many personal photos which involved only me, yet I have never kept pictures. My feeling is that I will remember those times well enough. When I finally forget them, it's time to move on from those memories. This photo opportunity, though, was much too important to leave to my human mind and fallible camera, you had better believe it!

Ten minutes later Lou Holtz emerged from behind the mirrored door and told me to come with him. The moment had arrived, and I was feeling weak. I was in the most reverent of places that I can think of, the Notre Dame Football Office, and was about to follow Coach Lou Holtz to sit and chat. Where I was about to go, few people had ever been. I felt not only privileged but dumbfounded. Coach Holtz opened the door, and I followed him through it. There was what I recall as the "Hall of Tradition." The corridor that we entered into was about thirty feet long,

and on the wall on both sides were pictures of the previous football coaches that had resided at Notre Dame, Heisman Trophy winners, and other great players from over the years. Knute Rockne, George "The Gipper" Gipp, Paul Horning, all the legends of the past were there in attendance. It was a sight for my eyes to behold with great awe. Then we entered Lou Holtz's office, and at that moment my hopes and dreams of so many years came together in one room.

Lou Holtz's office is a shrine to the tradition of Notre Dame football. It is rather large and is rectangular in shape. My guess is that the room measures nine feet by twenty feet, with the door placed at the far end along the longer wall. Directly inside the door a couch rests across the entire back wall, then turns the corner and travels down the side wall opposite the door for about six feet. When I was there, the couch was covered in Notre Dame apparel, mainly the Reebok-endorsed products licensed by the University. Every shirt, sweater, jacket, and even pair of pants I had ever seen pertaining to Notre Dame was on the couch. "I couldn't decide what to wear today," was Coach Holtz's first words when we entered the office. I could easily see the difficulty in the decision, for my entire wardrobe could not have matched the quantity of clothing lying on the couch. At the other end of the room sat a large mahogany desk cluttered with papers. Behind the desk, on the wall, was the greatest thing I have ever seen; the entire back wall was shelves, and on these shelves was memorabilia from Notre Dame history, things only a Notre Dame coach could possess. From the dates of the items, I surmised that the shelved articles are left there even when a new coach takes over the program and consequently the office. There were footballs from games such as the Notre Dame victory over Army in 1945, and the Rose Bowl game ball from that same year that brought home the National Championship to South Bend. There were signed pictures, and other priceless articles, at least priceless to a true Notre Dame fan. This was just the type of sanctuary that I hoped would exist, and I had now witnessed it in person.

The greatest thing I brought away from this meeting was this: Lou Holtz is one of the kindest men I have ever met. I was just a nobody who, like millions of other people, had aspirations of going to Notre Dame, and was a Notre Dame football fan. Yet, he took time out of his very busy day and spoke to me. He had to prepare for a major bowl game, but nevertheless he made time for a young fan with high hopes. The meeting lasted for only about fifteen minutes, in which time he asked me questions about what I would like to become, and how I was going to reach my goals. We discussed my future plans, asking questions such as what school I was going to attend, and what my choice of major would be. He brought up the idea of possibly transferring to Notre Dame someday, a thought that has yet to leave the back of my mind. He did not hollowly ask stupid questions, or act like I was wasting his time. He sat in his chair, looked me in the eye, and paid attention to what I had to say. After I told him that I played three sports in high school, and that I would play baseball for Valparaiso University, he told me a few stories about his experiences with Notre Dame football. The first story was about the game against Penn State earlier that year, and the joy that overcame him when Reggie Brooks caught the Rick Mirer pass in the back of the end zone to complete the two point conversion and win the game 17-16 in the

last seconds. Another emotional story he told me was the feeling of overwhelming delight after winning that National Championship in 1988, the only one of his twenty-five year coaching career. By this time, he needed to get to another team meeting, so he called in his personal secretary to take our picture together, and he also signed the program I had brought. As we walked to that mirrored door, most likely that last time I will ever pass through that door again, he put his arm around me like I was his own son, and said to me the words of a true motivator, "No matter what you strive for in life, don't ever give up!"

The drive from the JACC back home was a ride in a dream. I was there, and I was driving, but my mind was elsewhere. The thoughts of what had transpired that day ran through my mind, etching every word and sight I had seen into my memory. That day will not leave me until I am old and gray, and it will not take long for my children and grandchildren to memorize the events of that day, for I will talk about it for the rest of my life. The fact that I met "the Coach" was astounding, yet that was not what made the day so unforgettable, for I have met football celebrities such as Walter Payton and Jim McMahon before. The reason that Coach Holtz impressed me so much was his sincerity. He treated me as if I was one of his own players who had come to talk to him about a problem, or an old friend who had just stopped in to say hello. The meeting was not rushed by Coach Holtz, and he did not do other things while I talked. The attention that he paid me is comparable to any teacher I have ever tried to talk with because Coach Holtz is just that, a teacher. "The Coach" is truly a hero to all who have ever met him, and I have met him.

GIRLS CAN PLAY SOCCER TOO

by

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On a cool spring weekend I was loafing around the house and the phone rang. I never would have thought it would be Mr. Brackney, my old soccer coach. And I could not believe that he was asking me to play with his boys in a soccer game. Instantly the memories of playing on his and Mr. Dickinson's soccer team came to my mind.

It all started one fall afternoon in 1985 at Dogwood Park. Actually, it began the instant that I woke up that day. I went through my normal routine for the day. I woke up, ate breakfast, took a shower, then went to school. But the day dragged on. I would look at the clock at