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Journey to Immortality

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As he turned in his chair and nodded out the window of his Frericks Center office Tuesday morning, you heard the emotional hitch in his voice.

"My father worked in that big brown building right over there," Mike Kelly said of the old NCR building that stood across Brown Street from the University of Dayton campus. "He drove back and forth every day (from Ludlow Falls.) Back then it was about a 40-minute drive and I remember in the summer how excited he was when he got home. He was our Little League coach and he just

loved coaching."

While Jack Kelly planted the seed with his son, the thing really took root a few years later when — as an eighth grader — Mike walked into Bill Ginn's physical education class.

"He had played basketball at UD and he was the basketball coach at our school and he coached the quarterbacks. He did it all," Kelly said. "And in the winter time I'd go into his gym class and he was in short pants and we'd play basketball or badminton. And when it got nice, we'd go outside and play softball. I thought, 'Wow, and he gets paid for this. This would be fun.'

"And suddenly I'm thinking maybe I don't have to work at NCR. Maybe I can go to college and one day be a teacher and coach. And from that day on I never thought about doing anything else."

Talk about childhood dreams coming true — Kelly went on to become one of the winningest coaches in college football history.

In his 27-year career at UD, he had a 246-54-1 record and a .819 winning percentage. His 1989 Flyers team won the NCAA Division III national title and his 2002 and 2007 teams were named NCAA Football Championship Subdivision Mid-Major champs.

This weekend Kelly — who retired as the UD coach three years ago and now is an associate athletics director at the school — will be inducted in the College Football Hall of Fame in South Bend, Indiana.

Although it's a gala two-day affair, Kelly still wasn't comfortable basking in the glory of it all Tuesday.

"Maybe it goes back to my roots," Kelly shrugged. "I'm a small town guy with a small town attitude. I went to a little college (Manchester). I was just very average all the way through. I wasn't big time. I was small town."

Certainly you could argue he was both, though there's no debate — even though he and his wife now live in Kettering — he's still small town through and through.

"Growing up in Ludlow Falls there's not a lot to do," he said. "My dad was the fire chief and he started that whole Christmas lights thing there, so I spent winters stringing Christmas lights.

"Other than that my life revolved around Ludlow Creek. We went fishing there all summer and I took my shot gun and hunted there all winter... I could still walk down there and show you where every big rock is, every oak tree and sycamore. I could tell you about the bass I caught in the little water spot and show you where I swam.

"So it was the creek and, of course, playing sports."

From Milton-Union High, his sports took him to Manchester College in Indiana. After that he coached three years of high school and then got a job at Hanover College.

"I made \$7,250 a year," he laughed. "I taught 12 hours, was an assistant football and baseball coach, head wrestling coach and during the summer the president needed someone to drive around the countryside and pick up the \$100 deposits from the incoming freshman. I did that a couple of years."

He met Rick Carter at Hanover, followed him to UD and then became the Flyers head coach when Carter left for Holy Cross in

1981.

"When I got the job, my biggest concern was that I had been on the defensive side and it seemed like most head coaches around the country were involved in offense play calling," he said.

"Immediately I called three people — Woody Hayes, Bill Mallory at Miami and Bill Narduzzi at Youngstown State. I explained I was a new head coach and asked if I needed to move from defense to offense. All three said the same thing. They said put yourself in a position where you are most comfortable. Coach one side or the other and find somebody else to handle the other.

"And that's what I did. I coached defense and Dave Whilding took over the offense and I never muddled in it."

Kelly said what really helped was that they had a template that worked: "The idea was don't try to do too many things, but do a few perfectly. And I didn't try to change things for the sake of change. I'm a traditionalist at heart.

"I've got the same shot gun (a 20 gauge Winchester pump he bought for \$52 at a local hardware when he was nine). The same fishing pole. The same Rolodex. All my years coaching I had one offensive coordinator, one defensive coordinator, one secretary."

Along the way though, Kelly admits he had to learn to mellow out as a coach: "My first 10 years it was all win, win, win. I can't say I always had the best interests of the student-athlete at heart. There were times I was really tough on a guy when it wasn't necessary.

"But after a while I realized my job was a lot bigger than just winning. You see guys graduate and after a while a lot of them come back with their families and they talk about the influence you had. But some others didn't come back and you realize you weren't that good for them and that can't be. You want to have a positive influence on every guy."

He ended up doing that part especially well and that's why he'll be joined by several former players at this weekend's induction.

That said he still struggled to embrace the moment:

"Sure I like it, but it's not time for that yet. One day I'll settle into the rocking chair and pull out the scrapbooks, but right now it's not about yesterday. It's all about today. I want to keep trying to offer what I have to offer as long as I'm relevant or at least until somebody finally says, 'OK, your time is up. Get the hell out of the way Kelly. Time to go fishing.'"

Nobody will be saying that this weekend.

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