

Photo: John Chapman



# Football And Family

**Balancing football coaching and family life can be a daunting task at best. However, there are ways for coaches to create a football family that not only involves everyone, but helps players, assistants and family members grow in a positive manner.**

*By Paul Markgraff*

Long before earning the head-coaching job at Oklahoma, before his assistant coaching jobs at Florida, Kansas State, and Kent State, even before his days as an assistant coach and GA for the University of Iowa, Bob Stoops had a career decision to make.

“I had a business degree but I couldn’t see myself working for a company sitting behind a desk,” says Stoops. “I had to be involved with the team. Fortunately, Hayden Fry and a number of great coaches from his coaching tree at Iowa – Barry Alvarez, Bill Brashier, Dan McCarney – they said I needed to stick around there with them and be a coach.”

Sports was important to the Stoops family. His late father Ron coached at Cardinal Mooney (Ohio) High School, where Bob, his three brothers and two sisters attended.

“I was around sports all year,” says Stoops. “We were allowed to go with my father whenever we wanted to, meaning we could go to football practice and hang around. But, it wasn’t just football. He played baseball in the summers and we would go to the baseball field with him and be batboys. He was around basketball in the winters, scorekeeping and refereeing. It’s all we knew and to me it was always fun.”

When the time came for Stoops to choose a career, football coach was a natural choice.

Like Stoops, most football coaches believe coaching is more than a job. It’s a calling. As a result, coaches feel it is their responsibility to spend as much time as possible preparing their team. On top of their responsibilities to the team, the pressure to win has never been higher.

“Most head coaches just feel like they have to work as many hours as their competition,” says Steve Spurrier, former head coach at South Carolina and Florida, where Stoops worked as an assistant under him. “They are going to stay there until 11 o’clock at night, so we have to stay here until 11 o’clock. It’s the pressure to be successful. And I guess even if you’re not successful, you can always say you worked as hard as everyone else. It’s tremendous pressure.”

## Football And Family

The effects of the coaching lifestyle can be felt by a coach’s family. Coaches – who are also husbands and fathers – are often absent from home. Sometimes, the pressure to meet the expectations of the family while meeting the expectations of the program, administration and fans, can cause family strife. After all, there are only so many hours in the day.

“Perhaps the greatest cause of stress in humans is unmet expectations,” says Bill Kramer, head coach, Naples (Fla.) High School. “If my wife expects me home at a certain time and I’m not, it’s not going to be good. That’s why the wives and families are part of our program. My wife has cooked the pre-game meal with other parents and coaches for 20 years. Their kids come to the meal and they see what’s going on. If the kids are old enough, they can come to practice. This does two things. It allows the families to see what we do up close and it helps our players see that our families are part of this.”

On top of that, most coaches feel a sense of obligation to their players, to help them become not only great football



## COACHING PHILOSOPHY

players, but better citizens, employees, employers, husbands and fathers. Kramer says this philosophy is central to what he looks for in assistant coaches.

"This isn't a job, it's a lifestyle," he says. "This isn't for everybody. If you have any other notion about it, then you probably can't coach with us. When we interview someone for staff, I always want to have dinner with him and his wife, with my wife present. If the coach has kids, I'd want to have dinner with my wife and kids and his wife and kids. It's important that everyone involved understand that all decisions we make are based around how we are developing our student-athletes. We have a tremendous sphere of influence as coaches and we need to use it appropriately"

In such an environment, coaches often find it difficult to balance football and family.

"It helps when your family – in particular your kids – are school-aged," says Leroy Ryals, head coach, Thomasville (Ga.)

High School. "They can come around the field house or to the basketball gym or to the field. They can stay with you in your office when you're getting ready to go to the game. After that, you just have to plan everything. When you take a vacation, you take a vacation. You almost have to turn that cell phone off and really try to get away with your family."

Ryals says that for head coaches, planning is huge. In January, he gives his wife a 12-month calendar that shows built-in vacation days.

"I tell her that it's her responsibility to make sure we plan and we go on vacation those days, and then we just do it," he says.

"If you get a two-day or three-day weekend, you have to take your family on a little outing. It doesn't have to be more than a couple hours away. It's important to get away where people don't know you as well."

Gary Darnell, associate executive director of the AFCA and former head coach at Western Michigan University, says coaches can often find time to join their families and their teams at the team dinner, either after practice or before a game.

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"I always thought that dinner after practice or before the game was something you tried to maintain, because the family dining table has been a staple of solidarity forever in the family," he says. "For those who are strong in their faith, they can always find a way to get to church.

"All of those things that you think you have to do, you really don't need to do them," he continues. "That is the biggest thing for me. Time runs out and it runs out about the time you figure out that nothing is more important than family. Family is important now. You don't want to go through a coaching career and neglect your family, and then all of a sudden, you're finished coaching but your family is gone, too. None of us want that."

### Time Off And Trust

Spurrier says spending time with family is one of the most important things a coach can do, especially during the season.

"We've always had a Wednesday night family dinner where the wife and kids, all the assistant coaches so forth, come to the stadium after practice. We have a dinner with the entire group and after that, we'd watch practice tape and get ready for the game that weekend. We'd do that every Wednesday night throughout the season."

For Spurrier, players also needed a break from the grind. When he coached at Florida, Crescent Beach was only a little over an hour from Gainesville. On the team's open date, Spurrier and his family would drive to Crescent Beach on Friday and return to the university on Monday. He would also give his assistants and players the weekend off.

"Several other coaches around the league found out that we were giving the weekend off," he says. "We were winning the SEC every year, giving guys the weekend off. They'd never done it and thought maybe they ought to try it.

"It didn't help our team one bit by keeping the guys on campus and making them practice," he says. "But it's still difficult to make a coach take

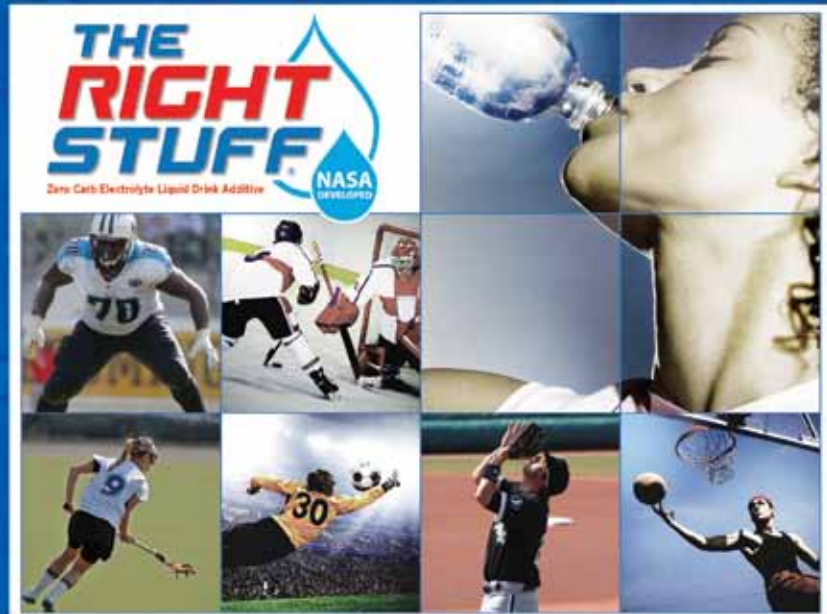
a couple of days off in the middle of a season."

Ryals says it's also important for coaches to develop trusting relationships with their assistants. That way, a coach can let down his guard when he does have some time away with his family.

"If you have a good assistant who you know is going to run things exactly like you without calling you, he's just going

to handle it and you can trust him to do it, that is huge," he says. "But it takes time to develop that relationship. They have to know your philosophy, how you think and what you would do in certain situations based on the best interests of the program or the department. That way, once we get to the vacation spot, and the people who are most important to me are with me, I'm not really worried about anything else." **AFC**

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