Starting A
College Football Program
From Scratch

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It was 1981. We had just won the national championship at the University of Georgia.

Herschel Walker was back for three more years (we thought). We had finished what looked like a super recruiting year. Things never looked brighter for Georgia.

Word drifted back to Athens, Georgia, that Georgia Southern College, a small school in Southeast Georgia, was planning to start up a brand new football program. One thing led to another and three months later I was on my way to visit the president of Georgia Southern to see what his plans were for his new football program.

Dale Lick is a dynamic, aggressive, young (everybody is young when I'm describing them) president.

After we finished lunch, I directed my first question to him: "Dr. Lick, on what level would you like for your football team to play?" Without hesitation, he replied, "Division I". I knew he was dead serious, but at the same time I knew he was crazy.

My next question was, "Dr. Lick, how long do you expect to be here?" He said he was on something of a 10 year plan (he had been there four years at that time). This was right in line with my thinking, so I felt pretty good about my first visit to Statesboro, Georgia.

Meanwhile, back in Athens I was torn between what I thought I wanted to do and what I thought I ought to do (stay at Georgia).

After 17 years, we had developed deep roots in Athens. The house was almost paid for. I liked my job. I liked our players and staff. I had no reason to even think about leaving Georgia, except — I liked the idea of starting a new football program.

I liked the thought of starting and building a program of my own from scratch. This had much greater appeal than taking over a "sick" program and trying to bring it back.

I had been doing basically the same things at Georgia for 17 years. I was defensive coordinator and assistant head coach. I felt it would be good for me to have new and different challenges, experiences and responsibilities — to look out another window, so to speak.

Coach Vince Dooley told me I could coach football at Georgia as long as I wanted to, and I appreciated that. I thought about the security of coaching at Georgia until I remembered the experience of Harry Mehre, who coached at Georgia in the 1930s. Coach Mehre tells this story on himself.

Coach Mehre's team dedicated beautiful Sanford Stadium with a great victory over Yale University. Georgia went on to have an undefeated season that year and the coach was rewarded by being given a "lifetime contract" to coach at Georgia.

The next year, however, Georgia went 5 and 5. As Coach Mehre tells it, "They declared me legally dead and fired me."

I'm not sure there is any security in coaching football anywhere, so I dismissed that as a reason for staying at Georgia.

Both our boys had played for Georgia, had graduated and were on their own. My bride was my only consideration in moving and starting over in a new place. When I asked her if she thought she could make the adjustment, she said she could if I could. "Do what you feel you need to do," she said.

It was May now and I had to make a decision. I did what my "gut feeling" told me. I took the job at Georgia Southern. I did it because it was what I really wanted to do.

Looking back, I may have used the symbolism of the dog sled team in making this decision. The symbolism of the dog sled team is this: "If you ain't the lead dog, the scenery don't change much."

For the press conference announcing my appointment as the new head football coach, the Georgia Southern athletic director, Bucky Wagner, had to make a fast trip to a local sporting goods store to purchase a football. All of a sudden it was discovered that Georgia Southern College did not won a football. This was really starting from scratch.

I knew that in starting a new program I would be doing many things other than coaching. However, I did not realize to what extent I would be doing all these other things.

My first function was that of a fundraiser. I spoke to every civic group in Southeast Georgia during that first year. I even went back to some a sec-
second time. I had the cost per item for every piece of football equipment and asked people to donate the price of a pair of shoulder pads or a helmet or a pair of shoes. I got many, many checks for $5 and $10, and I appreciated those just as much as the ones for a $100 or $1,000.

We acquired one of the physical education dressing rooms, put down carpet and new lockers and we had our dressing room. Not bad, either.

We simply lined off fields in an area which was used for physical education golf classes. A local person constructed goal posts, and we had our practice fields. Not great, but not bad.

Howard Beavers, equipment supervisor for the University of Georgia, gave me shoulder pads, helmets, sets of discontinued jerseys, old shoes and anything else we could use. We bought, at great bargain prices from other colleges, items of equipment. We were a multi-colored outfit. Not pretty, but a start in the right direction.

We bought used dummies and sleds from high schools and had our local "iron man" construct other pieces of equipment for our use. Not the best, but pretty good.

A single wide two bedroom trailer was our first office. This was donated to us by a local mobile home dealer and came complete with stove, refrigerator and two baths. I always liked our "office" but I was worried when they did not remove the wheels. I always thought that they might just "roll us out of town" if we lost. We had our office. Not great, but a conversation piece.

These experiences, all new and different for me, forced us to remember this bit of philosophy: "If you don't have the best of everything, make the best of everything you have."

I hired two high school coaches, Ben Griffith and Mike Healey, as full-time coaches and brought three graduate assistants with me from the University of Georgia. Dr. Patrick Spurgeon, professor of English, volunteered his services and we had our coaching staff. Very good staff, too.

In September, 1981, when school started, we put out a call for all students interested in playing football for Georgia Southern.

One hundred and twenty-four of the most enthusiastic non-athletes I have ever seen reported for the first practice session. At the end of the season, 110 of them remained.

Our schedule in 1981 consisted of Florida State JV's (we lost in the last two minutes), Fort Benning Doughboys and Jacksonville Magnum Force. We won these last two.

I had more fun coaching this group than any other in my 35 years of experience.

We had no real idea of the direction in which we would go with our football team. Our choices were: 1) NCAA Division III; 2) NAIA; 3) NCAA Division II; 4) Remain a "club" sport until our direction could be more clearly defined.

We decided we would go with the club sport idea for two years and then make a decision based on our economic status at the end of that period.

During this two year period of club football, it became apparent we would either apply to play NCAA Division II or NCAA Division I-AA.

In 1982, we kept Florida State Jayvees and Fort Benning on our schedule and added nine NAIA and NCAA Division II teams. We finished 7-3-1.

In 1983, we dropped Florida State Jayvees and Fort Benning and played an 11 game schedule composed of six NAIA teams, four NCAA Division II teams and on Division I-AA team. Our record was 6-5.

During these two years, we played our home games in the local high school stadium, capacity 4,500.

In 1983, we began construction on our own stadium, a 16,000 seat structure which was completed during the following year in time to play four home games.

Our stadium was made possible through the combined efforts of the people of Southeast Georgia who believed in our football program to the extent they "dug deep" to enable us to play in "the prettiest little stadium in America."

For geographical reasons more than for any other, we decided to apply for NCAA Division I-AA in 1984. We had scholarship money for approximately 40 players and had five full-time assistant coaches. I personally thought our venture into Division I-AA would be "professional suicide" on my part, but things worked out well for us. We had a record of 8-3 in 1984.

In 1985, we were 13-2 and won the Division I-AA national championship.

If you have read this far, you are aware of our evolution from the original 124 walk-ons in 1981 to our championship team of 1985.

People have asked repeatedly: "How did you come so far, so fast?" My answer: "I don't know." However, I can put my finger on a few things which stand our as being really good for us.

1) Great players. We have been very fortunate to have some very good players. Tracy Ham, our quarterback, for instance, is the best in America doing "his thing", which is running the triple option, throwing and scrambling. Overall, we might not have had the best players, but we had the players who played best together.

2) Great loyalty and support. Our administration, faculty, student body and community have been completely supportive of our efforts to have a good program. This has made our task so much easier.

3) Assistant coaches. We have had the hardest working group of assistant coaches and graduate assistants I have ever been around. They have done an outstanding job of teaching football and "caring" about our players.

4) Luck. This might be the greatest factor of all in our record to date. We have had much sheer good fortune, but I believe luck is the residue of hard work. We have worked hard and we have been lucky.

Each of these four ingredients has been necessary for the development of our new football program.

We have never set goals in terms of wins and losses. Our objective from the beginning has been simply to be competitive. I feel we now are at the point.