

Levine, Ronald, 27 July 2009

**Ronald Levine**

Marist College

Poughkeepsie, New York

Transcribed by Ann Sandri

For the Marist College Archives and Special Collections

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**Transcript: Ronald Levine**

**Interviewee:** Ronald Levine

**Interviewer:** Gus Nolan

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Marist College (Poughkeepsie, New York)

Marist College Social Aspects

**Summary:** Ronald Levine discusses his early years. He talks about his involvement with Marist College and the inception of the college's football club. He examines and elaborates memorable events that he remembers about his time as a coach on the Marist football team.

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[00:04](#) **GN:** Today is July 27<sup>th</sup>, Monday. The interview is with Ron Levine. He's an attorney in town. And the more importantly, he's the first Marist college football coach. So good afternoon, Ron.

[00:17](#) **RL:** How are you, Gus?

[00:19](#) **GN:** Ron, this is kind of a historic occasion for us to get somebody like yourself in and talk about your past at Marist. And to allow us to record it for our archives. But before we get into your contact with Marist. I'd like to ask something about your own life before Marist. Like where were you born and grew up? And what schools did you go to?

[00:46](#) **RL:** Well actually I was born in St Francis Hospital.

[00:49](#) **GN:** In Poughkeepsie?

[00:50](#) **RL:** And I started my career at the corner mansion and bridge in Poughkeepsie. And I am a graduate of the Poughkeepsie school system. I graduated from Poughkeepsie high school in 1957. And I did my undergraduate education at Cornell University School of Arts and Sciences. And from there, I went to Cornell University Law School. And I graduated in 1963.

[01:20](#) **GN:** And during the time of your schooling, this is only about your general interest. Maybe in the academic field, was it math, history or science that you were particularly interested in?

[01:33](#) **RL:** I started out with the idea of becoming a lawyer. And I de-grasp for one semester at the urging of my high school chemistry teacher. I originally entered Cornell as a student in the school of chemical engineering and I, very fast discovered that my aptitudes were in some other direction and transferred in the School of Arts and Sciences. I was one of the Sputnik kids. As soon as the Russians got close, everybody who could get over ninety-five in science was immediately targeted.

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[02:16](#) **GN:** We were lagging behind in scientists.

[02:18](#) **RL:** We were behind and I was going to do the deal. I couldn't have done much and I was very lucky to get it out with my life and still be attending the same school

[02:30](#) **GN:** What other activity now? Outside, were you involved in debate?

[02:34](#) **RL:** In high school I was in lots of stuff. In college, I play football. As that was my pretty much other than fraternity life, my sole extracurricular activity.

[02:47](#) **GN:** And when do you move from actually playing football to becoming a coach and an assistant in terms of strategies of developing teams?

[03:01](#) **RL:** I had had a long interest in the X's and O's part of football. When I was admitted to the law school, I was still only a junior. So I would be spending my senior year in the law school. And also my freshman year in the law school. But I still had a year of eligibility left and I used it. I played in my senior year of high school of college as the first-year law student. And there was a coaching change that spring and I happened to be down in Poughkeepsie for some kind of a family function. And I didn't own a car. And I was standing outside the New York freeway in New Paltz hitchhiking a ride. And this gentleman picked me up and asked who I was and where I was going and so on said, "Well you know I think I can help you there." And it turned out to be Tom Harp who had just been hired as the Cornell football coach.

[04:21](#) **GN:** What a coincidence.

[04:22](#) **RL:** A wonderful coincidence because four and a half hours later. I had a job as a graduate assistant with the coaching staffs and which I did for the remaining two years of my law school career. And that got me very interested in coaching.

[04:43](#) **GN:** Okay. When you finished law school, do you go right into practice?

[04:49](#) **RL:** I went to work for the Atomic Energy Commission. I was a weapons attorney. And I

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was stationed in Manhattan.

[04:57](#) **GN:** Okay. And then when do you come back to Poughkeepsie to...?

[05:01](#) **RL:** I came back to Poughkeepsie in the spring of 1965. I couldn't have been here more than a couple of months. When I got a phone call from Bob Finn who I had known since elementary school asking me if I would be interested in coaching the new to-be-formed Marist football team.

[05:26](#) **GN:** Did you know Finn personally? In other words was he a kid on the street who played football or stick ball or whatever?

[05:39](#) **RL:** I knew him from childhood.

[05:42](#) **GN:** Oh OK.

[05:44](#) **RL:** We were in the same elementary school. He was younger than I was but not a lot. But I know I'm well enough to know him by nickname and which I choose not to disclose [...]

[06:00](#) **GN:** No, I wouldn't go into that here

[06:03](#) **RL:** And he knew me by a nickname which I also will not disclose.

[06:08](#) **GN:** Okay when he asked you about this, what was your mindset? What kind of investment of time do you think you're going to put into it?

[06:01](#) **RL:** Well first when he asked me about it, I asked him why he couldn't get a coach. Because there were a half a dozen high school coaches in Dutchess County. I knew every one of them. And any one of them would have been eminently qualified to coach this program. And his response was that none of them were interested. And in retrospect, I can understand why. It was going to be club football. If you gave up your high school job and this one didn't work out for any reason, you'd be out of coaching. These guys didn't choose to take that risk. For me it wasn't a risk, I was still going to be a lawyer.

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[07:11](#) **GN:** Were you practicing in time at this time?

[07:13](#) **RL:** Yeah, I was working with a law firm in Poughkeepsie. The direct answer to your question is I decided that if I was going to coach, I was going to spend the same amount of time coaching as I would if I was a paid member of the staff. I didn't expect to coach for more than a couple of years. I thought that I really could give it a great shot and get everything going and then just be a lawyer.

[07:54](#) **GN:** And your interest was really because you're interested in the game. And you take a lot of pride in accomplishing, putting something together like a team like this?

[08:05](#) **RL:** Well, certainly I had a love for football. But I don't think you could coach for very long before the kids either are going to become part of your life or you stop coaching.

[08:22](#) **GH:** OK. Well when you came here, what did you do find? What kind of a students were prepared to play for you? Had they had experience? Had they played varsity?

[08:32](#) **RL:** It was the sixties.

[08:33](#) **GN:** Okay.

[08:34](#) **RL:** And the whole idea of club football was an exciting part of, I would say, the 60s mentality. The difference between Bobby Finn and his friends and members of the SDS was the choice of what type of excitement they wanted to focus on. The kids in the middle 60s were doers and they were either going to do something like invent club football.

[09:16](#) **GN:** Or protest the war.

[09:17](#) **RL:** Or they were going to have war protests and that kind of stuff. Marist was not a place for war protesters in the 60s.

[09:27](#) **GN:** No but we did have one a little later on.

[09:30](#) **RL:** Yes, you did. An interesting anecdote to that was I believe that was the protest where

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we had a meeting on Friday morning because there was a night game. And the meeting was in Dr Foy's office upstairs in the tall building. Then it was the tall building. And I think that Tom Wade, the Dean of students and Howie Goldman, the AD and I were present. And the idea was whether or not we were going to have to cancel the game. Because of the protest and Linus heard everybody out and said, "I don't think you'll have to cancel the game. This protest is going to end shortly after lunch. No Marist kid is going to protest over a weekend." And right on schedule somewhere around 1:30. The protest signs went down and school was out and everyone was going to Frivolous Sal's for the post-game party.

[10:36](#) **GN:** Now it's get back into organizing this project of football organization. Looking back at it, what was some of the major problems? They didn't have uniforms. They didn't have a field really. How was this put together?

[10:56](#) **RL:** Marist basically could provide nothing for the development of this program. Except support and well wishes. So for example, the athletic field which served as a soccer field was really no field at all. It was in terrible condition.

[11:27](#) **GN:** It was a rock little place

[11:30](#) **RL:** Very. And the lower fields hadn't been built yet. We actually... On days when we were stuck on campus, our field was the space between the grass between the north goalpost and the parking lot. And the parking lot. And when we practice under the lights, we practiced in the parking lot in whatever space was left after people parked for class.

[12:00](#) **GN:** You didn't have a lighted field to practice in?

[12:02](#) **RL:** No, we didn't one of the great stories is ... We set up some lights one in November when the time changed and we know so sooner to turn them on. When the lights went out and everybody looked around wondering if we had caused all the lights on the Marist campus to go

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at one time with our one rinky-dink set of lights. And then we noticed there was no lights on the other side of the street. And of course that was the night of the great blackout. And interestingly enough it happened within seconds. After the time that Chris Kelly and Smokey McKiernan turned on the plug for our lights and that incident has been the subject of a few beers over the years.

[12:53](#) **GN:** It's kind of a myth, yeah. It started the whole blackout along the eastern coast from Massachusetts.

[12:59](#) **RL:** Well, Chris Kelly will tell you, he did it.

[13:05](#) **GN:** There are many stories relating to that. Not all lot of which we want to go through here.

[13:11](#) **RL:** The reality is that in the first ten years of football, the stories in many ways kept everything alive because it was the same excitement. The same effort from the kids to make things happen.

[13:30](#) **GN:** OK let's take some of those stories. How about uniforms? Where did they come from?

[13:34](#) **RL:** well. The equipment was the result of some assistance from Dr. Foy who discovered that there was a school going out of business in Columbus Ohio. And we arranged to buy their equipment. It happened to be a junior high school. So when this equipment arrived in Poughkeepsie. Once again, Kelly, Smokey McKiernan went out in a truck to pick it up.

[14:12](#) **GN:** A U-Haul kind of thing?

[14:14](#) **RL:** Yup a U-Haul. In addition to getting the equipment, they got an altar. They've got shelves for the library. And they showed up with this equipment and obviously, it wasn't going to fit any of my players. And I never had the courage to ask Dr. Foy if he knew this all the time.

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But it was in good condition. And when I had to disclose to him that it was junior high school equipment, he said, “Well, you ought a be able to deal with that.” And I did. I called all of these coaches that I know real well and I traded them. You know six helmets for six bigger helmets. And that's how we got the equipment to play the first season.

[15:08](#) **GN:** You're mentioning Dr Foy here. Were you involved also with Howie Goldman any other personnel on the Marist staff?

[15:17](#) **RL:** the people that I was involved with closest were Tom Wade who was the dean of students at the time. Dr Goldman, the athletic director. And Bob Norman who worked in communications and had taken the football program on as his own pet dream where he would become the voice of Marist College Football. So those are the three people I had most contact with and I had a lot of contact with Dr Foy because I didn't fit anywhere. The football program was a club program. Often the decisions that had to be made had nothing to do with the athletic department. So often, Dr. Goldman and I were in front of Dr. Foy for guidance and for direction. And when it came to the students, the same thing was true with Dean Wade because we didn't really fit under any kind of fabric. And I was very much intent on making us fit. I didn't want us to be out on an island. I wanted them to keep thinking about us as becoming more a part of the family. I really believed that eventually Marist, if it all worked out right, would become a varsity program.

[16:49](#) **GN:** So that would be the difference then for a club status and becoming part of the NCAA regulatory agency, playing under their rules but there you'd be involved in the college program per se.

[17:03](#) **RL:** Well I believe that if we spent several years out on an island and remained on that island, they would never come to the point where they felt that we should become part of the

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varsity program. It turned out that way for the other schools whose football programs died when the club died.

[17:33](#) **GN:** Was Iona one of those schools?

[17:35](#) **RL:** No. Manhattan was. Iona followed the same track as Marist. They became...

[17:48](#) **GN:** What about Fordham?

[17:49](#) **RL:** Fordham was different because...

[17:54](#) **GN:** They had a history of football.

[17:56](#) **RL:** They were different because they were... They were a different level of educational institution. They had all the facilities. I think Fordham was a club for a while and then actually stopped being a club. And then a couple years later started up again as a varsity football program. But they were the only school like that. NYU dropped as soon as it became apparent that they couldn't continue. Manhattan dropped. Schools like that who decided they didn't want varsity football stopped playing it.

[18:37](#) **GN:** What kind of interest was manifested in the student body for it? Was there...?

[18:42](#) **RL:** Marist.

[18:44](#) **GN:** It was a small student body to being with but.

[18:47](#) **RL:** I would say that Marist life as a sports involved with student activity life started with the football program. I don't think they had a program before that. I don't think anybody went to games.

[19:09](#) **GN:** Well basketball was rather limited if you remembered basketball...

[19:12](#) **RL:** Gym had no walls

[19:14](#) **GN:** Had no walls. No seating capacity.

[19:18](#) **RL:** I've heard educators. From all over the country talk about. How important football is

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to student life. Not because it's football because it's the first sport of the school year. If there was a different sport if you started by playing baseball then the whole situation might be reversed.

And there's no question that that's true at the large historical institutions. And one of the things that Bob Norman really wanted to push was making Marist as much of a college athletic family as you could make in a small institution. And he worked diligently at it. And that was fine for me because I've always thought that hoopla and music and cheerleaders and all those things were just as important as the football game.

[20:18](#) **GN:** Absolutely right. It's continued this way we'll get back to that later on. I mean we are now. Come on a Saturday afternoon of a home game and you see that really demonstrated in great force out there

[20:32](#) **RL:** Marist is just a small microcosm of a big school. It does everything the big school does with in its own means.

[20:44](#) **GN:** Coming back to the organization part, what about practices? Were you able to get time from your firm to come here regularly and supervise practices and organize plays for these fellows who had no background really?

[21:02](#) **RL:** Well the truth is of the first fifty kids. Probably fifteen had even played football. But on the other side of it, I have decided if I was going to do it I would do it the same way, I was taught to do it. So in the preseason, we would practice twice a day. And what we did at Marist, in those first years, was we practiced. They would be on the field at six in the morning. The practices would be started at 6.30. We would practice till 8.30. I'd go to work. And I would be back at four o'clock for the afternoon practice. And in those early years, there was no place on campus for us to live during that summer period. So we got... We made arrangements elsewhere. And there's a host of stories that go along with that. We had for example, in the first two years,

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the boys ate at St Francis Hospital Dining and then, I'd believe for two other years they ate at Western printing which was right across the street. For their meals That was before Champagnat was built and there was actually a facility that we could go into before school started.

[22:47](#) GN: Right and the McCann center is a long way off yet.

[22:50](#) RL: Oh yes.

[22:51](#) GN: So you have the honey house. Perhaps to go to the bee house

[22:54](#) RL: One year, we stayed in the bee house. It was the worst experience of my life. And I got to go home at night if I wanted to. I almost had to stay just to make the players understand that I was willing to live under the same.

[23:10](#) GN: Same condition

[23:11](#) RL: Conditions as they were.

[23:14](#) GN: Yeah. Well. When all is said and done now that first years as I read about it now it was it ... three wins and three losses. You did all right out there whoever you were playing.

[23:25](#) RL: We did fine. We practiced as I said regularly. There was no days off. I had excellent coaching training. I had really been taught how to do it by professionals for two years and that doesn't necessarily mean you're going to, it's going to work for you but I certainly knew how to do it and how much time was going to have to be spent doing it and I got the players to buy into it. They wanted to beat Manhattan. They wanted to beat Iona. Lord knows they couldn't beat them in anything else. Marist ...

[24:12](#) GN: Basketball was miniscule.

[24:16](#) RL: This gave them a real opportunity and Bob Norman first coined ... He called them, "the giant killers." And they got a lot of they got a lot of excitement in that. In the first year, Iona beat us up pretty well and Seton Hall beat us up pretty well but in the other games, we either won

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or came in almost a winner so we finished three and three.

[24:51](#) **GN:** Let's move along. You're here for fourteen years as coach.

[24:54](#) **RL:** The two years came and went. Actually at the end of the two years, I told my wife that I was ready to go. And she was very much surprised by my statement because we had really taken. We had really become a part of a lot of things. Football didn't just blossom in on the campus. There is a lot of community interest in it. The games were being played down at Riverview and Frivolous Sal's started just about at the same time. And they played a tremendous part in the initial excitement. I had this feeling of frustration that the kids really didn't want to make the commitment that I knew was coming next. And I thought that after year two, it was a critical time. We knew that we could become a successful program. I knew what that meant in commitment. And I wasn't sure the kids wanted to do it. And one night I told my wife this. She was the only person I'd ever mentioned it to. The next day the two captains and couple of other guys showed up at the house and the theatre show was about to begin. I was the one-person audience for the show. It had been carefully rehearsed with my wife and children. And so one of the captains, Don Rocky said, "Coach we hear some terrible rumors. What's the problem?" And I told them. And he said, "You know. This is what we think would make things a lot easier." And he looked at my wife and said, "Mrs. Levine, why don't you bring the boys in." And in come Ronnie, Michael and Steven then. And he says, "Now, what do you think? You think that our team could have cuts at least as long as your kids?" And I have looked and they've all got butch cuts now it's 1968. It's the height of the 60s, yeah. And my players have all got you know Marine haircuts here. And my kids all look like the Beatles. And I looked and I said. Yeah. I suppose I could do that. He goes, "You know. we've got an outside linebacker I won't tell you who it is that wears earrings." And I said, "I think I saw them one night at Sal's." "We just think you ought to

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loosen up a little bit if you do. We'll give you everything we've got but you just gotta laugh a little bit." And fourteen years later, we were still laughing.

[28:36](#) **GN:** What a story. More help. I know just by reading the things here. There's two coaches one guy is Ira Effron and John Seacond.

[28:49](#) **RL:** They were two of the first coaches

[28:51](#) **GN:** Did you know them personally?

[28:55](#) **RL:** I played high school football with Ira. John lived next door to my grandmother.

[29:01](#) **GN:** OK. So they heard about this and you convinced them to come on board and...?

[29:06](#) **RL:** I can't remember how John got involved. Probably just over hamburgers at my grandmother's house, one Sunday. Ira, I sought out because I knew that he knew how to play I offensive line and I thought he would do a great job coaching it.

[29:34](#) **GN:** So that's more the technical football strategy element. Was there anybody for medical training or you know what do you do with sprained ankles?

[29:45](#) **RL:** Well the trainer was... Doc Goldman's trainer was available. We didn't have to go find our own trainer. My own personal doctor was a Kurd Holzer and he told me he would be very interested in handling the team. And he did a wonderful job and he took care of the minor stuff. And if anything serious happened, he referred the player to one of the community orthopedist or whatever.

[30:24](#) **GN:** How about... Coming back to this, getting the team going and learning plays, the discipline of practice and so on, was that implicated in to the move overtime in other words, did they have to be pepped up...

[30:36](#) **RL:** It was implicated to them in the first five minutes of day one. If you remember this period, it was a period of Vince Lombardi. It was a period of Bear Bryant. It was a period in

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which successful coaches, the successful icons were driven men who believed that football had to be played by focused driven young men who are willing to give everything they had and then some. And I happened to be one of those people. So I didn't. It never dawned on me that I wouldn't ask them, the kids at Marist, to do the same thing. And I didn't. I wanted them to give one hundred ten percent. So I had a focus. I hoped that they would live up to it and they never turned, they never let me down. The Marist kids always gave me everything they had. And in our worst season.

[31:56](#) **GN:** Was there was an interest widespread to who want to be part of it? I mean did you turned away kids? Or were you lacking?

[32:06](#) **RL:** no We never had to turn anybody away. Everybody was welcome. The sport itself would turn away people. And once it became known that I was going to run this kind of a program, the next year kids didn't come who didn't want to make that commitment. Every once in a while, a few kids would show up and quit after the first day which was fine with me because...

[32:45](#) **GN:** You didn't want to carry them.

[32:46](#) **RL:** I didn't want to carry them. You're right.

[32:48](#) **GN:** How about other things like getting rest and things of that sort, scheduling Who did that? Did you do that or is that part of Italo, somebody who would be?

[32:59](#) **RL:** We had the opportunity to get referees through at first, the local high school programs. A lot of the guys who were doing high school games also had college credentials. So the club president, I mean I would tell the club president who to call. And he could get that all worked out and Doc Goldman always helped.

[33:27](#) **GN:** And how about travel? Were there buses?

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[33:29](#) **RL:** That was part of the club concept. It had been sold to Dr. Foy as sort of a business school application. The club officers would run their entire business. And in the first I would say in the first seven or eight years they did, a hundred percent. So you know, they would meet with me, I'd say, "Well, this is going to be an overnight game. This is what you've got to do go out and do it." And they did it. And Bobby Finn was a wonderful beginning president. Bob Bailey followed him. He was terrific and a whole bunch of other guys came along after that, they were just as good.

[34:17](#) **GN:** Yeah. Finn talks about that as having actually done a lot to develop himself in terms of later life. Organizing and...

[34:25](#) **RL:** You have no idea. I mean they grew up in front of my eyes. Both the players and the administrators. They took so much on. And they were so serious that it would have been hard to leave them. It was a growing experience for a lot of people. Me included. And I've never looked back and regretted a minute of it.

[35:01](#) **GN:** Let's talk about it kind of a typical situation for a game coming up. Now. Did you review films of the team you're playing? Did you have a scouting report? Do you have some kind of...?

[35:15](#) **RL:** We tried to do everything. We tried to do everything just the way a big-time team would do it. We did have film. There was a program that was run by a guy down in Westchester who would send a car up here on a Saturday around 5.30. And if your films were there at the police station, he would pick them up and you could have them back the next morning at 10.30 and it worked. And there were times when because of night games or traveling, we were unable to have the film there at the right moment. Guys drove down to Peekskill to his place of business and sat there while he ran the films off and sent them back.

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[36:15](#) GN: Yeah of course, the technology was not as advanced as it was today.

[36:19](#) RL: No, it was sixteen-millimeter and. If you had a sixteen-millimeter camera, that was state of art then. And we did. So that's what we used. We also tried to do film exchange which we discovered was hard because not all of the coaches that I was playing against or coaching against were honorable men and they would cheat. And so we had. I mean I actually had one coach who hired one of my former assistants to sit in the stands with a lip reader and read my lips. Because he wanted to get that advantage over us. (laughter)

[37:20](#) GN: That's really pushing it.

[37:23](#) RL: For club football. That was... I thought a little bit ridiculous. But it did happen. We did all of that stuff. We would show the film to the players on Sunday nights. We would meet every Sunday if we weren't playing on a Sunday. We would meet every Sunday at 10.30 in the morning look at the films ourselves. Break down into the offense and defense. Have a game plan ready for the players when they came in at seven o'clock at night.

[38:00](#) GN: When the players would come in, were the line ups pretty much formed? You know who was going to play. They know who was going to play by and large.

[38:09](#) RL: You might not know until seven o'clock on Sunday night who was hurt. They were supposed to tell us. But none of them wanted to be taken out so they wouldn't.

[38:21](#) GN: "I will be alright."

[38:24](#) RL: You have that. But there were never a lot of position competition. Because we didn't have enough people. We typically would have by the early part of the season, forty-five and forty-six guys playing. So that was enough for a defensive unit and offence unit and some subs for each. And specialists.

[38:57](#) GN: Okay. Let's fast forward. Well before that in that period of the growing up phase, tell

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me about some memorable game. Is there one that might stick more than other?

[39:13](#) **RL:** Well the initial story of stories of course was the fog game where we played Manhattan in the fog.

[39:23](#) **GN:** And Bob Norman was calling it.

[39:24](#) **RL:** Bob Norman was calling the game in the fog

[39:26](#) **GN:** At least what he thought was the game.

[39:29](#) **RL:** And we actually win the game on a touchdown pass which God knows, we got off and it got caught.

[39:29](#) **GN:** The original Hail Mary.

[39:41](#) **RL:** Well it was close in. We weren't throwing it from a long distance but still, if it hadn't been caught, the game would have ended, nothing-nothing. That was the initial one, I think that. The next...

[39:57](#) **GN:** Who was that against?

[39:59](#) **RL:** That was against Manhattan. And the game that actually probably told us we had actually reached the point where we were as good as everybody else would happen a few years later. A number of times. But the first time it happened, we played Albany State here on homecoming and beat them 49-nothing and they'd been undefeated before that game. After that I think Marist football players started to believe that there really wasn't anybody that we were going to schedule that we couldn't beat and. We didn't win the national championship that year We lost at the end to Seton Hall on a field goal kick. To St John's on a field goal kick. But two years later, we would go undefeated and beat everybody and then actually play Seton Hall in bowl game when they were a Division Three football team. And we only lost them by one point. So we had the two undefeated seasons. After that, the kids felt they could play anybody. Beat

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anybody if they got things going. We had some tremendous victories, Westchester in 1972 and Oswego State in 1974 which were really memorable. We also lost a ballgame 41-40 on the last second. That was just as memorable, believe it or not. So I would say that by 1969. The kids had reached the point where they really thought they could win every game.

[42:05](#) **GN:** This is four or five years now. It started in '65.

[42:08](#) **RL:** Well four years. We played three seasons.

[42:10](#) **GN:** Let's fast-forward a little bit now to the present time. What has kept football alive here? Some schools have dropped it. And I was wondering. Is it this spirit you just talked about that they thought they could match anyone else? And it spreads the yeast though the dough as it were.

[42:35](#) **RL:** Two words. This is only my opinion. But the two words are Dennis Murray. He has an abiding faith in college athletics. And he has been behind the growth of football at Marist College to what it is today and solidly behind it. On the players' side of it, the faith is still there. Marist. Now, I don't know what's going to happen this season. Because they're in there going into an entirely new concept. And I don't think anybody really knows how it's going to work out. But up to now, Marist has been able to find like schedules with teams with like goals which didn't involve scholarship football. So I would say that without meeting these kids up to now. Eighty to ninety percent of the kids playing football at Marist are the same kid that came to Marist before. They're not being recruited anywhere else. They're not being given any money anywhere else. They still want to play football. Marist is a great school. It's a great place to get a liberal arts education. And they come here and lots of the other old teams have dropped in Iona most recently. Siena. They reach the point where they didn't believe they could function anymore. I don't think that the ultimate Marist kid has changed. Now, I suspect. We're going to

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be entering a period where we need more blue-chip athletes. And the big test is going to be how to get them since we're not going to be giving scholarships.

[44:52](#) **GN:** Well I think there's a ticket out there for the stadium that would kind of impressed students who don't make it at Notre Dame and don't make it at, you know, the big schools.

[45:02](#) **RL:** You probably haven't noticed but everybody has one of those things out there. Well least we have one now and that will make a big difference. There's no doubt about it. We have a dedicated coaching staff. I understand they expanded it this year which is going to be very helpful because recruiting is going to be very important. We've got to get kids in from the states that Marist has never even been seen in. We're playing. I think the nearest team in our league is four-hundred miles away. Wow that's a an entirely new concept. And it's easy to say, "Well we can get a kid in from California or a kid in from Florida. Or North Carolina." But it isn't any kid. It's got to be the blue-chipper cause we're not going to get the blue-chipper from home. There aren't that many in this part of New York State. And the ones that exist get scholarships and go somewhere else. It's places like California and Florida, North Carolina where football is so big that and the programs are so good that there are kids that just get lost in the shuffle. Florida is turning out two-hundred, eighty-eight, top-level, division-one football scholarships every year. That's... But they've got like ten division-one teams. That's not even enough for them. So there's a tremendous number of kids playing football down there.

[46:55](#) **GN:** Who just don't make it to the next level.

[46:56](#) **RL:** Who aren't going to get the big money. And are they there for us? Absolutely. Finding them is going to be a big job. And I don't know what the plan is. So I don't know really where they're going but I know they're spending the time they have to try to locate these kids and get them to play.

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[47:22](#) **GN:** So this then unless we play in places like North Carolina or even California, Pennsylvania. People wouldn't know we're here

[47:37](#) **RL:** No doubt about it.

[47:38](#) **GN:** And so the name has to be able to recognized not only in public opinion polls. But also in the athletic program.

[47:46](#) **RL:** And the fact is that there would have been other choices, we could have chosen to go scholarship and play against lower-level scholarship teams in the northeast and go back to the Northeast Conference. Now the good thing about that would have been that we were playing teams that aren't too far away and the bad thing would have been that they've got, they're giving out ten scholarships and we're not. And so that was a choice. Another choice which I at least have heard, they tried to do was to go into the Patriot League which is not scholarship football. But a very high-level none-scholarship football similar to the Ivies. Fordham was very unsuccessful in the Patriot League and I don't know that we would have even been able to qualify but that would have been another direction. The reality is they've made a choice. It appears to be the best choice. And if it doesn't work out, they'll be the ones to make that decision and make another choice. The field is one reason to keep making choices. You don't build that kind of a field to drop sports.

[49:23](#) **GN:** Right. It has a number of other uses but football is the prime.

[49:28](#) **RL:** No doubt.

[49:29](#) **GN:** That's where it filled up. They don't fill up to watch the soccer game, you know. They really do come on a Saturday afternoon and there's just, as you mentioned before, you know the whole college spirit is involved.

[49:45](#) **RL:** If this program pans out and they become competitive in this league, the time will

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come when you're going to see seats on the other side of that field. Because this community can support thirty-five hundred, four thousand people every Saturday night in the fall. If you're playing Dayton and San Diego and now these are big schools. And this isn't the old Marist-Siena rivalry. This is big time athletics and the only solution is to win if you win. Ten thousand people want to come and see you play.

[50:38](#) **GN:** It's not important. It's the only thing, Lombardi might say.

[50:40](#) **RL:** I never had any doubt about that. Winning is really the only reason to be playing a sport like football. It's hell to everyone involved in it. It's brutal. It's violent. It requires more time than anybody should ever have to spend on even on a job. It's getting loyal wives to put up with it. Everything about that sport if it's played right, isn't any different. Whether the name is the New York Giants or Marist College. The guy that you're playing against is going to make you work hard to beat him.

[51:30](#) **GN:** What then would you say are the positive effects of...? Why should you keep football? What will it do for the students?

[51:40](#) **RL:** It's a learning process. All of its own. It teaches a value system that does not get taught in the normal educational value. And at a place like Marist. That value system is being taught to people whose athletic careers would have ended the day they became a freshman. If it had meant going to bigger and better schools because none of them were going to play at bigger and better schools. The idea that you're just going to walk on a major college program anymore doesn't exist. This is still amateur football. You can call it what you want. But this is non-scholarship opportunities for kids who have been overlooked. Either because they're not good enough or because they got lost in the shuffle. And that kid is not going to come here and then transfer somewhere else. He's going to come here and spend this four years here. And if he's

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successful in his sport, he will graduate with a lot more on the learning curve than if he had just been a student. Coming here as a day student. I believe that. I never have lost that idea of what college athletics is all about it was the way I went to school. It was the way I learned. And I believe that the same lessons are being learned at Marist. I know the head coach. I know what he is. And I know that his kids are getting the same value system taught to them that they would have been getting if I was still here.

[54:08](#) GN: I have talked to some of your players. There seems to be a certain comradery as well that develops long lasting. The guys that have left here, twenty years ago, are still very much bonded if that's the word they used.

[54:25](#) RL: I must tell you that in the lightweight football program last year was the fiftieth anniversary of Coach Cullen going to Cornell as the lightweight football coach and it happened to be my fiftieth anniversary as well. Because that was my first year on the team and seven hundred fifty people turned up for the party. That's an enormous number. Considering that the the first day, I played against Princeton there. It might have been thirteen people in the stands. I ran the good fortune to turn up last fall also at West Point for my personal fiftieth anniversary of playing against West Point and discovered that it was their fiftieth anniversary. And lo and behold, I got to spend three hours with a group of West Point guys who had played against me in that game fifty years ago. So what you're seeing at Marist is really normal. It's a brotherhood. And it's a fun brotherhood. It's... There isn't anybody who lasted through four years of a college athletic program and doesn't have mostly good memories.

[56:02](#) GN: If you had an occasion to talk to the Board of Trustees here. It is something you want to say to them to encourage them maybe in this venture spending nine million bucks for a stadium. When there are other needs might be questioned. It was questioned by some of the

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lower staff here.

[56:26](#) **RL:** Well here's the answer to your question. I retired when Marist went varsity. I was not unhappy with their decision to go varsity. I was unhappy with their decision to go varsity and then try to do on a shoestring. But in my case it wouldn't have made any difference what I was happy or unhappy about. Because I couldn't be a full time football coach on what they were going to be willing to pay me. So I had six kids and it was time to and one of them was going to be going to college the next year. It was time to give someone else the opportunity. Six years later when they were seriously consider dropping it because they couldn't win. I received some inquiries about whether or not I would be willing to come back and help and I met with some people up here and I said, "Look. Before I am going to answer your question or even say anything, this is what I want to see from you folks. Because I haven't been following that closely I know whether you win or lose." But that's pretty much it. And I went over everything all the information that they had. And I said, "Look, I think I'll come back as an assistant." This is really the direction I would like to see you going. You're not doing these things right. And more often than not that explains the losses. I retired again after two years. I didn't think they took some of the things that I said seriously. Mike Malet eventually got fired. The new guy came in. Did not win a lot of games. And then they started to turn the program around. And they started to beat people and get into a plus situation which I thought was great. This is hard work, this business of running the football. I mean if anyone from the board of directors actually said, "We'd like you come and sit down." I'd probably tell of the same thing that I told Brian Cleary twenty years ago. Here give me all this information and let me read up on it and then I'll answer any question you want. I think that they've got enormous possibilities here but it is a critical moment in time. They're going to have to see if they can actually run a program in this new...

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[59:43](#) **GN:** the new league.

[59:44](#) **RL:** Well that's not necessarily the new league. It's the new world that they've been left with. There is no one left now who was part of the original club football situation. We're it. Iona's gone. Siena gone and Manhattan's gone. All of those schools are finished. St Johns even. You tell me Saint John's can't run a football program. They chose not to. And they had a gorgeous fields with more stands than here. Iona built a field on campus and they've dropped football. This is a critical moment. More of the business considerations are going to come to bear. I don't think they'll ever run out of kids that want to come here and play football. If I was younger, I'd signed up for the first position that was available on the gym staff. No matter what position was. That's the greatest thing that I ever got out of it. So I don't think that will ever change the question. The issue is not going to be. The kid. The issue is going to be whether you can make it work within a system that's changing in probably the wrong direction. It's all about the basketball money unfortunately. And a lot of schools like Marist are in football in part because they need the sport to qualify for the Division One basketball program. In the olden days, Marist could be a Division three football team and a division one basketball team but that's not allowed anymore so. The needs of schools like Marist are not, I think, addressed by big-time athletics. They could care less whether Marist becomes a Division three basketball program or a division one basketball program. You're on your own. They haven't set up Division one athletics for the lower echelon Division one programs. And you've got to make it work. Dennis will make it work if it's possible.

[01:02:29](#) **GN:** It is complex. Because of all of the fact is that you've been talking about now.

[01:02:34](#) **RL:** well think about this for a minute. Dayton, Ohio is in the hotbed of college football. Ohio State, Michigan. These schools are all forty miles apart. And here you are now

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going to take out a team that has won at this level regularly. The kid that didn't make it to Ohio State who lives a hundred miles down the road in Canton, Ohio. The odds are he's a lot better than the kid from Wappinger's who didn't make it. The odds are he's been trained better. He's played more football. He can walk on that Dayton campus and they've got a stud. And we're trying to find one from Ohio. The same thing is true in Florida. The same thing is true in California. Talking about the University of San Diego, it's gotta be fifteen thousand boys playing high school football within fifty miles of the San Diego campus. They can't all play at Berkeley. But a lot of them can still play pretty well. And we're going to have to figure out how to get that kid onto our campus.

[01:04:05](#) **GN:** Throw the big net out there and see what you can bring in. But I mean make it an attractive campus would be one step in that direction once they see it here. You know.

[01:04:15](#) **RL** Now I've always had a thought. Our great years came when we started hitting the transfer the drop the junior college kid. And that's what we had our best teams and we got kids who were blue chippers whose careers didn't pan out where they went. There's a lot of risk in that.

[01:04:51](#) **GN:** you have to be open to them on all levels and academically put them into program that are satisfactory.

[01:04:57](#) **RL:** There's a lot of risk but it made it may be that our next Nigel Davis will come just that way. He'll be a blue chipper who didn't make it where he started. And then turns out. Oh anybody would have ... Nigel's case a perfect way to get players. Nigel went away as a freshman 190-pound fullback. Two years later Nigel played for me as a 250-pound fullback. He grew up in that period if the coach had redshirted him if he had been 210 pounds when he got there. He would have never come back to Marist. But he was 190 when he got there. He was too small.

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They didn't like it. They got rid of him. If somebody had said the coach you know you're a dummy, when you needed to weigh 225. The coach would have said well I don't have crystal ball. And I made a decision to keep somebody else. But that's reality. And there are a lot of these kids wandering around. Somebody is going to have to spend the time and effort and have the good fortune to find them.

[01:06:15](#) **GN:** So we need volunteers to be scouts as it were to kind of checking on to see what's happening out there.

[01:06:21](#) **RL:** Well, you need a coaching network. Yeah. I got Nigel because his coach knew that he was working as a security guard at IBM and said to me why don't you call the Davis kid. I didn't know he was back in Poughkeepsie. But you know. You have coaches that know how to work a coaching network. I mean. You know a lot of Professionals.

[01:06:55](#) **GN:** Well we've got a good hour or so there. Ron, is there anything I didn't ask that you would like to say? It's certainly been a pleasure. Just hearing out and getting your insights because they are precious and.

[01:07:11](#) **RL:** I will tell you that. We had in the city of Poughkeepsie, a photographer the name of (James) Whitey Deckner. He was an albino. And he was actually I think probably more or less my age. And he had gone to work for the journal as a photographer after high school. And the first day of practice. They sent him over to take pictures of the team. My wife made a practice of bringing my sons down to the field as many days as she possibly could. At that particular time there were only two. Stephen was about two weeks old. But there they were in their uniforms for reasons known only to Whitey. He took a picture of Ronnie and Michael in their red jerseys under a tree holding a football and. But he took it in black and white. There are pictures that just frame a moment. This picture does that. The season was over. We were three and three. It was

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Christmas time. I got a phone call to stop at the journal for they were having you know little informal drinks and sandwich just before Christmas and I knew a lot of the guys who were working there. Anyway and so I stopped on my way home and after a bit, they announced that they were going to give a gift and I opened up the gift and here was this picture in a frame. Totally unsolicited, a real Christmas gift. Yeah. And that picture sits on my wall at home on my wall in the office. On our wall in Vero Beach. On the walls of both of the sons who are in the picture. Which you can do now because of modern technology. And I don't have to look any further than that to know what all it meant to me. I have another picture of my daughter who at eighteen months joined the Marist cheerleaders. And in our and was a cheerleader in both of our undefeated seasons when she was just a toddler. So it was a program that encompassed all of our excitement and thinking and development as a family. And we tried very hard to give as many of the players an opportunity to participate in that. And I think we probably did a decent job.

[01:11:02](#) GN: Oh Ron let me tell you as one of the Marist faculty for forty years. I mean I knew Bob Norman very well. I heard the game. That was being announced in the fog. I was in Esopus that Saturday night. And I know. And it's just. It's important to kind of let you know as a staff member here you know your contribution to this institution is really unique. And it stands out there. It is in stone. And it will be preserved for many years to come.

[01:11:35](#) RL: Yeah it is it's a gorgeous place. Well worth the trip. And in my case the trip was above fifty years. Almost.

[01:11:45](#) GN: thank you.