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Goodbye Coach Ranager

Colby Jubenville

I said goodbye to my college football coach, Tommy Ranager, Wednesday at a funeral home in Brandon, Miss., and it made me reflect on the moments in my life that have defined who I am, what I do, and why I matter.

I would like to share with you a story that I think might take you back to your playing days, back to a time when you had a relationship with a coach. You might see a piece of yourself in this and feel compelled to call your coach and tell him or her what he or she means to you before you lose that chance and have to do it silently like I did.

More than any one group, coaches have impacted my life by providing opportunities to help me find my unique voice. By modeling leadership in this way, they teach their players how to close execution gaps and ultimately create cultures that give birth to the potential of people.

I have been around some great coaches in my life. My high school coaches Charlie Miller and Bob Rutledge were some of the most successful coaches in the Mobile, Ala. coaching circles. Those who follow Millsaps football may recognize Rutledge as a former Millsaps standout and Hall of Fame inductee.

Because of coaches Miller and Rutledge, I decided I wanted to play college football for Coach Ranager at Millsaps, and at that point, I sealed my own destiny.

Coach Ranager had such a powerful impact on my life that I was convinced I wanted to coach college football, and in 1998, I helped start the football team at Belhaven College with another Mississippi coaching legend, Norman Joseph.

Prior to starting that football team at Belhaven, I wrote a dissertation while



completing a doctoral degree at The University of Southern Mississippi on the coach/student-athlete relationship largely based on my Millsaps experience and what I endured with Coach Ranager over a four-year period.

Today, I am charged with building the next generation of leaders in the sport industry as a faculty member at Middle Tennessee State University. On campus, I've had the opportunity to develop a strong relationship with head football coach Rick Stockstill, who has moved the MTSU football program to an unprecedented level of success and implemented a system that catapulted MTSU from worst to first in the NCAA Academic Progress Rate (APR) in his third year at MTSU.

My relationship with Coach Stock reminds me of what I've known for some time: coaches matter. They make a difference. And Coach Tommy Ranager was no different.

Coach Ranager was destined to coach football, and more specifically, he was destined to coach me. It's easy to say that now, but as I look back and reflect on my life, without his presence and his will, I can say without an ounce of doubt I would not be the person I am today. Here's why.

In the late summer of 1990, my parents

dropped me off at Millsaps College, entrusted me at the tender age of 18 to Coach Ranager, and departed from the campus onto Woodrow Wilson Drive, back to what was normalcy in Mobile. They did not look behind them as they drove away. I know that because I looked and waited for them to turn around, and they never did.

Scared, uncertain of my future, and wondering what the next step would be in my life, I soon realized that I now had a new life, a life under Coach Ranager.

During my first practice session, Coach Ranager walked up to me, looked into my eyes, and said, “*Corey*, I’m gonna send you back to Mobile in a pine box.”

Remember, my name is not *Corey*, it’s *Colby*.

Coach Ranager called me *Colby* only one time in my career at Millsaps, a moment that I’ll reveal later.

Later during that first August football camp, Coach Ranager made me and go through drills helmetless because the equipment manager did not have one to fit me.

Ranager liked that. He laughed and said, “Well, *Corey*, I guess you’re just gonna have to practice without one!”

I thought to myself, This can’t be happening! It simply just could not be. But it was.

It was the first step Coach Ranager took in imposing his will on me, just like he did with others around me. He didn’t do it for control. He didn’t do it for a power play.

He did it because he wanted to see exactly what a player could handle. He did it because he wanted to see where each player was and where each player wanted to go. He did it because he realized one simple idea that seems to be hidden from plain sight today: the efforts that got me to that point in my life would not be sufficient to get me to where he wanted me to go, and he accepted the responsibility to create the struggle inside and outside myself that he knew I needed if I was to make a difference in

my life and the lives of others.

Little did I realize it then, but Coach Ranager was helping me to develop a set of philosophies that I still use today.

Looking back on my time at Millsaps with Coach Ranager, it became clear to me that adversity must be used as a way to accelerate growth.

Ranager did not allow players to shy away from adversity.

He taught you to take it head-on so that you could truly understand exactly where you were in the process of improvement.

For him, it was the perfect truth.

It was you versus your fears, and Coach Ranager was focused on teaching a premise to help you attack them: the man makes the moment, the moment does not make the man.

I didn’t play much my freshman year as I backed up Flint Minshew (a martial arts black belt that looked like Kyle Van den Bosch with hair) and Sean Brewer (the last three-time NCAA Division III All-American).

I saw them both at the funeral, and memories of the time we spent playing for Coach Ranager (particularly those times before practices spent discussing what we would do later that night) came rushing back—memories of a simpler time where all we had to do was study, roam the halls of the Kappa Sigma house, and play to the level that Coach Ranager demanded, which seemed impossible then.

My freshman year was full of doubt about my purpose, my ability, and myself, and Ranager clearly saw it, but he was a master at bringing someone along.

I did not know it then, but Ranager was shaping my values for the future and making sure that I was mentally, emotionally, and physically ready for the challenges that lay ahead.

As a defensive lineman, I would constantly see him point and hear him yell to me, “*Corey*, stay low man! You’re gettin’ blown off the ball!”

Later, as a young coach at Belhaven, I would find myself using the same techniques as Ranager, pointing my fingers the same way he did, and it made me laugh.

Many times in later years, I wanted to call him and tell him how much he influenced me, but I didn't know where to begin, and didn't know what I would say, or how he might respond. Maybe I was still afraid of him.

As I have learned, you far regret the things you don't do in life much more than you regret the things you did, and I greatly regret not telling him what was on my heart.

I will have to live the rest of my life knowing that I didn't get a chance to tell him thank you, and quite frankly, it's one of the reasons I felt compelled to say goodbye and travel to see Coach one last time at his funeral.

Coach Ranager believed in doing the little things correctly, and it showed in the way that he interacted with his players.

I remember one time before lights-out on a road trip when Coach Ranager walked into a room where, as freshmen, Will Jacks and I busy doing what freshmen do. He looked right at us, smirked, and said, "I hate freshmen," and turned around and walked out. We got the point.

As his players became sophomores, Coach Ranager would interact with them more, and

from time to time, he would call us into his office.

Once, he called me to come in because he had something he wanted to ask me. My older brother Brady played at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tenn., while I was playing at Millsaps, and that game was one Coach wanted to win badly every year. The week of the Rhodes game, Coach Ranager called me in and demanded that I tell him if I gave my brother our playbook, since they had beaten us the year before, and he was convinced that was why.

I assured him I didn't, and he responded, "Well, we will see." We lost to Rhodes that year as well, but we did win the Southern Collegiate Athletic Conference (SCAC) for the first time in school history.

I'm not sure if he believed me, but I do know he took great pride in that SCAC championship. I know this because he went all-out to show us in his own way by buying us a t-shirt that read "Millsaps College Football—1991 SCAC Champions."

No rings, no banquet, just a gray t-shirt that Coach Ranager handed out to us individually.

I tried to quit every year that I played for Coach Ranager, but he would never let me. I would walk into his office, with my head down, and he would look at me and say, "Come on in!"

I would pause, sit, and say, "Coach, I don't want to play football anymore." He would sit there and stare at me for about two minutes and say, "Go get your pads on, and I will see you on the practice field. We have some work to do today."

I would stand up, say, "Yes sir," and walk out.

I would call my dad in Mobile and say the same thing, and my dad would say, "You have to make that decision, not me." My dad would later reveal that he knew that phone call would come every year, and he was always ready with the



same response. We laugh about that now as if it was part of the script that was collaboratively written for me by him and Coach Ranager.

What they *did* collaborate to teach me was that true leadership commands us to see the good in someone, even when they can't see it in themselves.

Coach Ranager would rarely show that side of himself to you, but when he did, you recognized it for what it was, and it kept you going.

During the season, Monday afternoons meant film sessions, and they were never a pleasant experience. In fact, I always dreaded them. He would play the tapes that documented my mistakes over and over, and say, "You see, Corey, that's how you should NOT play defensive tackle!"

Once again, he was pushing me to see how I would respond to the adversity he created.

During the funeral, the pastor called Coach Ranager a "difference maker," and I had to agree just by looking at the legacy he left in the people who were sitting around me.

Tim Turner was sitting next to me, and his brother J.T. was seated behind me. They own a chemical company in Jackson, Miss. Sean Brewer sat two people over on my pew, and he was recently selected as one of the top assistant principals in the state of Mississippi. Shane Reed, a civilian contractor for the United States Air Force, was seated behind me. Others were present, too, but just that quick glance made it clear that Coach Ranager delivered on the promise of turning young boys into men.

Also at the funeral, I saw coaches whom I had not seen in many years, like former Millsaps Head Football Coach and Athletic Director Ron Journey and former Millsaps Offensive Coordinator Joe Don Samples. We reflected on our time together and the experiences we had with Coach Ranager.

I heard current Millsaps Assistant Athletic Director and Head Baseball Coach Jim Page

speak, and it reminded me of the role he played with my development while he was an assistant football coach under Ranager.

Jim was the encourager. He realized what we were up against with Coach Ranager, since he had been through it himself. Coach Page made sure he worked a positive word at some point in practice, during a film session or after a game.

Jim would tell freshman that he was related to Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin and as a freshman, I believed him. At that point, I needed something—*anything*—to believe in, and Coach Page gave me that.

My junior and senior seasons came and went in a blur, all affording me chances to seize in the form of mid-afternoon kickoffs where I could line up and compete, win or lose. In the end, we probably won about as many as we lost, but in either case, Coach Ranager was riding me every step of the way. We finally beat Rhodes my junior and senior years to even the family record at 2-2. Coach liked that.

In the end, the bus rides (including a 27-hour odyssey to Colorado College), the bad hotels, and the cafeteria food (with a six-dollar limit) taught me that in anything I do, a price must be paid, and a process must be followed to achieve and excel.

Coach also taught me that any worthwhile win in my life would present many roadblocks to overcome before I experienced the success that I sought.

In 1993, I got my first real "win" in life, and of all of the other degrees or awards that I have earned in my life, it's the one I still cherish the most. Coach Ranager presented me with the Defensive Lineman of the Year award in 1993 at a small banquet at the conclusion of our senior season.

Dubious of his intentions, I was shocked that he called my name, and remember saying to myself, "He is doing this to make a point."

I cautiously walked up, he put out his hand, and I shook it. He nodded his head, looked me

in the eyes, and said, “Colby, you’ve earned it.”

It was the first time in my life I felt like I had earned his respect, and I knew that I was ready to take the next step. It was my first private victory in my adult life, and knew that there would be many more to come. It was a defining moment for me and one that set my course, galvanized my knowledge and experience I received at Millsaps, and, ultimately, led me to where I am today.

Soon after, I left Millsaps College with everything I owned in the back of a 1987 Isuzu Trooper II. As I exited the Millsaps gates one last time with a degree in my hand, a championship shirt on my back, and a letter jacket neatly tucked away with the rest of my belongings, I made that same left turn onto Woodrow Wilson Drive my parents made almost four years before and was on my way to the next set of challenges waiting for me.

In a final analysis, it’s apparent that at Millsaps students learn to do two things well: critically think and write.

Student-athletes who played for Coach Ranager learned how to do so much more.

The day after the funeral, the *Nashville Business Journal* honored me as one of Nashville’s Forty under 40, a group recognized for outstanding contributions through dynamic leadership within their industries in Middle Tennessee. It was a wonderful event that recognized people who are impacting the community in a positive and powerful way.

Each honoree was able to give a three-word speech as part of the acceptance process. If the speech went over three words, a charge of



\$25.00 per word was assessed with the proceeds going to Junior Achievement of Nashville.

My name was called, my contribution was noted, and I approached the podium. I gathered myself, looked firmly into the audience and declared, “My college football coach died Monday. Coach, this is for you.”

That 11-word speech cost me \$200.00, but it was worth every penny.

After all, Coach, *you* earned it.

Dr. Colby B. Jubenville is a Professor of Sport Management at Middle Tennessee State University and Director of the Center for Sport Policy and Research (www.sportpolicy.org ; @sportpolicy) and Publisher of the Journal of Sport Administration & Supervision (www.jsasonline.org ; @JSASonline). From 1990-1993, he masqueraded as a defensive tackle for Coach Tommy Ranager and graduated in 1994 from Millsaps College in Jackson, Miss., with a B.A. in History.

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