



Fall is my favorite part of the year – changing of the leaves, relief from sweltering temperatures and of course, football. During the summer I attended the two-day Conference USA Kickoff where I interviewed coaches and players from the fourteen schools. I wondered who of this group was in the one per cent who might see the NFL gridiron in the next few years and which coach was a winner not just in championships, but with lessons in life for his team.

Before the session even started, I had one of those, “This Could Only Happen To Me” moments. I was still trying to get orientated and passed a slender black man in a suit. “Are you Coach Frank Wilson?” No, he wasn’t. He did look to know what he was doing, unlike me, and politely gave me directions to the room set up for the media.

A few hours later, I again saw the mystery man. He was now wearing a Conference USA tag. He asked me how things were going and of course, I excitedly told him about my interviews so far.



We chatted about football and somehow ended up in an area I am passionate about, the NFL. “So who

do you like in the Pros?” I inquired. He grinned. “The 49ers” and then walked away. A photographer I knew from NASCAR walked up to me and said, “Wow, you were talking to the man.... Merton Hanks!” Yes, I googled him when I got home. “Safety San Francisco 49ers... 4 times Pro BowlerDefensive Player of the Year... Super Bowl Champion.” How did I miss that gigantic Super Bowl Ring? A good thing there was a day two!!

It’s no secret with young kids being thrown into the limelight overnight; coaches have their work cut out for them being a manager, mentor and in some cases parent. Imagine having that responsibility to 115 kids between the ages of 18 to 22. It takes special men to be coaches. According to Coach Brad Lambert of Charlotte, “I look at it as I do my own children. I have eighteen years to pack their suitcase. When they leave home, they go with this suitcase. When our guys come in, you have to look at who has been packing their suitcase for the last seventeen years. Some you have to unpack then repack. It’s a fun process, just getting to know kids and bringing the right ones in. Hopefully they leave better men than they came in.”

I asked how the coaches could keep their teams from unpleasant sagas like Baylor’s. Coach Jay Hobson of Southern Miss found that having two daughters of his own is advantageous to getting out his message – “I emphasize the importance of being a good man. I’m always looking for the guy that gets between the white lines – a guy that’s an extreme-

ly physical football player, but outside the lines, it’s my wife, my daughter, their mother.” As he pointed out, the morals and the principles are the same as our era, but young men have to be careful not to put any negative vibe out there especially with social media. We agreed that coaches have their work cut out for them.



Middle Tennessee’s Coach Rick Stockstill embraces the responsibilities. “A good coach wins games, but a great coach saves lives. I want to help these kids learn how to be a good husband, good father, good parent, good son and good person so when they leave my program; they are ready to take on the world.” His athletes must understand “You aren’t going to be able to play football all your life. There are more important things than football – get your education, build relationships that can get you the job you want, get involved in the community and internships. You may play football until you’re only twenty-five.” Unless you’re Merton Hanks, I thought to myself.... Where was he anyway?

I did catch up with Merton toward the end of the session. Known for his interception gyrations during his 49ers’ tenure, he is currently Senior Associate Commissioner of Conference USA. We chatted about his playing under Hayden Frye at the University of Iowa, being drafted into the NFL and life as a 49er as well as after the gridiron. His favorite quarterback to play against? Joe Montana in practice! And his last career interception? Brett Farve on Monday Night Football. His

advice to the kids coming into football? “Don’t specialize in one sport. Play a little bit of everything. Guard against burnout. Guard against injury. Your body only has so many reps.” Merton also played baseball, basketball and ran hurdles in track. “My mom ran track too,” I interjected. “I didn’t take after her. I ran after the track team though.” We laughed in unison.



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Ghosts? Could be. Time warps? Could be. Maybe it’s the longing for what was that propels the ghostly tales. Long lost love, children happily playing in simpler times. Was there a ghost in the Cabaret. Maybe it’s the music of great entertainers hanging in the air, the sound of boot heels on the old wooden dance floor. What about Clairemont and Nameless? I wrote, “It must be terrible to watch your town die around you.” Think of the implications, the energy of bodies and souls who once inhabited these places who might want to go home again.

I have no answers, but it sure is fun to tell stories! I’ll bet you can come up with at least one tale that might indicate a supernatural encounter. Go ahead and tell it. Who knows if in the telling you find a truth, a memory, a shiver, or a whisper in the night that might have been a voice.

BOO!