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Play by Play with Dan McCarney

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Terrible. Pathetic. Utterly inept. Any of these could be used to describe Iowa State football in the years before head coach Dan McCarrney's arrival. But during his 10 seasons in Ames, McCarrney has turned things around. We've seen competitive teams playing before capacity crowds at Jack Trice Stadium, long-elusive wins over Iowa and Nebraska, and even a trio of bowl game appearances.

And though he's in the midst of another hectic season, McCarrney sat down with ethos to talk about halftime speeches, wrestling against Cael, and the trouble with his golf game.

INTERVIEW BY: Ward Philips PHOTO BY: David Osterhaus
ethos: In your 10 seasons here at Iowa State University, you have enjoyed a lot of success. What are your long-term goals for the ISU football program?

Dan McCarney: We want to put this program into a position so that every year we have a chance to be successful and have a real chance to win. We want a program our fans can be proud of every single year, and when a season ends one year, there is great anticipation, excitement, and enthusiasm for the next year. Obviously, we’re always working towards bringing a Big 12 championship to Iowa State. We know it’s an unbelievably tough challenge in this conference – the best in America. All of the resources are limited here – the smallest stadium, the budget is the smallest. We know we battle all of those things, but I enjoy doing things people think we can’t do and what people don’t want us to do. We sure got a long ways to go there. We’ve accomplished a lot, and we plan on doing a lot more in the future.

e: You have definitely proved a lot of critics wrong in the last 10 years.

D.M.: Yeah. You know it’s a tough job – there are no easy ones out there – but it’s a tough job for a lot of reasons. But the people here are fantastic. I love this place.

e: As a former Iowa Hawkeye player and coach, how did it feel beating them as a Cyclone for the first time?

D.M.: It was an unbelievably emotional experience. We went in to Iowa City that day seven years ago, and we were nearly 30-point underdogs. I was just so happy for my players. They had been through so much. And the fans who had gone through 15 years of misery losing that game. So it was a great feeling, a tremendous victory. One of the most thrilling victories we have had. It had a lot to do with us gaining some respect, credibility, and honor in our program because we beat a program that had dominated this school for 15 years.

e: How strong is your loyalty to Iowa and Wisconsin after being such a big part of their programs for so many years?

D.M.: I’ll never forget what the University of Iowa did for me and what the University of Wisconsin did for me. But my loyalty is to Iowa State University, to these fans, and to the people I work for here...

I was a player and coach for over 19 years at the University of Iowa, in some of the greatest years in Iowa football. So I will never forget that. Then I went to Wisconsin. We went from 1-10 to 10-1 and brought the first Rose Bowl Championship to Wisconsin in the history of the school – one of the greatest experiences I have ever had. Then I came here and brought the first bowl championship after a number of years to this school. I am unbelievably appreciative and respectful to all three of these universities. But my loyalty is to Iowa State University. There is no doubt about that.

e: As a former offensive lineman, do you ever get the urge to strap on the shoulder pads and show your players how it’s done?

D.M.: [Smile] Well, once in a while you want to do that, but common sense wins out. I don’t want to end up over at Mary Greenlee Hospital. [Laughs]

e: What are you like in the locker room at halftime?

D.M.: You have got to be yourself. First, you have to make adjustments. You can go in there and holler and scream, but if you are not making good tangible adjustments, then you’re wasting everyone else’s time. If you are only yelling all the time, it ends up just being a roaring train – it goes in one ear and out the other. I have never been a passive guy, however. It is not my personality. I try to be honest with the kids. I try to assess what we have done in the first half and tell them this is what we have to do to win the game. I’ve gone in to locker rooms in every possible scenario, but I think if I am consistent on what has to be done and stress what has to be done, it will have a very positive effect. But there have been times, don’t get me wrong, when players might need to be hugged, they may have to have their spirits lifted. And there is no question that sometimes they might need a size 12 up their rear end. [Laughs]
e: Did you ever consider recruiting Cael Sanderson for the football team?
D.M.: Oh, I would have loved to have him. I don't know where he would have played, but there is always room for Cael Sanderson on this football team. He might be a linebacker, a safety, a fullback...but he is a winner through and through.

e: As a former wrestler yourself, how long do you think you would last against Cael?
D.M.: 10 or 15 seconds at the most, and I would be hearing the words “Off of your back, Mac!”
Cael is just something. He reminds me of the great Dan Gable. He doesn't look like a Greek god, but he sure does wrestle like one. He is so intense, so dominant, and so good. And he is one of those guys who you really pull for in athletics and in life because of the type of person he is. When you can be that successful and that humble at the same time, it is just as good as it gets. I wish I could coach him.

e: When you are not thinking about football, what peaks your interest?
D.M.: My wife and kids. Enjoying my kids' lives through athletics and education is a real pleasure. I have been real involved with my parents and their family. Other than that, I make sure I get at least 30 minutes of exercise every day. It is a good relief mentally as much as physically. In the summertime I play a lot of golf and tennis. I’m OK at tennis, and I stink at golf. (Laughs)

e: What’s your handicap?
D.M.: Oh, I couldn’t even guess how bad I am.