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Visitor

Player-Foul

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Sentinel SPORTS

NAMED 1992
"BEST SPORTS EDITION"
1st Place
By the
West Coast
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Photo: Salli Nyberg

UNLV running backs coach Joe Saunders maintains a close watch on his players from the sidelines during game time.

W.G. Ramirez

When Joe Saunders began his coaching career, he was a fresh college graduate from the University of Nevada-Reno with a passion to mold young football players into potential college stars, as well as professional candidates.

It began in the Reno area, at Hug High School, where he had some contacts that helped him get a position coaching the freshman team. It was a unique experience for Saunders, who says, "I really wasn't that far removed, as far as age, from their seniors who were 17, 18 years old." Saunders was 22 at the time, had a bachelor's degree in education, and was able to relate real well with the players.

He moved over to Reed High School, then back to Hug, during an eight-year period that saw his mind drift away from some-

thing he says he felt was a priority in his life. As a result, he briefly retired from coaching any type of football.

"I got out of coaching for a while because I felt like I needed to go back to school and I was putting a lot of time into high school coaching," admits Saunders. "I wanted to go back and get my masters or at least work on some credits toward my masters. That allowed me to pull back and take a look at where I wanted to go with coaching."

In 1988, Saunders had spoken with UNR Head Coach Chris Ault about a part-time or graduate-assistant position with the Wolfpack but there was nothing available. Instead he moved back to his hometown, Seattle, in 1989.

Thanks to a friendship that he was able to maintain, Saunders landed a graduate-assistant job with the Washington

Huskies in April of 1991, coaching their receivers. Saunders admits that, "It's pretty much who you know, and that's really how this business works."

Although he says it's not the same as being an actual position coach, Saunders was a part of the staff that coached the Huskies to the National Championship that season.

When Saunders attended Walla Walla (Washington) Community College and UNR, he starred as a defensive back. Many position coaches are best at the position they actually played, but according to Saunders, there is no being picky when you go in as a GA.

"As a graduate assistant you go in at any position that they have available, because you want to get in," says Saunders. "It, not necessarily, is the position that you may want to coach. I did want to work with the secondary, and that's why my second stint as a graduate assistant, I went to University of Nevada and actually did work with the secondary."

When Jeff Horton was hired as head coach for UNLV, he brought eight assistants with him, including Saunders.

"When I got my head coaching job, he was the first guy I hired full-time," Horton says. "He does a great job with the running backs instilling toughness. He's very aggressive and he gets the kids to play like that, and that's why I really like him."

"If you ever notice the practice area where Joe is at, it's got the most toys. He coaches hard, he works the kids hard, he really relates well them. I think he's one of the brightest young coaches in college football," added Horton.

UNLV's offensive threat may be in the air, but according to Horton, without a quality running game, his passing attack means nothing.

"Our running game really makes our passing game that much better, so we have to be effective running the ball," says Horton. "Joe does a good job blending it all in, making the kids feel like they're a part of the whole show."

Saunders does his share of recruiting as well, and says that there is different attributes he looks for when seeking out high school talent.

"From our staff, we pretty much outline what we'd like to see per position," says Saunders. "The intangible things are also what we bring into play and we're talking about character with those kids. Do they have a desire to be great players? Do they have a desire to be great students? Those are things that we look for outside of - 'the kid is 6-4, 250 lbs.'"

"Obviously you have to stress the academic side. You're not talking to parents and coaches about this young man unless he can play. If he has the skills, than I go beyond that and make sure that the kid is lined up for proper classes his senior season and make sure that he's taking care of summer school if he needs to make up some classes."

Saunders feels there are as many advantages as there are disadvantages for young athletes heading into college.

"The advantages are the same all the way across, for all student-athletes. They are able to get an education paid for being on scholarship, to be involved in the college process and take advantage of that. Hopefully they take advantage for the full five years."

"The disadvantage for the kids, at different times, is that they're discarded along the way because they were marginal players or because they didn't meet someone's expectations."

Saunders also feels there is a strong message that young Black student-athletes must understand.

"As an African-American student-athlete, they have to come with their eyes open and be very honest with themselves about college athletics. Number one, there is a low percentage of college athletes that go on to pro athletics. Come in open-minded and thinking those thoughts, as a freshman, you're gonna excel and you're gonna do the very best you can. (Plus) you're gonna maximize your opportunity in the classroom to the fullest extent. I think at different times, we have a tendency to look at the picture of athleticism only and not look at the academic side. The priority is academics."

At home, Saunders is a family man to wife Joyce and their three children. (See Saunders, Page 22)

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