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HIGH SCHOOL

Respect and admiration for Carpenter is undeniable

Tom Wilson Lancaster Eagle-Gazette

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I remember the first time I met Rob Carpenter. Of course, it was on a football field. The Golden Gales were practicing, and to be honest, I was a little nervous and apprehensive at first to go up to him.

I knew he had played in the NFL and knew that he coached the Lancaster football team, and even though I have interviewed famous people before, this was a little different.

I slowly walked over to him and introduced myself and let him know that I would be covering the Golden Gales. We just kind of watched practice and didn't say much to each other, but I do remember just from our little interaction together and walking away that day thinking, this guy is so down to earth and easy to talk to.

Little did I know that day back in 2014 that we would build up more than a coach-reporter relationship. We not only built a good working relationship but a friendship that I will always cherish. Coach Carpenter retired this past November after coaching the Golden Gales for 23 seasons.

For the past seven seasons, I would make a point to go to Lancaster's football practices, usually twice a week, just so I could talk with coach Carpenter. I obviously didn't need to do that, but it was something I wanted to do because I thoroughly enjoyed our conversations, and man, did we have some interesting ones.

Coach Carpenter is one of a kind. When I think of Lancaster football, I think of Rob Carpenter, but through the years I quickly realized he was more than a great coach. He is a wonderful husband, father, grandfather, and if you are his friend, he is as loyal as anyone I have ever met. More than anything, he is genuine.

I think the world of him and feel blessed and honored that I was not only able to have a working relationship with him, but a friendship that I will cherish forever, but I don't want to

get ahead of myself.

Back to that summer of 2014 when we first met. Maybe it was because I was a little older than most reporters he has dealt with, and to be honest, I'm not sure why we clicked right from the start, but we did.

We talked about so many things, and most of the time, it wasn't even about football. We talked about his childhood and how he loved growing up in Lancaster and his love of playing for the Golden Gales. We talked about his four sons, Bobby, Jonathan, Georgie, and Nathan. It was obvious that he was proud of each one of them and how successful they each have become as adults. We talked about his wife, Susie, and the amazing job she has done with swimmers at Valley View.

I would ask him questions about playing in the NFL, and he was more than happy to tell me his war stories, whether it be about Earl Campbell, Kenny Stabler, Lawrence Taylor, Bum Phillips, or Bill Parcells.

He talked about the love he had for his high school coach, Earl Jones, and about his first head coaching job at New Lexington and his star player, Danny Finck.

He talked about how he could have remained in one of the big cities where he played professionally, but he wanted to come back home to Lancaster and raise his family, and how he always wanted to come back and be the head football coach at Lancaster.

He talked about his relationship with the late Bill Sampson, and how Tony Albertini was the first coach he hired when he got the Lancaster job.

Each year, we just seemed to get more and more comfortable with each other. I talked with him about some personal stuff going on in my life, and he always gave me great advice, including when I almost took a job with Buckeye Sports Bulletin.

I was offered the job and was contemplating what I should do. Should I take the job or not? I thoroughly enjoyed my job at the Eagle-Gazette, but this was a chance to cover Ohio State football.

I asked coach Carpenter what he thought I should do, and he gave me his advice and it stuck with me and will remain personal, but I obviously didn't take the job. From that point on, our relationship grew even stronger.

Fast forward to the night of Lancaster's football banquet. At the end of the banquet, I presented him with two photos, one of me interviewing him for the last time at Fulton Field,

and one of him on the sidelines during his last game, and to my surprise, he in turn, presented me with a photo of him playing for the New York Giants, running the ball against the Washington Redskins and football card when he played with the Houston Oilers.

He wrote on the photo: Tom, Thanks for the best Lancaster football coverage ever, your friend, Rob Carpenter. I have it proudly displayed on my desk.

On Saturday night, coach Carpenter's family had a surprise retirement party for him at his house. He had no idea it was happening. I was honored to be invited.

I know coach Carpenter has impacted a lot of lives during his coaching career. That's what coaches do, but to see it first-hand was amazing. To hear former players and coaches stand up and tell their stories on what Rob Carpenter has meant to them, was amazing, and gave me goosebumps. The love they have for him is undeniable.

I obviously never played for coach Carpenter, and I will never be a part of the brotherhood of Lancaster football, and at times during Saturday night's party, I felt a little out of place because of that, but coach Carpenter never treated me like an outsider. He made me feel like I was a Golden Gale.

As I was saying my goodbyes at the party Saturday night, he was the last one I said goodbye to. We hugged and he thanked me for coming. I started to get emotional and had to walk away quickly, but I did manage to tell him how much I will miss talking with him and how much he meant to me.

Coach Carpenter, I know you have impacted a lot of your players' lives, but you have impacted mine more than you will ever know. The respect and admiration I have for you as a person is something I can't put into words.

You never made coaching about yourself and I have never heard you say a negative thing about anyone. You are always upbeat and positive, which is a wonderful quality to have. Just know that you impacted me in so many ways, more than you will ever know, so thank you for that.

Enjoy your retirement, coach. You deserve it.

twilson@lancastereaglegazette.com

740-681-4358

Twitter: @twil2323

