

Salve Regina Memory Project

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Interviewee: Tim Coen

Interviewer: Renee Dube, class of 2025

Transcript

Introduction: *The following interview was conducted with Tim Coen, the interviewee, and Renee Dube, the interviewer, for the Salve Regina Memory Project. It took place on Thursday, September 22nd, 2022, at Salve Regina University. Tim Coen served as the football coach for Salve Regina from 1992 to 1999. He finished his career at Salve with 53 wins, 12 losses, and an overall .815 winning percentage.*

Renee Dube: What originally sparked your interest in football?

Tim Coen: Well, our family has always been into football. My dad played at Boston College and coached at Brown University for a long time. So, I was always around it. [I] just loved it. I coached for sixteen years high school [football] before this opened. I was in Portsmouth at the time, teaching and coaching. I put my name in at Salve because it seemed like an interesting thing to do. [A] crazy thing to do; starting a program from scratch when there weren't even players here. And I got the job. The first year was interesting. It was go to school at Portsmouth during the day, get changed, rush over here for three o'clock everyday, and try to get a bunch of kids where in some cases had never really played before. A lot of them were kids who just played in high school and weren't thinking about playing in college that decided to come out. They really didn't know much about the game. We got a few kids late that we recruited that were good players. So, we had a few football players and a few guys that were just trying really hard

to learn the game. After practice I would go back into the office over in the baseball field kind of by the parking lot near left field, that's where our offices were at the time. They had really no locker rooms, there was no weight room. So, we'd go [to the office] and just get on the phones and just try to recruit kids all night. I didn't get home until about eleven o'clock. So, I would leave my house at about six to go to school [to] teach. Then [I would] come over here and spend the evening recruiting. After a couple years of that, the administration here put telephone lines in my house so that I could go home after practice and recruit and [make recruiting calls]. That was really helpful, but we spent hours trying to get kids to come. And the big selling point to come here was that if you were a pretty good football player, you could start early, you could play a lot. We got a lot of people that way. We got an awful lot of Rhode Island kids which was our goal. Obviously, we got a lot of kids from New York, and Connecticut and Mass[achusetts], but we got an awful lot of kids from Rhode Island. URI doesn't take a lot of Rhode Island kids; you have to be really good to be playing at that level.¹ So, we would get that kid that was maybe close to playing at URI and they could come here and [we] had a lot of success because of this. So, it was a really fun time, it was a crazy time, but it was a really fun time. The thing about this place was there was no locker room, there was no weight room, so the kids had to be bussed over to the YMCA if they wanted to lift. And kids would come to practice with their practice pants on and their shoulder pads and stuff would be in the back of their trunk. They would be opening their trunks to throw on their uniforms and then run to practice. We practiced, I can't remember the name of it but, you know where the swimming pool is? That dorm that's over there, the big mansion? I don't know the name of it, Carey?² ... We didn't have practice facilities, we didn't

¹ University of Rhode Island

² Carey Mansion was formerly used by Salve for its field. The university no longer rents it.

have locker rooms, the place is so much different now. I kind of went through a few questions at once.

Renee Dube: That's alright. So, we touched a little bit on the field. Toppa field that we use now was in pretty rough shape until about five years ago. Did you ever use the field at Gaudet Middle School in Middletown?

Tim Coen: No, it wasn't available to us then, we didn't have any turf at that time. So, when I was here, we practiced ... [on campus]. There is another place that I don't know the name of. If you go down Annandale about a third of the way down, there was a dorm that was a third of the way back.³ We would get changed there game day and the kids would get taped up and we'd walk down, it was a long driveway, and you'd get to Annandale and then you'd weave yourself down to Toppa field. And we'd do that as a team and it would be kind of cool because all the cars would come and they'd stop and honk at the guys as we were going down to the game so it seems kind of archaic, but it was a fun thing. We would walk to the game, and everyone was pretty proud of the fact that it was our little path to go to the field before every game. So that was different; they don't do that now. There's been a lot of improvements, but I think because of all the things we had to go through, it made us better. It made us harder, the kids were like it's the world against us and we are going to go out and show everyone how we can play. That's probably why we had a lot of success, we had to be tougher than the rest. I have a couple other questions, but you can keep going and then hopefully I'll remember.

Renee Dube: Did you do some of them now? Anything you want to bring up?

Tim Coen: Yeah, game days. If we had an away game, the only people that got bagels in the morning for the bus ride, we had like eighty kids on the bus, were the kids that were on the meal

³Conley Hall

plan. So that means there would be like twenty bagels for eighty kids. So, on my way here, I would stop at the bagel store and buy like sixty bagels or something so everyone had a bagel. I'm sure it doesn't work that way now. The Athletic Department would probably just pay for the kids' breakfast themselves. So, we'd have like a three-hour ride and twenty bagels. It's just that some people didn't realize what it took to have a football team. It was growing pains wherever you went. Like if you had an away game, they would give us meat for after the game for sandwiches. One of the athletic directors I don't remember who it was said, well why don't you just take the pounds of meat and then stop and have like a picnic. You know eighty kids on the football team who are going to have a picnic? You think they are going to slice it up? They are probably just going to stick it in their face. That doesn't make any sense. So, my coaches would have to come two hours before the game, they would get the back of a pickup truck with a little table, and they would have the bread and they would make sandwiches for the kids. So that after the game everyone would have something to eat. That's the kind of thing that went on that was so different from here, for what it is now. This gym that's so nice here, we didn't have anything like that. I remember in daylight savings time would come and we would be over at ... [Carey] and there were no lights [on the practice field]. After an hours practice it's dark. So, one of the guys would put a flashlight to his head and tap it so that he could look at the cards that you have to show. So, we would have that, and kids would circle their cars around the field with the lights on so we could practice at that time in the season. So, the last three weeks in the season when daylight savings was there, we would have to do that everyday. So, we'd circle up the cars and the lights so that we could see and practice. So, things have improved since then, but a small school like this that took the chance on starting a football program which a lot of people probably questioned, because it's expensive. They weren't ready to do the things that we needed

to have done. But the administration was really supportive of me and the athletic program. In my opinion, whenever they saw things happen, they would try to help. They really cared about the program. I mean we played some games [where] the stadium would be packed and the good thing about starting a football program, I think, was Chris Kiernan was the one that started the program, he wanted to do it for male enrollment, I think that was the main reason of it. At the time, the school was probably eighty to ninety percent female. There are instances where now it's probably not much different.

Renee Dube: Yeah, it's about seventy-thirty.

Tim Coen: Yeah, I would think, it's still a lot. At least there is some males here and I think that was one of the major reasons. Football brings a time where the community on campus can have some place to come for a couple hours, and be together. Not necessarily did they come to watch the game, but they came to have fun with their friends. I think it's a good thing for a campus and I think that's why he did it. He was really helpful to me. He was great. He did everything he could to try to get this thing going.

Renee Dube: So, Mr. Vin Petrarca worked in the ADJ department, and was an assistant football coach for a time. Did you have any experiences with him?

Tim Coen: He was my man. He is a good friend of mine. He was extraordinary, a great guy. I don't know if you know him, but he is unbelievable. He's been here close to forty years now. But [he was] energetic, he could be tough, he could be caring. I'd say that without him on campus, and [with] me teaching at a high school program where the head coaches are now all fulltime here. We had none. So, I would run to practice after school, which no one that we played had a coach that wasn't coaching [full time] on campus. It was crazy that we had to do that but all my assistant coaches they would make a thousand bucks, maybe fifteen hundred dollars for

doing all the stuff that we had them do. So, it was not much. I got guys that really loved it. And Vinny, he was my eyes and ears on campus. The kids loved him, feared him because he wouldn't let them just do whatever they wanted to do. If they were messing up, he would be the first person there to know how to correct them. He'd always be there letting me know what was going on around here. He kept track of their academics; he kept track of their social issues as well as being a good coach. He is just a great guy. He was instrumental, I think, in the success of our program.

Renee Dube: What were your experiences with some of the players like? Were there any that were exceptional players, or any players that turned professional?

Tim Coen: No pros, some made All American, some made Academic All American. We had some really good football players, but for the most part, we were like a team of a bunch of guys that got together and cared about each other. I think that was the most important thing and the reason for our success. We did have a spattering of really talented kids, but we also had a bunch of kids that cared about each other. The thing that makes me most proud of the time I coached here was that if you talk to any of our players, and you look on Facebook and stuff, they all follow each other and they hang out together still. They get together even though they've had families. They still care about each other, they get together and they talk regularly, it's the nicest thing, I think, I gained from being a coach here. The kids really appreciated each other and they take great pride in the time that they were here. They loved Salve football, and they still do. So, it's kind of nice.

Renee Dube: That's great. So, your remarkable time here gave you the nickname Salve's Father of Football and led you to be inducted into the Salve Regina Athletics Hall of Fame in October of 2016. How do you feel about this?

Tim Coen: I gave everything of myself to be here; my family. My wife allowed me and supported me in everything I did. And I put in so much time, I mean it was a crazy time, my mind was always here. You know my wife had a baby; my son, and we had dogs, and she did all that and allowed me to do this. It was necessary because it never would have gone over if I didn't put in the time that I put in, because we wouldn't have gotten the kids. It wasn't hard because it's a beautiful campus and selling the fact there is probably five girls to every guy. And the opportunity to play early and to play right away was the selling point. But it was difficult because we didn't have facilities. What are you going to tell them to do? Are you going to bring them in and show them the beautiful gym we have and the great facilities? We didn't have anything. You would have to spend hours and hours and hours on the phone trying to talk to kids. So, it was hard, it was difficult, and it was really time consuming. When we came out and we did so well, we won maybe three or four major conference championships. It was kind of unheard of because we were just a fledged out program that had started from scratch. We were the talk of the conference really. We went to championship games. Tremendous pride I would say in getting to coach here. Being in the hall of fame it was a long time coming. It should have happened earlier, but it happened and I'm proud of it. It was a good time in my life, really, a great time.

Renee Dube: It's certainly something to be proud of!

Tim Coen: Yes it is. I'm really proud because I feel like the kids that played for us cared about each other and cared about what we did. They would really take pride; they are very prideful in the fact that we did so well. That makes me the happiest. I don't really care about my own record, that's not that big of a deal. But for them to be proud and for them to have enjoyed their

experiences here, makes me feel good. I see them, or I talk to them, or I hear about them regularly, and they still talk about Salve Football. So, I say that's pretty good.

Renee Dube: So, your son Liam actually had a very successful career in football as well. Do you want to talk about that?

Tim Coen: Yeah, Liam used to come to practice here. When we had training camp in the beginning of the season he would stay over. So, he got to know all the kids, and the kids would wrestle, and he was only a little kid at the time. So they all know him. As he started to get more and more successful, he went to UMass Amherst and then he coached there. Then he went to Brown as a coach, and then he went to URI for a year, then he went back to Brown again, then he went back to UMass again, and then he became the offensive coordinator [for the] University of Maine, and then he became a coach for the Los Angeles Rams, which is pretty amazing. He was there for three years, then he went to be the offensive coordinator at Kentucky, and then the Rams got him back as their offensive coordinator. There has never been an offensive coordinator from Rhode Island in the NFL. So, my son has done quite well and I'm super proud of him. But the nice thing is, ... [I receive emails from many of my Salve players saying how proud they are of him]. It's kind of like a whole family affair from Salve that cares a lot about my son also and everything that he has done. I'm really proud of him, but I'm not surprised. That's what he did his whole life, that's what he loves. Started here, that's kind of cool.

Renee Dube: That is cool. So, we talked about how the team was like a family, during your time here, was it consistent like that the whole ... eight seasons, or where there any rough patches? Or was it just a really strong community all around?

Tim Coen: I don't want to be negative about some of the things that happened here; I could be. A lot of the thing was [that] we became very popular in the newspaper, the Daily News, it kind

of takes away from the other programs a little bit because we got a lot of ink. That was a little rough sometimes. There were rough patches, I mean some of the kids get in trouble here or there. I think when they started the program some of the people were concerned the guys were going to be beating people up on campus. We were going to bring in some brutes to play football. That didn't happen; it wasn't like fights and kids beating people up, and stuff like that. I was proud of that because most college campuses you are going to get that. We really didn't have that, we didn't have anyone messing around with women and stuff like that, none of that took place. But there are a lot of bars in town, and sometimes we had a little problem there. You know, maybe a little too much alcohol consumption at times. Little stuff that we would have on every campus. We had some minor issues but for the most part it was great. Most of our kids graduated, most of them have gone on to do pretty well, a lot of them have done very well. I don't know how many kids would have played for me in those eight or nine years I was here, most of them have been pretty successful. I follow a lot of them. They have families now and jobs, and they are doing well. So, overall, it wasn't terrible, it wasn't a lot of headaches. But as a coach, you have your job over here, and then this huge job over here, you know you didn't get paid huge at the time, but you have to do your best. The amount of time that I put in over here was huge. You know you got to know the kids' backgrounds, about their families, when things are going tough in their lives, if they are having trouble academically. So, you have all the things that every football program has, and a quarter of the time to do it, and no full-time coaches, all part-time guys. The nice thing about it is, I had guys that I had coached with for years, I had two guys that were traveling every day from Johnston after teaching and coming all the way here for practice. That's an hour ride on top of just leaving school. It was awesome. Really, really, a great time, we had Jimmy Lynch who was our equipment manager, he's since passed. He was affiliated here

because when I got here, he was already involved in the athletic program somehow.⁴ He was a swim coach for years and years and years and he was here on a part-time basis, and I think he lived in Cranston. He was our equipment guy. The kids just loved him, he was just that type of guy that everyone remembers. He was another one of those guys, like Vinny [Petrarca], that was instrumental in the success of the whole program now. All those little things he does and that he did, the kids just took great pride in, they loved him like he was a father, a grandfather, you know? Those are the kind of things I remember. It wasn't so much that we did much with the rest of the Athletic Department, we were kind of separate. I think the SID [Sports Information Director] ... was still here.⁵ I think he's still here. He's been here for a long time. The guy that does the stats and stuff for the athletics, I can't remember his name, but he was here then. The rest of the people for the most part are gone. I went through two ADs when I was here.⁶ And I guess they tried to help; they didn't know much about football. It was tough, starting a football program when you have eighty kids as opposed to most teams have twenty. And you have to have all the equipment and it just logistically was a lot more difficult than other sports, and expensive too. For the most part, I think it was a great idea, I think it was successful. The team is still doing pretty well. So, it was a good experience for me. Anything else that you have?

Renee Dube: Nope, unless there is anything you would like to add?

Tim Coen: Nothing I can think of.

Renee Dube: Well, thank you so much and congratulations on a great coaching run and thank you for taking part in the Salve Regina memory project.

⁴A WWII veteran, Jimmy Lynch (d. 2015), was adored by the Salve community. Prior to working at Salve, he coached swimming and football at several Rhode Island high schools. The Salve football team's equipment manager, he is remembered for his positive attitude and his desire to motivate those around him.

⁵ Ed Habershaw

⁶ Athletic Directors

Tim Coen: No problem!