

Larkey brought winning attitude to HCHS football program



Harlan County coach Tom Larkey talked with quarterback Jordy Brewer.



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By JOHN HENSON
Harlan County Sports.com
Tom Larkey flashes a shy smile when he describes a recent conversation in Lexington with new Bryan Station football coach Craig Yeast during a press conference to promote the i-High Bowl.

"He came up to shake my hand and he said 'Man, you're a legend,'" Larkey said with a laugh mixed with pride and disbelief.

Even after 263 wins stretching over four decades, Larkey is not comfortable with such high praise, even if his numbers show he clearly belongs among the state's all-time greats.

"There aren't a lot of coaches who stay in this business this long. You have to have a drive in you to do it because you face problems every day. Sometimes you just want to jump in your car and take off and throw up your hands and give up," Larkey said.

The humility and work ethic he gained as the youngest of nine children of Perry (P.T.) and Mae Larkey have served the Harlan County coach well as he builds a second program into a state powerhouse. P.T. held several jobs, including working as a magistrate as well working in the railroad and in the concrete business.

Larkey also believes in hard work, beginning a 21-year stint at Kerns Bakery in London while attending college. Early in his teaching career, Larkey would work

several hours a night at the bakery and then get up and go to school the next morning.

"Growing up the way I did, I think I learned a lot about responsibility. If you have a responsibility to do something, you must do it," Larkey said. "If a team sees a coach is lazy and is always wanting to call off practice early or weightlifting, that sends the wrong vibe to kids. I enjoy getting right in there with them. I want them to know I'm their leader."

"Hard work," according to veteran London sports writer Tom Liesenhoff, is the key to Larkey's success through the years. "He's stayed with the running game, and not a lot of people seem to do that anymore."

Setting a good example, Larkey believes, is part of a coach's job.

"I think consistency and work ethic are the keys," he said. "Kids learn that after a while. They begin to realize and pick up the same thing. It's like being on the job. You're supposed to be there at 8 o'clock and don't be tardy. That's the same way it is in practice. You don't miss and don't make excuses. We have other coaches here like that. (Basketball) coach (Mike) Jones is like that, too. He believes in all this, too."

Humble beginnings

Larkey's football career began in junior high school while growing up in London. He played football and ran track even though he was pushed into neither by his parents, who were not sports fans.

"None of my brothers and sisters ever played any ball. I guess I got involved playing in the fifth grade mainly because of my buddies playing," he said. "It was one of those deals I was pretty much on my own. I lived a mile from school, so I walked to practice and back from practice. My parents were supportive of me when I started playing, but they didn't know what was going on."

Larkey had a solid but unspectacular career at London High School. His career highlight, an 88-yard interception return for a touchdown against Pineville, is remembered now with Larkey's self-effacing humor.

"I intercepted a pass over at Pineville and ran it back. The pastor of our church was sitting there with my parents," Larkey said. "He turned and asked my mom, 'Did you see that?'"

"She said 'See, what?'"

Liesenhoff's description of the play in the newspaper still draws a laugh from Larkey, who remembers that his speed was described as "mediocre."

Larkey attended Sue Bennett in London for two years before moving on to Cumberland College and then to Eastern Kentucky University to work on his master's degree while teaching. Larkey paid for college by working at the local bakery, a job he continued for many years after college was over.

An early disappointment

After graduating from Cumberland College, Larkey began his coaching career back at London on the middle school level.

By that time, London and three other schools had merged to form Laurel County High School. Former Harlan coach Dan Beasley coached the first three years,

posting a 7-3 record the first year before back-to-back 3-7 seasons. Bob Beck posted a 3-7 mark in his only season as coach.

Kuhl, Larkey's coach at London, was set to take over the program in the fall of 1974 and he asked Larkey to join him on his coaching staff.

"My head coach, Lawrence Kuhl, had more influence on me than anybody," Larkey said. "He was like a second dad to me. The community talked him into coming back. He agreed to do it, and he was going to hire me as one of his assistant coaches. We went all the way through the spring and part of the summer and he decided he couldn't give up his banking business to do that. He asked me if I would consider being the head coach. I only had two years of experience. I told him no at first, but he talked me into believing I could do it." Kuhl recommended Larkey at a meeting of the Laurel County Board of Education.

"He came to my house about 10 that night and said "Congratulaton, you are the new coach at Laurel County."

At 24, Larkey found himself in charge of the football program at southeastern Kentucky's largest high school.

"I was really scared, scared of taking over a program that was not successful," he said.

Larkey said he made some mistakes trying to prepare his first team for competition.

"I thought I was another Bear Bryant. My first game was against No.1 preseason pick Tates Creek with coach Roy Walton. He dressed over 100. Tates Creek won 28-27 and coach Walton came over to our dressing room and told our kids how impressed he was with how hard they played."

Laurel County finished 5-5 in Larkey's first year, then 7-4 and 6-4 the next two years. After a 4-6 mark in 1977, Larkey found himself in trouble.

"Certain people thought they needed a new head coach," Larkey said. "After a month of trying to keep my job I said to heck with it, you can have it. I'm not going to beg for nothing."

Larkey says now he learned quite a bit about coaching from the experience.

"I began to realize you had to have commitment from players. You have to stick to the ones who have the right attitude and want to work. That's the way I've been ever since," Larkey said.

Hindsight, as the say, is 20-20, but Laurel County football struggled through much of the next three decades. Letting their hometown son go may have been the biggest mistake they could have made.

"Probably," said Liesenhoff, when asked if letting Larkey get away doomed Laurel football to failure.

"It was tough, but I knew I was young," Larkey said. "I loved coaching football and I wanted to hang around a little while."

Liesenhoff, who wrote at the London Sentinel-Echo from 1961 to 1996, still keeps up with Larkey, who he coached in London youth league football and wrote about as a high school player and then a coach.

"I probably follow him more than our local teams," he said

Pounding the Rock

Larkey remained in Laurel County two more years coaching cross country and track and then decided to rejoin the football coaching staff as an assistant.

"The program really started going downhill and we all decided to get out of it," Larkey said. "That's when I came to Cawood."

Larkey spent two years as an assistant under another legendary coach, Jim Cullivan.

"Actually, I learned more, not so much about football, from Jim Cullivan. I learned how to deal with boys in different situations," Larkey said.

After the 1984 season at Cawood, Larkey discussed moving to Rockcastle County as an assistant before fate intervened again.

"I heard they needed an assistant coach and I talked to the head coach and he wanted me," Larkey said. "He went to talk to the superintendent about hiring me, and while he was there the superintendent told him he was fired."

Larkey said he received a boost when the late Gene Lowe, well known in athletic circles for many years as the owner of Lowe's Sporting Goods in London, recommended Larkey to Rockcastle County Schools Superintendent Cleston Saylor.

"They decided to give me a chance. I didn't have any assistant coaches, but Cleston had a son who was 22 and needed a teaching job," Larkey said. "Tony Saylor ended up being one of the best defensive coordinators in the country, plus he was very loyal and dedicated to me. One of the reasons I hated to leave Rockcastle County was because of our friendship."

The rest, as they say, is history. With Larkey running the offense and Saylor the defense, Rockcastle County was slowly but steadily transformed into a state power. After winning only four games in 1985, the Rockets won six in 1986 and then nine in 1987. In 23 years in Mount Vernon, Larkey had only one losing season (the first) and won at least 10 games nine times, capped by 3A state runner-up finishes in 2001 and 2002.

"We got things going, got them in the weight room and got them stronger," Larkey said. "I ended up having a complete staff of players who played for me. Support in the county began to grow and things began to get real good for us there."

One of the highlights for Larkey in Rockcastle, besides all the winning, was the opportunity to coach his sons, Chris and Dackery. Chris was a star running back on Larkey's early teams at Rockcastle then went on to Eastern Kentucky University. Chris was on his dad's staff for 18 years and eventually coached his younger brother. The brothers are now coaching together at North Laurel High School, where Chris is in his third season as head coach. While Chris is a teacher like his father, Dackery is a state parole officer.

"I wouldn't trade what I've done with my sons for anything," Larkey said. "We're not only father and son. We're great friends. We've established a close relationship. I don't think they'd be doing what they are now if we hadn't coached together."

Leaving his sons, Larkey said, was another reason moving from Rockcastle was difficult.

One more challenge

After 23 years in Mount Vernon, Larkey was well established as one of the state's top coaches and had turned Rockcastle into a consistent winner that included two state runner-up finishes. That kind of success was exactly what Tim Saylor wanted for Harlan County High School.

"I think there are a lot of factors involved. I looked at a lot of things when I was looking for a coach. The blueprint of building the Rockcastle County program was there with coach Larkey," said Saylor, the superintendent of the Harlan County School District. "Good players and good staffs are also important, and the off-season program has been a tremendous boost for this program. A lot of work has been put into it, and we're reaping the benefits from it. We've been missing that part of it."

Larkey was well known for his weightlifting program at Rockcastle and it was one of the first steps in turning Harlan County into a consistent winner. The Bears soon began winning offseason weightlifting meets and continue to progress in that category, dominating the competition in meets last spring.

Even before he could start work on transforming the players from Cawood, Cumberland and Evarts high schools into winners, Larkey first had to build a coaching staff, and he planned on doing it with the coaches already employed by the district. Ovie Canady, the head coach at Evarts, was selected the defensive coordinator. Cumberland coach Jon Reynolds, a former lineman at Eastern Kentucky University, took over the offensive line and helped transform the unit into one of the state's best last year. Scott Caldwell, a highly successful coach on the middle school level, was named the freshman coach with the important task of integrating first-year players into the HCHS system. Last year's freshman team was unbeaten. Former Cumberland quarterback Eddie Creech works with the junior varsity team, and former Cawood linebacker Denny Farmer helps Canady with the defense and Creech with the junior varsity team. Freddie McCreary, the school's athletic director and a former player for Charlie Hunter at Evarts, is also a member of the coaching staff and has drawn praise from Larkey for his help on the offensive side. Glen Wills moved from Cawood and continued his work as a trainer and also helps the program by providing in-depth statistical and historical information to the media.

"I didn't ask to bring in a lot of high-profile coaches from out of town," Larkey said. "I knew there were well qualified coaches right here in the county, so those were the ones I went to talk to. I think I put together a pretty good staff. We get along good. They know football. Ovie (Canady) reminds me of Tony Saylor. He's very loyal and dedicated to me. He's very intelligent and knows how to run the defense."

Canady says working with Larkey helped him become a better coach.

"I have learned more from coach Larkey about football in the past three years than I have ever learned in my life," he said. "He coaches football the way I feel it should be played — run the ball, be tough both mentally and physically, and play solid defense. That formula has worked 260 times for him, so it must be right."

After losing their first game in 2008 at Letcher Central, the Black Bears quickly jelled into a solid football team. HCHS posted an 8-4 mark and won a road playoff game at Wayne County, a rare feat for Harlan County teams over the past 20 years, before falling to Breathitt County in the second round. The Bears matched the 8-4 mark the second year, winning three straight district games at home at one point, all in dramatic fashion. The Bears again won a road playoff game, at Southwestern, before falling in the second round to Letcher Central. Year three saw the Bears go from good to a championship caliber team. Harlan County rolled through its district schedule, winning the school's first district title, and then won three straight playoff games to capture the first regional title for the county since Evarts knocked off Pikeville in 1990. Harlan County posted an 11-3 mark and advanced to the state semifinals before falling to eventual champ Highlands.

"I think it's been a pretty fast turnaround to do it in three years," Larkey said. "I have a lot of help, and that's the key, plus the kids' attitudes have changed a lot over the last three years. They know it takes hard work and they know it takes a lot of time. They know they have to be disciplined. It's a great feeling to know Harlan County is on the map now in football."

"I knew we had the right man for the job, but the success has come quicker than I thought it would," said Saylor, who led Cumberland to two state runner-up finishes in the early 80s. "If you look at the program, we don't have the Division I type players, but we have a lot of good players. My hopes were we'd see some productivity in four years. For him to come in here and do what he's done is remarkable."

Larkey says administrative support is crucial to any program's success and he's had that in Harlan County.

"It's been exactly what I expected it to be," Larkey said. "I coached against (Saylor), and I knew he would support me and support the football team and all athletics. I also knew winning was expected. I wanted one more challenge in my life, and it's been a big challenge."

Despite all his success, Larkey has remained humble.

"The first time I met him, I thought 'uh, oh, here comes this big-time prima donna coach from over in Rockcastle,'" said Harlan County High School Principal Bob Howard. "He came in and was one of the best gentlemen I've ever encountered. He's never demanding and was always very respectful of me. I couldn't ask for a better relationship with a coach. I think we really made the right decision. He had a no-nonsense approach of what he wanted to do and it's proven itself out.

"From an administrator's point of view, it's turned into a fun thing to be around Harlan County football. We've not had to work a bunch of problems out. They have a great boosters club and I never have to worry about that program. I'm really looking forward to this season."

"Tom is not an 'I' person, and I think because of that he gains respect from his peers and his players and his coaches," Saylor said. "I think the football program has a lot to do with pulling the community together. They have a tremendous following and people are talking Black Bears football. There are a lot of people excited."

Larkey knew his job was to build a winning football program when he returned to Harlan County and he knew he'd have the support he needed.

"It makes it a lot easier when you have an administration that will back you up and support you," Larkey said. "I've been through all kinds of administrations. That support is basically what can keep you coaching or make you want to quit coaching. I've also had a lot of support at home."

Taking the next step

With a 3-0 start this year, the Black Bears are ranked among the state's top 5A teams and are considered the favorite in the eastern half of the state with all the other top teams (Bowling Green, John Hardin, Warren Central and Christian County) in regions 1 and 2.

"Winning breeds success, and we're seeing that now," Saylor said. "I see a lot of leadership now from the older kids. I can't tell you how important that is, and it's building. We had great leadership last year from the seniors and the younger kids bought into that. This year's seniors are doing the same thing. I really do see it building."

"He came in with high expectations and has met all those in my opinion. HC has already won five playoff games. I don't think Cawood and Evarts had more than six combined in over 80 years of football between them. That is a measurable impact," Canady said. "The real impact is a thing you can't really measure. It is a mystique he has about him. He is a winner. Some guys have that and some don't."

Larkey was one win away from a state championship twice at Rockcastle but insists his career success isn't based on taking the next step. He knows what a championship would mean to a community with a rich football heritage that watched its teams stumble to mediocrity and below over the past 20 years.

"A state championship would be one of the greatest things in the world, but I don't coach to do things for me," Larkey said. "Everybody wants to win a state championship. I've been runner-up twice, and I'm proud of that. It's the team and community that is going to take more pride in a state championship, if we ever get one, than I will. It would be nice to win a state championship for the county and the team, but I don't think about it being for me. I think about it for the team and all their friends and family and fans."