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UCF Football at Division IA - Death of UCF Coach Jerry Richardson: A Tribute

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Just over a week ago two events took place that will have a profound effect on the University of Central Florida as well as its athletic program.

On Thursday August 31, UCF football inaugurated its first Division IA season with a blow-the-big-lead, come-from-behind, and hang-on-to-win victory over William and Mary, 39-33.

The move to Division IA football means that UCF is making the biggest gamble a university can make in athletics, moving up in competition where the rewards are great, the risks are greater, and the chances of success are no better than fifty-fifty. In the world of IA football only a small percentage of the schools make money, some break even, and many ring up massive amounts of red ink. But if you were going to take this gamble, Orlando might be the best place to do it as football is a religion here and the pockets to support it are deep.

Florida, and especially Central Florida, is a place rich in football talent. UCF must convince that local talent to stay home, build a first-rate program, and lure the area away from its commitment to the Gators and Seminoles. This will take time, money, and dedication. The president of the university is well aware of these obstacles and has chosen to make the gamble for the big payoff that Top Twenty rankings can bring. The new era has begun.

Within a few hours after the game the athletic program and the University were struck by a tragedy much greater than most people on the campus may ever realize. At about 3 a.m. Friday morning Jerry Richardson, the head coach of woman's basketball, was killed when a stolen car moving at nearly 100 mph ran a red light and hit Jerry's van broadside.

Jerry Richardson, age 40, has been at UCF through four seasons and in that time has become a strong and quiet force on campus and in the community. He inherited a troubled program and last season took his team to a conference tournament championship and the NCAA tournament, a first for the UCF women's program. Not only was he building a program, but more importantly he was having a significant impact on the lives of young women in Central Florida.

This of course is not surprising. Jerry Richardson came to UCF from the Navajo Nation Reservation in Shiprock, New Mexico, where he transformed a struggling high school women's team into four-time State Champions. From 1982 to 1993 Jerry Richardson made the Lady Chieftans of Shiprock into a story of mythic dimensions. More importantly he changed the lives of the young women he coached. Eighty percent of them went on to college, mostly as non-athletes; this at a school with a fifty percent dropout rate in a population beset with poverty and alcoholism.

Richardson believed, and made his players believe, that there was nothing you could not do as long as you had two things: opportunity and a positive attitude. Jerry Richardson brought both to Shiprock and to UCF.

He was above all a teacher, not a coach. He understood the ephemeral character of victory on the courts, and the significance of preparing his women for life after basketball. "The trophies gather dust, the kids don't, they keep moving," he said. Jerry Richardson's players moved on, well prepared for the world after basketball.

On Wednesday at the Memorial Service on campus many people spoke about how their lives were touched by this remarkable human being. Richardson was on the Board of the Coalition for the Homeless and was actively involved in their projects. He gave his time and effort enthusiastically, and always gave his best. He knew no other way.

I did not know him well, but I had enough contact with Jerry to know that I was in the presence of greatness. His tall slender build, his quiet intensity, the dignity and strength he exuded left you with that feeling. When he spoke you knew you were listening to a voice of wisdom and compassion, a man of gentleness and firm will, dedicated to the people around him.

The testimony of his players from Shiprock and from UCF confirmed all those feelings. On Wednesday his UCF players spoke of him with love and awe. They prepared a video of Jerry at practice and in game situations which they put to the music of "The Wind Beneath My Wings." The question "Did I ever tell you, you're my hero?" resonated through the Arena.

True heroes in sport or elsewhere are rare these days, but Jerry Richardson clearly is a hero: A great human being whose life is worth emulating, whose values are worth adopting.

To say that Jerry Richardson will be missed would be an understatement of massive proportions. It was an historic week for the University of Central Florida.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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