

Game-planning for a big victory

Part 2 of series: WIU players, coaches follow plan coordinated by cancer-stricken coach Patterson

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MACOMB — The phone rang and Don Patterson was on the other end asking for an immediate meeting. The late-evening, mid-July call left Western Illinois athletics director Tim Van Alstine thinking he needed to find another head football coach.

"I hung up the phone and told my wife, 'He got another job.' That's the first thing that came to my mind," Van Alstine said.

The news Patterson broke that night when they met in Western Hall was much worse.

The coach, heading into his 10th season at WIU, had been diagnosed with tonsillar cancer and would be taking a leave of absence.

"I was shocked, scared," Van Alstine said. "Here I am losing my coach for (the duration of the treatment) and I became scared for another reason. That was the hard part."

After telling Van Alstine of the news, Patterson laid out his plan for the football program while he was gone.

Assistant head coach and offensive coordinator Mark Hendrickson would assume the role of acting head coach.

Said Van Alstine: "I was very impressed Don had this all planned out, but it didn't surprise me any. That's how he is — very focused and very structured."

Patterson told Hendrickson of his diagnosis on July 1 before Patterson departed for a scheduled family vacation the next day. He also told Hendrickson what his recommendation to Van Alstine would be.

"I had talked to Mark even before we left, so he had a chance to know what was coming," Patterson said. "I thought he needed to know in advance."

Even facing an unknown future, Patterson was concerned about how the temporary position would affect Hendrickson, who has been on the coaching staff at Western since Patterson took the reins in 1999.

Since his sons, Myers and Davis, started playing, Hendrickson attended Macomb High games on Friday night. Myers is a Leathernecks sophomore and Davis was a senior running back this year for the Bombers.

Unless the Leathernecks had to fly to an away game, Hendrickson would attend games on Friday night and then drive overnight for Western's game on Saturday.

"I felt bad for Mark and for Davis, and for that matter (Hendrickson's wife Erica and 11-year old daughter Georgie)," Patterson said. "That's an opportunity he had in the past that he didn't have this year."

The extra week did help Hendrickson process the news and start to prepare.

After coming back from visiting family in Texas, Patterson told his football family — the Western administration, coaches and the players who were in Macomb for workouts.

"(The condition workouts were) a competition, so it was loud and everybody was having fun," senior running back, and team captain, Herb Donaldson said. "He brought it down with a somber moment.

"It was weird. I've never had anybody that I've known have cancer affect them like that. Cancer is kind of that mum word."

After that meeting, Patterson had just two final things to do before temporarily turning the program over to Hendrickson.

Patterson attended the annual Missouri Valley Football Conference meetings and media day. He also addressed the entire team on Aug. 3, the opening of training camp. It was four days after his first chemotherapy treatment at the University of Iowa Hospitals & Clinics.

"He was there for 45 minutes," Hendrickson said. "It was an emotional meeting."

The season starts

With the head coach away from the program, there was the potential for a schism within the team to develop between the offense and defense.

But that never happened.

"One of the great things about this situation (at Western) is the relationship Mark and I have," defensive coordinator Tom Casey said in August. "You can go to a lot of different programs around the country and not have that. If we didn't have (a good relationship), this would be very difficult."

What wasn't difficult for Patterson was staying away.

"That's one of the things I was most surprised about," Lisa Patterson, Don's wife, said. "He was able to leave the team to Mark."

That didn't mean that Don Patterson was totally hands off. He tracked the first three games of the season on the Internet and helped plan the itinerary for the team's road trips.

As for the football, Casey oversaw the defense as always. On offense, Hendrickson picked up the additional workload on what was for nine years a collaboration with Patterson.

"It was a little bit hectic," Hendrickson said. "(South Dakota State coach John Stiegelmeier and North Dakota State coach Craig Bohl) both had the same question. 'Are you doing this yourself?' They couldn't imagine doing that."

What helped was that the Leathernecks were experienced both on the coaching staff and on the field. Most of the staff had been together at least one season. The lone new addition was former player Frisman Jackson. The team itself was senior laden.

After a 1-2 start with close losses at Arkansas and South Dakota State, the Leathernecks won four in a row.

After completing treatment in Iowa City on Sept. 16, Patterson was on the sideline when Western hosted Stephen F. Austin.

"After the loss (to South Dakota State) I thought maybe I could give an emotional lift and be a solid cheerleader," Patterson said. "I wasn't any help at all (in regards to coaching), but I could look players in the eye and congratulate them or pat them on the back when they came to the bench."

The return

Those four games were the first small steps Patterson made towards the goal of returning to the sideline this season.

"I'm just concerned with him being well and feeling well," Lisa Patterson said. "But I know that he is happiest when he is with his football team and that makes him feel better. So whatever he is capable of doing, I'm OK with that."

The first date circled for the return was Oct. 18 against Indiana State, just over a month after completing treatment.

"Looking out ahead the goal was to be fully functioning for that week," Don Patterson said. "But it takes a long time to get better so I told Mark well in advance that I couldn't do anything that week either."

A bye following the win over the Sycamores gave Patterson an extra week to recover that much more.

On Wednesday of that week he had a follow-up appointment at UI. He was cleared to return to full-time status, if not entirely the 15-18 hour grind that coaches put in during the season.

Patterson participates in the afternoon team meetings and practices and works on the game plan at night. Hendrickson plans the practices in the mornings.

Patterson's first practice was Oct. 26 when high winds tore through the region.

"Somebody asked me if practice was how I remembered it," Patterson said. "I told them I don't remember it being that windy."

Patterson's return to the sidelines caught almost everyone by surprise. He showed up unannounced for the weekly coach's luncheon. Even the Western administration was unaware how much involvement Patterson would have for the game against Northern Iowa until Patterson talked about his return with the media.

Patterson has one last follow-up appointment scheduled for Dec. 16, six days after he turns 58.

However, he came full circle on Nov. 1 when he led the Leathernecks onto the playing field.

"It was pretty emotional for me," Lisa Patterson said, "to see him come out with the team, and to see that he's back and doing what he loves to do."

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