

From Boys to Men: An Interpretive Ethnography of College Football

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Football**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation consists of an interpretive ethnography grounded in a circuit of culture framework. The ethnography was conducted on and written about the Midwest State Mustang's (a pseudonym) football program, one of the most successful programs at the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) level over the past half-decade. The researcher immersed himself within the culture of Mustang football for an entire calendar year, attending team functions such as practices, workouts, meetings, social events, and games. The term, *culture*, within college football programs has been used as an all-encompassing buzz word; the present dissertation aims to apply academic theory and definition to the complex concept of culture. Using the circuit of culture model as a guide to understanding culture as a fluid process occurring through the production, representation, and consumption of cultural products, the researcher further implements a multi-level (institutional, organizational, and individual) exploration of culture based in various academic research areas. Literature from institutional theory, organizational culture, organizational politics, organizational justice, political skill, and motivation and inspiration are all implemented to support the circuit of culture framework.

This dissertation aims to identify ways in which members of Mustang football produce, represent, and consume cultural products, in addition to the process of cultural learning that new members experience. The results are conveyed in the form of narrative ethnography, written in the first person to convey to the reader the lived experience of the researcher during his year-long research endeavor. The unprecedented access granted to the researcher allowed for rich and plentiful data that grants an extensive and comprehensive analysis of a captivating and complex cultural setting.

To Aaron, your influence on the [Mustangs] lives on. I hope I have done them justice.

To Grandpa, thanks for ... everything.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I try, but oftentimes fail, to live my life according to four guiding principles: Gratitude, humility, work ethic, and success. If this were included in my literature review, the previous sentence would read: I try, but oftentimes fail, to live my life according to four guiding principles: Gratitude, humility, work ethic, and success (Zenger, 2012). These four principles are best thought to occur in a circuit. An attitude of gratitude lends hand to humility after realization that your accomplishments are futile without the help of others. In turn, humility leads to a greater desire for hard work to atone for your own shortcomings and limitations. Ultimately, an elite work ethic translates to success in any endeavor. The circuit both closes and commences after coming to the realization that your own talent and abilities contributed only minimally to your success, and you once again find yourself grateful for all of the wonderful people in your life.

I consider the completion of this dissertation to be a great success. As such, I am grateful towards many individuals for their direct or indirect assistance, humbled by the help and support I have received, and dedicated to pursuing my future endeavors with an unmatched work ethic to ensure that their support has been worthwhile. It is my hope that, because thanking you in these pages will undoubtedly fall short of my intentions, I will find a way to adequately do so in the days, months, and years to come.

To Dr. Jordan Bass, you have provided me with guidance, much needed constructive criticism, and confidence to pursue what I initially viewed as an insurmountable task. You trusted me to approach this project in an unusual way, pushed me to step outside my comfort zone, and offered the timeliest of help along the way. More importantly, I am grateful for the times spent *not* discussing this dissertation. In short, thank you for your friendship.

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To Jane Widger-Fulton, you make a difference in the lives of student-athletes each and every day. I admire your compassion and kind-heartedness. One time in three years you were stern with me: [Molly] had just taken her job in [Nebraska] and you insisted I stay in Kansas until I graduate. Thank you for that.

To Tim Schlosser, thank you for challenging my beliefs and pushing me to pursue my passion. For someone that took seven years to obtain his master’s degree you are among the smartest people I know.

To Cheryl Harrod, thank you for putting up with me the last three years. You have been the best Lawrence Mom I could have asked for.

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To my family, you are everything to me. [Molly], in sticking with the theme of this project, I undoubtedly outkicked my coverage. You push me to be my best even from 421 miles away. I could not be more proud to call you my wife.

Mom, again in theme, you are the toughest person I know. You have always bestowed on me a love that I could never repay you for.

Nana, you have believed in me since day one. Your encouraging text messages always seem to come at just the right time.

Jenny, Dave, and [Nathan], it took a while to find you, but I couldn't be happier to finally have a sister and brothers.

[Randy] and [Laylah], once I finally learned to water ski you accepted me into your family wholeheartedly. For that, I am grateful.

To the rest of my family, if you are reading this that shows how much you care about me. Thank you and I love you.

To the [Mustangs], you did not disappoint me. I came to study a winning culture and that is what I got. Thanks for letting me be a small part of the brotherhood.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

-Philippians 4-13

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KEY TERMS

Midwest State University (MWSU): Pseudonym given to the overall university.

Mustangs: Pseudonym for MWSU's school mascot.

Chester: Pseudonym given to the city where MWSU is located.

Midwestern Football Conference: Pseudonym given to the conference MWSU is member of.

Football Championship Subdivision: The NCAA level the Mustangs football team belongs to, also known as Division I-AA.

Wright Football Complex: Pseudonym for the campus building housing the Mustangs football offices, locker room, meeting rooms, and training room.

Hughes Stadium: Pseudonym for the home of the Mustangs.

Watson Fieldhouse: Pseudonym for the indoor training facility attached to Hughes Stadium.

Mustang Arena: Pseudonym for Midwest State's basketball arena which also houses the Mustangs weight room.

McKinney Dining Hall: Pseudonym for the on-campus dining hall where all team meals are held.

Redshirt: A term indicating that an athlete has withdrawn from competition for one school year (i.e. A redshirt freshman is academically a sophomore but is in his first year of athletic eligibility).

Offense: The team with possession of the ball and trying to score.

Defense: The team without the ball and defending against the score.

Special Teams: Plays most often involving a kick, such as the kick-off, punts, field goals, and extra points.

End Zone: The 10-yard area at each end of the field. When a player enters this area with the ball it is considered a touchdown and worth six points.

Extra Point: A scoring play occurring after a touchdown during which the scoring team has the opportunity to kick a short field goal to earn one more point.

Field Goal: A scoring play worth three points during which a kicker successfully kicks the ball through the uprights located in the back of the end zone.

First Down: The point at which each team begins with possession of the ball. Teams get 4 chances, or downs, to move the ball 10 yards. When a team gains the necessary yardage, it receives a new set of downs.

Quarterback: The offensive player who most often directs the offensive plays and throws passes.

Running Back: An offensive player who specializes in carrying the football.

Wide Receiver: An offensive player who specializes in catching the football.

Tight End: An offensive player who specializes in both blocking and catching the football.

Offensive Lineman: An offensive player who specializes in blocking the defense.

Defensive Lineman: A defensive player attempting to tackle to running back or sack the quarterback.

Linebacker: A defensive player positioned between the defensive linemen and defensive backs responsible for directing the defense.

Defensive Back: A defensive player most often responsible for defending against the wide receivers.

Kicker: A special team's player responsible for kicking field goals and kicking off after scores.

Punter: A special team's player responsible for kicking (punting) the ball when a team reaches fourth down.

KEY PLAYERS

Randy Murphy: Pseudonym for Head Coach.

Colton Floyd: Pseudonym for Head Strength Coach.

Clayton Buck: Pseudonym for Co-Offensive Coordinator.

Matthew Cobb: Pseudonym for Co-Offensive Coordinator.

Dominic Grant: Pseudonym for Defensive Coordinator.

Peter “Goose” Lloyd: Pseudonym for Associate Head Coach/Tight Ends and H-Backs Coach.

Sebastian Watts: Pseudonym for Running Backs Coach/Recruiting Coordinator.

David King: Pseudonym for Former Offensive Coordinator.

Samuel Morris: Pseudonym for Secondary Coach and Passing Game Coordinator.

Trystan Solis: Pseudonym for Defensive Assistant.

Derick Pierce: Pseudonym for Wide Receivers Coach.

Barrett Humphrey: Pseudonym for Linebackers Coach and Special Teams Coordinator.

Frankie Palmer: Pseudonym for Offensive Assistant.

Molly Mays: Pseudonym for Director of Football Operations.

Reverend Patrick Gordon: Pseudonym for Team Reverend.

Terrence Daniel: Pseudonym for Junior Safety. Defensive Captain.

Taylor Morrell: Pseudonym for Senior Linebacker.

Flynn Shaw: Pseudonym for Junior Defensive Back.

Conor Daniels: Pseudonym for Sophomore Wide Receiver.

Aaron Lowe: Pseudonym for Junior Wide receiver.

Henry Johnson: Pseudonym for Senior Running Back.

Noah Barker: Pseudonym for Junior Defensive Back.

Andre Erickson: Pseudonym for Sophomore Running Back.

Kolten Burke: Pseudonym for Redshirt Sophomore Quarterback.

Layton Dominguez: Pseudonym for Freshman Running Back.

Alfonso Henson: Pseudonym for Redshirt Freshman Running Back.

Kevin McGuire: Pseudonym for Sophomore Defensive Back. Special Teams Captian.

Jefferson “Hondo” Henderson: Pseudonym for Senior Linebacker.

Nathan Murphy: Pseudonym for Senior Linebacker.

Hayden Anderson: Pseudonym for Senior Tight End.

Ace Joyce: Pseudonym for Sophomore Defensive Lineman.

Sawyer Hayden: Pseudonym for Senior Offensive Lineman. Offensive Captain.

Gage Booker: Pseudonym for Senior Offensive Lineman.

Matthew Cobbs: Pseudonym for Senior Offensive Lineman.

Jayden Velez: Pseudonym for Senior Offensive Lineman.

Cam Hawkins: Pseudonym for Senior Offensive Lineman.

Andrew “Chuck” Berry: Pseudonym for Sophomore Defensive End.

Gideon Gill: Pseudonym for Senior Wide Receiver.

Niko Sexton: Pseudonym for Sophomore Tight End.

Alfie Lane: Pseudonym for Junior Kicker.

Arthur Wood: Pseudonym for Junior Defensive Lineman.

Coleman Doyle: Pseudonym for Junior Defensive Lineman.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants, names, titles, locations, and affiliations have been altered using fictitious pseudonyms. Direct quotations have additionally been altered to reflect the pseudonyms. The events, as noted and recalled by the author have not been changed.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

College football, complete with all of its flaws, blemishes, and shortcomings (player arrests, recruiting scandals, and overt commercialization to name a few), continues to be a dominant force in American society. American football games serve as cultural spectacles, both in-person and through television; the largest collegiate stadiums oftentimes occupy over 100,000 fans on game days, and the most watched games draw averages of 20 million viewers (Siegal, 2016). Morris (2004) accurately stated, “If baseball is America’s pastime, then football is its passion” (p. 1). Colleges and universities ostensibly devoted to, “the creation and diffusion of knowledge” are often better recognized and undoubtedly more greatly popularized through the existence of their football teams rather than their academic programs (Goldin & Katz, 1999, p. 38; Clotfelter, 2011). Former University of Michigan president spoke to this by saying:

Mention Michigan to a sports fan, and the image that probably comes to mind is that of the university’s football team storming onto the field wearing those ferocious maize-and-blue striped helmets. Fans think of our great rivalries with Ohio State and Notre Dame. They recall the names of such legendary Michigan sports figures as Yost, Crisler, Harmon, and Schembechler... Indeed, much of armchair America thinks of us first and foremost as a football school, even though the University of Michigan is widely regarded as one of the finest academic institutions in the world” (Duderstadt, 2009, p. 3).

Football has become so deeply engrained into the fabric of some college campuses that the school’s identity remains perpetually tied to their football program. Universities such as Alabama, Texas, and Ohio State exemplify the standing of college football in today’s society through the glaring disparity in recognition of football programs compared to their university’s academic programs.

The present dissertation implements an ethnographic approach to thoroughly analyze a collegiate football program. By fully embedding myself for a complete season with a Division 1 football team -- observing and taking part in practices, games, team meetings, team meals, and

other informal team activities -- I gained an abundance of rich data contributing to the understanding of the inner-workings of a college football team. Succinctly, the goal of the project was to examine the culture of the Midwest State University (MWSU) football team. More broadly, the researcher sought to explore culture by inviting the reader into the lived experiences of a unique group of people. After all, what is culture but a collection of values based on lived experiences?

Breaking the traditional academic form, the dissertation that follows is both an exercise in storytelling and empirical analysis. It aims to be of value (or interest) to a wide audience. The following paragraph, an excerpt from chapter 5, offers a preview of the manner in which the data is presented.

You'd have thought that you entered a funeral home if you walked into the Wright Football building on Sunday morning. After wins, coaches wear sandals, workout shorts or sweatpants, and hoodies to commemorate 'Victory Sunday'. They may as well have been sporting black drapes today. The world, as they knew it, was coming to an end. Not only did they lose to their hated rivals in their home stadium, but, to add salt to the wound, they limped away with some injuries to boot. The unofficial meeting spot around the Culligan water cooler remained dissonantly quiet and empty – particularly compared to the previous Sunday – as the coaching staff locked themselves in their given offices to pour over film. This was their self-imposed punishment; each of them were into the office early and would stay there until at least 11 p.m. that night (p. 182).

Interpreting the culture of a football program is ultimately an attempt to understand the reason behind the saying, 'It's just how we do things here.' Each program across the country operates within a distinctly different culture, which is shaped and molded over many years. While cultural values are shared across programs, it is the dissimilarities that create disparities in individual and team outcomes. To fully gain a grasp of the cultural phenomenon transpiring within a football program, such an extensive analysis was truly necessary. After a year spent with the team I still find myself with more questions than answers. Mysteries exist within

Mustang culture that even the longest tenured members of the program could not explain. It is as such with all cultures, which contributes to the appeal of cultural studies.

To do justice to the yearlong collection of data of which I undertook, an investigation into the numerous historical, societal, and cultural influences on Mustang football is essential. College football has both greatly affected and *been* greatly affected by American society. The remainder of this chapter provides a brief history of football on American campuses, discusses the increased commercialization of the sport, identifies some of the perceived negative aspects of college football, including athlete exploitation, concussions, and the perpetuation of masculine stereotypes, and offers a theoretical framework on which the study is constructed.

A Brief History of American College Football

The earliest semblance of college football appeared at the elite East Coast universities of Princeton, Rutgers, Columbia, Harvard, and Yale in the later part of the 1800's (Nauright, 1996; Smith, 2011). The names Walter Camp, Amos Alonzo Stagg, John Heisman, and Knute Rockne are immortalized in historical accounts of the origins of the game (Nauright, 1996). Camp, the six-year Yale letterwinner known as the "Father of American Football", Stagg, the first tenured professor in physical education (in turn becoming the first tenured college football coach), Heisman, the namesake of the most famous trophy in sport, and Rockne, the first coach to implement the forward pass, helped establish the foundation for what is currently the third most popular sporting attraction in America, trailing only professional football and baseball. The ascent of college football in America occurred astonishingly quickly despite several early hurdles. In a far cry from the organizational structure of college athletics today, early intercollegiate sporting contests were entirely student-ran (Smith, 2011).

The Intercollegiate Football Association, a student-run organization formed in 1876, adopted a rugby-style game for competition that would soon become the most popular game across college campuses (Smith, 2011). As European rugby rules gave way to a more recognizable form of American football, the popularity of the sport only increased. Universities assembled football teams rapidly, eager to compete against rival schools. The sport soon grew from a trendy campus event to a country-wide spectacle. Smith (2011) summarized the dramatic increase in football's popularity:

The annual Thanksgiving Day game in New York City for the two decades following the formation of the Intercollegiate Football Association promoted football as the beacon of commercialized athletics a half century before radio gave it additional promotion in the 1920's and television by the 1940's and 1950's. By taking the game to the financial and fashion center of America, football had joined the academically select colleges of the East with the social elite of America's largest city. By the 1890's, as many as 40,000 spectators, with many upper-class leaders, viewed the Thanksgiving Day classic. Having been taken away from the college campus, football was much more than a college game played for the students and a growing group of alumni. Football had become a social event, expanding it beyond just an athletic contest (p. 12).

As the popularity of intercollegiate athletic contests continued to grow among students and community members alike, university presidents and faculty recognized the financial prospects of this developing phenomena.

Since its inception, American football has maintained an enormous capacity for revenue generation. As the first tenured football coach, Amos Alonzo Stagg was rewarded with a salary of \$2,500 in 1891 from the University of Chicago (Lester, 1999). The Chicago Maroons, despite their presence as an early major college football power and founding member of the Big Ten Conference, eradicated its football team in 1939 when university president Robert Maynard Hutchins decided that the mission of big-time college athletics had grown incongruent with that of his university (Bearak, 2011). While the growing popularity and commercial nature of college football would bring many presidents to question its place in American higher education, few

have taken a stand like Hutchins. Coaching salaries continued to grow as university presidents faced pressure from influential alumni to produce winning football teams; an identical occurrence to what has produced Jim Harbaugh's current seven million dollar annual salary from the University of Michigan.

The Commercialization of College Football

The commercial appeal of college football in today's society has resulted in massive payouts for coaches and top-level administrators. A recent report from the USA Today identified 71 head football coaches and nine athletic directors as having annual salaries in excess of one million dollars (USA Today, 2015). Further, more than twenty athletic departments reported revenues greater than one hundred million dollars this past year, with a majority coming from contributions of donors. The landscape of college athletics has indeed changed substantially in the years since the student-ran Intercollegiate Football Association governed play. Along with increased revenue, big-time college athletics additionally faces scrutiny of many forms.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has been accused of being a cartel, and has been identified in court as an illegal monopoly (Eckard, 1998; Clotfelter, 2011). William C. Rhoden, in his book titled *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, asserts that American society diminishes the power and influence of Black athletes despite their athletic dominance. Student-athletes as a whole have been identified as an exploited population; while coaches and athletic administrators cash million dollar paychecks, those doing much of the heavy lifting are paid in scholarship and small stipend (Acain, 1998; Beamon, 2008; Mueller, 2004). Recent and ongoing litigation, as well as a heavy dose of public scrutiny, has resulted in increased benefits for student-athletes at Division I institutions, including unlimited

meal plans and ‘total cost of attendance’ payments. Practitioners and scholars alike agree that future reform is on the horizon (Sack, 2009; Edelman, 2015).

The Implications of Football’s Violent Nature

Both college and professional football have furthermore been scrutinized for the physical toll that the sport has on the athletes, and an inability from leaders within the sport to make it safer. Despite what are claimed to be technologically advanced helmets designed to protect the player, concussions continue to be a dark side for this popular sport. Further research exploring the link between multiple concussions and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative brain disease linked to dementia and suicidality, has shed light on the importance of player safety. Moreover, many question the societal implications of the brutal and vicious nature of the game. The same issue that many believe to be destroying the game in turn may be responsible for its popularity. Steve Deace (2013) argues for football’s popularity,

...because it embodies everything we love about American exceptionalism. Merit is rewarded, not punished. Masculinity is celebrated, not feminized. People of various beliefs and backgrounds — a melting pot, if you will — must unify for a common goal for the team to be successful (para. 4).

Indeed, even the earliest football enthusiasts were drawn to the sport by its aggressive nature. Walter Camp’s biographer wrote, “Camp was instrumental through writing and lecturing in attaching an almost mythical atmosphere of manliness and heroism to the game not previously known in American team sports” (Borkowski, 1979). The ‘atmosphere of manliness’ and ‘celebration of masculinity’ are delicate subjects in today’s society.

McGee (2016) emphasizes that culture is “a term that has crept its way into the lexicon of collegiate athletics over the past decade but has suddenly become the single biggest buzz word – and red flag – in the entire industry” (para. 5). Football continues to exist as a sport built upon stereotypical masculine qualities – toughness, strength, durability, and mental fortitude – in a

time when society encourages such stereotypes be broken down. Recent advertising campaigns, such as for Crossfit in 2012, encourage females to find ‘Beauty in Strength.’ In many regards, the predominant ‘football culture’ directly opposes what many believe to be the ideal American culture; yet the sport’s popularity continues to grow.

Multiple collegiate football programs have recently been scrutinized and punished for inappropriate actions on behalf of the student-athletes and a lack of response from the coaching staff, athletic administration, and even university administration. Recently, Joe Mixon, a University of Oklahoma running back punched a female at a campus restaurant, knocking her out and leaving her with several facial fractures. He returned to play for the Sooners after a yearlong suspension. Ten University of Minnesota football players were suspended from the team for charges stemming from a sexual assault allegation involving recruits. When the remainder of the team boycotted all football activities ahead of the team’s bowl game, head coach Tracy Claeys publicly supported his player’s right to do so. Oftentimes, issues like these are attributed to the culture of the program. A Title IX investigation of the Baylor football program stresses, “There are significant concerns about the tone and culture within Baylor’s football program as it relates to accountability for all forms of student athlete misconduct” (Baylor University, 2016, para. 8). Finally, after sexual harassment lawsuits were filed against the University of Tennessee for their handling of sexual assault cases, head football coach Butch Jones was forced to defend his program by stating, “There’s no culture problem” (Rucker, 2016, para. 3).

Research Questions

This dissertation aims to closely examine the culture of a collegiate football program. While culture has been identified and used largely as an all-encompassing buzz-word in the world of college athletics, a theoretical foundation based in culture studies and organizational

behavior research allows for a truer and more consistent understanding of the word and its meaning in this setting. For this dissertation, the culture of the Midwest State Mustangs football program is analyzed; specifically, the following research questions will serve as the basis for the project:

RQ 1: How is the culture of the Midwest State University football team produced, represented, and consumed by the various members of the group?

RQ 2: In what way does the circuit of culture contribute to the ‘learning’ of culture by new group members?

To address these questions, a modified circuit of culture framework will be implemented. The circuit of culture is “a heuristic or illustrative guide to approaching analysis of cultural processes from different aspects” (Leve, 2012, p. 2). The modified circuit employed for use in the present study investigates how culture, operationalized as a product, is produced, represented, and consumed by members of the group. In turn, it is hypothesized, culture is learned by new members. The modified circuit of culture is discussed further in chapter 3.

To assist in discerning the culture of Mustang football, several constructs from the field of organizational behavior will also be applied. First and foremost, the study operates from an institutional theory perspective, stressing that “we, as individuals and as a collective, cannot isolate ourselves from what is going on around us” (Furusten, 2013, p. 5). Further, organizational level constructs such as organizational culture, justice, and politics, as well as individual level constructs like motivation, inspiration, and political skill will be implemented. Before addressing these concepts, it is first pertinent to better understand the setting where this dissertation takes place.

Midwest State University

Midwest State University has a population of just over 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Emphasis is placed on teaching and developing future teachers; the original purpose of the school when it opened in 1857 was to train teachers, and that mission has held until today. Despite the strong emphasis on cultivating future teachers, MWSU offers bachelors, masters, and doctorate degrees in a wide array of other disciplines including science and technology, business, and fine arts. The current president accepted the position in August of 2014 after many years occupying leadership positions at various universities throughout the Midwest.

The metropolitan area that MWSU calls home was recently named one of the top cities for young college graduates to live. According to the 2015 campus climate report, 70% of students identify as White, 10% as African American, and 8% as Hispanic. Faculty reported an even greater racial disparity as 84% reported being White compared to 6% African American. Students of color reported being “significantly underrepresented and under-supported at [MWSU]” and added that their white peers “contribute to maintaining the culture and climate that could be very ‘racially intolerant’ at times” (Campus Climate Report, p. 26). In fact, students of color often refer to the campus and surrounding community as being “white-washed”. As it relates to the present study, many student-athletes on the MWSU football team are students of color and perhaps feel similar sentiment regarding their own campus experience.

Midwest State Athletics

The Midwest State department of athletics fields seventeen varsity teams (seven men’s and ten women’s) and is nicknamed the Mustangs. The current director of athletics, Charles Allen, has worked for the university for the previous 27 years and in his current role since 2013. Historically known as a ‘basketball school’, MWSU has struggled to uphold that tradition

recently; their men's basketball team has failed to reach the NCAA tournament since 1998 and their women's team since 2008. Throughout the athletic department, the Mustang football team has enjoyed the greatest amount of success over the past decade, including back-to-back conference championships the previous two seasons.

Midwest State Football

Prior to the recent conference championships, MWSU football had existed mostly as an average football program with a small handful of standout seasons. The school's first football team was fielded in 1887, but had failed to win a conference championship until 1999. A potential explanation for their recent success lies in the completion of their stadium renovation in 2013, allowing greater revenue generation and increased exposure for fans and recruits. Hughes Stadium currently holds approximately 14,000 fans and has recently been forced to provide standing room only tickets as a result of the Mustangs recent success.

Coach Murphy

Randy Murphy took over the MWSU football team as head coach in 2009 after previously serving as defensive coordinator at a nearby university. Murphy has suffered only one losing season since being named head coach and has finished third or better in the conference standings six out of seven years. Nearing his mid-fifties, Murphy has made coaching stops at five different schools, a steady coaching career compared to most. Having played linebacker in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), his preference leans strongly towards the defensive side of the ball. Murphy's defensive unit at his previous stop led the nation in total defense in 2002 and was top five in total defense on three other occasions.

In his introductory press conference at MWSU, he called the Mustangs a "sleeping giant" in the world of college football. His record confirms the statement and recent success has

allowed greater access to better recruits. His bio on the MWSU athletics website states, “[Murphy] has changed the culture of [Mustang] football.”

This dissertation aims to provide a unique exploration of a college football team currently enjoying program record levels of success. Unrestricted access to a college football program is rarely granted and this opportunity allows for an exclusive analysis of the foundations of culture within a football program. This study will benefit practitioners and researchers alike as it will offer a unique perspective of the production, representation, and consumption of culture within a distinctive group of people.

In order to provide greater context to this study, a wider view of the institutional factors influencing the Mustangs is included below. While this specific project acts as a detailed examination of one specific organization, failing to address the ways in which the MWSU football program interacts with the world around it would prove misleading. Furthermore, the actions and behaviors of the individuals that make up MWSU football oftentimes do not act on their own accord, as much as they may believe they do. Furusten (2013) stresses, “We are affected by tendencies toward greater similarity in many respects across the world, but we are also affected by local cultural factors” (p. 5). He goes on to claim that people “are not omnipotent or able to do whatever they want in a given situation. That which falls within the realm of possibility is determined by...tendencies toward globalization, and local variations in culture and how global trends are received locally” (p. 5-6). In response, if I am to do justice to this analysis of the culture of Mustang football, I must first assess the institutional powers that impact their culture. This serves as the purpose of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 2

THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

As we begin to explore the culture of Mustang Football, and specifically how new members learn and acquire the knowledge to thrive in an unfamiliar environment, it is first necessary to understand the various overarching cultures that the MWSU Football program occupies. Failure to do so is akin to “getting to know someone without asking about their past” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 73). The context in which this cultural analysis takes place is among the most vital pieces of information to fully comprehend as this project advances. Holding all else constant, this study performed in the exact same manner during the 1950’s, or focused on a different school in a different part of the country, inevitably yields vastly different outcomes. Bringing to light the various cultural environments constantly affecting the Mustangs therefore serves as the purpose of this chapter.

The 2016 MWSU Football team exists in an unequivocally distinctive environment, one affected by many influences outside of the control of the coaching staff. The lack of control for the coaching staff is an omnipresent nuisance in their quest for success. They are football coaches after all; total control is a daily goal. Legendary Notre Dame Football coach Frank Leahy described the responsibility of a football coach by saying,

Suddenly, this amazing machine (the team) becomes human with human foibles, so the coach has to introduce an entirely brand new set of instructions for maintaining the mental and emotional standards of the machine. He becomes a doctor, a lawyer, a marriage counselor, a psychologist, an accountant, a business advisor, a guide for the lovelorn. He must set an example morally, spiritually, and intellectually. He must offer advice of such sagacity that every member of the team will look to him for help and accept his advice freely. He must punish without destroying confidence. He must give orders as if he were a tank general. He must make decisions faster than a butterfly on a crowded freeway. He must maintain discipline with the severity of a fascist. All of this must be done without losing the delicate grip of complete control (Rozier, 1974, p. 81-82)

Hence, when Furusten (2013) suggests, “Decision–makers are needed, but that they themselves control the nature and timing of their decisions is doubtful,” (p. 7) football coaches likely recoil and debunk such a notion. In reality, coaches and decision-makers in general react to their environment more than they create it (Furusten, 2013).

Each individual entering into the Mustang Football program does so from a distinct cultural background, bringing with them ideas, thoughts, values, and assumptions unique to their cultural upbringing. The goal of the coaching staff is to change those beliefs, or at least alter them to a point that they closely resemble the beliefs of the staff, and more directly Coach Murphy. His cultural beliefs, as they pertain to running a football program, have been shaped through decades of experiences; successes and failures, mentors, and personal life changes all impact his approach to coaching football. Simultaneously, each member of his staff and every player on the team offers competing cultural beliefs. The Mustangs exist as a diminutive subculture occupying the American culture of higher education, American sports culture, football culture, and the culture of Midwest State University. These cultures surround the MWSU football program and notably impinge upon the way culture is produced, consumed, and learned by its members.

American Culture and Generation Y

This football program exists first and foremost within the setting of the present-day American culture. The founding of the United States and the large-scale migration that followed, make it among the most culturally and racially diverse nations in the world (Fisher, 2013). The prevailing connection between our founding fathers and Britain played a formative role in establishing the original cultural beliefs in America. For instance, ‘innocent until proven guilty as both a guiding legal and cultural philosophy went against the French Napoleonic inquisitorial

system, which historically was widely implemented across Europe (Watson, 2011). While undeniably rooted in the cultures of other nations, American culture holds true to many original elements as well. Jeffersonian Democracy, freedoms of speech and religion, and individuality have all become trademarks of American culture (Dietrich, 2008; Mill, 2015). These core values have remained steadfast since the founding of our country, but just as new athletes make culture change necessary in a football program, the culture of America transforms with each new generation. As such, we turn our attention to the generation making up the 2016 Mustang roster, most of whom were born in the mid to late 1990's.

Current college students, depending on the source, belong to either Generation Y or Generation Z (Alsop, 2008). Regardless of the title, several shared characteristics help to shed light on the makeup of this team. Entitlement and narcissism are often cited as preeminent attributes of either generation. A survey of members of Generation Y revealed their career expectations to be “higher pay (74% of respondents); flexible work schedules (61%); a promotion within a year (56%); and more vacation or personal time (50%)” (Alsop, 2008, p. 26). In essence, these individuals want to be paid more for less time spent working, and to be promoted for vacationing, or as Derrick Bolton, assistant dean and M.B.A. admissions director at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business puts it, "They want to be CEO, for example, but they say they don't want to give up time with their families” (Alsop, 2008, p. 26). When mentioning the entitlement of this generation, the phrase ‘Trophy Kids’ is common discourse. The moniker is less directed at the ‘kids’ themselves as it is at the parents who incessantly shower praise on their children and award mere participation with trophies. The deference towards participation trophies grows from the idea that they reward mediocrity and disincentive youth. Competition, antagonists of participation trophies contend, promotes growth, prosperity,

and innovation, cornerstones of the American Dream (Alsop, 2008). Not everyone disagrees with the idea of participation trophies however, journalist Molly Knefel argues,

The disgust that so many adults feel at the idea of everyone getting a trophy has to do with creating incentives. If everyone gets a trophy then no one will try hard; if everyone gets basic food and housing to survive, then no one will work. Of course, this isn't true. A soccer team full of 10-year-olds who all get participation trophies won't all sit down and stop playing soccer – the kids who are good at scoring points will still want to do so. But the kid who never scored a point will, for a moment, be recognized: You played soccer too (North, 2014, para. 5).

She goes on to lament, “If children are the future, then why are we so gung ho about preparing them to be treated unfairly?” (North, 2014, para. 6). Studies show a clear divide in which age groups favor participation trophies as opposed to winners-only trophies. Eighteen to twenty-four year olds are the only age group identified as being in favor of participation trophies, and the contempt for the idea grows correspondingly as age groups increase (Blake, 2014). This is significant in the context of Mustang football when considering the ages of the members of the coaching staff and their assumed feelings about participation trophies. While entitlement and narcissism serve as adverse characteristics of this generation, positive qualities exist as well.

This generation of individuals is more socially accepting of diverse racial, cultural, and religious identities than any before, and are more likely to maintain heterogeneous social circles (Winograd & Hais, 2011). They are also more likely to pursue careers that they feel passionate about, distinctive from their parents and previous generations who sought higher salaries and more stable careers (Arnett, 2004). Two monumental historical events, the September 11th (2001) terrorist attacks and the decade plus aftermath, as well as the Great Recession (2007-2009), have played significant roles in shaping feelings of uncertainty and financial insecurity (Turner, 2015). Such events occurring during the formative years of these individual's lives has greatly shaped their view of the world and outlook on the future.

Further challenging football coaches' missions is a growing tendency of young individuals to question authority, a prevailing mindset of progressive thinking Americans and especially rampant on college campuses (Boyer, Clark, Halttunen, Kett, & Salisbury, 2013). Rather than obeying authority as was customary many years ago, American society promotes a mindset of doubt rather than trust (Boyer et al., 2013). While such a cultural shift may undoubtedly serve the country and its people well in many regards, such an attitude is rarely encouraged or tolerated from the players within a football setting. Recent sideline outbursts in response to players' lack of respect by Florida coach Jim McElwain, Florida State coach Jimbo Fisher, or Clemson coach Dabo Swinney demonstrate typical reactions to such behavior. Questioning the truth to uncover underlying reasons for earthly phenomena promotes profound critical thinking and analysis (Sharpe, 2012). Questioning a football coach often leads to extra sprints and an unpleasant, mostly one-sided conversation, as I witnessed first-hand several times throughout this project. One of the key aspects underlying the culture of American Higher Education, in turn, is at odds with a longstanding decree in the world of football. "Football is like life," according to legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi, "it requires perseverance, self-denial, hard work, sacrifice, dedication, and respect for authority" (Maraniss, 1999). An inclination to question authority however, while undoubtedly a nuisance for many college football coaches, is far from the most potentially harmful cultural practice widespread on college campuses.

Alcohol Use on College Campuses

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism attests, "Drinking at college has become a ritual that students often see as an integral part of their higher education experience. Many students come to college with established drinking habits, and the college environment can

exacerbate the problem.” A national study conducted in 2014 found that over sixty percent of college students’ aged 18 to 22 drink alcohol on a monthly basis, and two out of three participate in binge drinking (2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health). Further exasperating the matter is the prevalence of drinking among athletes on college campuses. Athletes tend to be at a greater risk for excessive alcohol consumption as well as negative alcohol-related consequences (Martens, Dams-O’Connor, & Beck, 2006). Athletes are more likely to experience hangovers, find trouble with police, drink and drive, miss class, and experience injury while drinking than non-athletes on college campuses (Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Grossman, & Zanakos, 1997). Researchers have proposed that these behaviors may be the result of athletes’ biased perceptions of social norms across campus (Thombs & Hamilton, 2002). For instance, while the statistics support the opposite, a majority (61%) of athletes on college campuses believe that their typical teammate consumes more alcohol than they, and an even greater percentage (76%) contends that they drink less than the average non-athlete (Thombs, 2000).

Several cultural factors serve to explain the abnormally high rates of alcohol consumption among college athletes. First is the strong cultural tie between sports and alcohol, specifically beer, in American mass media (Crompton, 1993). Assuming most college athletes have maintained a steady interest in sports throughout their life, it is likely that they have been overwhelmed with promotions for alcohol related products during sporting events, whether televised or in-person. Recent Michelob Ultra commercials touting the beer’s low carbohydrate level actually attempt to draw a parallel between their product and other sports drinks (Judkis, 2016). A study examining alcohol related advertising during sporting events occurring between 1990 and 1992 noted that alcohol commercials accounted for an overwhelming majority (77%) of all beverage commercials (Grube, 2004). Over time, the constant pairing of alcohol and sports

together could lead to the consumer identifying alcohol consumption with sport participation (Martens et al., 2006).

Another explanation for the high-rates of drinking among college athletes is the existence of collegiate sporting events as a communal gathering. Fans of college sports report higher alcohol use and with greater frequency than non-fans (Nelson & Wechsler, 2003). Further, alcohol use during an on-campus sporting event significantly increases among college students (Neal, Sugarman, Hustad, Caska, & Carey, 2005). These facts are represented well by the commonly worn t-shirt worn on many college campuses during sporting events stating, '*Win or Lose, We Still Booze.*' While these statistics and illustrations do not provide justification for higher levels of drinking in athletes, the link could be in the reasons for alcohol consumption. Celebrating victories or consoling defeats are two leading reasons for alcohol consumption among sports fans (Martens et al., 2006). Athletes, those who are themselves directly responsible for the outcome of the game, may be subject to these reasons for alcohol use more so than fans (Martens et al., 2006).

A final cultural explanation for high rates of drinking among college athletes can be found in the elevated status of athletes on college campuses (Martens et al., 2006; Tricker, Cook, & McGuire, 1989). Specifically, athletes participating in sports that continue to gain mainstream popularity, correspondingly see their popularity and social status grow across campus (Smith, 2015; Sperber, 2000; Zimbalist, 2001). The celebrity-like status of many men's basketball and football players on college campuses, "may allow them access to a greater number of social functions, which in turn might make alcohol more readily available" (Martens et al., 2006, p. 311). This point is demonstrated by events such as former University of Florida student-athlete Aaron Hernandez's admission of drinking at a Gainesville bar at the age of 17, an offense that he

was arrested for but never charged (Lavigne, 2015). Curry (2000) states that male athletes described campus life as, “drinking, picking up women, and getting into fights” (p. 168). Bar fights are further described as a means of, “building team cohesion and expressing masculine courage” (Curry, 2000, p. 170). The ever-growing popularity of college athletes, in this context and others, is an important theme for the purposes of this study.

Football’s Place on Campus

The popularity and commercialism of college sports, particularly men’s basketball and football, continues to grow with each passing year. In addition to being wildly popular, many of the big-time college football programs generate millions of dollars per year. For example, according to the USA Today, the University of Oregon athletic department generated \$196,030,398 in revenue during the 2013-14 academic year. The overt commercialization of an amateur endeavor, in turn, has led to scrutiny from a variety of angles. “It has been said,” writes Clotfelter (2011) “that many American universities are best known across the country, if at all, not for their academic programs, but for their football teams, and this remark is as true today as it was when it was written, more than 80 years ago” (p. 5). Further driving home the point, Bass and colleagues (2015) ask, “What is the first image or phrase that comes to mind? Rock Chalk Jayhawk (University of Kansas)? Roll Tide (University of Alabama)? The blue turf at Boise State University? Mike Krzyweski (Duke University)? These are all illustrations of athletics symbols, traditions, and individuals for which major colleges and universities are known nationally and internationally” (p. 2). America is the only nation in the world in which the institutions of higher education are so closely associated with such commercialized athletic competition (Clotfelter, 2011). The result is often incongruity between the organization hierarchy and the power structures existing within universities housing powerful football programs. For

instance, Nick Saban, Alabama's polarizing head football coach, earned a salary north of \$7 million for the 2015 season, while Judy Bonner, the university's president, earns "just" \$535,000 per year. While university presidents theoretically oversee all university employees, the difference in salary and perceived influence substantiate a radically different power dynamic between university administration and football coaches. The benefits of college athletics to the university, tangible or not, provide athletic administrators and coaches with ample reason to build and maintain powerful athletic departments.

Sense of Community on Campus

A common justification for big-time college athletics is the ability of sporting events to build camaraderie and a sense of community on college campuses (Clopton, 2008). A strong sense of community is linked to myriad of positive social and academic outcomes for college students, including lower drug use, increased academic performance, and higher student retention (Battistich & Hom, 1997; McCarthy, Pretty, & Catano, 1990; Warner & Dixon, 2011; Warner, Shapiro, Dixon, Ridinger, & Harrison, 2011). In light of these effects, colleges and universities go to extreme lengths to intensify the sense of community on campus (Warner et al., 2011). One of the most common means of growing the campus' sense of community is through sports, particularly football (Clotfelter, 2011; Zimbalist, 2001; Warner et al., 2011). Former University of Michigan president James Duderstadt states, "College sports are woven deeply into people's lives in university towns like Ann Arbor" (p. 3).

Gary Olson (2010), provost and vice president for academic affairs at Idaho State University, claims, "Sports teams can foster a deep sense of community and social solidarity even when those teams lose more often than they win" (para. 15). Since 2008, the National Football Foundation reports that 59 colleges and universities nationwide have introduced football

programs and “all mention creating a more vibrant on-campus community and connecting with alumni” (National Football Foundation, 2014, para. 5). Despite these claims, little empirical evidence exists tying the existence of a football program to increased sense of community on college campuses (Clopton, 2007, 2008, 2009). Indeed, Warner et al. (2011) found no significant change in sense of community among Old Dominion University students prior to and after the introduction of their football program in 2009. Still, university administrators point to intercollegiate athletics and football in particular as the driving force for connecting students to the university. In fact, upon renovation of their football stadium, former MWSU director of athletics stated, “We hope that this renovation will be one our campus and community will enjoy for many years to come.”

In analyzing the culture of Mustang football, it is necessary to understand the external forces affecting the program. Culture is learned in a variety of ways, but at the age of seventeen or eighteen, newcomers to the team already have entrenched beliefs and values from unique cultural experiences (Tomasello et al., 1993). Football coaches are tasked with embracing the individuality of each of their players, but simultaneously teaching them to thrive in the unfamiliar culture of a football program. Many cultural values may carry over, for instance, from teachings of parents or high school coaches (Tomasello et al., 1993). Conversely, just as new tackling techniques and plays will be taught, new values will be introduced that force individuals to adapt and become accustomed to an unfamiliar social environment.

This chapter served to highlight some of the important cultural influences impacting the members of the Midwest State football program. Examining the actions and behaviors of these individuals in a vacuum, without first identifying the cultural environment within which they exist, would paint an incomplete picture (Furusten, 2013). The external environment surrounding

Mustang football and its members plays a role in determining beliefs, actions, and behaviors as much if not more than their immediate environment (Smith et al., 2012). Identifying the most influential societal and cultural factors influencing members of MWSU's football program, as was done in this chapter, allows for a more complete understanding of the production, representation, and consumption of culture in the current setting. It is with this breadth of knowledge that we are now able to move forward with the analysis of the present cultural product, while maintaining constant awareness of the various institutional forces at work.

CHAPTER 3

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following chapter serves as a thorough review of the pertinent literature for this study. In determining which information to include, several factors were considered. First, my preliminary encounters in the MWSU football environment helped to shape an initial impression of the important systems, structures, and procedures that shape the culture of the program. Next, a review of similarly framed studies provided an early indication of central concepts related to the project. In assembling this literature review, theories, constructs, and ideas are assembled in a logical and coherent manner by arranging them according to their level of influence towards the organization. Before addressing these levels of influence, a theoretical framework through which I base this study is presented. This modified circuit of culture framework is woven throughout the study as a means of assessing the manner in which culture is disseminated and learned throughout the Mustang football program.

Circuit of Culture

Hall's (1980) conceptualization of the way in which cultural products are produced, circulated, and consumed provides a model to better recognize the processes at work in cultural studies. The model suggests that the processes occur as a circuit rather than the previously implied linear relationships common in mass-communications research at the time. Although modified versions of it have been implemented since, Hall's (1980) model consisted simply of a process he termed "Encoding/Decoding." Hall (1980) stated, "the 'object' of these practices is meanings and messages in the form of sign-vehicles of a specific kind organized, like any form of communication or language, through the operation of codes within the syntagmatic chain of a discourse" (p. 128). The discourse, Hall argues, ultimately determines if, "the circulation of the 'product' takes place" (p. 128). Leve (2012) asserts that the circuit of culture framework

“represents the processes through which meanings are made and shared within and between cultures” (p. 2). However, the meaning must be expressed through discourse, as simple fulfillment of the production-circulation-consumption process fails to effectively apply meaning to the cultural product (Hall, 1980; Bass, 2013).

Hall’s (1980) application of the “Encoding/Decoding” model involved the ways in which television programs present messages (encoding) that in turn are interpreted by each individual (decoding) based on their own cultural background. Encoding occurs in the creation of a message with an intended meaning. Subsequently, decoding involves the consumer of the message accepting a meaning based on his or her own experiences (Hall, 1980). The way that an individual consumes a message relies solely on that individual’s prior cultural knowledge of the context in which the message is produced (Hall, 1980). Encoding a message involves a system of implied meanings, and demands that the producer understand how the consumer may consume and apprehend the message.

The encoding and decoding processes, although related, are not inherently symmetrical. Hall (1980) suggests, “What are called ‘distortions’ or ‘misunderstandings’ arise precisely from lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange” (p. 131). The manner in which both the producer perceives the audience, and vice versa, directly influences reception of the cultural product. Contrary to the behavior input frameworks theorized prior, Hall maintained that each individual encoded and decoded messages uniquely based on their relationship to the content (Hall, 1980). In order to fully comprehend and study the exchange of cultural messages, one must grasp the processes and contextual forces affecting both the producer and the consumer (Hall 1980; Bass, 2013).

Researchers have utilized and adapted Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" framework as a basis for developing their own, modified circuit of culture models. Richard Johnson (1986) suggested, "cultural studies is a process, a kind of alchemy for producing useful knowledge; codify it and you might halt its reactions" (p. 38). Rather than simplifying the process through which culture is defined, Johnson (1986) calls for a more complex model of culture involving intermediate categories. The production, circulation, and consumption phases of the circuit are each identified as interrelated moments in the life of cultural products. Each moment of the circuit is distinct, yet necessary to the whole (Johnson, 1986). He asserts that individuals entrenched in one moment of the circuit do not have the ability to see what is occurring at the other moments: "The forms that have the most significance for us at one point may be very different from those at another" (Johnson, 1986, p. 46). Restated, the producer of a cultural artifact may interpret that artifact significantly different than the individual consuming it. The value of this conceptualization of the circuit of culture model is in its capacity for modification. Indeed, Johnson (1986) claimed, "it might serve as a guide to the desirable directions of future approaches, or to the way in which they might be modified or combined" (p. 46). As such, several researchers have implemented a context specific modified circuit of culture model to study the production, circulation, and consumption of various cultural products.

Scherer and Jackson (2008) used a modified circuit of culture framework to analyze the production-representation-consumption cycle of adidas' television advertisement promoting the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team. The premise of the campaign centered on the All Blacks pre-match tradition of performing the Ka Mate *haka*, a ceremonial dance of the Māori culture. Working with an advertising agency, adidas devoted significant time and energy to better understand elements of the Māori culture prior to production of the commercial. However, as

Scherer and Jackson noted, “there were no guarantees with respect to how the commercial’s representations were decoded and articulated to real social practices, lived realities, and local power relations” (p. 508). As a result, the advertising campaign garnered much scrutiny and resulted in litigation concerning the rightful owners of the Ka Mate *haka* dance, which was used extensively in the commercial, as intellectual property. In addition, because adidas’ target audience for the commercial consisted of 18-24 year old White males, the production was executed in a way that appealed to that cultural perspective. As a result, *Black* (the name of the advertisement) depicted the Māori culture as “uncivilized, indecent, and savage” (Scherer & Jackson, 2008, p. 517). The researchers suggest that adidas aimed to present the Māori culture in this manner in an attempt to appeal to young, white males, who are entertained by the notion of vicious and fierce images in the sports context. A driving force for their study, and the significant takeaway for the current one, is to demonstrate “how abstract concepts assume concrete manifestations as they circumnavigate the circuit through its various articulatory moments” (p. 509).

A modified circuit of culture model has been used elsewhere in sport research, most notably by Michael Silk in his work on the representation of the 1998 Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games. In two separate projects both related to the games, Silk first examined interactions between television broadcasters of the games, and second analyzed Malaysia’s promotion of the city of Kuala Lumpur through media representation (Silk, 2001, 2002). Silk’s work not only exemplified sport’s place in the production and consumption of culture, but also demonstrated the extensive ways in which the circuit of culture model can be modified and utilized.

Implementing a modified circuit of culture model, I intend to examine how the Mustang coaching staff (producers of culture) produces and represents a specific cultural product to their players (consumers of culture). An important occurrence in the production of culture will be the level to which the culture is learned by the consumers, and the extent to which they become producers themselves to regenerate the circuit.

Leve (2012) advocated for the circuit of culture “as a tool of analysis that opens the way for an exploration of the multiple interrelated processes involved in the construction and management of a cultural phenomenon” (p. 1). The model provides a framework for the investigation of the organizational culture created and managed by key leaders within the Midwest State Football program. As such, the moments included in the modified circuit presented here – production, representation, and consumption – will serve as a guide for the ethnographic process. The modified circuit of culture being implemented is displayed in figure 1.

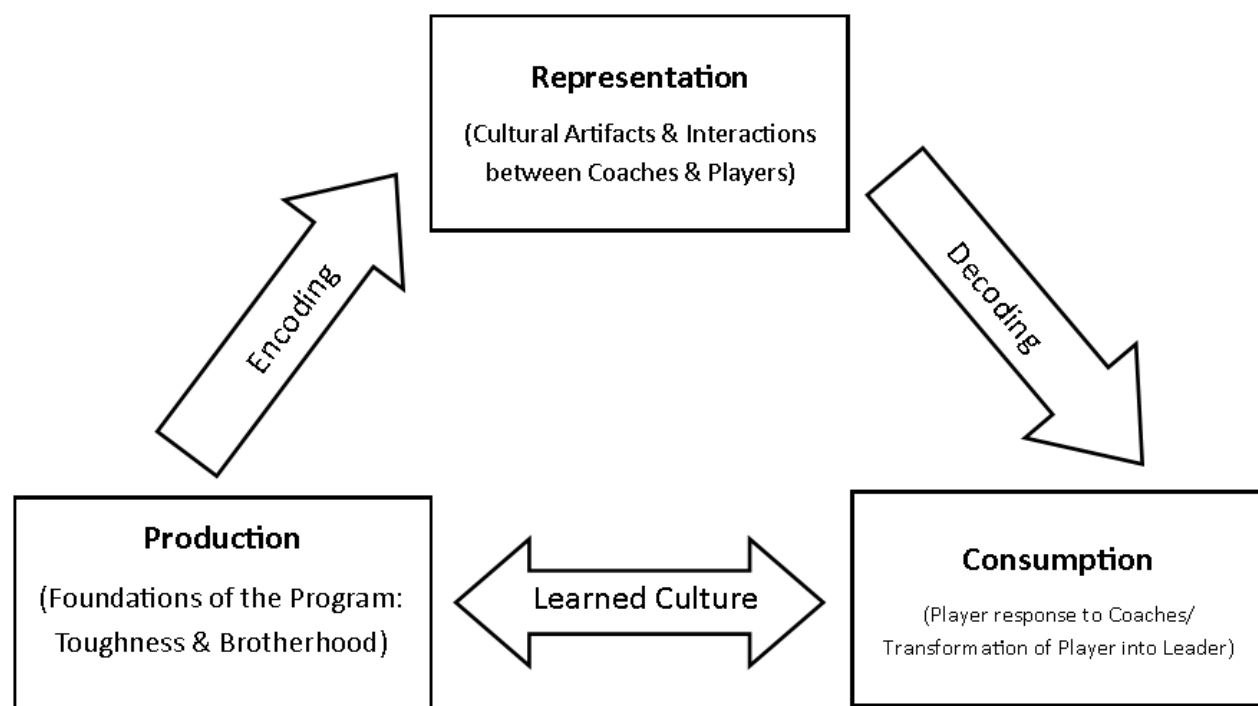


Figure 1.1. Modified Circuit of Culture for Mustang Football

Cultural Learning

The study of cultures is unique to the human species (Tomasello, Kruger, & Ratner, 1993). Studying cultures involves a thorough understanding of the artifacts, social institutions, and behavioral traditions of a social group of people (Tomasello et al., 1993). Further, human beings are distinctive in their abilities to learn from one another this cultural information. Individuals are inherently inclined to imitate other people, which is a foundation for the study of cultural learning (Gergely & Csibra, 2005). Cultural learning, often referred to as cultural diffusion, is the study of the uniquely human form of social learning, in which individuals acquire culture specific products and forms from others and adapt the knowledge for use in their own lives. Tomasello and colleagues (1993) claimed, “once a practice is begun by some member or members of a culture others acquire it relatively faithfully, but then modify it as needed to deal with novel exigencies” (p. 495).

The present study asserts that the culture of a football team, although remaining relatively similar from year to year, changes enough with each new season that each member of the team must re-learn the culture. Many players will have a better understanding of the culture as a result of several years’ experience, so the learning curve will likely be steeper for newer players. Most research pertaining to cultural learning involves the manner in which human children learn cultural processes from their environments, including their parents, other children, and other interaction with their social environment (Gergely & Csibra, 2005; Tomasello et al., 1993). Researchers have, however, applied similar concepts to better understand how individuals discover and learn the culture upon entering a new social group (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003).

Tomasello and colleagues (1993) offer three forms of cultural learning in which humans participate: imitative learning, instructed learning, and collaborative learning. Imitative learning

is the simplest form of cultural learning in that individuals often do not understand why behaviors are being performed, but are rather performing them in an attempt to imitate established members of the social group (Tomasello et al., 1993; Heyes, 2012). An example of imitative learning occurs when an individual enters a new social group and adopts the unique fashion of the group. The newly initiated individual is unaware of the cultural significance of the clothing, yet chooses to dress the same in order to fit in. Imitative learning can also occur as individuals observe other members of a group being rewarded for certain behaviors (Heyes, 2012). New members will in turn mimic behaviors in an attempt to receive similar rewards.

The next form of cultural learning, instructed learning, transpires as previously assimilated individuals teach new members cultural practices and behaviors (Tomasello et al., 1993). The important distinction between imitative learning and instructed learning is the presence of self-regulation (Tomasello et al., 1993). Self-regulation refers to an individual's capacity to manage their thoughts, emotions, and impulses in a manner that allows them to cognitively think prior to action. In imitative learning, people simply mimic the behaviors of others without knowledge of intent for their behavior. When cultural learning is instructed, knowledge is gained that allows individuals to understand the reasons for their behaviors based on the likely outcome (Tomasello et al., 1993). In the example regarding fashion choices, instructed learning involves established members of the social group informing a new member that they wear a shirt and tie to work each day because it is company policy and other choices in dress would result in punishment from management.

The final form of cultural learning is collaborative learning, which “takes place when neither interactant is an authority or expert; the intersubjectivity is symmetrical” (Tomasello et al., 1993, p. 500). The process of collaborative cultural learning is thus distinct from the previous

two forms in that rather than culture being diffused, it is being created. As individuals arrive at solutions to cultural matters jointly, new cultural practices, beliefs, or values are formed and subsequently disseminated throughout the social group. As this form of cultural learning takes place, each member collaborating in the production of cultural products brings with them knowledge from previous cultural interaction from the current social group and others (Tomasello et al., 1993). Tomasello and colleagues postulated, “in collaborative learning individual subjects appropriate into their own cognition a representation of those parts of the learning experience that require active efforts at perspective-taking” (p. 501). In order for collaborative learning to take place, members of social groups must fully comprehend the unique cultural perspective of themselves as well as the other subject. This form of cultural learning is most likely to take place among members of the social group already highly informed of the cultural practices of the group.

An understanding of how culture becomes learned and adopted by individuals is significant to fully analyzing the culture of a collegiate football team. Each new member must quickly assimilate into their new environment first by imitative learning and then instructive learning. The extent to which their previous social groups share common cultural beliefs and practices may play an important role in how rapidly cultural learning takes places.

In order to more fully comprehend each stage of the modified circuit of culture being implemented, it is first vital to define the context in which this particular social group exists. This project aims to do so in two ways: First, an in depth analysis of the relevant organizational behavior research that was identified as important to discerning the existing culture of Mustang football. The selected elements -- institutional theory, organizational culture, organizational politics, organizational justice, motivation and inspiration, and political skill – are theorized to

influence the MWSU football program and its culture at one of three levels: institutional, organizational, and individual. Second, this project will offer a portrayal of the various external cultures currently affecting the Mustangs, namely the current state of American culture, the culture of Higher Education in America, the culture of intercollegiate athletics, the culture of American football, and the historical culture of the MWSU football program. Each of these different cultural perspectives provide insight into how and why individuals within the Mustang football program produce, represent, and consume culture.

Institutional Level

In applying a modified circuit of culture model to better understand the phenomena of culture occurring within MWSU football, identifying the setting of the investigation is imperative. As referenced above, the circuit of culture framework relies extensively on identifying external cultural perspectives and pressures at play throughout the process (Johnson, 1983). While understanding the current organizational structure of Mustang Football is central to the present analysis (as detailed in Chapter 1), of equal importance are the processes affecting the development of that structure. As a means of better contextualizing the MWSU football program, an institutional approach was implemented. As such, the relevant literature from the field of institutional theory is presented below in order to provide perspective on the various institutions affecting analysis of the current project.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory acts as a means of diagnosing and identifying the resilient forms of social structure by delving into why certain rules, norms, and routines become adopted by a societal group (Scott, 2004). Thus, institutionalization occurs when a practice or behavior becomes established as norm among a group of people (Scott, 1987). Although often used

synonymously, institutions and organizations are not the same. Institutions refer to entities such as governance structures, social arrangements, norms, rules, and ways of thinking and organizing that arise out of a social need for structure and regulation (Furusten, 2013). Zucker (1987) asserted, “institutional theory is inherently difficult to explicate, because it taps taken-for-granted assumptions at the core of social action” (p. 443).

When using institutional theory to examine organizations, it is crucial to recognize them as autonomous social actors within greater societal processes (Tolbert & Zucker, 1999). Selznick (1957) stressed a holistic and contextual approach to studying organizations through institutional theory, and suggests that organizations behave as living forms that change and adapt as needed over time. A key assumption of institutional theorists is that the environment in which the organization exists strongly dictates the introduction of formal structure into the organization more so than even market pressures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). By implementing an institutional approach for this project, it is thus fundamental to gain a firm understanding of the environment inhabiting the Mustang football program, which is the purpose of chapter 2.

The quintessential forces driving institutional theory are those of legitimization and survival (Furusten, 2013). When organizations adopt novel ways of approaching their business resulting in greater productivity or effectiveness, such practices and structures come to be legitimized into the environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Early-adopters of the innovative processes are at first seen as unorthodox and rebellious, but as the process becomes institutionalized throughout the environment, those who refuse to adopt are eventually believed to be outdated and irrational (Scott, 2004). However, some processes, referred to as “rationalized myths” are adopted as sound practices despite offering no positive outcomes (Furusten, 2013). Consequentially, in order to either gain or maintain legitimacy in their given environment,

organizations occasionally implement illogical procedures (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983). Restated, behaviors that are common may be taken for granted and embraced ceremoniously within an organization for no reason other than to appear legitimate.

Illustrations of structural practices or procedures that organizations adopt in order to gain legitimacy include organizational charts, job titles, and organizational rules and policies. In the context of a collegiate football program, the coaching assignments, practice schedules, and recruiting procedures are all examples of potentially institutionalized entities. For example, although more efficient structures may exist, in order to maintain legitimacy the structure of most college coaching staffs appear nearly identical (i.e. Head Coach, Coordinators, and Position Coaches in a traditional hierarchical structure).

As organizations accept these legitimized elements, their chances for survival increase due to isomorphism (Zucker, 1987). Isomorphism refers to the similarities in form, shape, or structure of organizations resulting from the institutionalization of these features (Scott, 2004). Institutional isomorphism occurs in three distinct ways: normative isomorphism, coercive isomorphism, and memetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Isomorphism acts as a means for survival as “the use of external assessment criteria – that is, moving toward the status in society of a subunit rather than an independent system – can enable an organization to remain successful by social definition, buffering it from failure” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 349). Both internal organizational members and external organizational constituents hold stronger commitments to an organization integrating externally legitimized structures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Normative isomorphism occurs as a result of professionalization through two processes (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999). The first is through professional training, in that individuals entering

into a specific industry receive similar training as other individuals in the industry. As such, individuals with similar training background entering into various organizations tend to opine that organizations should operate similar ways. Typical examples of the occurrence of normative isomorphism are attorneys, medical doctors, and professors, each of which receive comparable technical training and carry that with them into the organizational environment (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999). Normative isomorphism also occurs in the coaching profession, as coaches typically maneuver similar career paths, and thus receive comparable training in becoming a college coach. The average college football coach either played college football or served as a student volunteer coach, and then moved on to be a graduate assistant before earning a full time assistant position (Donnelly, 2015). In taking similar career paths and learning through the same type of training, many coaches maintain similar views regarding the manner in which a football program should operate. In his recent press conference after being hired as the head coach at the University of Minnesota, PJ Fleck suggested that he had learned a great deal from former head coaches he had coached under as assistants:

I want to thank the Jim Tressels, I want to thank the Jerry Kills. Coach Kill did tell me, hey, tell him you're a Kill guy. I said I'm a Kill guy. I'm part of the Kill tree. I do know that. Coach Kill taught me a lot how to care for players. When I already did care for players, he taught me how to care more. Mike Nolan, who changed my entire life. Greg Schiano taught me to be how demanding, to be the most demanding that I could be but also love people at the same time, to bring out the best in everyone. I look forward to bringing out the best to our players here at the University of Minnesota (Derlan, 2017).

The second manner in which normative isomorphism occurs is through the diffusion of ideas by means of interaction and communication across organizations (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Certain organizational environments are more conducive to this form of isomorphism than others. For instance, physicians and other members of the health care industry are much more likely to interact and gain information from other individuals in the field

than engineers, who tend to keep their knowledge more private (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999). Although coaches are more inclined to keep information from their opponents, the high turnover rate in the coaching profession offers a different opportunity for isomorphism to occur. As coaches leave to join another program, they bring with them all of the previous knowledge gained in their prior positions. As this continues, all football programs, in terms of structure and processes, begin to appear more alike (Raustiala & Sprigman, 2012).

Mizruchi and Fein (1999) declared that coercive isomorphism “is driven by two forces: pressures from other organizations on which a focal organization is dependent and an organization’s pressure to conform to the cultural expectations of the larger society” (p. 667). Government mandates or legal requirements often force organizations to adopt policies and procedures to remain compliant in their given environment. In their seminal piece on institutional isomorphism titled *The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational field*, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggested, “Organizations are increasingly homogenous within given domains and increasingly organized around rituals of conformity to wider institutions.” (p. 150). In simpler terms, as industries require more government restrictions and intervention, the regularity of the environment’s organizations will continue to persist. This is certainly the case in college athletics, as the NCAA continues to expand their rulebook in hopes of maintaining control over a large number of competitive organizations. The growth in power of the NCAA simply results in growing homogeneity among athletic departments and athletic teams.

The other force driving coercive isomorphism is pressure to conform to societal expectations (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999). This process offers prodigious respect to the power that social pressure can have on organizations, so much so that organizations will alter their structure

or procedures in order to appease social groups and maintain legitimacy in their social environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Again, certain types of organizations are more susceptible to such pressures, although institutional theory claims that all organizations acknowledge societal pressure and adapt as needed (Scott, 2004). College football programs, specifically in this very moment in time, face tremendous social pressure from multiple angles. Those pressures and their implications are discussed further in Chapter 4.

The final isomorphic mechanism, mimetic isomorphism, occurs as a “response to uncertainty” (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999, p. 657). As organizational leaders face ambiguity, they often turn to other organizations within their environment perceived as successful, and simulate their behavior (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Because of this phenomenon, many football coaches have referred to the occupation as a ‘copycat business.’ Specifically on-the-field behaviors such as play-calling and football techniques are readily available to all coaches through film exchange. Bill Walsh’s implementation of the West Coast Offense was referred to as a ‘gimmick’ by many, before being employed widely throughout college and professional football (Raustiala & Sprigman, 2012). In response, coaches attempt to keep other operations within their program private, such as practice plans, weight training programs, and recruiting profiles. Estes (2016) suggests,

There is no more paranoid group in sports than college football coaches. They go to great lengths to close off practices and scrimmages from prying eyes, employing people for just this purpose. They refuse to release depth charts. They restrict player interviews. They restrict assistant coach interviews. They've been known to change cell phone numbers regularly. They even try to get the state's open records laws changed. All of this because they want to restrict information for fear of giving an edge to an opponent, thus harming chances to win a football game (para. 2-4).

The recent events at Wake Forest, in which a former coach turned radio crew member relayed private information to opposing coaches, was highly publicized and referred to as ‘traitorous

espionage' (Estes, 2016). As noted earlier, however, these procedures often diffuse to other programs in a more ethical manner by means of normative isomorphism.

The use of institutional theory to analyze organizations has been prevalent not only in traditional organizational theory research, but in sport management research as well (Washington & Patterson, 2011; Kikulis, 2000). O'Brien and Slack (2004) suggested, "all sport organizations are embedded in organizational fields of some description, and are thus subject to attendant institutional pressures for change" (p. 36). A result of what has been deemed *unclear technologies* (as opposed to organizations with a clear technical focus such as banks and engineering firms) has led researchers to assert that sport organizations are particularly susceptible to institutional pressures (Greenwood, Oliver, Suddaby, & Sahlin-Andersson, 2008; Washington & Patterson, 2011). Organizations featuring unclear technologies oftentimes must balance various organizational goals, such as winning football games, graduating players, and maintaining NCAA compliance. These organizational goals oftentimes compete against each other, and thus encourage leaders within the organization to give in to societal pressure as a means of gaining or sustaining legitimacy.

Isomorphism in sport organizations in particular has been well researched (Washington & Patterson, 2011). Slack and Hinings (1994) examined the effect of coercive isomorphism in Sport Canada's National Sport Organizations (NSO's) and identified Sport Canada's pressure as the governing body as a reason why the NSO's adopted similar bureaucratic structures. The researchers further identified normative and mimetic isomorphic forces as key players in the development of organizational structures in addition to coercive isomorphism (Washington & Patterson, 2011).

Arthur, Van Buren, and Del Campo (2009) implemented institutional theory in an unusual yet fascinating manner, as they sought to explain the differences in distance between men's and women's tee boxes on golf courses as a product of the political ideology of the state and district in which the course was located. The researchers' hypothesize,

Nonpolitical institutions embedded in communities – like legislative districts – that elect political candidates whose gender ideologies focus on differences between men and women, and the need to “protect” women – might then face mimetic, normative, and coercive isomorphic pressures to structure golf-related relationships between men and women in highly gender-differentiated ways. A golf course, for example, in a highly conservative legislative district might therefore reflect in its physical layout significant perceived differences in the abilities of men and women. In short, the political environment influences perceptions of women's physical abilities (p. 518).

Nearly 500 golf courses were used as the sample for the study, in which the distance between the men and women's tee boxes served as the dependent variable. The independent variable, political orientation, was operationalized as whether the state where the course was located voted Republican or Democrat in the most recent presidential election as well as the conservatism or liberalism of the political representative for the golf course's district (Arthur et al., 2009). Results indicated that through institutional theory, the political environment of the organization (golf course) is statistically significantly associated with the distance between gender specific golf tees (Arthur et al., 2009). More specifically, golf courses located within more conservative political environments tend to place women's tee boxes further away from the men's tee box and closer to the hole, possibly in order to “protect” women. Golf courses inhabiting more liberal political environments, on the other hand, positioned tee boxes more closely together, potentially a result of their belief to treat women as equals (Arthur et al., 2009). This unique research study provides support for the notion that external organizational environments play a substantial role in organizational structures and processes in oftentimes rare and unusual ways.

Isomorphic behaviors have been analyzed in NCAA athletic departments as well. Cunningham and Ashley (2001) aimed to expand on findings by Danylchuk and Chelladurai (1999) concerning isomorphic tendencies of Canadian intercollegiate athletic directors. The researchers operationalized isomorphic behaviors as “the perceptions of athletic directors and their assistants regarding the importance and delegation of managerial activities” (p. 47) and suggested that if these individuals showed similar behaviors across organizations that isomorphism had taken place (Cunningham & Ashley, 2001). The following competing values were implemented as frameworks for the study: population ecology, institutionalism, and strategic choice. Population ecology explains isomorphism as a Darwin-like natural selection among organizations. Organizations survive by adopting best practices from other organizations, or fail to do so and become extinct (Hannan & Freeman, 1977). Institutionalism, as explained in detail above, suggests that social pressures and expectations drive isomorphic behavior (Dacin, 1997). Finally, strategic choice theorists suggest that isomorphic behaviors are not inevitable in response to external forces, rather, “the organization, either through top decision-makers, powerful entities in the political realm, or the characteristics of important organizational personnel, has substantial choice as to what changes are necessary or wanted” (Cunningham & Ashley, 2001, p. 50).

Researchers proposed a specific hypothesis for each of the competing values of isomorphic behavior (Cunningham & Ashley, 2001). If a population ecology framework were sustained, it was hypothesized that athletic directors and their assistants would prioritize and delegate activities similarly across all divisions of the NCAA. In addition, organizations that behave in an isomorphic manner were hypothesized to outperform athletically those who do not. Hypothesized for the institutional perspective was that perceived importance of activities and

delegation would be vastly different across NCAA divisions, but similar within the same divisions. Again, isomorphic athletic departments were believed to perform better than endomorphic departments given an institutional perspective (Cunningham & Ashley, 2001). Endomorphic behavior is characterized by autonomous decision-making not influenced by institutional processes or societal pressure (Cunningham & Ashley, 2001). The strategic choice perspective was hypothesized to result in variation between all athletic departments and no differences in performance based on isomorphic tendencies.

Isomorphic and endomorphic athletic departments were identified as a result of responses from athletic directors and assistant athletic directors on a questionnaire designed to recognize the perceived importance of activities, amount of time spent on activities by the athletic director, and amount of time spent on activities by staff members. Participant's mean scores were determined, and athletic departments were categorized as endomorphic (responses one standard deviation above or below the mean) or isomorphic (responses within one standard deviation of the mean). Performance of the athletic department was determined by the department's standing in the Sears Director's Cup, a ranking based on all athletic teams' athletic finishes in national polls. The results of the study indicated no statistically significant differences between divisions for importance or the delegation of activities (Cunningham & Ashley, 2001). This finding supports both the population ecology and strategic choice perspectives. Further, no statistical difference was found between endomorphic and isomorphic athletic departments in their performance based on the Sears Director's Cup, supporting the strategic choice perspective (Cunningham & Ashley, 2001). In supporting the strategic choice perspective, the authors failed to find support for isomorphic behaviors among NCAA athletic departments, a finding that goes against many other empirical studies performed on sport organizations. Despite the findings,

some disagreement can be found in the manner in which the research was conducted. Washington and Patterson (2011) assert, “One could argue over the way Cunningham and Ashley (2001) operationalized institutional isomorphism versus population ecology isomorphism” (p. 7). Isomorphism has traditionally been theorized and operationalized as organizations “*appearing* more similar over time” (Washington & Patterson, 2011, p. 3, italics added). In the isomorphic context, appearance and behavior were operationalized in substantially different ways. In turn, although these specific individual behaviors of athletic directors and their assistants were not subject to isomorphic pressures, the study does not deny the potential of isomorphism affecting the organization in different manners. This particular study notwithstanding, the role of the external environment and isomorphic pressures remains a vital level of analysis in regards to the formation of culture in an organization.

In an attempt to contextualize the environment surrounding the Midwest State University football program, an institutional approach is being implemented. The program not only occupies the overarching environment of the MWSU athletic department, but also is located within the University as a whole, the Midwestern Football Conference, and the universal environment of college football. Further, the impact of the current American culture and culture of Higher Education cannot be understated. These external factors influencing the Mustang football program were discussed in Chapter 2. Beyond the institutional level of analysis, this project will further examine key features occurring at both the organizational and individual level within the Mustang football program. Included at the organizational level, beyond the organizational overview given in Chapter 1, are the organizational behavior concepts of organizational culture, organizational politics and organizational justice. These three concepts are explained in further

detail below, as well as their relationship to the present study and the culture of the Midwest State Football program.

Organizational Level

In analyzing the Mustang football culture, several organizational level constructs will be implemented. These constructs, organizational culture, politics, and justice, assist in advancing the body of knowledge relevant to this study. When applying these concepts, each is explored as an integral component of the modified circuit of culture described above.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is a complex phenomenon, defined and conceptualized through research in a multitude of ways (Maitland, Hills, & Rhind, 2015). Every organization, regardless of industry or size, has a specific organizational culture entrenched within it (Smith, Stewart, & Haimes, 2012). The culture of a given organization provides meaning for the decisions they make and the actions they take. Schein (2010) compares the culture of an organization to the personality of an individual; an individual's behavior is a direct result of the personality existing inside of them. Thus, much like personality, organizational culture operates as an abstract concept, something tangible only through the actions and behaviors of the organization's members (Schein, 2010). Anthropologists, archaeologists, and sociologists ruminate abstract thought as a primary trait for human behavior, a way for individuals to conceptualize the world around them (Blanchard, 1995). Both the individual and the combined behaviors of organizational members provide evidence for exposing the underlying culture. Studying culture is a form of abstracting an observable phenomenon: "If an abstract concept is to be useful to our thinking, it should be observable yet increase our understanding of a set of events that are otherwise mysterious or not well understood" (Schein, 2010, p. 14).

The widely agreed upon importance of culture as a predictor of successful organizations has encouraged an abundance of academic research on the topic. The following pages are meant to summarize the relevant literature to provide a framework for conceptualizing organizational culture. The English word culture carries with it many distinctive meanings dependent on the context with which it is used. Edward B. Tylor, an anthropologist, portrayed culture as, “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Smith, Stewart, & Haines, 2012, p. 81). Cultural anthropology as a field has adopted Tylor’s definition of culture as a way of understanding the human ability to catalog and translate experiences symbolically (Applebaum, 1987).

Culture has further been described in the field of sociology as the values and beliefs of a group of people, ranging from that of an immediate family unit to the culture of an entire society (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). From this perspective, culture provides us with an understanding of social norms and customs, a reason for why individuals and groups think and behave the way they do. Culture in this sense is present at each of the following levels: individual culture, group culture, societal culture, and human culture. For the purposes of the present project, organizations are best thought of as “culture-producing firms” (DiMaggio, 1977, p. 441) in which members endlessly search for meaning within the context of their organizational environment. Rather than engaging in a systems model view of the organization, which suggests organizations operate as a rigid system of inputs-throughputs-outputs, a more fluid, cultural approach is taken.

Researchers studying the culture of an organization have taken both anthropological and sociological approaches, although theoretically the two differ only slightly. Sociologist Raymond

Williams reiterated this sentiment by stating “Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 82). Consequentially, the most comprehensive way to understand organizational culture is to draw information from both anthropological and sociological studies.

Literature focused on organizational culture began surfacing in the late 1970’s (Maitland et al., 2015). Despite its existence as a concept in organizational analysis for close to four decades, a shared definition ceases to exist. Given the complex and abstract nature of the culture phenomenon occurring within organizations, the lack of agreed upon definition comes without disbelief. Those studying culture oftentimes do so carrying vastly different purposes and agendas, lending hand to a variety of definitions, each demarcated with a specific objective in mind (Alvesson, 2012). Taylor, Irvin, and Wieland (2006) believe the field of organizational culture to be “the battleground of competing paradigms that influence how researchers conceptualize phenomena, use methods to collect and analyze data, and represent their findings” (p. 305). In response to these competing approaches to organizational culture studies, Martin (2002) recommends three building blocks for building an organizational culture study: 1) a clear delineation of the research paradigm and methods, 2) the perspective on, definition and operationalization of culture, and 3) the research interest of the study. Before delving further into the organizational culture literature, a firm grasp of these building blocks is essential.

A paradigm is defined as, “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 183). Two fundamentally different paradigmatic approaches have surfaced in organizational culture research. The first, more popular approach, examines culture as if it is something an organization *has* (Maitland et al., 2015). Those applying this approach believe that

culture is measurable within an organization as a variable (Smircich, 1983). Quantitative measures are typically implemented in an attempt to associate culture and various organizational outcomes (Maitland et al., 2015; Smircich, 1983). The alternative paradigmatic approach to organizational culture studies, which have been implemented less frequently in academic research, attempts to provide meaning and significance to the behaviors of organizational members, the occurrence of social events, and the presence of institutional processes (Maitland et al., 2015). This more subjective epistemological approach to studying culture prefers qualitative methods including observations, interviews, and ethnography. The priority is not to predict or produce generalizable results, but rather to provide rich data regarding a specific culture.

The second building block for organizational culture research includes the perspective through which culture is viewed, the definition of culture used, and the way in which culture is operationalized for the given research project. The accepted perspective “shapes how research defines and operationalizes the organizational culture under study” (Maitland et al., 2015, p. 502). Perspective designates the primary importance of the study based on a three-perspective framework including integration, differentiation, and fragmentation (Maitland et al., 2015; Martin & Meyerson, 1988). When implementing an integration perspective, most definitions of culture “include an explicit focus on what is shared” (Smircich, 1983, p. 56). This perspective suggests that a clearly defined culture exists within the organization. A differentiation perspective views culture within an organization as ambiguous and lacking organization-wide unanimity (Martin & Frost, 2011). Subcultures are emphasized in a differentiation perspective as a way to represent opinions of lower level employees (Maitland et al., 2015). Finally, a fragmentation perspective opines, “the relationships among the manifestations of a culture are

neither clearly consistent nor clearly inconsistent; instead relationships are complex, containing elements of contradiction and confusion” (Frost, 1995, p. 609 as cited in Martin & Frost, 2011). The operationalization of culture in a given study is designated by the perspective and definition used (Maitland et al., 2015).

Although the conceptualization of culture may be plainly stated in a study, “it is the cultural manifestation that researchers actually study which reveal how a given inquiry defines culture” (Maitland et al., 2015, p. 502-503). The most frequently studied manifestations of culture are forms, practices, and content themes (Martin, 1992). Forms refer to the various languages used, rituals observed, and stories told within an organization (Martin, 1992; Maitland et al., 2015; Martin & Frost, 2011). Practices in an organization include specific tasks assigned to members, forms of communication, and hierarchies of power (Martin, 1992). The values and assumptions, either visible or indiscernible, make up the content themes manifestation (Martin, 1992; Martin & Frost, 2011). Once the research paradigm and methods are made known, and the perspective, definition, and conceptualization are outlined, the final building block for organizational culture research is to identify the research interest of the study.

Recognizing the research interest of a study is akin to understanding the motive of the researcher for executing the study. Motivations for performing organizational culture research fall into one of three classifications based on the knowledge one hopes to attain (Girginov, 2010). A technical understanding of culture seeks to predict and control, while practical knowledge looks to gain a mutual understanding, and finally, emancipatory knowledge hopes to expose and eliminate absolute power (Girginov, 2010; Maitland et al., 2015). These building blocks proposed by Martin (2002) provide a concrete foundation in order to better understand the history of research performed in the field of organizational culture. Literature on organizational

culture provided below is subsequently systematized according to the paradigmatic approach taken by the researcher.

Positivist Paradigmatic Approach to Culture

A positivist epistemology is built on empiricism, in which data collected and analyzed using verified procedures act as positive facts (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Positivists reject the notion of metaphysics, and believe that research should focus on what can be observed and measured (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Philosopher Auguste Comte posited that society operates according to absolute laws much like the laws of physics and mathematics (Comte, 1975). Positivists investigating organizational cultures identify culture as a variable with observable and measurable qualities, and look to generalize findings to other similar organizations (Maitland et al., 2015). By measuring culture, positivists believe they can in turn manipulate the relationship between culture and positive organizational outcomes (Smircich, 1983). The following is a review of organizational culture literature based in a positivist epistemology.

Deal and Kennedy's (1982) Cultural Model

The assumptions made in Deal and Kennedy's (1982) cultural model are that culture is established in an organization through feedback received and rewards given, as well as the amount of risk taken by organizational members (Deal & Kennedy, 2000). Four different types of organizations are described based on the amount of time between action, feedback, and reward, as well as the level of risk individuals are willing to take in their position (Deal & Kennedy, 2000; Saffold, 1988). The four types of culture within an organization were termed 'work-hard, play-hard culture' resulting from rapid feedback and low risk, 'tough-guy macho culture', with rapid feedback and high reward, 'process culture' involving slow feedback and low risk, and finally the 'bet-the-company culture' resulting from slow feedback and high risk

(Deal & Kennedy, 2000). The purpose of defining and measuring these culture types was proposed to provide managers with a recipe for how to operate based on the demands of the given industry, as well as for employees to recognize based on their own personality if they are a good fit for the organization (Deal & Kennedy, 2000).

Denison's (1990) Four Dimensions of Culture

Rather than establishing typologies, Denison (1990), proposed four dimensions that contribute to organizational performance, growth, innovation, or learning (Schein, 2010). Mission, consistency, involvement, and adaptability made up the four overall dimensions, with each including three sub-dimensions to provide further detail (Denison, 1990). Organizational members are surveyed based on their perceptions of the organization in each of the dimensions, resulting in a profile of the perceived organizational culture. This profile can then be compared against other organizations deemed as effective or not (Schein, 2010).

Denison's (1990) dimensions of culture have been used as a theoretical framework for research in sport organizations as well. Smith and Shilbury (2004) sought to map cultural dimensions of Australian sports organizations by drawing partially from Denison's (1990) dimensions. The authors claim that although "the dimensions are underpinned by common themes, that they can be difficult to locate given the variable and often creative labels placed upon them" (Smith & Shilbury, 2004, p. 141). For this reason, they define their own dimensions unique to Australian sport organizations: rituals, symbols, size, and history and tradition (Smith & Shilbury, 2004). These four dimensions are provided in hopes of carrying over to further research on sport organizations.

O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell's (1991) Organizational Culture Profile

O'Reilly and colleagues (1991) developed the organizational culture profile (OCP) in order to assess person-organization fit (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). The authors suggest, "A logic of person-culture fit fundamentally drawn from an interactional psychology perspective in which aspects of both individual and situation combine to influence a focal individual's response to a given situation" (O'Reilly et al., 1991, p. 487). The purpose of this profile is to determine if a 'good' culture exists within an organization based on the overall perceived fit of its members within the culture (Takeda, 2007). Person-organization fit has been empirically tested and has shown a positive relationship with job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and negatively associated to turnover rates (O'Reilly et al., 1991).

Cameron and Quinn's (1999) Competing Values Framework

The competing values approach to defining organizational culture types is based on two sets of perpetually competing values related to organizational effectiveness (Cameron & Quinn, 2005; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981). The two dimensions (internal versus external focus and flexible versus stable structure) were determined to be the most influential factors contributing to organizational performance as defined by both experts from the field and a factor analysis (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981). Members of the organization are asked through a survey to perceive managerial behavior based on the two dimensions. The culture types resulting from the competing values framework are clan (internal focus, flexible structure), hierarchy (internal focus, stable structure), adhocracy (external focus, flexible structure), and market (external focus, stable structure). The typology is "based on the theoretical idea that the poles of any given dimension are in conflict with each other and the cultural solution is how to reconcile them (Schein, 2010, p. 168).

The competing values framework has been used more frequently in sport research to typify or create cultural profiles of various sporting organizations. A study involving Triple-A baseball teams sought to identify which culture type, based on the competing values framework, baseball teams implemented (Yun Seok & Scott, 2008). The authors identified both market and clan type cultures present among the organizations, as the teams tended to be both goal-driven (market) and value solidity and trust (clan). Organizations that maintained a strong culture, characterized by agreement among members of the competing values, were positively associated with the size of the organization as well as the winning percentage and game attendance levels (Yun Seok & Scott, 2008).

Another study examined sport employees' job satisfaction through the lens of the competing values framework in the Korean Professional Baseball League (Yun Seok, Martin, & Park, 2008). Market and clan cultures were again identified as being prominent among the organizations, and further suggested that a clan culture promoted greater levels of job satisfaction among employees (Yun Seok et al., 2008). An exploratory type study was performed to assess the validity of implementing the competing values framework in sport organizations (Colyer, 2000). The researchers compared results from the organizational culture assessment instrument to qualitative results measuring culture to assess the congruency between them. The study suggested that the competing values framework could be used as a valuable first step to identify broad themes throughout a large sporting organization and to gather information from a large amount of participants. The authors do, however, acknowledge, "this model alone will not provide a complete multidimensional view of an organization's culture" (Colyer, 2000, p. 337).

The practice of measuring culture through surveys or other quantitative methods has been contested within the field for oversimplifying a complex process. Schein (2010) suggests,

“Culture is an intrinsically shared phenomenon that only manifests itself in interaction, so whatever dimensions are measured by the survey are bound to be superficial” (p. 160).

Summarizing organizations into a single, unified picture, while so many autonomous elements exist, leaves no option other than a partial synopsis (Smith et al., 2012). For this reason, several researchers approach cultural studies from a far different perspective, objecting to gather rich, detailed data from a singular organization in an attempt to provide a comprehensive evaluation.

Constructivism Paradigmatic Approach to Culture

Individuals operating from a constructivist epistemology believe that knowledge is gained through the interaction of lived experience and ideas (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Rather than seeking to generalize findings, constructivists attempt to uncover truth as it exists in a specific domain (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A more subjective form of research, constructivism conceptualizes “organizational culture as the setting, in which behavior, social events, institutions and processes become comprehensible and meaningful” (Maitland et al., 2015, p. 502). Using qualitative methods, researchers pursue a thorough understanding of the culture of a singular organization through rich, comprehensive data. In turn, organizational culture research performed from a constructivist epistemology offers clues and suggestions for discovering culture as it occurs in unique settings (Schein, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

As referenced briefly above, a sociological approach to organizational culture suggests that culture can best be conceptualized as social norms and beliefs expressed within the confines of a given organization (Swidler, 1986). The constructivist approach allows for an in depth analysis of the unique social norms occurring in a given group, in the case of the current study, a collegiate football program. The ways in which social norms, and in turn organizational culture, manifest themselves are the source of debate for organizational culture scholars. The

“Encoding/Decoding” circuit of culture model provides a framework to explore how culture disseminates through MWSU football, but other organizational culture specific conceptualizations provide further detail to implement in the study of culture and augment the current project.

Schein (1985) proposed that culture should be analyzed at three different levels, where the levels referred to the “degree to which the cultural phenomenon is visible to the observer” (p. 23). The levels range from the overtly tangible cultural artifacts visible to all, to the espoused beliefs and values of the organizations members, to their basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 2010). The surface level is named artifacts, and includes anything that an individual would typically see, hear, and feel when facing a new group with an unfamiliar culture. The visible items belonging to the group such as infrastructure, artwork, and clothing are all artifacts of culture. It also includes language, emotional displays, rituals, and observable formalities (Schein, 2010). In an organization, the organizational chart, formal job descriptions, and other organizational processes and procedures constitute cultural artifacts as they each hint at how the organization operates (Schein, 2010). Schein warns, “the most important point to be made about this level of the culture is that it is both easy to observe and very difficult to decipher” (p. 24). He points to the difference in cultural meaning of the pyramids to the Egyptians and Mayans, who used pyramids for vastly different purposes: tombs for the Egyptians and temples for the Mayans, as evidence for the need to discern further meaning of artifacts (Schein, 2010).

The second level of culture in Schein’s model is that of espoused beliefs and values. Shared beliefs and values of organizational members do not necessarily begin as such, as they must be learned and tested within the confines of the organization. Each individual begins with a set of their own beliefs based on their cultural background. These only become shared among

group members through empirical testing. For instance, imagine two football coaches disagree in their beliefs over which style of defense works best against the run. The only manner in which their beliefs become shared is if one coach can prove to the other, through watching film or otherwise, that his defensive style stops the run more effectively than the other. Slowly, Schein (2010) asserts, individual beliefs and values will give way to shared beliefs and values, which ultimately become assumptions. In our example, the adopted belief of the new defensive style will only become an assumption through continued testing and reliable results, evidenced by continued defensive success against the run.

The final level is termed basic underlying assumptions and deals with those beliefs and values that have become so engrained as part of the organization that it is assumed as second nature: “This degree of consensus results from repeated success in implementing certain beliefs” (Schein, 2010 p. 28). These basic assumptions often guide behavior among group members, as it conveys how to perceive their environment. A shared basic assumption of most college football programs is that winning football games is important. Although it appears intuitive, a football team that lacked such a shared assumption may find themselves wondering about the purpose of their behaviors. The shared basic assumptions of the group provide each individual with cognitive stability and “defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations” (Schein, 2010, p. 29). Schein indicates that in order for an individual to truly become aware of the cultural assumptions of a group, they must fully become a part of that culture.

Hatch (1993) sought to fill the holes that she believed existed in Schein’s conceptualization of the three levels of culture. Her cultural dynamics model examines four

processes: manifestation, realization, symbolization, and interpretation (Hatch, 1993). The static model described by Schein is thus transformed into a dynamic process, as displayed in figure 2.

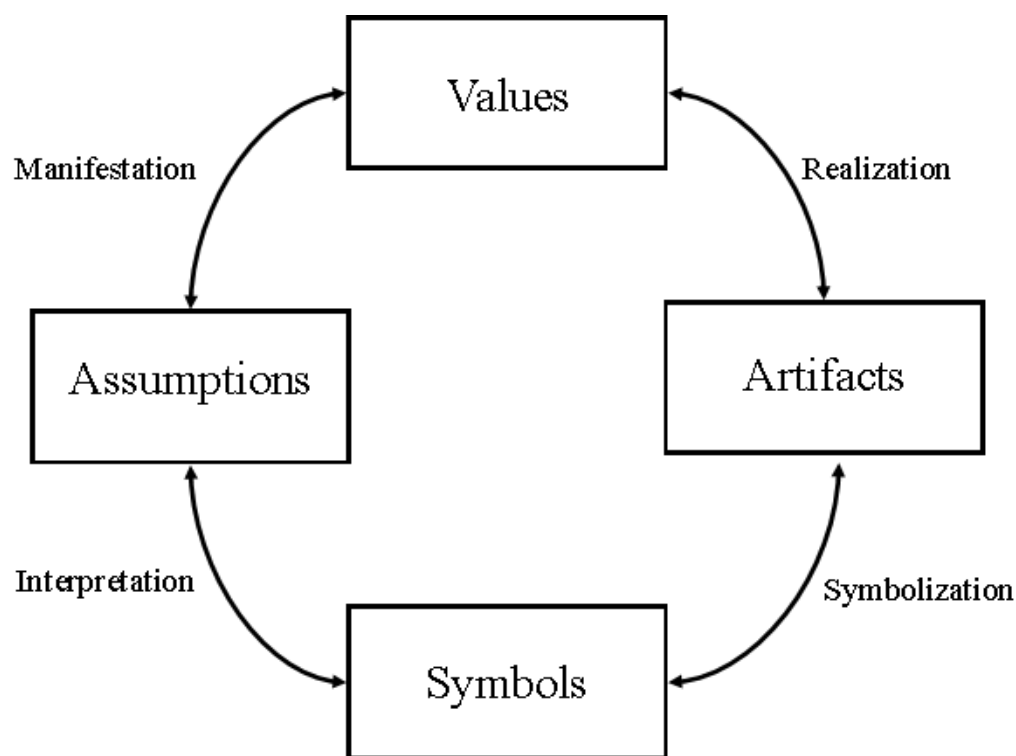


Figure 3.1. Hatch's (1993) Cultural Dynamics Model

The manifestation process refers to “any process by which an essence reveals itself, usually via the senses, but also through cognition and emotion” (Hatch, 1993, p. 662). Incorporating Schein's model, cultural assumptions become exposed through perceptions, cognitions, and emotions in the manifestation process (Hatch, 1993). The manifestation process is comparable to Hall's (1973) encoding process in that they both contribute to the development of cultural products (Bass, 2013). The cultural dynamics model, however, takes place within a single organization, whereas encoding in the circuit of culture assumes that cultural products are created for outside consumption. Manifestation, which is posited to contribute to the creation of organizational culture by allowing members to interpret the intangible assumptions of the

organization as decipherable values, occurs in two manners: proactive and retroactive (Hatch, 1993).

Proactive manifestation is the process through which cultural assumptions shape individual values (Hatch, 1993). For example, the assumption that a football team attempts to win every game would proactively manifest the values of hard work and competition. The core culture of an organization is made up of multiple assumptions that “engage in manifestations simultaneously, and interactively, to reveal values” (Hatch, 1993, p. 662). It is possible that multiple core assumptions manifest into competing values, which then must be deciphered and handled accordingly. The proactive manifestation of assumptions into values ultimately determines action and behavior of organizational members (Hatch, 1993).

Retroactive manifestation occurs as values either preserve or adjust existing cultural assumption (Hatch, 1993). When values and assumptions are congruent, retroactive manifestation acts to maintain the balance and provide individuals with a comforting sense that all is well. Values and assumptions become incongruent, and a retroactive manifestation occurs to adjust assumptions, when newly engaged values produce consistently positive and successful results (Hatch, 1993; Schein, 1985). This is the process occurring when a coach, set in his ways about a certain defense, consistently witnesses a different defense producing positive outcomes. This process can occur both inter- and intra-culturally, as values transferred from a different cultural domain that prove useful could be adopted as assumptions in the new culture. The interconnecting of multiple cultural domains (as is the case within the MWSU football program) poses difficulty in the manifestation process, as Hatch described,

Because assumptions are not phenomena about which members are normally conscious, organizational members will find it difficult if not impossible to distinguish culturally based values from other values once the values have been recognized as (or mistaken for) values of the culture. The incorporation of new values will proceed as if they were being

reaffirmed, but, instead, the presence of the new values among the old values will serve to realign the basic assumptions. However, if new values are not retroactively taken to be part of the culture, the manifestation process will ignore them (p. 664).

The realization process most closely resembled the decoding process theorized in Hall's (1973) circuit of culture model. In the cultural dynamics model, realization refers to the process of converting values into artifacts, and vice versa (Hatch, 1993). As described above, cultural artifacts refer to the physically observable objects, as well as the language, rites and rituals customary to the organization (Schein, 2010). Again, realization occurs both proactively and retroactively either by "making values real by transforming expectations into social or material reality" or alternatively "by maintaining or altering existing values through the production of artifacts" (Hatch, 1993, p. 666).

The key concept related to proactive realization is the materialization of ideas and expectations through cognitive, perceptual, and emotional processes. The values and expectations developed in the manifestation process are made tangible in the form of physical objects, organizational events, and discourse through proactive realization (Hatch, 1993). Revisiting our earlier example, a football program in which the importance of winning exists as a deep cultural assumption, the values of hard work and competition are proactively manifested. In turn, those values become tangible objects such as helmet stickers rewarding hard work, language urging players to "compete" or "play to win," and celebrations following victories. Retroactive realization refers to the process of transforming artifacts into values (Hatch, 1993). This process brings about two possibilities: artifacts either reaffirm current values or contradict them (Hatch, 1993). If the artifacts and values do not align, two more possibilities remain. The artifacts are either ignored, removed, or abolished, or are absorbed and accepted into the culture through the realignment of values, which in turn can retroactively manifest as assumptions (Hatch, 1993). This process most likely occurs as new members are introduced to the culture and

bring with them artifacts from a different culture, or if existing members attempt to change the current culture by adopting and displaying new cultural artifacts.

In order to fully understand the symbolization process offered by Hatch, it is first fundamental to grasp Hatch's addition of symbols to Schein's levels of culture. Although symbols and artifacts are often conceptualized as synonyms, Hatch offers a differing perspective. Symbols act as a way for those who employ them to provide a subjective meaning to otherwise objective matters (Hatch, 1993). To offer another football specific example, awarding a helmet sticker means little prior to the attachment of meaning to the object. Once the sticker has an attached meaning, it becomes both an object to be desired and a point of pride.

Prospective symbolization occurs as artifacts become labeled with meaning and significance (Hatch, 1993). The difference between the literal meaning of the object and the full meaning of a symbol can best be explained as a surplus of meaning (Ricoeur, 1976). Symbols are first introduced into the culture as artifacts, and become accepted as symbols as a part of prospective symbolization (Hatch, 1993). Retrospective symbolization, in turn, transpires when organizational members become more aware of the literal meaning of symbolic artifacts (Hatch, 1993). For instance, the size of the head coach's office in most football programs is larger than the other coaches. This, of course, offers symbolic meaning in that the head coach leads the program and has the most power within it, thus inhabits the largest workspace. However, through retrospective symbolization, it becomes realized that the larger office is necessary for hosting meetings, as well as recruits and their families, activities typically not done in assistant coaches' offices. Hatch (1993) asserts that both the objective and subjective forms of symbols and artifacts play a role in the culture of an organization.

Finally, the interpretation process included in the cultural dynamics model occurs as individuals educe the broad cultural environment in order to contextualize symbols (retrospective interpretation) and alternatively for symbols to become a piece of the cultural core (prospective interpretation) (Hatch, 1993). This prospective form of interpretation either upholds or confronts the basic assumptions of the culture, while retrospective interpretation transforms the meaning of symbols through knowledge of the basic underlying cultural assumptions (Hatch, 1993). When symbols reinforce the basic assumptions of a culture, prospective interpretation acts as a confirmation of beliefs. If, alternatively, symbols are incongruent with basic assumptions, those symbols must either be dismissed as an anomaly or adopted first as value and eventually as assumption (Hatch, 1993).

Thus completes the circle of the cultural dynamics model, although Hatch (1993) emphasizes the nonlinearity of the model, and rather stresses it as a fluid process. Each process (manifestation, realization, symbolization, and interpretation) occurs simultaneously and continuously. As such, “none of the processes can stand on its own; each needs the perspective provided by discussion of the others to be fully transparent” (Hatch, 1993, p. 661). This fluid model proposed for studying organizational culture, although somewhat more structured than Hall’s (1973) “Encoding/Decoding” circuit of culture, provides an added layer of information to frame the current study. The modified circuit of culture model being implemented for the current project borrows concepts from both Schein’s (1985) levels of culture model and Hatch’s (1993) cultural dynamics model. In addition to understanding the concepts pertinent to organizational culture, it is equally important to decipher the power structure within the organization. In doing so, a better comprehension of how social beliefs and values are transmitted throughout the organization and learned by organizational members will be obtained.

Organizational Politics

Ferris, Russ, and Fandt (1989) succinctly stated what researchers and practitioners alike have agreed upon for years, “Politics in organizations is simply a fact of life” (p. 143). This unassuming proclamation rings true for any individual who has been a part of organizational life in any capacity. Until relatively recently however, anecdotal evidence and intuitive hunches accounted for the entirety of our knowledge regarding how organizations serve as political arenas. Serious attempts at empirically analyzing political behavior outside of the realm of political science and governmental institutions began when March (1962) deemed business firms to be political coalitions. He suggested, “the business organization is properly viewed as a political system and that viewing the firm as such a system both clarifies conventional economic theories of the firm and suggests some ways of dealing with classical problems in the theory of political systems generally” (p. 663). Kaufman (1964) masterfully argued the similarities of organizational theory and political theory a short time later. Empirically exploring organizations through a political theory lens has since become quite customary.

Mayes and Allen (1977) were one of the first to attempt to tackle a definition of organizational politics. Their review of previous literature on the topic led to several criteria: 1) organizational politics is a multi-level phenomenon, able to occur both at the individual and organizational level, 2) politics can occur outside of the resource sharing system, and 3) a clear distinction between political and non-political behaviors (Mayes & Allen, 1977). Their research led them to define organizational politics as “the management of influence to obtain ends not sanctioned by the organization or to obtain sanctioned ends through non-sanctioned influence means” (p. 675). Despite this early working definition of organizational politics, an agreed upon definition has yet to be reached. One potential reason for the lack of concrete definition could be

the fact that political behavior appears different from person to person. Mayes and Allen (1977) state, “Anyone associated with almost any form of organization eventually becomes aware of activities that are described by employees as ‘political’, but what is termed political by one observer may not be viewed as political by another” (p. 672).

Most individuals interpret politics within an organization to be any sort of behavior in which an individual or a group attempts to sway opinions through power or persuasion (Pettigrew, 1977; Tushman, 1977; Allen, Madison, Porter, Renwick, & Mayes, 1980). In addition, political behavior is often assumed to be self-serving, where the primary purpose is individual gain rather than organizational outcomes (Burns, 1961; Gandz & Murray, 1980). The most complete and relevant definition for the purposes of the present project was proposed by Ferris and colleagues (2006), in which organizational politics is described as “a social influence process in which behavior is strategically designed to maximize short-term or long-term self-interest, which is either consistent with or at the expense of others’ interests” (p. 145).

Implementing this definition, it is clear to see that politics could play an important role in the development of culture within the Mustang Football program. Organizational politics has been classified according to two dimensions: assertive-defensive and tactical-strategic (Ferris et al., 2006). The assertive-defensive continuum refers to whether the political behavior is performed in response to a perceived opportunity (assertive), or in response to a perceived threat (defensive) (Ferris et al., 2006). An assertive political behavior typically occurs as individuals realize a chance to improve their standing with an individual or among the group. On the other hand, defensive behaviors come about as a reaction to an event that could damage an individual’s reputation, such as creating an excuse or justifying a behavior (Ferris et al., 2006). The tactical-strategic dimension references the time frame for achieving the political objective. Tactical

behaviors are meant to achieve short-term aims, while strategic behaviors are directed at longer-term objectives. Being easier to witness and account for, tactical behaviors have garnered more attention in the literature on organizational politics.

Examples of tactical political behaviors include apologies and self-handicapping (defensive), as well as ingratiation techniques and self-promotion (assertive). Strategic behaviors are more difficult to observe and identify as political in nature, but include behaviors such as self-handicapping and learned helplessness (defensive), or developing sought after reputational characteristics, such as attractiveness and credibility (assertive) (Ferris et al., 2006; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). In initial observations of the Mustang football program, such behaviors are commonplace, and implemented by a wide variety of individuals. The reach of politics within an intercollegiate football program, however, extends far beyond the walls of the football offices. Coaches, staff members, and players certainly take part in political behaviors, but in order to fully capture the phenomenon of political agendas affecting the operations of Mustang football, it must be viewed through a wider lens. Namely, the political behaviors of MWSU athletic administration, boosters, opposing coaching staffs, fans, and even coaches wives all play key roles in how Coach Murphy and his staff run their program.

When analyzing the culture of MWSU Football, organizational politics (including political behavior occurring outside of the organization that still affects it) greatly influences how cultural messages are produced and represented. Those individuals who hold the most power by means of political behavior will ultimately craft the cultural product that the team consumes. The primary intention of emphasizing organizational politics in this particular setting is to understand how individuals (coaches, staff, players, boosters, etc.) gain and maintain power to produce cultural messages that become consumed by other individuals within the program.

In its short history, researchers have identified a broad influence that politics can have in an organization. Beer and colleagues (1984) presented organizational politics as a key contributor in hiring practices, suggesting that employers are inclined to hire individuals similar to themselves. Extending this research to sport and the present setting, organizational politics not only carries the potential of influencing hiring practices for coaches and staff members, but could have an impact on recruiting practices as well. Organizational politics has further been demonstrated to be a factor in performance evaluations, goal-setting strategies, and managerial decision-making (Ferris et al., 1989). Researchers propose that managers will practice politically charged behavior in attempts to appease multiple constituency groups (Ferris et al., 1989).

By extending research on organizational politics to the setting of an intercollegiate football program, the present research will hold the capacity to recognize organizational politics on many institutional and organizational levels. Rather than a traditional manager-employee relationship that has been analyzed in past research, through a comprehensive investigation of a complex organization the researcher will witness political behavior within and across multiple levels, including but not limited to coach/player, head coach/assistant coach, head coach/administrator, and head coach/booster relationships. In addition to the political nature of the organization, the oftentimes-unpredictable nature of these relationships will also affect perceptions of justice and fairness among its members. Particularly in an environment characterized as volatile and unpredictable due to high turnover rates of players and coaches, as well as the convergence of a wide range of individuals from diverse backgrounds, feelings of justice are essential. These concepts are addressed in further detail below.

Organizational Justice

The emotional and competitive nature of football in specific and sports in general make feelings of fairness and justice necessary among any team. In the organizational setting, Rawls (1971) declared justice to be “the first virtue of social institutions” (p. 3). Research on the topic often leads to similar conclusions, namely the importance of a sense of fairness among organizational members as a prerequisite for effective organizational functioning (Greenberg, 1990; Moore, 1978). Moreover, concepts such as fair pay, equity in hiring procedures, and fairness in handling organizational disputes and grievances have all been studied in connection to organizational justice and effectiveness (Greenberg, 1990; Aram & Salipante, 1981). Not surprisingly, researchers have shown interest in the intersection of organizational justice and organizational culture. An essential matter for the present project will be the presence of a perception of organizational justice (from a wide variety of constituents) within the Mustangs culture, and the effects, positive and negative, on the team.

Researchers of justice distinguish the idea in one of two ways: by either focusing on the content or on the process (Greenberg, 1990). Distributive justice assesses the fairness of the outcome achieved by a judicial decision (Cohen, 1987; Törnblom & Vermunt, 2013). Procedural justice, on the other hand, considers fairness as a result of the policies and procedures implemented to arrive at the judicial decision (Greenberg & Tyler, 1987). Research analyzing the concept of distributive justice, which is characterized by Adam’s (1963, 1965) equity theory, typically has been experimental in nature. Equity theory suggests that individuals perceive fairness as a comparison of ratios between themselves and those around them in a particular setting. The ratio consists of the individual’s perceived work outcomes such as pay or other rewards and their contributions. When comparing their ratio to the ratios of others in the environment, there are essentially three potential emotional outcomes. In the case that the ratios

are unequal, “the party whose ratio is higher is theorized to be inequitably overpaid (and to feel guilty) whereas the party whose ratio is lower is theorized to be inequitably underpaid (and to feel angry)” (Greenberg, 1990, p. 400). A feeling of satisfaction will arise when the ratios are perceived be equal.

To test this theory, researchers implemented experimental techniques in which participants were asked to perform everyday office work such as filing or organizing (Andrews, 1967; Jorgenson & Dunnette, 1973). The participants were led to believe that other individuals, who were equally qualified for the position, were either being paid more (evoking a sense of anger) or less (evoking a sense of guilt) than they were (Greenberg, 1990). A majority of similar studies illustrated that, to compensate, participants would either raise their performance to handle feelings of guilt, or lower their performance in response to anger (Freedman, 1976).

The theory of procedural justice garnered more consideration as it became clear that oftentimes the tangible outcome of a judicial decision falls outside of the decision-makers control (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). More important, according to procedural justice theorists, is the process with which individuals arrive at a judicial decision. Research examining this viewpoint often compared two types of control, process and decision, with regard to dispute-resolution procedures (Greenberg, 1990). Process control allows individuals to gather and present information beneficial to their case, whereas decision control does not allow such benefits. In mock legal cases used to examine this theory, identical judicial findings were perceived as more fair in cases where the disputant was given process control (Walker, Lind, & Thibaut, 1979). The manifestation of the theory of procedural justice advanced the paradigm that regardless of the outcome of the decision, individuals place a higher emphasis on the process behind the decision. The presence of consistent, unbiased, representative, and ethical procedures

for decision making are commonly thought of as important factors for procedural justice (Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980).

Recently, the idea of interactional justice has entered the literature as a third dimension of organizational justice. Chief to this concept is the manner in which supervisors treat employees and display social sensitivity (Bies, 1986). Behaviors associated with interactional justice include “listening to a subordinate’s concerns, providing adequate explanations for decisions, (and) demonstrating empathy for the other person’s plight” (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997, p. 435). Empirical research demonstrates that when these types of behaviors are present, organizational members perceive their supervisors as fair and impartial, and are less likely to complain or speak poorly of their supervisor (Blodgett, Hill, & Tax, 1997). The three dimensions (distributive, procedural, and interactional) have been examined both independently and as a whole, joining to measure organizational justice as a whole.

The concept of organizational justice has been implemented in the sport setting. Whisenant (2005) used the three dimensions to examine the role of organizational justice of high school athlete’s levels of commitment to their sport. Specifically, whether their perceived levels of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice influenced their intentions to continue playing their sport. The findings suggest that a relationship exists between high school athlete’s perceptions of fairness and their desire to continue participation (Whisenant, 2005).

Research on justice in college athletics has recently been directed towards fairness concerning distributive justice (e.g. Hums & Chelladurai, 1994; Mahony, Hums, & Riemer, 2002, 2005; Mahony & Pastore, 1998). Anecdotal evidence indicates a trend towards examining fairness in distribution as well. For instance, a growing sentiment exists that supports equal distribution of athletic department revenue to each sport, regardless of which sport actually

generates the revenue (Mohony et al., 2002). An empirical study analyzing this issue suggests, “Women are stronger supporters of equal distributions and equal reductions, whereas men are more supportive of making decisions based on need and contribution of the program” (Mahony, Riemer, Breeding, & Hums, 2006, p. 159). It is worth noting that a majority of revenue generating sports programs throughout the country are male sports, particularly football and basketball.

Kim and colleagues (2015) recently examined the relationship between perceived organizational justice in a college athletic department and coaches’ feelings of job satisfaction and commitment towards both their supervisor and the athletic department. Prior studies had established relationships between organizational justice and job satisfaction in the sport setting (Whisenant & Smucker, 2007; Jordan, Turner, Fink, & Pastore, 2007), yet the researchers advance the research by investigating “relationships between organizational justice and coaches’ attitudinal outcomes...through mediating effects of social exchange relationships...via a multifoci perspective” (Kim, Andrew, Brewer, & Gillham, 2015, p. 308). The researchers hypothesized perceived organizational support (POS) to mediate the relationship between procedural justice and commitment to the organization as well as job satisfaction. They further conjectured that leader-member exchange (LMX) would mediate the correlation amongst interactional justice and commitment to supervisor and job satisfaction (Kim et al., 2015). The study consists of three stages:

Stage 1 includes the actual perceptions of organizational justice. The second stage, as the first social exchange phase, examines the direct relationships between organizational justice and direct outcomes, such as POS and LMX. Finally, stage 3 consists of the relationships between POS and LMX on relevant outcomes such as multifoci commitment and job satisfaction. According to the model, when recipients perceive higher levels of organizational support or supervisory support as a consequence of heightened organizational justice dimension perceptions, they will develop emotional

attachment to the organization or supervisor via the aforementioned multi social exchange process (p. 309).

The findings highlight several interesting findings, particularly for the purpose of the present study. First, coaches for all sports (including men's basketball and football) perceived distributive justice in their athletic department to be unfair. In the context of their study, this indicates that coaches were unhappy with the amount of athletic funds their team received based on their contributions to the athletic department. Further, POS fully mediated the relationship between procedural justice and job satisfaction as well as affective commitment towards the athletic department. Finally, the relationship between procedural justice and affective commitment towards the athletic director was fully mediated by LMX. These results emphasize the importance of social exchange variables (such as POS and LMX) on the perceptions and outcomes of organizational justice in the college sport setting (Kim et al., 2015).

The present research project will examine organizational justice as a result of each dimension (distributive, procedural, and interactional), and on multiple levels (athletic director/coach, head coach/assistant coaches, and coaches/players). The perception of fairness and equity is vital for the functioning of an organizational structure as unique as a college football program. Most often players are rewarded for hard work with playing time, a very subjective measure. In order to keep players committed to the program, even if they do not play, they must feel a sense of justice and fairness in how the coaches reward the players. As noted, justice can be assessed in three distinct ways. However, organizational justice is not important only at the player-coach level. In addition, assistant coaches must feel a sense of justice in the decision making of the head coach, who in turn will weigh the level of fairness in the decision making of the administrators and the athletic director. Each individual and group's perception of justice may in turn affect the opinion of another, making these levels dependent on one another.

Organizational justice in the context of the current project will be analyzed to reflect this dependency rather than viewing each level and each dimension of justice as distinct occurrences.

Individual Level

The concepts of organizational culture, politics, and justice occur at the organizational level of analysis. While individual members of the organization play an integral role in the manifestation of such concepts, for the purpose of the current project they are analyzed as occurring to the organization. Meanwhile, a pair of concepts are described below that will be examined at the individual level. First, the idea of motivation and inspiration, integral convictions in a football program, will be addressed. Next, focus will turn to political skill, a concept directly related to organizational politics.

Motivation and Inspiration

The role of inspiration in American football has grown in importance and exposure through the mass media. Evidenced by popular outlets such as ESPN and NBC broadcasts of coaches' and players' pregame speeches, inspiration is perceived to be an important piece of playing football. Inspiration, defined here as a feeling of mental stimulation that encourages positive action, can be obtained through many different processes. According to anecdotal proposals however, football is a sport in which players must be inspired to play well. Indeed, the Mustang football coaches implement a wide assortment of inspirational strategies, ranging from quotes on signs in the locker room to profanity laced rants during practice. In my preliminary encounters with the MWSU football program, it became eminently clear that the coaching staff believes in the power of inspiration to evoke greater levels of performance from their players, on and off the field.

Oftentimes inspiration and motivation are used interchangeably, or at the very least as foregone outcomes of one another. Popular sports media undoubtedly implies that motivation to succeed is a direct result of feeling inspired. Gonzalez, Metzler, and Newton (2011) state, “Sportscasters often point to inspiration as a source of athlete motivation, describing coaches who deliver inspirational pep talks that motivate their athletes” (p. 445). Research from the field of psychology also draws a link between inspiration and motivation. Thrash and Elliot (2003) define inspiration as “a motivational state evoked by a revelation and directed toward the conversion of transcendent, revealed knowledge into a work of art, a text, or some other concrete form” (p. 872). However, while multitude theories of motivation exist, and the relationship between inspiration and motivation is often assumed, the association between inspiration and motivation has received little empirical attention.

In response to a lack of literature on the subject, Gonzalez and colleagues (2011) sought to empirically test the relationship between inspiration and motivation in sports. In their experimental study, the researchers randomly assigned participants (consisting of college football players) to one of two groups: the experimental group watched a movie clip of an inspirational pep talk while the control group watched a movie clip of a coach delivering game instructions in a strategic manner. Dependent variables tested were inspiration, inspiration to perform, situational autonomous motivation, and emotion. A statistical difference between the groups in the reported level of overall inspiration indicated the treatment had the desired effect of evoking feelings of being inspired. Further, athletes reported feeling more inspired to perform within their sport, a sense of emotional dominance, and lower levels of amotivation upon watching the inspirational movie clip as opposed to the strategic clip. No difference was found

between the groups for pleasure, arousal, intrinsic motivation, identified motivation, external regulated motivation, and overall autonomous motivation (Gonzalez et al., 2011).

Simply put, this lone empirical study testing the relationship between inspiration and motivation fails to support the commonly held notion that feelings of inspiration naturally give way to greater levels of motivation. It does, however, affirm, “that poorly chosen inspirational tactics might actually harm the motivation of athletes” (Gonzalez et al., p. 453). This conclusion was drawn as a result of participants in the control group reporting statistically greater levels of amotivation than participants in the treatment group. Stated differently, while inspirational tactics such as pregame speeches may not lead to greater levers of motivation to perform, ineffective inspirational techniques have the potential to evoke feelings of amotivation or indifference. Amotivation is defined as the lowest levels of self-determination by Mallett and Hanrahan (2004). It is characterized by four dimensions: capacity/ability beliefs, strategy-beliefs, capacity-effort beliefs, and helplessness. A fundamental limitation of the study, and one acknowledged by the researchers, is the use of a video clip as an inspirational tactic. While a difference did exist between the experimental and control groups in level of inspiration after watching the clip, this experimental design fails to account for the personal relationship between the coach and player. The clip used, Al Pacino’s famous speech from *Any Given Sunday* (“either we heal as a team or we will die as individuals”), which certainly could be considered inspirational, does not evoke the emotional connection potentially existing in the coach-player relationship. The researchers call for further inquiry on the subject using real coaches, and also emphasize, “the importance of identifying differences among coaches is also an area that future research should consider” (p. 454).

Indeed, individual differences between coaches and players could play an important role in the value of an inspirational pep talk. Differences in setting and situation were found to be important influences of the perception of athlete's preferences for emotional pre-game talks (Vargas-Tonsing & Guan, 2007). Male athletes have also been identified as preferring a greater amount of emotional content in pre-game speeches than female athletes, who prefer higher amounts of informational content (Vargas-Tonsing & Guan, 2007). This is an important distinction for the purposes of our present study, which includes an all-male population. Finally, emotionally charged pregame speeches have demonstrated the ability to significantly raise team efficacy beliefs when compared to purely informational or strategic speeches (Vargas-Tonsing & Bartholomew, 2006). While these studies emphasize that the speeches were emotional rather than inspirational, a strong connection exists between the two. Self-transcendent emotions have been identified as having "the potential to increase someone's desire to succeed or be virtuous" (Thrash & Elliot, 2003 as cited in Gonzalez et al., 2011, p. 448). Further, positive emotionality and inspiration are significantly positively correlated in college students (Thrash & Elliot, 2003).

Although studies have downplayed the relationship between inspiration and motivation, other research has attempted to identify why it is that some athletes are simply more driven to succeed than others (Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004). Pertinent to the present research, and pervasive in sport psychology research, is the role of the social-contextual conditions surrounding an athlete that serve to either empower or challenge feelings of motivation (Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004). Motivational theories suggest that highly competitive environments, such as that of the current study, promote extrinsic motivation among its inhabitants. The focus on winning, an outcome goal, is predicted to decrease intrinsic motivation in athletes (Vallerand, Deci, & Ryan, 1987). Intuitively, the constant focus on and pressure to win may drive athletes to lose an internal

desire to compete, and be replaced by the external desire to succeed. Further, past researchers emphasize the power of intrinsic motivation in maintaining a healthy desire to learn and improve (DeCharms, 1968). Extrinsic motivation has been linked to burnout and feelings of satisfaction in participation (Gould, 1996; Vallerand, 2007a & 2007b). However, research has failed to fully support the link between competitive social environments and extrinsic motivation (Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004). The importance of motivation of top-level athletes, nonetheless, cannot be understated.

Inspiration, emotion, and motivation play an important role in the context of MWSU football. The Mustangs head coach reflected these sentiments when he said, “football is an emotional game.” During the course of the present ethnographic study, the motivational tactics used by coaches, strength coaches, and players will be thoroughly analyzed. More importantly, the responses to these strategies, and player’s perceptions of the efficacy of inspirational pep talks will be assessed. Speeches are often used as a means of transmitting cultural beliefs and values (Schein, 2010). As such, the present research will identify how MWSU football coaches use emotionally charged speeches as both a way to inspire their players and a means of instilling their cultural beliefs. An integral factor in the effectiveness of inspirational pep-talks is the ability of the speaker to appear sincere. Politically skilled individuals possess this ability. Another crucial concept at the individual level of analysis, political skill, is covered below.

Political Skill

As outlined above, organizational politics is pertinent to this study at the organizational level of analysis as a means of identifying the political nature of the Mustang football program. Relatedly, political skill on the individual level will be a crucial component of the analysis of the

individuals within the organization. Because conceptually political skill and organizational politics are connected yet distinct, they are analyzed separately in this project.

The predominate difference between organizational politics and political skill is that organizational politics is the analysis of the organizational political dynamics and power struggles, while political skill is the aptitude to act, for personal gain, on the knowledge that the organization is a political arena (Treadway et al., 2012). Based on the implied assumption of the inevitability of organizational politics, possessing political skill offers far-reaching benefits. While political skill remains formally undefined, most researchers agree that it exists in some form as a tool that allows individuals within an organization to better comprehend the social fabric of the organization and use that knowledge to augment their own personal objectives (Kimura, 2015; Ahearn, Ferris, Hochwarter, Douglas, & Ammeter, 2004).

Early research on the topic painted political skill as devious and deceitful behaviors. American society also tends to label those who act in a political manner with similar descriptors. While indeed, politically skilled individuals do hold the ability to act in such a way, researchers have more recently applied a positive connotation to the construct, asserting that a certain level of political skill is necessary for all members of any organization (Ferris et al., 2005; Bass, 2013). For individuals and organizations to succeed in this day and age, politically skilled individuals must be present (Ferris et al., 2005). Further, Ferris and colleagues (2005) proposed a four-factor model of political skill, where dimension reflected positive virtues.

The four dimensions of political skill as identified by Ferris et al. (2005): social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity, have been adopted for use by most researchers in the field. Social astuteness is best described as a keen awareness of social situations and the ability to accurately construe one's own behavior and the behavior of

others. Interpersonal influence comprises an individual's adeptness in subtly yet convincingly influencing others and regulating your behavior to fit the given setting. Networking ability includes the possession of a wide network of valuable human resources and the wherewithal to use the network in a favorable manner. Finally, apparent sincerity is the aptitude to come across as a person of high character with integrity and authenticity regardless of the environment (Ferris et al., 2005, Kimura, 2015).

From these four dimensions, Ferris and colleagues (2005) developed the Political Skill Index (PSI), an 18-item scale that remains the most widely used measure today. The scale has been used to demonstrate relationships between political skill and job performance ratings, reduced employee stress levels, upward appeal, and coalitions in the workplace (Ferris et al., 2005; Bass, 2013). The quantitative measure also displayed evidence for the distinctiveness of the political skill construct as it was shown to have no relationship with general mental ability, thus setting it apart from other measures of social effectiveness (Ferris et al., 2005).

Political skill has only once been used empirically in the sports setting. Treadway et al. (2014) assess the role that political skill plays in the ability of college coaches to successfully recruit high-level student-athletes. Recruiting has become nearly as important as the tactical aspect of college coaching, and it stands to reason that a politically skilled coach could hold an advantage in securing the commitment of a top recruit. The researchers defined recruiting effectiveness as a composite score of recruiting websites such as Rivals.com that prescribes a certain number of 'stars' to talented high school athletes. After controlling for BCS status, tenure of coach at their given school, number of conference championships won by the school, and position of coach (head or assistant), their analysis revealed a positive relationship between political skill of recruiter and recruiting effectiveness mediated by the success of the head coach

(Treadway et al., 2014). Simply put, the researchers argue that recruiters high in political skill demonstrated an ability to leverage the success of their program more effectively when recruiting potential student-athletes than coaches who were low in political skill.

In my preliminary interactions with the Mustang football coaches, it is exceedingly apparent that each member of the coaching staff is politically skilled and dexterously traverses the highly competitive environment in which they exist. In addition to its apparent importance in recruiting, political skill has also been suggested to dictate the production and dissemination of cultural messages within the circuit of culture (Bass, 2013). In this context, politically skilled individuals, whether it is coaches, administrators, players, or anyone else associated with the program, will hold the power to create and propagate the cultural products consumed by the team. As such, the head coach must maintain constant awareness and control of the power structure present in the program. A politically skilled player or staff member with an alternative agenda carries the possibility of corrupting the desired culture. Alternatively, politically skilled individuals who have consumed and learned the culture as set forth by the coaching staff could potentially be a strong force for cultural production and representation.

As mentioned above, in addition to examining the political skill of various members of the MWSU football program, it will also be important for myself as a researcher to carry with me a certain level of political skill as I infiltrate this organization's day-to-day operations. As someone with an extensive sports background, but less than extensive technical knowledge of football at the Division I collegiate level, it will be vital for me to be politically skilled in my interactions with coaches and players. Doing so will lead to trust and security in my presence during private team meetings during which exclusive information may pass. In the best interest

of both this project and the MWSU football program, I will maneuver this unknown terrain with political skill to the best of my ability.

This review of literature has served to identify significant contributions from the fields of organizational behavior and cultural studies that relate directly to this project. First and foremost, the modified circuit of culture functions as the principal framework through which to analyze the culture of Mustang football. In an attempt to organize this large body of information, concepts were assembled according to their level of influence: institutional, organizational, or individual. While each body of literature has been separated for the sake of clarity, it cannot be understated the interdependency of each piece of information as it relates to this study. For instance, examining organizational justice in a vacuum within the MWSU football program without also acknowledging the institutional factors at play would prove futile for a project of this scope and magnitude.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

The intent of this dissertation was to comprehensively examine the organizational culture of an intercollegiate football team. Theoretically driven from research in organizational behavior and cultural studies, this research project aimed to investigate the dynamics at play when a diverse group of individuals converge onto one college campus with the purpose of either coaching or playing the game of football. To achieve this goal, the method by which the project was completed serves as a crucial component.

This chapter fulfills several purposes. First, an overview of the various epistemological backgrounds that drive academic research and the research design are presented. This will include the advantages and disadvantages of each, as well as an extended discussion of the epistemological belief that served as the backdrop for this project. Second, this chapter will include an overview of qualitative research methods, with a more in-depth analysis of ethnographies, containing their history as a research tradition and the various manners in which they can be conducted. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a description of the research strategies implemented for this research project and a brief look into pertinent aspects of my background as researcher that impacted this study.

Epistemology

Epistemology has been described as “the philosophical study of how...knowledge is acquired” (Andrew, Pedersen, & McEvoy, 2011, p. 9). A vital question to be asked in regards to one’s epistemological beliefs is, “What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 12). Alternatively stated, how does a person’s prior convictions affect their understanding of the truth? Epistemology is an individual’s way of distinguishing

truth from opinion. Whereas ontology, “the study of the philosophy of knowledge,” seeks to answer ‘what is?’ questions, epistemology aims to answer ‘how’ or ‘what’ questions (Andrew et al., 2011, p. 9). Contingent on ontological and epistemological notions, researchers adopt paradigms from which to conduct empirical research. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) indicated, “the net that contains the researcher’s epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises may be termed a paradigm” (p. 13). Two main paradigms driving research today include positivism/post-positivism and constructivism.

Positivism is based in empiricism through scientific testing (Macionis & Gerber, 2008). A researcher operating from a positivist perspective holds that truth about the world around us, and thus, knowledge is gained solely through tested and substantiated data. As such, positivists perform hypothesis testing in lab settings as a means of determining causality (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Through empirical research, positivists seek to provide ‘proof’ for the phenomenon in question.

Epistemologically, positivists believe in one, perfectly measured reality in which all worldly occurrences can be measured and thus attributed to law (i.e. the law of gravity). True positivists argue that society functions as a result of general laws similar to the absolute laws of the hard sciences (Comte, 1868). However, due to strict rules dictating research designs in true experimental design research, scholars often encounter difficulties in adopting this perspective for the social setting. In response, many scholars performing research in a social setting do so from a post-positivist perspective.

Contrary to positivist research in which investigators seek to uncover ‘proof’ of the legitimacy of a hypothesis, post-positivists conduct research in an attempt to fail to reject a hypothesis (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Patton, 2015). In doing so, post-positivist

researchers simply determine the likelihood that an event will occur in the non-experimental setting. Strict guidelines governing research design remain present in post-positivist research.

The nature of positivist and post-positivist philosophies lend credence to research performed that includes numeric data. Because “knowledge is shaped by data, evidence, and rational considerations,” positivist and post-positivist researchers implement quantitative methodologies when conducting research (Andrew et al., 2011, p. 10). A crucial component of this research process is the presence of objectivity, in which the researcher’s personal feelings or opinions do not interfere with the collection or analysis of data. Any evidence of researcher bias in the development or presentation of a research project represents an inability to accept the findings.

Several benefits are associated with research conducted from a positivist/post-positivist perspective. When performing research in a controlled setting, researchers have the ability to manipulate variables as a means of determining causality. In addition, the numeric nature of quantitative research allows results of studies to be comparable across research studies. Criteria defining statistical significance permit readers to conclude the significance of results. While these benefits exist, certain boundaries have additionally been proposed with regards to the positivist and post-positivist paradigm.

Most notably, critics of these paradigms suppose that numerical data cannot sufficiently explain complex and multifaceted social phenomena (Silk, Andrews, & Mason, 2005). In response, Frisby (2005) recommended, “we need research to be conducted from multiple paradigms” within the field of sport management (p. 2). Sport management, a field historically dominated by researchers operating within a post-positivist paradigm, has been urged as a field to approach research from a wider variety of paradigmatic positions (Frisby, 2005; Zakus,

Malloy, & Edwards, 2007; Quatman, 2006). While sport management researchers have taken up this initiative, Quatman (2006) suggests that it has been approached with caution, stating that the field maintains “a culture of guarded optimism at best towards these new approaches” (p. 14).

Finally, Edwards and Skinner (2009) propose,

...a need to move beyond current research practices and embrace socially inclusive approaches to understanding the lived experiences of sport managers in order to promote a more inclusive culture for the generation of knowledge in the field (p. 4).

In response to this call, the present dissertation was conducted from a constructivist perspective.

Constructivism, or social constructivism is “rooted in the assumption that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work and that they develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (Andrew et al., 2011, p. 10). Those operating from a constructivist approach are inclined to believe that knowledge is gained as a result of social interaction (McKinley, 2015). In turn, one’s cultural upbringing and surroundings prescribe and influence their sense of the world (Andrew et al., 2011). Meaning and knowledge are thus interpreted subjectively, and constructivists surmise that research and researcher are intertwined to the extent that they cannot be disjointed. Because of these beliefs, constructivist researchers conduct qualitative research that allows the researcher’s beliefs and values to be included in the study (Andrew et al., 2011).

When operating from this perspective, no singular reality exists; rather, individuality and locality define reality. Edwards and Skinner (2009) suggest, “interpretivists [constructivists] acknowledge realities, which can be observed and explained in a multiplicity of ways” (p. 20). The experiences of one individual, for instance, should be compared with caution to the experiences of another individual as a result of vastly different cultural occurrences between the two. Because of the nature of the debate surrounding ontological, epistemological, and

methodological beliefs and practices, to surmise that limitations exist when operating from a certain perspective is more a matter of one's opinion on the topic than a statement of fact.

However, by conducting this project from a constructivist standpoint, several liberties inherent to quantitative research and the positivist/post-positivist perspective will not be present. First and foremost, causality of any findings will be unable to be assessed due to the non-experimental nature of the study. Further, any findings resulting from this project will lack generalizability in that they will fail to apply to the general population. Finally, any assessments of validity and reliability, common practices in quantitative research to allow readers the ability to gauge the legitimacy of a study, will be absent.

Despite these drawbacks, the present study offers a unique, exclusive, and valuable perspective that is currently lacking in sport management literature. Qualitative research, in the present case an ethnographic approach, allows the researcher, and in turn the reader, to experience the lived realities of a unique group of individuals. In his book, *Casing a Promised Land: An Autobiography of an Organizational Detective as Cultural Ethnographer*, Goodall Jr. (1994) stated:

I gradually learned that what constituted communication in organizations did not correspond very much to what I was reading and contributing to scholarly journals. Most of what was actually important was being left out, not because of scholarly intentions to mask the realities of organizational life, but because the traditional forms of scholarly writing did not allow us to account for the content that we were experiencing (p. xi).

The preceding statement served as my motivation and impetus for undertaking this project.

While many different qualitative methods are available for researchers to implement, an ethnography provides the most effective means for answering the primary research question of this study: How is the culture of the Midwest State University football team produced,

represented, and consumed by the various members of the group? The following section describes in further detail the multiple facets of ethnographic research.

Ethnography

The practice of ethnography -- which means, basically, representing in words what you have lived through as a person when your stated purpose was to study a culture -- has a variety of beginnings, depending on whose history you read and what intellectual baggage you carry into that reading (Goodall Jr., 1994, p. xxiii).

In adopting an ethnographic approach to research, the inquirer presupposes that a unique culture is developed over time as a result of interaction among a group of people (Patton, 2015). While the exact methods and approaches to conducting ethnography varies greatly dependent on both the researcher and the subject, “what makes the approach distinct is the matter of interpreting and applying the findings from a *cultural perspective*” (Patton, 2015, p. 101). The individuals contained within the studied group of people, including their thoughts, behaviors, and actions, are inclusive products of the culture in which they inhabit (Silk, 2005). The researcher is not exempt from cultural influence and must account for those pressures both in reflection and in writing.

At its core, “ethnography is that form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about” (Denzin, 1997, p. xi). Ethnographers undertake multiple methods to fulfill the goals of their research, most notably observations and interviews (Wolcott, 2008). To minimize ethnographic studies to merely observations and interviews, however, would offer a deeply inaccurate portrayal of an ethnographic approach. More accurately, ethnography is a lived experience in which the researcher becomes included in the culture of a group of individuals (Patton, 2015; Murchison, 2010).

The terms *ethnography*, *fieldwork*, *participant observation*, and *natural observation*, have all been used to encompass ethnographic type research (Andrew et al., 2011). While each of these terms describe portions of the ethnographic process, an essential distinction of ethnography compared to the others is the unifying of the process and the product (Schwandt, 2001). A researcher's ability to fuse his or her experience living in a culture (process) and the resulting text (product) constitutes ethnography. The following sections describe the processes of *doing ethnography* and *writing ethnography* as well as the particular strategies undertaken for this project.

The Process (*Doing Ethnography*)

It is good for the Ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on. He can take part in the native's games, he can follow them on their visits and walks, sit down and listen and share in their conversations. I am not certain if this is equally easy for everyone – perhaps the Slovanic nature is more plastic and more naturally savage than that of Western Europeans – but though the degree of success varies, the attempt is possible for everyone (Malinowski, 1922, p. 21).

The process of doing ethnography contains no strictly set rules or guidelines. Unlike performing a one-way analysis of variance for instance, or even structured interviews, procedures governing the ethnographic process are largely at the discretion of the researcher. In an attempt to uncover and reveal the culture of a group of people, ethnographers implement a wide array of research methods. Even when ethnographers carry a plan of action into the research field, this plan changes course as unforeseen events occur (Fetterman, 2000). In response, ethnographic researchers must constantly be willing to adapt to change and embrace oftentimes unplanned events. It is frequently such events that provide the researcher with valuable information that augments the overall body of work and reveals facets of culture that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

In undertaking the current project, several methods contributed to the comprehensive ethnographic piece: observations, interviews (semi-structured and informal), and participation. Goodall Jr. (1994) suggests, “to understand the cultural life of an organization or a community – as far as true understanding can be achieved – a scholar must listen and to watch: specifically, listen to stories and watch what happens when they are told” (p. xvii). Observing a group of people with the intent of deciphering their culture, however, includes far more than simply listening to stories told amongst the group. Goodall Jr. (1994) would go on to state,

Just as every line is important to the plot of a good novel, every episode of talk is important to the overall story of an organization. Don’t try to collect stories; try instead to write down complete accounts of episodes of talk that you hear – dialogue, facial expressions, body movement, silences, and so forth, as well as description of the office space, what is on or underneath the desktops, what is hanging on the walls, where the chairs are placed, and so forth. Look for the action in the scene, but don’t leave out any details because, like any good mystery, details will later become more important than they at first seem (p. xvii).

Through the process of observing in this project, no details were omitted; while the natural inclination was to focus on the action, every intent was made to identify minutiae that acted as evidence of an overarching theme. The essential research tools necessary for this project were my own observational skills, as well as a distinct ability to decipher meaning from seemingly meaningless discourse. O’Reilly (2005) suggested as key skills to develop as an ethnographic researcher: “ascertaining the language of the participants, strengthening your explicit awareness, developing writing proficiency, learning how to develop rapport with participants, and becoming an effective and efficient notetaker” (as cited in Andrew et al., p. 110).

In addition to observations, interviews contributed to my understanding of the culture of MWSU football. Both semi-structured and informal interviews were conducted as a means of more clearly identifying relevant themes and beliefs of participants. Semi-structured interviews

are entered into with explicit goals and specific questions, but allow the researcher freedom to digress and ask follow-up questions (Fetterman, 2010). Informal (unstructured) interviews occur in the form of casual conversation and allow the researcher to approach a participant regarding any topic at any time (Fetterman, 2010). Both of these interview techniques were implemented throughout the course of this study.

Finally, participation played a significant role in involving myself in the culture of the Mustang football program. Four roles have been identified that occupy the continuum from participant to observer: complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant, and complete observer (Gold, 1958). Complete participant assumes the role as a member of the group and does not divulge their status as researcher to the rest of the members. Participant as observer maintains a role within the organization while other members are aware of their position as researcher. Observer as participant does not actively participate in cultural activities, but observes cultural behavior and performs interviews. Finally, complete observer keeps a distance as to not be noticed by the 'natives' and does not perform interviews or interact within the cultural environment (Gold, 1958). The role I undertook for this project was that of participant as observer.

In order to conduct this study, several logistical issues were first addressed. First, access was gained to the Mustang football program through a personal connection with Coach Murphy. No limits were placed on my access to meetings, practices, workouts, or games, however, an understanding was reached regarding what could and could not be included in the final publication of the dissertation. First and foremost, no information regarding football specific game plans or strategies that would not otherwise be public knowledge were included, nor was information regarding injuries to student-athletes, unless that information was also made publicly

available through local media outlets. Further, it was made clear that any participant had the right to refuse participation in interviews, and also had the right to discuss information ‘off the record,’ meaning that I would not include it in the final publication.

After first discussing the details with Coach Murphy, IRB approval was obtained for permission to conduct this study. Due to the large number of participants and the relatively low level of risk involved in the study, a signed informed consent was not required from each participant. Rather, at a beginning of the year meeting held in January, I addressed the team as a whole and informed them of their rights as participants. Each participant received an information statement outlining the details of the study and my contact information should they have any questions or concerns. As part of this address, I notified the participants that I would contact them either in person or by phone if I had interest in conducting an interview with them throughout the year. Phone numbers were obtained through the Director of Football Operations (DOFO).

I also obtained weekly schedules for the team from the DOFO, which allowed me to plan which team events I would attend. Events include coaches meetings, position meetings, full-team meetings, leadership council meetings, social events (pool party, bowling outing, etc.), individual on-field workouts, strength and conditioning sessions, academic meetings, training room sessions, full-team practices, and games. Other, non-organized team events were also available for me to attend at my own discretion or upon invitation from the parties involved.

During these events data was collected in note-form, as I worked to distinguish the significant cultural events taking place. During meetings, as to not distract or make self-conscious the participants, I was either constantly taking notes, even when I have nothing interesting to write, or I did not bring my notebook and took notes from memory afterwards. The

purpose was to ensure that participants did not become self-conscious if I immediately began writing when they talked. During informal interviews, in order to build rapport among the participants, notetaking was done from memory immediately after the conversation. More structured interviews were recorded for accuracy and convenience. Participants were informed prior to recordings, and recordings were immediately deleted after being transcribed.

Undertaking this research project, logistically, required an enormous time commitment. The nature of doing ethnographic research necessitates a commitment to fully experiencing the culture of a group of individuals. Despite living a significant distance from Midwest State University, I remained frequently involved with their football program. During the offseason I spent significant portions of time in [Nebraska] acquainting myself with the members of the program. After viewing the team calendar, I scheduled my visits mostly around significant team events, but also took part in more mundane events as well. In season, I attended all but one game due to a prior commitment. At times, depending on my schedule, I would spend up to two weeks at a time with the team, attending each of their events as if I were a full time staff member. During games I received a sideline pass to be able to be as close to the players as possible. The pass allowed me the same access as coaches, meaning I could talk with players, move up and down the sidelines, and walk on the field during pregame warmups. When the team played road games I traveled with the team by bus or plane and stayed in the team hotel, affording me ample opportunity to better observe and interact with my subject.

Methodological Details

Research Timeline

Beginning on January 10th and spanning until November 27th I spent approximately 174 days in [Chester], [Nebraska] performing research. My commute was approximately six hours

long from Kansas to [Nebraska] and would typically take place on either Wednesday or Thursday afternoon. There were several occurrences when I would spend an entire week or more in [Nebraska], which proved valuable in making my presence commonplace within the football program.

The first event I attended was the back-to-school team meeting on January 10th. Afterwards I returned for several workout sessions in the weightroom in late January, and then Hell Week in February, which actually covered two weeks. Next I came back several times throughout the spring in order to observe spring practices and workouts, team meetings, and several informal team events or personal interactions. Such informal events consisted of visits to player's dorm rooms or apartments upon invitation, shadowing players for a standard day on campus, joining players for lunch in the campus cafeteria, or playing pickup basketball with some of the assistant coaches. Participating in these informal events allowed me to develop rapport with the players and coaches and earn their trust as one of their own.

Less organized team activities take place over the summer, so a majority of this time was spent with the coaching staff as they prepared for fall camp and the season. I took this time to develop relationships within the staff and to acquaint myself with the inner-workings of the football offices. Throughout the summer I would oftentimes stop in to various coaches' offices unannounced to strike up conversations or ask questions that had crossed my mind. At times these interactions centered on football, the upcoming season, and the culture of the team. Other conversations steered clear of football all together, instead delving into personal matters, other interests, or current events such as sporting events or political topics. These conversations often revealed as much if not more about the culture of the team as did football-specific exchanges.

The season truly begins to pick up at the beginning of fall camp. I was fortunate enough to spend extensive time in [Nebraska] throughout the fall, taking in over half of fall camp. During this time the team would spend the entire day consumed in football activities. During downtime – in between practices, meals, treatment, meetings, and film – I would either interview a coach or player, or casually insert myself into ongoing conversations. Typically during informal conversations I would put my notebook aside in an attempt to come across as more natural.

Once the season began I spent more time in [Nebraska] than in Kansas. Most weeks consisted of four to five days in [Nebraska] and two or three in Kansas. I only missed one game, during the third week of the season. Twice during the season I stayed in [Nebraska] throughout the week rather than returning to Kansas. This allowed me to attend all practices and meetings. Daily practices were consistent throughout the season (Monday practices followed the same schedule each Monday throughout the season), which made it crucial for me to attend and observe at least one of each practice. Remaining in [Chester] during the week allowed me to do so. I determined early on in the research project that the final game, whenever that would occur, would serve as the final data collection.

Interview Subjects

During the course of this project I interviewed (formally or informally) well over seventy-five individuals. While I undoubtedly grew closer to certain players throughout the year, I made it my intention to speak to and get to know as many of them as possible. Most interviews were informal, consisting of me casually talking with an individual or group of players during down time at practice, in between meetings (occasionally during meetings against the wishes of the coaching staff), or elsewhere.

I conducted thirty-two formal interviews, all of which were semi-structured. I entered these interviews with specific questions to ask but allowed the conversations to grow organically. I would not stop the interviewee if he or she veered off topic from my decided agenda. The level of structure varied for each interview; some stayed on script while others deviated dramatically.

There were several individuals interviewed outside of the players and coaches. Namely, Midwest State's director of athletics, Charles Allen, their associate athletics director, Marc Allen, team lawyer, Joseph Bailey, the team doctors Charles Walker and William Owen, MWSU donor William Bates, a group of tailgating fans, several player's parents and other family members, and several fans from opposing teams. Although not each of these interviews is reflected in the results, they were all vital in building upon my understanding of the Mustang football culture.

The Product (*Writing Ethnography*)

The major problem for a student of organizational culture is not simply how to do research (despite our preference for courses in "research methods"), but how to write about the research. For it is in the act of writing that the theme(s) of the culture is revealed, shown rather than told, and the writing should therefore be as carefully plotted as any good novel (Goodall Jr., 1994, p. xix).

Researchers have approached the writing of ethnographies in a multitude of ways, with main, generic categories being report, analysis, and narrative (Denzin, 1997). Report ethnographies present data in a straightforward manner with a goal of matter-of-factly describing social reality. Analysis ethnographies allow the researcher to interpret their experiences and provide analysis of their collection of data. Finally, researchers conducting narrative ethnographies communicate their experiences through story telling. While this is far from an exhaustive list of ethnographic forms, other forms typically fall into one of these categories (Denzin, 1997).

The ethnographic form implemented for the purposes of this project was narrative; the writing of ethnography is as much a product of the researcher's epistemological perspective as it is a preference in writing style. Ethnographies written in report form are often done so from a post-positivist perspective, whereas narrative ethnographies exist almost entirely in the constructivist epistemology. The epistemological stance of this project has already been critically examined. In writing ethnography, I believed that my perspective as a researcher was simultaneously a valuable asset to include in the interpretation as well as an irrepressible and pervasive presence that necessitated accountability throughout the research process. To truly describe and understand a culture "is not to recount the events of a society but to specify what one must know to make those events maximally probable" (Frake, 1964, p. 111). In turn, the writing of ethnography and the development of theory is one in the same. Frake (1964) reiterates this sentiment by stating, "cultural description implies that an ethnography should be a theory of cultural behavior in a particular society" (p. 112).

The product of this project is the written ethnography, with the intent to invite the reader into the same experiences that I lived through over the previous twelve months. The results were reported in chronological order as a means of accurately conveying events to the reader as they occurred in time. My hope was to gain a greater understanding of the cultural tendencies of the MWSU football program, and translate that knowledge into a meaningful and rich narrative to be experienced by the reader. The written ethnography is divided into chapters broken up out of season by key events and in-season by each game. Within these chapters are short discussion sections through which I begin to tie the data back to the literature and apply my own observations and discussions.

In conducting this form of research, several inherent shortcomings exist, while simultaneously carrying advantages that make the undertaking worthwhile. Goodall Jr., (1989) summarized the advantages and disadvantages by stating that an ethnography

...invites writers to deal with the various and changing meanings that people associate with situations and makes no claim for generalizability, replicability, or infallibility. It is a situation-specific, author-specific, fallible method. It asks more questions than it pretends to answer, and its chief product is a perspectival understanding of the truth created by and constituted in a transient rhetoric (p. 137).

Researcher Positionality

As referenced throughout this chapter, my perspective as the researcher for this study is closely intertwined with my interpretation and representation of the data. Denzin (1986) suggests, "Interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher" (p. 12). Because I only experienced this given time-period of MWSU's football culture, and was limited even further by my physical distance from their campus, my understanding of their culture is inherently incomplete. Additionally, there were certain coaches and players with whom I grew closer to than others, which led to their perceptions of culture becoming more identifiable to me. It is in these voids where my own beliefs, meanings, and biases will become exposed. Altheide & Johnson (2011) suggested ethnographers should "accept the inevitability that all statements are reflexive, and that the research act is a social act" (p. 592).

My positionality as a researcher for this dissertation was addressed throughout the writing of the following chapters. However, several important realities should be addressed before moving forward. Namely, my ability to first gain access to a closely guarded community, and become quickly assimilated into their culture. Several ethnographic researchers have addressed similar circumstances in their attempts to gain access to particular groups of people (Newman, 2011; Goodall Jr., 1989, 1991, 1994, 2000). My close relationship with Coach Murphy afforded

me the luxury of conducting this study, the freedom to do nearly whatever I wanted within the MWSU football offices, and an insider's knowledge of privileged information that was often kept between the two of us. That relationship also obligated the coaches and players to respect me and accept me into their lives. Alternatively, it also made them weary of my presence; many of the coaches and players likely took me to be a mole in the program, seeking information to relay back to Coach Murphy. This dynamic is weaved throughout the narrative presentation of the data.

My background as a collegiate athlete and current position working in the college sports industry further served as validation for my presence among this team. I have occupied a college locker room, taken part in friendly trash-talk among teammates, experienced the proverbial joys of victory and agonies of defeat; in short, I feel at home in the arena of college sports. I also have a deep understanding of the organizational behaviors of sport organizations. Not only do I currently work for a highly successful Power Five athletic department, I am also approximately five years into graduate studies in Sport Management. Regardless of my actual knowledge of how sport organizations operate, my title and academic degrees (and standing as a Doctoral Candidate) provide credence as a relative expert on the subject. This too, is an important point of emphasis in the following chapters.

As this dissertation now moves into a narrative form, I aspire to make this transition without losing sight of the goal with which I set out to accomplish. This is not *Friday Night Lights*, *Our Boys*, or *The Sweet Season*; distinguished novels that tell stories of the many ups and downs of various football teams. The intent of the following chapters is to convey the culture of this specific group of people, not to tell the most thrilling or momentous stories from the upcoming season. Wins and losses are noteworthy only in how coaches and players react to their

occurrence, not as an end-product. Statistics are equally trivial. Included in the pages that follow is one person's perspective on the cultural phenomena that is a college football team. With that said, a certain beauty exists in the ability to draw the attention of the reader while simultaneously analyzing a research question. Admittedly, this is a fine line to draw, and one that I hope to have accomplished.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

Why We're Here

The Murphy family cottage is understated, occupying approximately half of a football field's worth of lakefront property on Lake Marion, an average sized lake outside of Springfield, Iowa. Two water skiing boats can be seen through the windows of the cottage, which comprise nearly the entire east wall. Another boat, a pontoon, is tied up to the dock, awaiting its nightly cruise around the picturesque lake. Two important reasons brought me to the Murphy cottage during this particular summer weekend, where I found myself sleeping on an air mattress that refused to remain inflated and waking up to the sun, as the east wall windows lacked shades. First, I was dating the patriarch's daughter, which in itself required a great deal of courage. The second reason, I thought at the time, would surely call for the greatest feat of bravery I would ever muster. Three years earlier Molly and I met in graduate school at the University of Kansas. We planned to be married the following summer. Only two questions, and a year's worth of planning, stood between that dream and reality.

Randy Murphy is an intimidating figure, a persona he no doubt embraced and enhanced in my presence. His thick, burly mustache has remained intact since the 1995 football season when, as the defensive coordinator for the Southern State Jaguars, his players made a bet that he would have to shave it off if they were the top-ranked defense in the SEC. He obliged, but has yet to make a similar wager since. Most likely for fear of showing weakness, he never shows his teeth when he smiles. He still exhibits a hint of the athleticism that made him a starting linebacker for the Jaguars in the 1980's and earned him NFL tryouts. When his playing career ended he went into coaching, establishing himself throughout his career as a no-nonsense, tough-

mindful defensive coach, and eventually got a chance to prove himself as a head coach at Midwest State.

Those who knew of my plans, and who also knew Randy, wished me a sort of guarded luck; the kind of luck you wish to someone walking into the lion's den. The perfect opportunity occurred the prior weekend when I found myself fishing the pond by Murphy's Nebraska house, Randy by my side; however I convinced myself that the timing wasn't right. Now I was backed into a corner; he knew it was coming soon and the weekend at the cottage would likely be my last chance before football season, which would postpone the process another year. He avoided me the best he could all weekend. Molly and her mother, Laylah, did their best to manufacture circumstances that afforded the two of us privacy. It was as though we were a high school couple and all of my friends knew I hoped to ask him out on a date. Their attempts ended fruitlessly. Finally, Sunday morning, a mere couple hours before we would have to leave the den of the lion for our respective homes, I had my chance.

He awoke with the sun per usual, window shades or not. I awoke with the sun, the lack of window shades, the deflated mattress, and my nerves to blame. As he poured a cup of coffee from the pot he would finish over the next hour we both decided that the time had come. We stepped out the back door of the cottage in unison and he started, "So."

"I think you know what I am going to ask you," I finished his sentence.

We made our way to a pair of Adirondack chairs on the lakeshore.

"There's just something I have to tell you first," he said, as we both looked out on the quiet lake.

"If you hurt her," he made a fist with his huge hands and looked me in the eyes, "I'll hit you."

Exit strategies were running through my head. *Would it be better to jump in the lake and hope I could outswim him or make a dash for the road and hope that I could outrun him?*

“If you hit her,” he continued, his hand still in a fist, “I’ll kill you.”

Hopefully I can make it to the road so there are at least some witnesses.

Despite the cool early morning temperatures, beads of sweat poured down my face as I did my best to assure him that he had no cause for such concern. Our conversation lasted nearly two hours, approximately two minutes of which were occupied by my words. The remainder was advice -- marriage advice, career advice, financial advice, parenting advice – from my future father-in-law. Looking back, the experience was quite pleasant aside from the death threat. I never imagined that I would be in a similar situation – scared to hell – to propose another infringement on his life only a year and a half later.

The wedding went off smoothly, capped by a semi-compliment from Randy: “He’s the only guy she ever brought home that I actually kinda liked.” I’ll take it. Six months of marital bliss passed before I found myself back where I was a year and a half earlier. Being a second year doctoral student at the University of Kansas I was at a point where I needed to tackle the topic of my impending dissertation.

Some ideas bounced around between my advisor and me before we settled on an ethnography of a college football team. Naturally, the Midwest State Mustangs would be the focus and naturally, I was scared to death to ask Randy if I could write an extensive, in-depth, and exposing 300-page paper about his football team. Christopher Hamilton, Randy’s former boss and current athletic director at North Tech University, has personally told me no less than a dozen times that football coaches are among “the most secretive and paranoid people in the world.” When I asked him what he thought about the idea, Hamilton responded simply, “I’m just

glad you aren't asking me if you could write it on our football team." He followed that up by wishing me luck. The same kind of luck I was wished before asking Randy for his daughter's hand in marriage.

I decided to march on, confident I could convince Randy to allow me access to his team the same way he granted my wishes to marry his daughter, sans death threat. Christmas at the Murphy's transpired like a re-run of that weekend at the cottage two summers prior. I carefully plotted my chance to have a one-on-one moment with Randy, each time being denied, mostly by the paralyzing fear coursing through my body. Finally working up the courage while we watched Boise State run up the score against Northern Illinois in the Poinsettia Bowl, I sensed it was the right moment. Pouncing on the opportunity I asked, "What do you think about me writing my dissertation about your team?" Time seemed to freeze as I awaited his response.

"Yeah. I think that could be cool," he replied almost instantaneously.

Thank goodness. One thing is for certain, Randy Murphy is far more protective of his daughter than he is of his football program.

The twelve plus months that followed blessed me not only with a greater understanding of the inner-workings of a college football program and a dissertation to show for it, but with an experience that far exceeded my expectations. I was a fan of the Mustangs since my first date with Molly. We had attended more than twenty games, home and away, over several seasons. I had been to practices and knew some of the coaches and players. However, this experience, as grueling as it was at times, allowed me to enjoy the roller coaster of a season ridden by the Mustangs. It blessed me with lasting relationships, countless laughs, plenty to cheer about, and even a little heartbreak and ecstasy.

Following is my account of the Midwest State Mustangs 2016 season. Moreover, it is a story of what happens when a married 27-year-old PhD student decides to write his dissertation about the family business that just so happens to be six and a half hours away.

January 2016 Back to School Team Meeting

The 2015 Mustangs had it made. After a first round bye, they went on to beat West Grove handily in the second round of the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) Playoffs. All they had to do was beat Northeast State and the Mustangs would have their shot at revenge. They would get the Warriors on their turf, a field that they had not lost on in three full seasons. This was the team to dethrone the dynasty that was Canyon Ridge football, four-time defending national champions, the most recent of which was won in thrilling, or heartbreaking depending on your perspective, fashion over Midwest State following the 2014 season.

The 2015 Mustangs had it made, but came out flat. Nothing went their way against Northeast State. Any sign of a comeback was quickly dismissed by a turnover or a penalty. In the end, the Mustangs were left to think about what could have been. The Mustangs *continue* to think about what could have been. As much as they talk about leaving it in the past, as often as assistant coach Clayton Buck tells his offense that “this is a new team,” the sting refuses to leave. The reality is that this *is* a new team. Archer Moore and Rory Johnson, the All-American pillars of the offense are gone, having moved on to play on Sundays. Defenders Bear Palmer, Corey Patterson, and James Jordan, anchors for a highly effective, if at times flawed, defense have also moved on. Many talented players expect to step in and fill those positions. But this year’s team is *different*. It was yet to be seen if that would manifest itself for good or bad.

Members of the 2016 version of the Midwest State Mustangs have experienced heartbreak. They have also experienced success unlike anything seen in the history of the

program. This year's graduating class will likely leave as the all-time winningest class in the history of the university. Murphy came to Midwest State intent on winning the national championship at a time when most fans would have been content simply with a winning season. "It says something about the state of our program," Mustang's strength coach, Colton Floyd told me, "when we win a share of the conference championship and make it to the playoff quarterfinals, and it isn't good enough." Despite the losses of many key players from the season before, expectations were once again high for this team.

My first experience with this year's team would be at the back-to-school team meeting, January 10th, 2016. Snow, wind, and ice extended my drive by nearly three hours and brought me back to my youth of long winters in Minnesota. While the elements were harsh, the final block of my drive proved most treacherous as a nail managed to puncture my left rear tire just before pulling into the Murphy's driveway.

"All this for a thirty-minute meeting, huh?" Randy asked as I removed the jack from the back of my 2006 Jeep Grand Cherokee. This question necessitated no answer, and also did not receive one. As we worked to remove the now entirely deflated tire I asked Randy about the agenda for that night's meeting. It was clear that he had conducted dozens of meetings just like this in the past, and also that until this moment he hadn't fully considered what he would say to his team tonight. One thing was glaringly obvious: Randy was agitated, and not because he was changing a tire in sub-20 degree weather. The FCS national championship game had taken place the day prior, culminating in the crowning of Canyon Ridge as undisputed royalty in the world of FCS football. The Warriors hardly broke a sweat, cruising past Northeast State, 33-7, and eventually Western Tech, 37-10 in Frisco, Texas. Randy claimed to have not watched the game, but I have my doubts considering he would go on to recount all of the ways in which Canyon

Ridge exposed and overpowered their overmatched opponent. Regardless, he was clearly still disgusted that his team had failed to even allow themselves the chance to unseat the Warriors.

“I don’t think we had great leadership last year,” Murphy would go on to tell his leadership council later that night, “Otherwise we would have played in that game yesterday.” The leadership council, implemented by Murphy a few years back, consisted of players voted by their peers as the team’s leaders. Meeting at various times throughout the year, they offered a unified voice for the players on various team issues and policies. Tonight’s meeting consisted of returning leadership council members and took place immediately before the full team meeting.

Although several players included on the council wanted input on more important issues, it was a start. On the agenda for tonight’s meeting: the issue of whether or not to allow music to be played through speakers in the locker room prior to games or if players should be forced to wear headphones. It was already obvious to me why some of the members craved input on more important topics. The discussion went nowhere fast and led to no resolution. The council moved onto more pressing matters: whom to add to the council for the upcoming year.

The first name, suggested by Murphy and immediately agreed upon by members of the council, was Redshirt Sophomore quarterback, Kolten Burke. Including the prospective starting quarterback on a leadership council like this one seemed overtly obvious to me. With the advent of the forward pass at the turn of the 20th century, the importance of the quarterback position to the game of football increased dramatically. As offenses expanded and playbooks became thicker than physics textbooks the consequence of the position only grew. It is commonly believed that no team, collegiate or professional, can win a championship without an elite level quarterback “manning the ship,” so to speak. Even still, including the quarterback on this council was not guaranteed, particularly considering Murphy’s presence as a hard-nosed defensive

coach. It became increasingly clear throughout the season the importance he placed on the defensive side of the ball; abiding more by the phrase *'Defenses Win Championships'* than the aforementioned dependence on quarterbacks. Nonetheless, Burke was unanimously added to the leadership council followed by several more players.

At this point the additional names carried little to no weight as far as I was concerned as I was only vaguely familiar with a handful of the returning players. However, grabbing my attention were the adjectives used to describe these prospective nominees. Tough, hard-nosed, and competitor were used as labels for the potential additions. Academic grades were also a topic of discussion with each nominee. When Murphy suggested adding a kicker I looked up from my notes, certain I had misheard. As customary as it may be to include the starting quarterback in a group of leaders, it is equally customary to not include the kicker.

Murphy quickly put to rest my preconceived notions of Alfie Lane, the nominated kicker, when he offered that Lane is, "one of the rare kickers that's tougher than shit." I learned throughout my time with the Mustangs that toughness is one quality that you should not lack in if you wish to see the field, no matter your position.

With the deep wound still fresh, Murphy could not help but again bring up the fact that Canyon Ridge University had just won their fifth consecutive national championship the day before. The mere mention of the Warriors around him prompts a conflicted response; as a long-time coach he respects and admires the program they have built, but as a competitor he wants nothing more than to end their streak. As the leadership meeting closed he conveyed this sentiment to the young men chosen to lead this year's team by telling them, "We gotta go to Rogers [the location of Canyon Ridge University] this year, someone's gotta knock them off." A palpable insinuation that that someone should be them.

With clear disgust in his voice, offensive lineman Jayden Velez responded by saying, “Shit’s gotta stop,” and they all left the room in silence.

The Wright football complex sits in the northeast corner of Hughes Stadium, the recently renovated home of the Mustangs. Through the entrance sits a reception desk typically occupied by Marie Whitney, the gregarious receptionist welcoming of all strangers, along with at least one student worker. The stairs to the left lead to the locker room, training room, and field entrance. The hallway to the right will take you to a loop of coaches’ offices and meeting rooms. When first entering the building three trophies dominate the space. Two of them make sure that each visitor is aware that the Mustangs are back-to-back Midwestern Football Conference Co-Champions. The other a traveling trophy earned by the victor of the annual Midwest State-Midwest Tech rivalry game.

Despite the Wright building having several designated meeting spaces, the Culligan water jug centrally located between the coaches’ offices and the meeting rooms serves as the unofficial meeting spot for the coaching staff. At any given time throughout the day anywhere between two to eight coaches would gather to discuss football, politics, or any other random thought that crossed their mind. Topics ranged from, but were not limited to, which genre of music was best, who would win a game of one-on-one basketball, or who clogged the downstairs toilet. Being football coaches, many of these discussions turned quickly to shouting matches regardless of the subject matter.

Covered with pictures, graphics, and plaques, the walls of the complex commemorate current and former players. One entire wall is dedicated to alumni that went on to play in the

NFL. Another wall occupies a large picture taken before the 2014 National Championship game showing the Mustangs sideline in front of a sea of green and gold Warriors supporters.

I sat in the back of the large meeting room after the leadership council meeting, waiting for the players to come back in for the full team meeting. I wondered what the atmosphere of the room would feel like. Would they still be dejected from the last game played on the field they could see through the meeting room windows? Or would they be excited about the start of a new season, ready to move on and put it in the past?

The unanimously selected leadership council member, Kolten Burke, entered the room first and it became instantly apparent why he was chosen to be a leader among this team. Burke was unassuming but confident, a trait that would be tested throughout the season. As he entered this first meeting of the new season, he did so with the clear understanding that this was now his team; All-American Archer Moore had taken his last snap in a Mustang uniform almost exactly a month prior to this night.

As others entered the room, Burke greeted each individually until it almost became an impossible feat. He introduced a transfer wide receiver to his teammates and asked several players how their winter break had been. He even joked with a student assistant coach about whether his old rundown car made it back after traveling for winter break. He knew a little bit about everyone involved in the program. Maybe I was predisposed by the discussion that had taken place during the earlier leadership meeting, but Kolten Burke appeared to have everything necessary to be a bonafide leader of a collegiate football team.

While players filed in I also noticed that my presence, taking notes and appearing inquisitive, had peaked some interest. One player approached me and asked if I was the new transfer. Being flattered to be perceived as someone capable of playing Division I football, I was

inclined to play along and say yes; However, I realized I couldn't be that cavalier in my newly adopted role. Besides, Coach Murphy would soon reveal who I was and why I was there, but until that point I felt myself becoming the object of many curious glances.

With rare exception, Murphy would start every meeting throughout the season with the same phrase: "Hats off, sit up in your seat." Every player would respond in the same fashion: by following orders. After announcing to the team that their overall grade point average from the previous semester was not good enough and must be improved in the spring, he next mentioned why I was there in a way only he could. Pacing back and forth in front of the team he told them where I was from, what I would be doing and that, "he is here to write about a winning culture, so don't fucking disappoint him."

How do I follow that?

Mustang strength coach Colton Floyd, who quickly became my favorite staff member with which to converse, did most of the talking for this meeting. After years of yelling instructions at athletes in a militaristic manner, I got the sense that he had forgotten how to speak any other way. Floyd possessed an uncanny ability to speak in clichés that did not come across as such unless you were taking notes and went back to them later, as I was. When he had finished I wanted nothing more than to walk downstairs, past the doors to their locker room, across their synthetic turf field, into Mustang Arena, and pump iron until the next morning.

Maybe he was feeling the same way I was after hearing Floyd talk because as Murphy took his place in front of the team again he clearly had a more intense expression covering his face. He tried to discuss the logistics and timing of spring workouts but quickly realized that that was not the intent of this meeting. He also inherently lacks the capacity to communicate well unless discussing football, water skiing, or auto racing, topics that transform him into a Winston

Churchill-like orator. Rather than allowing the team to fall from the high that Floyd had just bestowed on them, Murphy now wanted to capitalize and send one final message.

He asked his team to stand up if they love football -- everybody stood simultaneously as goosebumps covered my arms – and told them that he was in Frisco a few days prior and that it “fucking sucked.” He then told the team that they are tougher than we are, and everyone immediately knew who ‘they’ were. Finally, after challenging his team’s toughness another half-dozen times he said to them, “I couldn’t watch one down of that game yesterday. It made me want to throw up.”

Just like at the end of the leadership council meeting an hour earlier, Murphy exited without another word said and the rest of the team followed suit. Message sent. Message received.

The motivational talks of Coach Murphy and Coach Floyd had the same effect on me that Pixy Stix have on an eight year old. Basketball was my first love, but like many Americans, college football sends me into a euphoric state each fall Saturday. I can’t help but experience elation when a screaming, half-mad fullback runs off the field, blood flowing from his nose. On more than one occasion I have leaped from my couch out of pure joy having just witnessed a miraculous catch or bone-crushing hit. I know, deep down, that something is seriously maladjusted with someone who attains such bliss in watching young men whose intent is to physically dominate their opponent on each and every play. I am not, however, ready to confront that issue just yet. Not with the opportunity that lay in front of me. I was convinced after the Mustang’s back-to-school team meeting that I was just as eager for the season as the players or coaches.

Discussion #1

Successful football programs attract the attention of those who aim to recreate their success. While Midwest State has enjoyed record levels of success in recent years, the gold standard in the Midwestern Conference and throughout the country at the FCS level is Canyon Ridge. Immediately upon commencing this ethnography it is clear that the Mustangs compare themselves against the Canyon Ridge standard. Additionally, they study their best practices and tendencies in an attempt to identify what it is that allows them to maintain such high levels of success.

Scott (2014) suggests that organizations, in a response to uncertainty, will often look to successful organizations from the industry for guidance. Mimetic isomorphism was among the most notable themes recognized early on in this experience. Nowhere was mimetic isomorphism more evident than in the relationship between Midwest State and Canyon Ridge. As I sat with Coach Murphy in his office early on in my research I noticed the extent to which he and his coaching staff seek to emulate some of the things that have turned the Warriors into a perennial power. Coach Murphy was undecided on whether a particular recruit was worthy of earning one of the coveted scholarships that his program had remaining to offer. The recruit was a solid player but by no means was he flashy or a surefire all-conference caliber player. “These are the kind of guys that Canyon Ridge gets,” Murphy told me. “They take good players and they play great within their system.”

The phrase ‘What would Canyon Ridge do?’ was common discourse around the office. The only three programs I heard referenced in this capacity were the Warriors, the Alabama Crimson Tide, and the Southern State Jaguars under the guidance of former coach Morgan Wright. The Warriors and the Crimson Tide are unarguably the two most successful programs in

college football and the Jaguars enjoyed a high level of success when Murphy served under Wright as Defensive Coordinator. When Coach Murphy and I watched an early-season game between Canyon Ridge and West Charleston, he predicted that despite facing an early deficit, the Warriors would come back to win. “They are more mentally tough than everyone they play,” he said. “They know they are gonna win. That’s where we have to get to.” The Warriors won in overtime.

When I talked with Coach McLain later in the season he suggested that Canyon Ridge was a primary reason for the reputation of the conference as a hard-nosed, old-school football conference. “Canyon Ridge lines up and runs the same stuff every week regardless of who they are playing,” he told me. “They aren’t flashy, they don’t try and trick you. They just line up and go at you. They say, ‘This is who we are, if you beat us, so be it.’ Because of their success all of the defenses are starting to look the same in this conference.” The success of competing organizations forces those trying to keep up to identify and address areas of weakness. Such isomorphic behavior oftentimes results in organizations appearing and behaving similarly (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The Midwestern Football Conference is nearly unanimously considered the best football conference in FCS football. Many years ago Canyon Ridge shaped a successful formula for creating and maintaining levels of success rarely seen in college football. In response, the rest of the conference has taken pieces of their formula and inserted them into their program in hopes of mimicking their on-field success.

Normative isomorphism is additionally a common theme witnessed throughout this ethnography. Normative isomorphism occurs through two processes: professional training and the diffusion of ideas across organizations (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The culture created within Midwest State football is a direct product of the coaching staff’s

experiences at their previous coaching stops. This is most evident in the connection between MWSU and Southern State football. Five of MWSU's coaches (Murphy, Cobb, Watts, Morris, and Floyd) served on the coaching staff at Southern State under Wright, and Coach Cobb and Watts played for Wright and Murphy. Few meetings, formal or informal, pass without 'The Southern State Days' being mentioned. Beyond reminiscing about the past, these conversations serve as a means of reinforcing the values and principles learned during those times.

The Midwest State/Southern State connection is far from the only one lending hand to normative isomorphism. Coach Dominic Grant, whose coaching career began as a graduate assistant at Upper West Tech, studied their defensive schemes and even talked with coaches from their staff to assist in the Mustang's transition from a 4-3 to a 3-4 defense this season. The similarities between the SEC Conference at the FBS level and the Midwestern Conference at the FCS level are evident in the way the teams from each operate. "We all know each other because we have either coached with or against each other, or we recruit the same kids," said Coach Buck, who served on Eastern State's staff for several years as well as Northern Tech's. "There aren't really any secrets."

The presence of the final form of isomorphism, coercive isomorphism, is undoubtedly present within the Mustang's program as well. Coercive isomorphism refers to an organization's pressure to conform to overarching societal and cultural expectations and norms (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999). Two prominent topics of discussion among the coaches are the need to adjust to this new generation of student-athletes and the overarching feeling that American society as a whole has grown more sensitive. "This is a tough game we play," Coach Murphy told his team during an early season meeting. "Our society is very soft. This isn't a soft game. It isn't for soft people."

The coaching staff has, however, taken steps to adjust to the changing times, a direct result of societal pressure to change the football culture as a whole. Many years ago derogatory names and sayings were the norm in college football. While many coaches continue to utilize profanity and insults as motivation, it has undeniably been toned down. Coach Murphy even addressed his coaching staff on the topic early in the year, urging them to cut down on their swearing and completely eliminate the use of certain insensitive terms and sayings that had worked their way into the everyday language of many football programs throughout the country.

Concussions are another controversial topic surrounding football culture. The very existence of tackle football has come into question due to the potential long-term effects that concussions may have on the brain. In response, the Mustang's defense implemented a new tackling technique this year that is intended to cut down on blows to the head and neck area. At Southern State, before concussion research was prevalent, Coach Murphy taught his defenders to tackle using the phrase, "Eyes through the throat." The new technique teaches tacklers to target their shoulder pad through the legs of the ball-handler and to wrap their legs before going to the ground with them. The result: Only two Mustangs missed any time with concussion-like symptoms this season. When one of those players came to the sideline during practice after lowering his head to make a tackle, Coach Murphy reminded him, "You can't lead with your head."

Hell Week(s)

Twenty-nine days had passed between the last game of the 2015 season and the first team meeting of the 2016 season; Twenty-nine more would pass before their first required workouts. Many of the returning players, particularly those who had logged a high number of snaps the season before, used this time to allow their bodies to heal. Some younger players jumped on the

opportunity to make strides in the weight room. Others fell behind, as is too often the case for countless college football players who fail to realize until it is too late the commitment it takes to succeed at this level. Members of the Mustangs were not exempt from falling victim to this fate.

The Mustangs were set to begin winter conditioning with the ritualistic ‘Hell Week’ in just under a month. Serving as the first test of toughness for the upcoming season, nearly every collegiate team in the country goes through a similar weeklong training program that is equal parts physical conditioning and mental training. Murphy so loves Hell Week that he affectionately refers to it as the County Fair, a time filled with laughter and happiness. For the players at least, neither of those would be present.

Minutes into the first Hell Week session, Coach Murphy walked over to me as I watched a group of offensive lineman execute a drill, leaned in close and casually told me, “he’s not gonna make it,” as he motioned towards one of the lineman. Hell Week gives the coaching staff an initial chance to evaluate their team, to see who has been working out between the last game of the season and now, and who will emerge as leaders for the upcoming season. For the players, completing Hell Week is a rite of passage, a miserable experience that’s completion is exuberantly celebrated.

The offensive lineman in question would go on to quit the team before Fall Camp started.

After a pleasantly uneventful drive the night before, my alarm Monday morning sounded three hours before the sun finally decided to rise. The Murphy’s golden retriever, Chase, hardly attempted to raise his head from the tile in the front entryway to greet me good morning as I passed by him on my way to the kitchen. Despite the early hour, I was eager for my first chance

to see the full team in action. Randy shared a similar sentiment as he entered his kitchen with an extra spring in his step and look of intensity in his eyes.

As is customary this time of year in this part of the country, Randy started his car fifteen minutes before our departure to allow it time to defrost. Having received my itinerary the night before, I knew to be ready ten minutes ahead of schedule in the event that he decided to call an audible. Ten minutes early is considered on time to Randy. As we pulled out of the driveway in his Chevy Impala snowflakes fell on the windshield.

Murphy had threatened his team that, weather permitting, Hell Week would take place outside on their game field, an option most of the players actually preferred considering the alternative. The alternative was Watson Fieldhouse, a 53 year-old facility attached to the West side of Hughes Stadium. Because of the age of the fieldhouse and lack of recent renovations, the playing surface was near the equivalent of an outdoor basketball blacktop. “You’ve seen that place,” Coach Watts told me regarding the Fieldhouse. “It’s shitty!”

Most of the team was already warming up by the time I walked into the Fieldhouse. Groggy eyes and yawns failed to mask the anticipation and nervousness that filled the air. With a blow of his whistle Coach Floyd signaled for the team to assemble into their stretching lines; seniors in front, freshman in back. As the team went through their warm-up routine, complete with constant berating about form from Floyd, I wandered through the lines. Several players made attempts at starting conversations with me as I passed, others shot anxious glances at my open notebook. Those who approached me did so from a position of curiosity. “So what kind of stuff are you looking for?” one player asked, while another inquired about how long my paper had to be, “like twenty pages?” he guessed. Amused, I let out a hearty laugh, simply saying, “I

wish.” Hayden Anderson, a senior not known for his bashfulness, demanded a cut of the profit from my book sales if I mentioned his name.

When the team’s warm-up ended, organized chaos ensued. Players dispersed in predetermined groups to every corner of the Fieldhouse. Everybody was in a full sprint. Coaches awaited them, ready to explain the designated drill for their station. When Floyd again blew his whistle, eighty plus bodies sprang into motion; pushing weighted sleds, high stepping through ladders, or shuffling between cones. Coaches and players alike screamed at the top of their lungs. Senior offensive lineman Sawyer Hayden, a burly individual with hair falling below his shoulders and a well kempt beard, showed no mercy when a freshman appeared to be giving less than his complete effort.

“Motherfucking run,” Hayden bellowed, followed by a phrase that seemed to echo throughout the Fieldhouse, “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Hayden was far from the lone upperclassmen scolding his younger teammates. Randy’s son and my brother-in-law, Nathan Murphy, upon completing his turn at the sled push station turned to Robert Macdonald, an underclassmen and asked, “You haven’t gone yet have you?” knowing full well this to be the case. After being called out publicly, the freshman shot a glance at Nathan that only served to escalate the situation. “Don’t give me that look,” Nathan shot back, “Get up here and challenge me.”

Nathan followed in his father’s footsteps, serving as the middle linebacker and leader of the defense. He too sported hair past his shoulders and currently sat as reigning winner of the ‘best beard on the team’ award. Despite recently trimming his mane he still resembled a slightly more refined Neanderthal. After four years of fighting an uphill battle to ditch the title of ‘coach’s kid’, Nathan has positioned himself to be a crucial piece of the defensive unit during his

redshirt senior season. Coach Derick Pierce summed up Nathan's approach to football when he said, "Nathan's just a tougher SOB than everyone else."

I looked through the windows of the Fieldhouse as I moved from group to group. The Mustangs were nearing completion of their first day of Hell Week and the sun was just now beginning to rise above the horizon. I made my way to Sebastian Watts' station, MWSU's fast-talking running backs coach and recruiting coordinator who was leading his group through another drill focused on footwork. The players started by dropping to the floor onto their stomachs, rolling completely over, getting back on their feet, and then proceeding through a cone drill. With each repetition came another profanity-laced challenge from Watts: *Be faster, be better, be smarter.*

Upon completing the station Watts huddled his group for one of his patented speeches. "You guys would rather fucking smoke dope, go out drinking, skip class, than bust your ass on the football field." A running back had recently been caught with marijuana, leading to a suspension and giving Watts a reason to chew them out.

Watts continued, his voice rising in volume, "I'm all in!"

He was now face-to-face with 250-pound tight end Niko Sexton. He repeated twice more, "I'm all in. I'm all in. Are you fucking all in?" Sexton matched his intensity, inching closer and spraying saliva as he responded, "I'm fucking all in!" Watts, seemingly pleased with this passionate response, kept eye contact, calmly offered, "We're about to find out" and walked away. This would turn out to be one of the more mild mannered outbursts by Watts throughout the season.

After each group had completed every station, Murphy gathered the entire team in the center of the Fieldhouse. He gave them a brief speech about how this time is an opportunity for

improvement and that some of the groups are “lucky today because they are about to get another opportunity to improve.”

Still positioned at their respective stations, the coaches started calling out groups that failed to bring enough energy to their station. Five of the ten coaches decided to call back a group for another opportunity to improve, doing so by screaming the name of the leader of the group, typically a senior. This served as a form of public humiliation: you led a group that simply was not good enough today. The remaining groups rejoiced momentarily upon realizing they would not be subjected to further opportunities, then immediately dispersed to encourage their teammates.

Profanities filled the air as coaches sought to drain every last bit of energy from their players. To be fair, some coaches refrained from swearing. Others made up for it twofold. The intent was not malicious, but rather motivational. Although unsubstantiated, most of the coaching staff believed in their heart that screaming ‘move faster’ failed to deliver the same sort of inspiration that ‘move *fucking* faster’ did.

When the groups finished their extra opportunities, Murphy called them back and delivered a version of the speech I would go on to hear so often I could recite by the end of the season.

“Stay away from things that destroy you. Drugs. Alcohol. Disrespecting women. These things will not be tolerated if you wish to remain a part of this team. Respect your coaches and respect your teammates. The easy thing to do now would be to go back to bed and skip class. Don’t fucking do it. Don’t take the easy way out.”

When he concluded, the team moved in close with their arms in the air. A voice boomed out from the middle of the pack, “Mustangs on two...one, two”

“Mustangs!”

Players scattered towards the northeast doors of the Fieldhouse, collecting their sweatpants and sweatshirts as they left. The team managers scurried to pick up the equipment, jugs of water, and garbage cans that were strategically placed in the event a player lost control of his bowels during the workout. Wide receivers coach Matthew Cobb, a former standout quarterback at Southern State during Murphy’s time there, casually mentioned to several players that he liked their effort today, but added that it needed to be better tomorrow. Then with a slight tap on his chest he motioned into the Fieldhouse bleachers. They were now being occupied by the university’s ROTC members. The players looked up as Cobb said, “Look at that, we’re up before the Army.”

Despite its name, Hell Week spanned over two weeks, each day more grueling than the one before. Player’s bodies took a beating on the unforgiving Fieldhouse floor. An indoor practice facility is top on Murphy’s wish list for exactly that reason; two weeks of intense workouts on such a floor results in serious wear and tear on the joints. The guys’ legs were dead by the second week. Coaches did their best to keep the older guys out of certain drills, but with the season still eight months away they could afford to beat them up a little. Plus, the Mustangs’ players and coaches prided themselves on being tough, and senior players hated for underclassmen to see them sitting out of drills. Matthew Combs, a senior offensive lineman, had his appendix removed a few days before Hell Week started, forcing him to miss every workout over the two weeks. While watching his teammates get pushed to the point of physical and mental exhaustion during the second week, he commented to me in a soft, disheartened voice, “Man, I wish I was out there with them.”

What are you, nuts? I thought to myself.

A freshman likely would have praised his luck for a burst appendix right before Hell Week. A senior, on the other hand, understood how quickly time seems to move during these particular four or five years of your life. Hell Week is exactly that until you're a senior, and then, regardless of how grueling it may be, Hell Week actually becomes fun. You have earned the right to yell at underclassmen. You know that no matter how hard the drill, you are more mentally tough than the person next to you. Four years of playing college football grants you the comfort in knowing this to be true. You also know that this is the last time you get to go through this experience. Each passing day is one closer to not playing football again. For many, this is tough to grasp. Their entire lives have been shaped around the sport. Their identity, so firmly rooted in football, struggles to accept that this is it. So a missed practice or even a missed rep as a senior is magnified exponentially. The finality of the upcoming season, for many their last time putting on pads, weighs heavy on this senior-laden team.

This year's senior class lacks the star power of the previous year, when Moore and Burke torched defenses on their way to All-American seasons, but at its core is more vital to the success of this year's team. Five experienced seniors make up the starting offensive line. Nathan and his close friend Jefferson Henderson occupy the two middle linebacker spots in the Mustangs 3-4 defense. Wide receiver Gideon Gill returns, coming off of a record-breaking junior season. Outside of the locker room a sign on the wall reads *'If you stay, you will be a champion'*. This group of seniors has fulfilled that promise, but are hungry for more. "We were in the playoffs last year, and once you get a little taste of it you want it all," Hayden told me, "We came up short and that's not our expectation, so we want to get back out there and complete it."

Hell Week was the first of many steps in that process. The two week ordeal ended on Friday, February 19th, with a spirited workout. Energized by knowing that the following day would allow them several more hours in bed than the previous two weeks, the Mustangs finished Hell Week on a high note, which clearly pleased the coaches. Several younger standouts included Leon Rivers, a redshirt freshman linebacker, and Tyler Barrett, a defensive back. Both had been involved in minor off the field incidents following the previous season but received Murphy's praise for their toughness and willingness to bounce back from adversity.

The fact that these players were 18-22 year old boys transforming to men before my eyes would be reconfirmed to me countless times throughout the season. Most of them were so physically gifted beyond their age that it was easy to forget that they were still college students, and that outside of football, they acted like college students.

As ritualistic as Hell Week is for college football teams, so too is the partying afterwards. Two weeks of exhausting workouts earned these guys some time to let loose and blow off steam. Hearing players on the sideline talk about their plans for the night (pre-game at the house, then the Brew Haus, then Downtown) was a reminder of my days as a student-athlete.

The coaches were far from oblivious to their players' escapades, similar to those of real-life Animal House characters. They did their best to teach them the importance of good decision-making and made examples out of those who found trouble. When Coach Murphy told his team to avoid things that destroy you, including drugs and alcohol, he meant it. He also understood that drinking was part of the college experience. As long as they stayed out of trouble and showed up to practice on time and well rested, he tolerated their extracurriculars.

Coach Watts was as honest with his running backs as any other position coach. "If you want to go out and act like college students," he would tell them, banking on the fact that he

could relate to them and they in turn trusted him, “just be smart about it. You don’t want to have the same conversation he had in my office with me last year.” He said this as he pointed at Alfonso Henson, who smiled and shook his head as he recalled the event as if to say “*No. You most certainly do not.*”

My first few weeks with the Mustangs revealed a layer of culture to which I had not yet been exposed. As a fan – albeit one with close ties to the program – I picked up on surface level cultural practices over the past few years. I understood the emphasis that Coach Murphy placed on promptness and respect, along with the expectation of toughness that permeates the program. Hell Week exposed me to espoused beliefs and values shared by the staff and most upperclassmen that were yet to be accepted by the underclassmen. A culture of seniority, in which a clear delineation exists in rank order throughout the team; underclassmen defer to upperclassmen and upperclassmen defer to the coaching staff. Ignoring this hierarchy by questioning a “superior” leads to consequences.

The level of intensity surrounding this team is tangible. Everything is done with a purpose, and everything moves fast; it is among the most noticeable facets of being involved with the team. There is no down time and no breaks – lunch, bathroom, or otherwise. I once stepped into the public restroom in the football offices and overheard Coach Morris on a recruiting call from the stall. The coaches all share a similarly high level of intensity that is only matched by a handful of players – mostly seniors. It is common to see players taking initiative by watching film or working out on their own. It is rare that such occurrences involve freshmen.

Spring Season

They say to expect the unexpected. While I understand and appreciate the premise, the statement is contradictory and unrealistic. Molly and I had been married for eight months when we got the call. We knew that this was a possibility down the road but not so soon into our marriage. She was just entering the busy part of her work schedule. I was finishing my last semester of coursework and already three months into my research for this project. Yet, this was something we had both wanted. When we got that call we prepared ourselves for an immediate and drastic change in our lifestyle.

“What do you think about coming to work for me?” It was Randy, offering the Director of Football Operations position to my bride.

Molly is overwhelmingly kind, so she attempted to mute her excitement, knowing this would mean that we would live separately during the next eighteen months. It had been her dream to work for her father in this role. She had grown up around football and her dad always said she would have made a great linebacker.

When she officially accepted the job via phone, her and her father had an awkward professional discussion regarding her move to Nebraska, official responsibilities, and compensation. Despite doing their best to keep the discussion professional, Molly ended her portion of the conversation by telling her dad she loved him. Randy, unsure of how to proceed, made some inaudible noises on the other end of the line and hung up. This is the response I would expect from his as well.

The transition was far from smooth for the father-daughter duo. For the first month or so, Molly had to correct herself when referring to Randy as ‘Dad’ in the office and on the field. She would eventually resort to calling him ‘Coach’ at all times, even at home. Randy’s adjustment to having his daughter in the office was not without struggles as he often felt the need to protect her

from the coaches or players. He soon realized that she was more than capable of standing up for herself, something I had known for some time. On a single day I found myself on the receiving end of Molly's grumbles that she just "had to get away from him for a little while. He is driving me nuts" and Randy bemoaning that Molly "thinks she can just run my life now."

After the initial transition period, the arrangement worked effortlessly for the most part. By the time the season rolled along six months later the two ran in unison like they had worked together for years. Meanwhile, I was left back in Kansas acting as caretaker of a house, writing a dissertation, working a full-time job with part-time pay and no wife or dog to keep me company.

Molly moved to Nebraska in the middle of March, just in time for spring practices to start for the Mustangs. As is the norm in the world of football, she would have at most five days off between her first day on the job and the end of season. Coaches arrive in the office at seven and leave when they can no longer keep their eyes open. As a young up and coming assistant coach, Randy was allowed Thursday nights to be home with his family during the season. After dinner, Randy and Molly would then sit themselves in front of the television and watch game film of Southern State's Saturday opponent. Imagine how impressed I was when Molly identified the Cover 2 defense the Packers lined up in during that fall Sunday when we first started dating.

The Mustangs were in the process of transitioning from a strictly 4-3 defensive alignment to a 3-4 defense, requiring more of what coaches and players call 'install' during spring practices and position meetings. With so much turnover on the offensive side of the ball, including a new starting quarterback and running back, the offense also used more time than normal during the spring to ensure all players were on the same page from an X's and O's standpoint.

As with life, Nebraska weather in March is oftentimes unpredictable. As I made my way out to the team's first spring practice, a light, cold drizzle began to fall. Temperatures dropped to

the low 40's and I quickly realized that I was wearing nowhere near enough layers to keep warm throughout the upcoming two-hour practice. Undeterred, three-fourths of the team dressed with no sleeves under their jersey and no gloves. Particularly on the defensive side of the ball and along the offensive line, sleeves are a sign of weakness. As the team warmed up, I tried making small-talk with Kian Riggs, a former Mustang player and current assistant defensive coach. After a few words were exchanged, he simply looked at me and said, "Damn, it's cold out here." My shivering body and shaking hands indicated my agreement.

Murphy loved this weather. Not because he particularly enjoyed the experience, but rather because it toughened up his team. Last season they had played in an outright blizzard as eight inches of snow fell between kickoff and the final whistle of their 46-0 beatdown of Lakeview on Senior Day. That win would earn them a share of their second straight conference title. Murphy knew that inevitably there would be games played in poor weather during the upcoming season and that days like this prepared them for the inevitable.

He also had learned from his mentor, former legendary Southern State coach Morgan Wright, to practice in all conditions. Coach Floyd, who served on Wright's staff at Southern State, remembers practicing on fields that resembled ice rinks more so than football fields. Wright welcomed the inclement weather, hoping to see which players handled adversity and which players crumbled. Murphy, as they say, is a chip off the old block. As for Floyd, he went through the entire practice in a short-sleeve shirt. I considered watching from the heated press box but held onto my dignity by staying outside throughout the entire practice and not a minute more.

As practice wore on the weather grew worse and Coach Murphy seemed to enjoy every minute of it. The defense was dominant, helped in part by the weather and the fact that Murphy had forced the offense to play into the wind. He reveled in making the offense suffer.

Much to the displeasure of quarterback's coach and offensive coordinator, David King, Burke's first live action throw of the spring was intercepted. The defense threw a party on their sidelines near the size of the one thrown after Hell Week. The offense, lined up around midfield, could only watch on as the defense gloated. Most of them appeared rattled, including Burke.

Watching Burke throughout individual workouts, one-on-one sessions with his receivers, and 7-on-7 drills, I never saw him rattled until this moment. Coach Murphy was in his ear, "So this is the quarterback that's supposed to take over and be our starter? I put you into the wind and you throw a pick right away?" Murphy was relentless on the offense the entire afternoon.

The defense delighted in the berating that Burke was taking and a few decided to join in. Ace Joyce, far and away the best trash talker on the team, never missed an opportunity to chime in when the offense slipped-up. With Murphy still lecturing him, Burke received the play call and made his way back to the huddle. His voice on the pre-snap calls still conveyed confidence although his body language hinted at something else. I was interested in what King's play call would be; a pass showed confidence in his young, inexperienced quarterback but ran the risk of damaging his confidence further if another misstep occurred.

Burke snapped the ball and dropped back to pass. Gill ran a deep route towards the end zone and Aaron Lowe ran a cross over the middle. Conor Daniel, a quick 5'9" slot receiver found an opening in the defense and sat down in the middle of the field, ten yards from the line of scrimmage and looked in a perfectly thrown ball. This seemingly insignificant twelve-yard

gain managed to restore Burke's confidence and, at the very least, shut the defense and the head coach up for the time being.

The cold, wet weather undoubtedly had an effect on many of the players. A handful of special team's players huddled on the sideline, clearly uninterested in the play on the field, their only focus staying warm. Several times they were forcefully asked to focus on the play on the field by an upperclassmen. Never once did a member of the coaching staff pay them any mind. The special teams units and third and fourth string players, mostly consisting of underclassmen and walk-ons, rarely showed the same emotion and intensity seen from the starters. Knowing that something would have to seriously go wrong for you to play a meaningful down in a game will have that effect. The coaching staff did their best to make each guy feel valued, reinforcing that message at nearly every team meeting. "Every guy in here is important to the success of this team," Murphy would often say, "otherwise you wouldn't be in here."

Still, a marked difference in disposition revealed itself between the starters and the backups. Mostly, in my judgment, this was due to experience and maturation. There were, of course, several exceptions. George Holland, backup fullback, approached each practice throughout the season as if he were preparing to start in the upcoming game. He started the year buried on the depth chart, but injuries and work ethic moved him up the row. On the other end, Tyler Barrett, the Mustangs exceptionally talented starting defensive back who Murphy praised following Hell Week, often found himself on the wrong end of tirades from the coaching staff for his many antics displayed on and off the field.

In regard to practices, training and film sessions, and meetings, the difference between upperclassmen and underclassmen narrowed as the season wore on. By the time they played their first game, freshman had been in the program for over three months. They either matured,

learning by the example of their older teammates how to conduct themselves, or they grew tired of the constant lectures from the coaching staff for their lackadaisical behavior. Those who were not ready to accept the demands of being a college football player were redshirted. Those who failed to assimilate altogether were cut or quit.

Colton Floyd's shirt adequately expressed his feelings on this Friday after St. Patrick's Day. It is a day that football players throughout the country await with eagerness and dread. It is max squat day for the Mustangs. The day when football players work themselves into a frenzy, blast head-banging music throughout the weight room, scream in each other's faces, slap each other on the chest, and attempt to sit down in a squat and stand up with hundreds of pounds on their back. Floyd's rules for the day are simple and written on his shirt: *'Shut up and squat'*. The shirt was given to him by his former intern a decade ago because he said the phrase so much. He has worn it on every max squat day since.

I asked walk-on running back James Holland if he thought it was coincidence that Floyd scheduled max squat day for the morning after St. Patrick's Day. After all, Coach Grant found it hard to believe they even had school on the holiday ("When I was in school they would have spring break fall over St. Patty's Day otherwise they would have burned the fucking town down. That's the biggest fucking drinking holiday out there.") Holland laughed and agreed that there was no coincidence in Floyd's scheduling.

Based on the brain rattling music coming through the speakers and the energy level of the players none of them had partaken in any Irish traditions the night before. Floyd was positively glowing. Cam Hawkins asked him how he was doing and Floyd replied with an overly

enthusiastic “Great!” Today is his national championship and he is ready to win. Floyd urges the guys to compete against each other and “crank your intensity as high as it goes.”

When they walk into the weight room they are all business. Methodically they work up through their assigned weights to warm up. Once they have reached a weight that they need a spot, everybody else stops and makes their way over to encourage the lifter. They get in his face and do all they can to raise his adrenaline levels. If successful, they are treated as if they just caught a game-winning Hail Mary. Players mob the successful lifter and encourage him to go higher. This is among the most testosterone-filled environments I have witnessed. Ever. Other athletes brave enough to be lifting at this time, most of them female soccer players, looked on in horror at the overt displays of masculinity by the football team.

In-between practices and meetings the coaches retreat to their offices, tying up odds and ends from scouting opponents, recruiting, or watching film. It is during this time, especially early on in this endeavor, that I find myself unsure of how best to proceed. The easy option, and the one I am most unlikely to follow, would be to occupy the open chair in my wife’s office and carry on some version of small-talk with her and her officemate, Coach Pierce. At least until his promotion later this summer, Pierce is a ‘part-time’ coach (if there is such a thing) who is around my age, the youngest on staff. In order to avoid harassment from the staff, I do my best to avoid my wife during work hours. More than once I will have been called the ‘Assistant DOFO’ after being enlisted to help Molly with one task or another.

The alternative is to make my way around to each of the coaches’ offices, doing my best to initiate small-talk. Most of the time they are clearly uninterested but oblige anyway. Their offices are small – hardly enough room for me to sit down comfortably. At first, while we

familiarize ourselves, there is a script that we stick to depending on the coach. Coach Cobb and I talk golf. Coach Buck and I discuss college basketball, especially the Jayhawks. Coach Morris loves to talk food and the unusual way in which his body processes it. Occasionally those conversations involve Coach Grant, who once failed to realize that a toilet in the Wright Football Complex was out of order until it was too late, providing fabulous content for Grant's storytelling and undoubtedly resulting in a mortified janitor. Each of these coaches brings a unique personality to the staff. At times the perfect combination of histrionic characters like Grant and down-to-earth individuals such as Cobb. Yet, at other times, the competing personalities clash, sometimes in Royal Rumble-like fashion and sometimes in more subtle, muted ways.

The personalities of each coach are reflected in the tenor of their position meetings. None is more entertaining than the defensive line room, led by Coach Grant. Grant affectionately refers to the defensive lineman as the Cadillacs, the great American car. He believes, as does every other coach, that his group of players is the key that starts the engine of the team.

I sat in the back of the defensive line meeting room, which was partitioned off by moveable walls in the back corner of the large team meeting room, taking in the various conversations. The freshmen sat in back with me, mostly in silence. A couple of juniors discussed their recent spring break trip to Florida and one night in particular that seemed to have created some memorable stories. Grant habitually ignored these conversations as he helplessly attempted to work the projector that always seemed to malfunction, but chimed in when he found it appropriate. His comedic timing is unmatched among the coaching staff. The projector starts working after a few minutes and the players immediately drop their conversations and turn their attention to the north wall, which is now playing a clip of yesterday's practice.

“Any time this happens,” Grant starts out in a hoarse whisper, his voice slowly rising as he aims his laser pointer towards tackle Arthur Wood on screen, “you better kick his fucking ass.”

These coaches are hypercompetitive. They take it personally, even in practice, when one of their players gets beat. The defense desperately wants to beat the offense and the offense likewise. Cobb once told the offense that he expects “to win every single play during practice against this defense.” The coaches get along, but football comes first. I could count on one hand the amount of times I heard a defensive coach compliment an offensive player during practice and vice versa. Practices are competitive. But when another team takes the field, they become each other’s biggest supporters.

Grant continues to roll through the tape, talking his players through each position on each play. This entire book could consist of nothing more than one-liners from Grant and win a Pulitzer. No less than a dozen times throughout the year Grant would drop an especially well-timed phrase and a coach or player would look over at me as if to say, *‘Did you get that? That has to be in the book.’* After asking Coleman Doyle what he and Jayden Velez had a “lovers quarrel” about yesterday in reference to their half-hearted dustup, he decided to have some more fun at the expense of his starting tackle.

“Doyle, I know you are always my fucking golden child, but I did see a picture with a fucking Mustang cooler down there in Padre Island.”

The freshman in the back of the room sat in silence, unsure of how to best respond to this accusation. The upperclassmen howled in laughter at Doyle being outed for his beer-drinking in Texas over spring break. Doyle tried to laugh it off but sat uncomfortably, waiting for Grant to move on to the next clip. As lighthearted as the Cadillac’s meetings were at times, when the time

came to focus on the business at hand, the guys did so with a fierce intensity that reflected their position coach. Grant closed this meeting by demanding excellence from his group of players.

“You have to be running hot at all times right now. Get enough fucking sleep so your body can recover. Kick ass in the weight room. Kick ass in the dining hall. Kick ass in the sheets when you sleep at night.”

The Ohio State University football team had 100,189 people attend their spring football game this past April. Approximately 300 people chose to come out and support the Mustangs. Murphy, along with his coaches and players could not have cared less. After all, he has a quote in his office that reads: *The big time is not a place; it is the state of your heart.*

When Frosty Westering wrote those words he did so as an exceedingly content Division III football coach with no desire to ‘move up’ the coaching ladder. Similarly, although not identically, Randy is happy building an FCS national title contender in Chester, Nebraska. His coaching staff competes in recruiting against the ‘big boys’. Last year the Mustangs held their own on the field against a Southwest Lion team that would go on to a BCS bowl. In a recent recruiting meeting with his coaching staff Randy lamented a high school coach in Florida trying to push a lesser player onto him than the one he came to see.

“I didn’t get on a fucking plane to Florida to take that fucking guy,” Randy told his staff, mimicking the anger he felt on that day. “I want the guy that has the Florida offer. We have to beat those fuckers, too.”

The Mustangs do compete for FBS recruits. About half the roster had offers to play in the SEC but were swayed by the chance to play for a national championship and were impressed by Murphy’s history of sending guys to the NFL. This coaching staff has put together one of the

top recruiting classes in FCS football each of the past few years. As Randy puts it, “Recruiting is like shaving. You gotta do it every day or you look like a bum.” I can attest to the fact that this coaching staff recruits every single day of the year. So while the attendance and paychecks may not reflect it, this coaching staff and these players approach this program as if they are an FBS school.

The weather for MWSU’s spring game could not have been more different than their first day of spring practice a month earlier. Clear skies covered Hughes Stadium and temperatures reached the mid-80’s by kickoff. Before the game, the Mustangs invited kids from the community to join them on the field to run through drills and meet the players. Andre Erickson stole the show. The athletic quarterback turned running back danced and laughed with every kid in attendance, bringing smiles to the faces of the participants and their parents alike. He taught each kid a new touchdown celebration and laughed through it all.

The spring game started with a bang. Burke found Sexton on a quick out route towards the sideline and he was instantly met with a huge collision from a fast charging linebacker. Sexton, having already been a bit off-balance, flew into the sidelines right in front of where I stood, resulting in a loud thud and plenty of ‘oohs’ from the sideline. The defense had sent their message on the first play of the scrimmage.

The coaches also turned it up a notch, evidenced by their berating of the officials, which was already in mid-season form. Grant told an official no less than eight times in succession to throw a flag. The official finally obliged a few plays later but it was too late, the fiery defensive coordinator had already moved on to something else that pissed him off to no end.

Overall the spring game was a success, as everyone walked off the field under their own power. Coach Murphy was less than impressed by his team’s execution, but applauded their

effort. He also was encouraged by the leadership shown by his upperclassmen. At dinner that night I asked how he felt about his team. He immediately responded “They are *reeeeaaally* smart.” When he wants to emphasize a word he drags it out to make sure everyone knows he means it. He went on to tell me that this is the smartest team he has had at MWSU and that they will have to win games by outsmarting their opponents. This team’s intellect is no accident. “We gotta recruit smart guys. I don’t want any idiots playing here,” was a common phrase heard during recruiting meetings.

Summer Conditioning

I walked into the Wright Football Complex around nine in the morning to find Kolten Burke and Gideon Gill dissecting a single play over and over again. It was from a spring practice; Gill had run a corner route and Burke had overthrown him, or so it appeared. The two were playfully arguing. The disagreement arose from Burke believing that Gill had the opportunity to catch the pass had he accelerated a bit more. Gill claims there was “no chance in hell” he could have caught the ball.

As I poked my head in to get a glimpse of the play I was immediately drug into the argument.

“What do you think? He could have caught this couldn’t he?” argued Burke.

Gill sat in silence shaking his head. So confident in his defense that he didn’t offer a counterargument.

I sided with Burke, but who really knows.

After watching and rewinding the play a dozen more times, Coach King walked in, momentarily glanced at the play that had clearly been seared into his memory and simply offered, “you should have caught that Gill.”

Burke, like a victorious defense attorney, looked over at me with a half-smile and a wink. King was the judge and had just given the final verdict.

They might as well have been speaking a foreign language as I sat in a meeting with the quarterbacks and receivers. Whatever the opposite of the defensive line meeting room was, this was it. King never once raised his voice above normal talking level and went about his business without inserting comedic insults directed towards his players. There was no time for small talk here, only football. Burke is, as they say, a student of the game. He loves watching film and asking questions. I, along with a few other members of the team (coaches and players, no names will be given), found myself dozing off during long film sessions when the same play would be watched from three different angles over and over (and over) again. Burke is one of the few players who actually enjoys watching film.

Summer practices and workouts are optional in the same way that breathing, eating food, and drinking water are optional for your well-being. It wasn't the coach's enforcement as much as the players. The coaches are not on the field and not once did I hear a coach ask if a player missed a workout. "Great teams are the ones that govern themselves," Murphy would often say. The only penalty for missing a voluntary summer workout was a butt-chewing from a teammate, which is the worst conceivable punishment for any proud collegiate football player.

Player-run summer practices are not a Saturday in the backyard tossing the pigskin around. It is not as if they just show up and throw together a quick pickup game of two hand touch. The guys are deliberate with their practices. They run the plays that they are going to run the upcoming fall and practice at full speed. There is no tackling but that doesn't mean it isn't physical.

Nathan, Jefferson Henderson (affectionately nicknamed ‘Hondo’) and Terrence Daniel lead the defense. Nathan is the vocal leader; calling out the plays, correcting the younger players for their miscues and holding the older players accountable to demonstrate leadership. He also enjoys throwing figurative jabs (although he has been known to throw literal ones as well) at the offensive players. He has a tough outer shell, which took me a couple years to crack. On the field he transitions from day-to-day between his hardass *‘I’m gonna beat the snot out of you’* persona and the softer *‘I’m still gonna beat the snot out of you, but we’ll laugh about it later’* demeanor.

Hondo is quieter and far more reserved. He likely won’t initiate a conversation, but will be exceedingly pleasant if you choose to start one with him. Named a nominee for the American Football Coaches Association ‘Good Works Team’ recognizing college football players who have gone above and beyond to serve their community and enrich the lives of others, Hondo aspires to become a police officer when his playing days are over. Daniel is the “pretty boy” of the group. He enjoys summer practices because he can participate without a shirt, a double threat of showing off for co-eds walking by the stadium and enhancing his tan.

Together they lead a defense that they hope can be more consistent, if not as explosive, as last year’s team. Pass rushers Corey Patterson and Bear Palmer terrorized quarterbacks last season. However, they also gave up plenty of big plays that came back to haunt them against Northeast State in the playoffs when they allowed 39 points, a season high.

Player-run practices favor the offense. They play 7-on-7, which they call *skelly*, with no linemen, making it easier for the quarterback to read the defense. He also has the benefit of no enormous defensive lineman attacking him on every play. In spite of this, the defense held their own. The Mustang’s defensive backs are the most talented group they have had in years. The linebacker core, although undersized and a step slow, make up for their shortcomings with

experience, savvy, and toughness. Watching from the sidelines after going through defensive line drills, Ace, never shy about offering his perspective, announces for all the hear: “Man, the D is kicking the shit out of the offense today.”

The offense would have their days, but on the whole the Mustang defense outperformed the offense throughout the spring and summer, much to the delight of Coach Murphy. The offense was also going through a transition period. Family reasons forced offensive coordinator David King to move back home to Tennessee, leaving the coordinator position vacant. Hushed discussions among the coaching staff forecasted what Murphy would do to fill the opening. Matthew Cobb and Clayton Buck both wanted the job. Murphy exhausted all of his options, looking outside of the staff as well as considering internal options. He reached out to a few coordinators from other schools before settling on his choice.

Cobb and Buck would be co-offensive coordinators and Pierce would move into a full-time role coaching the receivers. Murphy rewarded loyalty and preferred consistency. The players were familiar with Coach Cobb and Buck, and more importantly Cobb and Buck had already bought into the Mustang’s philosophy. They preached the three T’s: *Tempo, Technique, and Toughness*. Murphy constantly reminded his coaches and players about the three T’s: “This team’s calling card is the three T’s. Tempo. Play fast but never in a hurry. Technique. You will go against better athletes. Be a technician. Toughness. America is becoming softer and softer every day. Don’t fall for that shit. In the end, we hang our hat on toughness. Be the toughest damn team in America.”

Floyd’s feet remained glued to the floor, his body swaying back and forth as he addressed the team:

“This is the third quarter of your preparation for the season. Make this the best summer of your career. This is where you develop your sense of purpose. This is where you prepare to become a national champion. Two back-to-back conference championships. We want more. Think we are going to do anything differently? Hell no. What do you expect? We’ve set a tone over the past couple of years. Hold your teammates accountable. Leadership and followership are equally important. I want to see great things. I want to see you pushing yourself to be great.”

Summer is the time to ensure you are physically prepared for the grind of a season the Mustangs hoped would extend into January. A strength coach is among the most vital positions on a football staff and Randy trusts nobody more than Floyd. They have been together for over twenty years, and when Randy accepted the job at MWSU, Floyd was the first person he made sure came with him. I asked Floyd what he thought the most important part of his job: “My job is to reinforce Coach’s vision for the program. Our entire lifting and conditioning program is designed with the intent to develop tough men.”

“Floyd makes us do stuff that we think is impossible,” Gideon Gill said, a crack of a smile developing across his face, “then we do it and he makes us do something harder.”

On this particular day the team arrives in groups of seven or eight to the stadium after finishing a weightlifting session in Mustang Arena. Floyd and his team of assistants, each of them armed with stopwatches, await them in the west corner of the south end zone. It’s hot and Daniel has his shirt off, as I have come to expect. Today’s workout has the guys climbing the steps of the renovated east bleachers, which were described as “really fucking steep,” and then making their way back down to sprint the length of the field, end zone to end zone: 100 yards. They would repeat the process again at the opposite end of the field and continue until they got back to their starting positions.

I lost count of how many times they completed the circuit, but it was enough to make one offensive lineman look like he might lose his lunch. He abstained, but took a while to compose himself before exiting the stadium. Floyd appeared to be basking in their pain. He took great joy in urging the players to pick up the pace. Every so often he would glance back at me with a half-smile after ripping into a half-assed effort from one of the players.

Floyd was in his element: barking orders and turning boys to men.

Randy escaped when he could during the summer months to the Murphy cottage. Lake Marion had once been a quiet, seldom-used lake where Randy and his childhood friends could waterski all day and not bother a soul. Many had caught on to the delightful attributes of the lake since, which detracted from the serenity that he had once found in coming here. Randy noticed, but didn't let it bother him. He still considered it sacred ground. Bring up the cottage in his presence and be prepared for a lengthy exposition on the history and culture of Lake Marion and its residents.

He is proud of the lake, the family property, and brags that he can teach anyone to water ski. Offended that I, growing up in Minnesota, had never learned to properly water ski, Randy made a point of teaching me to ski two summers prior. He entered full coach mode. First, he tied the rope to a tree and had me stand on ground to teach me the proper posture.

What a sight for the regatta of pontoons anchored in front of the cottage.

Next the boom, a water ski aid for four year olds, the age Nathan first got up on skis. Finally, long line behind the boat. I got up my first try...for about three seconds. Second try I made it all the way around the lake. I had passed my rite of passage to the Murphy family.

Randy was a member of a ski team growing up, serving as the bottom for the human ski pyramids you see in movies but never really believe exist. Home videos can verify that this actually happened. He still skis, that is, until Fourth of July weekend when he ruptured every muscle in his hamstring while skiing backwards on trick skis. The doctors told him it was one of the worst tears they had ever seen, but surgery was successful and he should be walking again by mid-September.

“That’s not gonna work. Our first game is September 3rd,” he informed them.

They reiterated that he should be walking again by the middle of September.

Discussion #2

The concept of cultural learning concerns the ways in which humans, particularly those becoming acquainted to a new cultural environment, acquire cultural knowledge and products for personal use as they acclimate to the given culture (Tomasello et al., 1993). Learning culture is akin to redefining how to live; values and assumptions that may previously have been taken for granted suddenly become replaced with new traditions and ways of being. The three prevalent forms of cultural learning (imitative, instructed, and collaborative) all take place within the Mustang football program.

Imitative learning, the most basic form of cultural learning by which a new member imitates the actions of established members, is evident immediately when new players are introduced to the team. At the first meeting of the year Coach Murphy asks his team to stand up if they love football. The seniors stood immediately, as did the juniors and most of the sophomores. The freshmen, as well as the two transfers, stood only after confirming that Coach Murphy’s request was literal. Tomasello and colleagues (1993) suggest that individuals often do

not understand at this point in cultural learning why behaviors are being performed, rather they simply perform actions as to not stand out from the more established members of the group.

More subtle forms of imitative learning are present as well. During Hell Week the upperclassmen confidently sprinted to the front of the line when moving on to a new drill while the freshman stayed in back. The upperclassmen had been through these drills for several years, knowing the proper form and technique, while the freshman had yet to experience them, so they observed before executing. Another example of imitative learning occurred before the back to school team meeting. As the players entered the Wright building many of them wore winter hats. Upperclassmen, accustomed to the team rule of no hats inside, immediately took their hat off upon entering the building. Several newcomers who had joined the team at semester followed suit when they saw the actions of the upperclassmen. Those who kept their hat on their head were soon informed of the team rule at the start of the meeting. Experienced members of the team understood the cultural significance of removing their hat indoors: it is a sign of respect. Newly initiated members of a group oftentimes do not understand the cultural significance of their actions (Heyes, 2012). By mimicking the established members of the group, newcomers avoid punishment but fail to fully comprehend the reasons behind the cultural behavior (Tomasello et al., 1993). Comprehension of the underlying reasons for cultural practices only occurs at the next level of cultural learning, instructed learning.

Instructed learning occurs when established members of a culture teach new members cultural practices, thus giving meaning to the behaviors (Heyes, 2012). When imitative learning occurs, new members mimic established members strictly to fit in, while through instructed learning new members are taught the reasons behind values and practices (Tomasello et al., 1993). Instructed learning takes place far more often than the other forms of cultural learning

among Mustang football members. Both coaches and upperclassmen act as teachers of culture for the underclassmen.

Work ethic and effort are two cornerstones of the Mustang football program. Coach Floyd, during the first meeting of the year, addressed the team by saying, “Embrace the process. The process should be done with great joy and enthusiasm. Do you have what it takes to be successful? Are you willing to put the work in that it takes to be successful? Be a workout warrior.” These statements epitomize what is expected from every member of the program, including coaches, players, and staff members. Through this form of cultural learning (and teaching), the newcomer gathers pertinent information related to the cultural expectations and practices of the team (Tomasello et al., 1993). By means of this information, the individual is then able to make cognitive decisions regarding their future behavioral choices, rather than simply mimicking the behaviors of more established members of the team (Tomasello et al., 1993). Because they are now armed with this information, and it is constantly reiterated to them throughout the year and their careers as Mustangs, the individuals understand the reasoning behind the distinct cultural behavior taking place (Tomasello et al., 1993; Heyes, 2012). The highlighted instances during the first morning of Hell Week are prime examples of instructed learning.

First, Sawyer and Nathan challenging freshman to raise their effort level sets a precedent for what is expected of them. When a few underclassmen lagged behind in getting from station to station, Sawyer screamed, “Motherfucking run! Are you fucking kidding me?” The culprits quickly sped up, understanding that their effort was unacceptable. The guilty parties could then regulate their thoughts and behaviors to better reflect the cultural expectations of the group, signifying that instructed learning had taken place (Tomasello et al., 1993). Nathan, having

known that Robert Macdonald had yet to take a turn on the sled push, called him out and challenged him. This public humiliation served as a reminder as to the effort expected from every member of the team. Finally, when Coach Watts got face-to-face with Niko Sexton, asking if he was 'all in,' it was another example of an established member of the Mustang culture instructing a relative newcomer of the sacrifice it takes to be successful. By responding in the manner he did, Sexton indicates that instructed learning had taken place. The 'opportunities' given out at the end of each day of hell week to those groups that the coaches believe failed to give maximum effort is a final reminder of the expected cultural practices of hard work and maximum effort. These cultural practices would be reinforced time and again throughout the season. By doing so, members of the group are consistently made aware of their expected behavior, which allows them to self-regulate by managing their thoughts to cognitively think about an action before carrying out the behavior (Heyes, 2012).

Collaborative cultural learning results in the creation of cultural beliefs and practices as established cultural members arrive at solutions to cultural matters jointly (Tomasello et al., 1993). In order for collaborative cultural learning to take place, the participating members must fully understand their own cultural perspective as well as that of others within the group (Tomasello et al., 1993; Heyes, 2012). The leadership council acts as an arena through which collaborative learning can take place. In principle, collaborative learning takes place when neither individual acts as an authority figure (Tomasello et al., 1993). As such, rather than cultural knowledge being passed on from an experienced member of the group to more inexperienced members, collaborative learning allows for cultural products to be created (Tomasello et al., 1993). Although the formation of the leadership council allows players to

voice their opinions on team matters, the presence of Coach Murphy as an authority figure disallows cultural products from being created.

Several members of the council stated that they wished for input on more important topics regarding the team. A few players even voiced concern over how much their voices actually matter, suggesting that the coaching staff, and more directly Coach Murphy, will listen to their opinions during the meeting, but still make whatever decision they feel is appropriate regardless of the players' sentiments. Based on Tomasello and colleagues (1993) definition of collaborative cultural learning, this does not constitute collaborative learning. Their definition states that through collaborative learning, members of the group arrive at cultural decisions jointly, which allows for the creation of cultural practices which are then disseminated to the other members of the group (Tomasello et al., 1993). While on the surface the leadership council appears to be an arena for collaborative cultural learning to take place, the presence and actions of Coach Murphy as an authoritative figure in the meetings disallows such learning from taking place.

The selection of new members to the council acted as a confirmation of the values that the coaches seek for their players to uphold. Only players who are thought to be tough, have a great work ethic, and maintain good grades (or at least show academic improvement) are considered. Coach Murphy constantly tells his players, "stay off any lists." By that he is referencing any academic, campus, or police reports that come across his desk. Academic reports are tolerated if intentional effort is put forth to fix the issue. Campus or police reports are typically handled on a case-by-case basis, and typically discussed among the leadership council.

The overarching cultural pillars of Mustang football are established by Coach Murphy and reinforced by the coaching staff and upperclassmen. In this sense, collaborative cultural

learning is not present. However, many underlying cultural values are established collaboratively. For instance, the subcultures present within several position groups are a product of the collaborative efforts between the position coach and the upperclassmen of that position. The defensive linemen value unfiltered honesty and boisterous enthusiasm. “I’m not sure if you are crazy enough to be a Cadillac,” Coach Grant told a younger member of the defensive line early in the year. Contrarily, the offensive line believes in carrying themselves with modest confidence. The linebackers collaboratively pride themselves on being the toughest unit on the team. Through collaborative learning each individual comprehends the unique cultural experiences of the other, which allows for a mutual creation of a novel cultural product (Tomasello et al., 1993).

Cultural learning is an on-going process due to the culture of a football team constantly changing ever so slightly. Schein (2010) suggests, “All group learning ultimately reflects someone’s original beliefs and values, his or her sense of what ought to be, as distinct from what is” (p. 25). As new members enter the Mustang program they are taught what values should be held higher than others, yet they continue to hold onto past experiences that may differ from their new environment (Schein, 2010). Therefore, culture is a fluid process, ever-changing as new members bring with them new conceptions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ In the end, if a group member is unable to adapt to Coach Murphy’s version of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ as it applies to several crucial matters, they will find it tough to maintain their spot on the team. “You know how to motivate the unmotivated?” Murphy once asked me, rhetorically. “You eliminate them.”

Fall Camp

“I love football and I love having guys around me that love football,” Murphy said, using one of his crutches to motion around the room at his assistant coaches as he delivered one of his patented phrases.

The comedic relief brought to meetings by Murphy’s crutches had worn off over the last few weeks, but he still took his share of grief from his players. More than once I spotted a Mustang mimicking the head coach’s use of his crutches to point out something on film. A pointer finger across the top lip in the form of a mustache always accompanied their imitations. Recently, led by Nathan, a few of the linebackers attempted to rig the golf cart that Murphy was using during fall camp. Seniors, I suppose could get away with these things. But during this meeting, intensity covered the faces of all those in the room.

“This article I have here should piss you off. The title reads: ‘The more things change, the more they stay the same’. It goes on to say that MWSU will take a step backwards this year without Archer and Rory.”

Murphy looked up from the article and looked Burke dead in the eyes.

“You were 2-0 as a starter last year. They didn’t mention that.” Burke had stepped in for the injured Moore and led the Mustangs to victories over Northern Tech and Grand Mountain State the previous season.

“This 2016 team will have it all together. We will be the best team we have ever had here. This article is bullshit. The only person who can put restrictions on you is you. *We are gonna take a step back. Bullshit.* This will be our best team ever. I expect to go up to Rogers and beat the shit out of the Warriors this year. I expect to be playing in January.”

It’s August 6th, 2016. The Mustangs are less than a month away from their first game – their first chance to wash the sour taste from their mouths of last December. Fall camp is the

final quarter of preparation for the Mustangs. “Make sure you are ready to embark on a hell of a journey,” Floyd insisted to the team. Make no doubt about it, fall camp has earned its reputation as a grind, in every sense of the word.

For three weeks straight they are asked to block, tackle, and compete against their teammates. Fights break out on an almost daily basis. At least at first they only practice once a day, then they move into two-a-days and all hell breaks loose. No classes, just football. A typical schedule during fall camp:

6:30 am: Breakfast	3:30 pm: Position Meetings
6:45 am: Treatment	4:30 pm: Dinner
7:15 am: Tape	5:45 pm: Treatment
8 am: Special Teams Meeting	6 pm: Tape
8:10 am: Position Meetings	6:45 pm: Centers/Quarterbacks to Field
8:45 am: Centers/Quarterbacks to Field	6:50 pm: Walk-through
8:50 am: Walk-through	7:00 pm: Practice #2
9 am: Practice #1	9:00 pm: Treatment
11:30 am: Lunch	9:30 pm: Snack
1 pm: Staff Meeting	10:30 pm: Lights out
3:20 pm: Special Teams Meeting	

Recent transfers, linebackers Taylor Morrell from East Tech and Nixon Bennett from Northern State, suggest to me and others that MWSU’s fall camp is the most physically demanding camp they have experienced.

Murphy is old-school. Drop a pass? Run the stairs. Miss a tackle, get chewed out on the field and then again in the film room the next day. If a player crumbles under his criticism he shouldn’t be playing football in the first place. He is extra tough on his players today, the first 2-a-day of camp.

Fullback Hayden Anderson finds me on the sidelines, leans over and says, “We picked a bad day to be shitty.”

They sure did. The Murphy's were forced to put their beloved golden retriever, Chase, down yesterday. Cancer in his eye had spread to his lungs making it hard for him to breathe. Nathan wrapped me in a hug at the start of practice, a telltale sign that tragedy had struck. Chase was given four to six months earlier in the summer but the cancer spread faster than expected. When this original news came, Randy told the team that when that day arrived, they sure as hell better not give him a reason to let loose on them. The day had arrived, and they were giving him plenty of reasons.

Aaron Lowe, the supremely talented receiver that broke onto the scene at the end of the previous season, couldn't seem to hold onto the ball. Lovingly, Murphy offered him a nickname: *One-a-day*, as in, he drops one easy catch per day. Each dropped ball is rewarded with a trip up the stadium stairs for the offending party. Lowe could have climbed the Sears Tower by the end of the first practice.

Not helping his cause was a monumental fifteen-minute downpour that momentarily turned the field at Hughes Stadium into a 100-yard pond and the footballs into medicine balls. Support staffers scrambled to find cover while players and coaches jumped up and down in excitement. Associate Head Coach, Peter 'Goose' Lloyd repeatedly yelled, "Now this is football weather!"

Floyd, now dressed in a fully see-through white t-shirt, bore the brunt of numerous off-color jokes that he accepted in stride.

The rain subsided and so did the Mustang's sloppy play. They seemed energized and re-focused by the shower. This turned into the most physical practice of the fall. The offense and defense sent jabs back and forth across the field, clearly sick of beating up on each other already. Allow me to contradict myself, but a positive animosity existed between the two sides. Like

Romeo and Juliet, some guys were best friends with a guy who wore a different color practice jersey. But between the stripes, once they went live, those friendships went out the window.

That's how Murphy and his coaches liked it.

“How can you play a sport and not be competitive? It doesn't make sense to me,”

Murphy once told me.

Fall camp drags on much like writing a dissertation. You signed up for it and all that it entails, but still experience days where it is the last thing you want to do. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. Both for the team and for me.

One week out from their opener against Westwood, the Mustangs simulate the entire game day, start to finish. Coach Grant bought into the simulation 110% and was ready to go starting with the defensive line meeting at 11 that morning:

“If you guys are going half ass on scout team then I'm gonna fucking punch you in the fucking neck. My blood is fucking boiling, my hands are fucking sweaty, my piss is fucking hot.”

I'm not sure what this means exactly but I take it he is fired up.

A couple more clips and he has settled down a bit. After promising not to make fun of his short arms, a half minute later he turns to one of his starting lineman who, granted, is challenged vertically, and asks, “Bails [Tim Bailey], do you ever watch that show on Lifetime about that midget community? What do you think they would think of you if you moved into that colony?”

Junior defensive lineman, Arthur Wood comments that he would be like Hulk Hogan. Ace then suggests that he might actually have better luck with the opposite sex (in so many words). Bails plays along. Coach Grant then flips the switch and is back to business: “Alright be

ready to go tonight. No fucking around. Everybody's ass should be ready and focused. Sprint out to the fucking field. There's only one speed we play and that's fucking fast. We hit motherfuckers and we fly around the field. Cadillacs on 2, 1...2."

"Cadillacs!"

The scrimmage itself offers little in the form of entertainment. For the sake of remaining healthy and fresh they are not tackling, although they do go full speed. The sideline, on the other hand, atones for the lack of action on the field.

Where do I start? Is it Ace spraying water on everyone who passes, including me? Maybe Andre, who bounces around from cluster to cluster inserting himself into conversations? How about freshman quarterback Julius Stanley, who picks up the phone that goes to the coach's box and has a conversation despite no one occupying the box? I was tapped on the shoulder on three different occasions and never caught a culprit.

The most entertaining play of the scrimmage was the last one, when the first team offense lined up in the victory formation against the second string defense. I suppose this is to practice winning? Burke snapped the ball, took two steps back, bent to one knee, then sprang up and threw the ball as high in the air as he could. The offense broke out into an exuberant celebration, signaling the end of the scrimmage and more importantly, the end of fall camp.

Sunday signals the start of game week. The Mustangs had been longing for this moment for more than nine excruciating months. They could now officially leave behind the heartbreak of 2015. The 2016 season starts tomorrow.

Discussion #3

Football is often depicted and portrayed used stereotypically masculine ideals. Christensen (2014) remarks, "Football is just another example of an institution where aggressive

masculinity is cultivated and rewarded” (para. 8). The physicality of the game itself is enough for many people to call for its abolishment (Smith, 2012). The institution of football celebrates the game’s brutality and fosters an intensely masculine culture in which being a man and being tough are synonymous. The culture of Mustang football, grounded in being physically and mentally tougher than their opponents, exhibits many instances of this culture of masculinity.

As someone who has spent his life in sports, I expected much of the language and behavior I witnessed during my research. As I take a step back and assess the collected data, it is evident to me that some, if not much, of the language used and behaviors exhibited could be quite foreign or even offensive to a person without a background in sports. Violence and aggression are normalized as part of the sport and taken for granted. Countless times throughout the season members of the coaching staff would make statements to the effect of, *well this is football, it’s a violent game.*

In his book, *Power at Play*, Michael Messner interviews former NFL players about their playing experience. When asking a player about feelings of sorrow or remorse when injuring others, the former player states,

When I first started playing, if I would hit a guy hard and he wouldn’t get up, it would bother me. [But] when I was a sophomore in high school, first game, I knocked out two quarterbacks, and people loved it. The coach loved it. Everybody loved it. You never stop feeling sorry for [your injured opponent]. If somebody doesn’t get up, you want him to get up. You hope the wind’s just knocked out of him or something. The more you play, though, the more you realize it is just part of the game – somebody’s gonna get hurt. It could be you, it could be him – most of the time it’s better if it’s him. So, you know, you just go out and play your game (Messner, 1995, p. 65-66).

This statement speaks to the normalization of violence in that throughout his career the player convinced himself that hurting others was just “part of the game.” This mindset is allowed in part by a suppression of empathy, created through the creation of an enemy (Messner, 2002). As a means of getting athletes to willingly inflict pain on others, their opponent – whom they most

often have no reason to dislike other than the color of their uniform – is objectified as an enemy rather than as human (Messner, 2002).

No Mustang coach during my time encouraged players to purposefully injure an opponent, but the language used was violent and aggressive. Even prior to their scrimmage in which they will play against members of their own team, Coach Grant tells his defense, “We hit motherfuckers and we fly around the field.” To some, the language combined with the purposeful intention of hitting others, although normalized as part of the sport, could be considered offensive. The expectation of players to put their own bodies on the line in an immensely dangerous sport in order to help their team win a mostly meaningless game is likely foreign to the non-sports fan. Yet, throughout the season I witnessed this scenario play out week after week. Injured players would nearly always try talking coaches and trainers into letting them back out onto the field. Players enjoyed taking turns at practice lining up across from their teammate and facing off in competition. Such behaviors had become normal to them through years of sport and football participation.

The coaching staff reinforces masculine behavior by rewarding the “tough” and scolding the “soft.” To show pain, vulnerability, or weakness risks being labeled as “soft,” a criticism among the most belittling to a football player. In football, the social construction of “toughness” lies in one’s ability to play through pain, inflict pain, and do so over the course of a game. Coach Murphy often says, “Football is not about being tougher than your opponent. It’s about how long you can be tougher than your opponent.” The willingness to play through pain is a cultural ideal referred to by sociologist Don Sabo as “the pain principle” (Sabo, 1998). Former professional football player Tim Green wrote in his book,

Doctors don’t coerce players into going out on the field. They don’t have to. Players have been conveniently conditioned their entire lives to take the pain and put their bodies at

risk. Players beg doctors for needles that numb and drugs that reduce swelling and pain... Taking the needle is something NFL players are proud to have done. It is a badge of honor, not unlike the military's Purple Heart. It means you were in the middle of the action and you took a hit. Taking a needle in the NFL also lets everyone know that you'd do anything to play the game. It demonstrates a complete disregard for one's well-being that is admired in the NFL between players (Green, 2008, p. 215 & p. 125).

Despite this excerpt being written about the NFL, the same can be said about college football as well. Returning from injury is admired, while sitting with an injury is scorned. These statements, and the observations I witnessed, demonstrate the normalization of pain and injury in football as well as the extent that playing hurt or inflicting injury are greatly venerated forms of masculinity within the institution of football.

Westwood College Bears (Game 1)

Randy can blow some serious smoke. If the Mustang's upcoming opponent has enough guys to field a team, he is deeply concerned. He could watch game film of peewee football and see enough plays to convince him that it will take everything they've got to beat this team. "They've got a really good running back, some fast receivers, and they run a new offense this year, they're gonna be tough," he would tell his team to start the week.

Even in the comfort of his own home he won't let up. "We should beat them," he'll say, "but it'll be a good test. They got some athletes. We will have to play a helluva lot better than we have practiced."

You don't become a head football coach by taking teams lightly. That doesn't mean that there isn't time for some lighthearted fun along the way. Enter *Polish Football*. The only time that members from the offensive line, defensive line, secondary, and kickers join forces and make alliances.

Before practice each Friday, members of the MWSU football team take part in the Polish Football tradition despite nobody knowing its true origins.

“We used to do it at Southern State, maybe Sebastian taught these guys how to play,” offers Murphy.

Sebastian insists he has nothing to do with it: “No, I have no idea where it came from” he says convincingly. The mystery continues.

Polish Football consists of two teams of anywhere from four to eight players that line up across from each other 10 yards apart. The player on the end of the line starts the game by attempting to kick the ball and have it land beyond the five yard mark dividing the two teams but within ten yards of the initial kick (a five yard window). The kicking team scores if the opposing team is unable to catch the ball cleanly off the first bounce. Attempts at researching the origins of Polish Football have been futile to this point.

This game is taken seriously by the Mustangs. Arguments break out constantly over rule violations, definitions of a ‘clean catch’, and so on. Just another competitive outlet for these testosterone-filled young men. “First Friday practice, you know what that means?” remarks Andrew “Chuck” Patel as we walk across campus, “Polish Football!”

There are four games taking place today, each on the north end of the field. The first handful of guys practice their kicks before they have enough to field a team. Sexton, the tight end that sprayed saliva at Sebastian during Hell Week, unleashes his secret weapon on his second kick of the day. He has nicknamed it ‘The Flying Dutchman’ and it is executed by taking a ten-yard running start to gain momentum, jumping in the air as he approaches the line, and gently kicking the ball in an attempt to have it land just beyond the five-yard mark. The Flying Dutchman was attempted three times, each of which resulted in an easy catch for the opposing team and taunts from the on-looking players and coaches. His determination and resolve, nonetheless, should be applauded.

Senior fullback Harvey McCarthy offers a vastly different approach. Standing just behind the line, McCarthy holds the ball no more than two feet off the ground. Keeping the rest of his body completely still, he swings his foot back and jabs at the ball rather violently, attempting to force the ball to nosedive immediately after the five-yard mark. This technique proves far more effective than The Flying Dutchman as McCarthy collects at least a half dozen points for his team on the day.

Linemen from both sides of the ball make even the simplest catches appear impossible. I witness Bails drop four balls on the day. Gill, after finally having enough, moved next to Bails and stepped in front of any balls that were within a five-foot radius of the stone-handed lineman. Cam Hawkins is the exception. The 6'6", 320-pound offensive lineman who many consider an NFL prospect, wraps his enormous hands around the ball each time it comes his way. He does so nonchalantly, simply grabbing the ball and flipping it back to the other team as if he were bored with the game.

Freshmen and transfers watch Polish Football with curiosity, mostly wondering why these guys get so excited to play this simple game. On this first game day eve, there are no newcomers taking part in the tradition. Some of them try to learn the rules, eager to join a team one week from today if the upperclassmen will have them. Others mingle in the end zone, too "cool" to join in. The coaches watch from midfield and laugh at their players while simultaneously holding their breath that none of them break a finger. Coach Solis and Coach Humphrey join in on a game on opposing sides but offer little to their respective teams. Humphrey, as he is known throughout the program, boasts once the whistle blows, "I didn't score a single point for my team, but once I joined we made a huge comeback. My presence alone led the team to victory."

Friday practice is far less interesting than Polish Football. After warming up, the team executes all of their special teams' plays, ensuring each player knows their spot on the depth chart and their assignment on the field. The offense and defense then split to opposite ends of the field, defense on the north end and offense on the south, and run through their plays. I stand behind the offense, chatting with the third stringers, surely distracting them from learning the plays. They do not seem too interested anyway as they were far more into their conversation about the crop of freshman girls on campus.

After practice the team heads to a campus cafeteria for their team meal consisting of fried chicken and lasagna. It has been the Friday night team meal ever since Murphy arrived at MWSU and it will remain as such until he leaves. He is exceedingly superstitious, a trait he acknowledges. Despite the chicken giving players, as Chuck puts it, "bubble gut," he refuses to alter the meal. In fact, the entire Murphy family is superstitious. Murphy's wife, Laylah wears the same outfit for every game, while Nathan has lucky game day underwear and blames last year's playoff loss to Northeast State on the fact that he forgot his lucky game day pin. I oblige their superstitions because I have to, but have none of my own. Nonetheless, I, too, was blamed for last year's playoff loss for wearing a new pair of pants to the game. Molly chastised me, "Who changes up their pants for a playoff game!?"

Game day has finally arrived. 266 days. The Mustangs can finally put Northeast State in the rearview mirror.

"6-5. 6-5. 7-4. 9-4. 5-6. 13-2. 10-3. These are the records of each team since this coaching staff has been here." Grant addressed his defense with his patented growl. He paced back and forth, glasses halfway down his nose. "Do you know why I read those to you?" He

answered his own question before giving anyone else a chance. “Because they are in the past. You leave your mark on this program starting tonight!”

This message has been repeated to the team countless times throughout the offseason and leading up to this game. But tonight, it carries more weight. The looks on the players’ faces reaffirm this. Many of them nod their heads in agreement. The seniors, seated in the front row, each stared down at the ground; some of them reminiscing on their careers to this point, some of them looking ahead to their final season that starts in about three hours. The freshmen, seated in back and playing in their first collegiate game tonight, looked around the room, eyes wide with excitement and nerves.

The entire team then walked outside to the field as one and lined up along the north goal line, closest to their locker room. The guys were all dressed in suits, as required by Coach Murphy on game day. Humphy stood in front of the team and called out each special teams unit as the members of that team stepped forward to the ten-yard line and faced their teammates. No talking was allowed throughout the process. As Humphy pointed at a player from the special teams unit, he would walk silently back to the goal line as his backup replaced him. The previous week, during the walkthrough, six mistakes were made. Tonight, zero. The guys were locked in.

The media had made claims in the buildup to this weekend that it would be *the greatest opening weekend in college football history*. Perennial powers Alabama and USC squared off, Wisconsin played LSU at Lambeau Field, Texas hosted Notre Dame, and Florida State played Ole Miss. An engineering doctoral student would be considered diligent and hardworking if he or she were so dedicated to their field of study that they spent a beautiful Saturday afternoon in an office pouring over their studies. As a sport management doctoral student dedicated to my studies, I spent the afternoon holed up in an office, taking in the slate of afternoon college

football games. On the 60-inch television in Coach Murphy's office the Wisconsin Badgers, despite being significant underdogs, were handing it to the Louisiana State University Tigers. Murphy, always a fan of the Badger's style of play, frequently commented on their toughness. "They're gonna win this game because they are tougher. They can run the ball and stop the run."

Murphy is able to relax in the buildup before a game. He figures he has been doing this for long enough that he has no reason to be nervous or anxious. Molly, on the other hand, is frantic. This is her first game as director of operations and she shows no mercy in both directing and operating. She has already forcibly removed two men from the football building, and is now intently questioning two assistant coaches about some matter regarding their volunteer coaches. Both coaches shoot glances my way with eyes that say *'does she always get this uptight?'* *Not always, but watch out when she does.*

Kickers and punters head out to the field first, followed by a handful of other players. Burke walks out of the locker room wearing his game pants and an American flag t-shirt. "He loves American flags," one of his teammates would tell me, "He wore a different American shirt every day over Fourth of July weekend." Several of his teammates dub him the 'Anti-Colin Kaepernick' in reference to the 49ers quarterback's refusal to stand for the national anthem during recent games. He warms up with receiver Jaidyn Knapp, a redshirt freshman that also caught passes from Burke in high school when they led their team to a state championship.

Had God bestowed on me the ability to select the weather for tonight's game I would not have changed a thing. As I stood on the field, watching players warm up, I could smell charcoal from the nearby tailgates when the breeze hit just right. The grounds crew had just turned the field lights on in preparation for the setting sun, which was still keeping us plenty warm. The

stadium speakers remained silent, but Kenny Chesney's *The Boys of Fall* could be heard from the parking lot.

*When I feel that chill, smell that fresh cut grass
I'm back in my helmet, cleats, and shoulder pads
Standin' in the huddle listenin' to the call
Fans goin' crazy for the boys of fall*

As the team gathered in the locker room one final time before taking the field, a vast collection of personalities were on display. Burke, unable to sit still, walked throughout the locker room dapping (as they call it) everyone he passed, sometimes three or four times. A few of the linebackers sat on the couches that face the televisions and whiteboards, locked in concentration and staring straight ahead. The offensive linemen were seated on their stools in a circle as Jayden Velez pointed at them one-by-one, which prompted a brief, awkward dance move. Flynn Shaw, a junior defensive back, displayed markedly better dance moves as he moved in rhythm with the song playing over the speakers and rapped along with the lyrics.

When the current song ended the next one started with bird calls, which immediately signaled for every player in the room to jump out of their seat and do some version of jumping or dancing or screaming or all three. Being a 27-year old country music fan I had never heard the song, but quickly learned that it was a favorite among those in the room. Velez, all 6'5" 330 pounds of him, belted out the entire chorus as his teammates surrounded him, inching closer and closer. He was relieved by Chuck, who entered the middle and started throwing his long hair back and forth, screaming the lyrics at the top of his lungs. In a matter of forty-five seconds the room had transformed into a mosh pit. At no point did I fear being injured, although I was keenly aware of my nearest exit.

Murphy entered the mosh pit, briefly calming the crowd of amped up players. He stood in silence for a few counts, taking in the energy of the room. Every player took a knee, all eyes looking up at their head coach.

“We will focus on three things tonight, gentlemen. Tempo, technique, and toughness.” I had heard this speech before, but it carried a different aura in this setting. “Tempo: we play fast but not in a hurry. Technique: when all else fails, rely on your technique. Be technicians tonight. Finally, our calling card, toughness. Each time you take the field we must be the toughest team out there. Now let’s get a prayer.”

The players held hands as did the coaches and staff members on the perimeter of the room.

After about twenty seconds, the team rose as one and made their way out of the locker room. I stood by the exit and watched each player pass. Some were stone-faced, the type of intense look you would expect from a soldier preparing for battle. Others, dancing and laughing, as if getting ready for a Saturday night party. Many of them felt compelled to greet me on their way out with a fist-bump or a quick dap. Unbeknownst to many, dapping originated as part of the Black Power movement in the 1970’s. Black soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War used the dap as a friendly greeting and display of unity. Although the etymology of the term remains unclear, it is widely believed to be an acronym for *dignity and pride*. As American society currently navigates through tumultuous racial tension and divide, I find solace in witnessing and taking part in this ritual among a racially diverse group of young men. “How do we bring a group of guys from very different backgrounds together and make a difference?” Coach Murphy once asked his team, before answering his own question by saying, “We lead by example.”

Despite lacking the pageantry and electricity surrounding, say, an Ohio State or Florida game, the players and coaches failed to notice. The Mustangs hope that 10,000 people show up to support them tonight. To contrast, earlier in the day, 110,222 people came out to witness Michigan beat Hawaii 63-3, the 266th consecutive game of more than 100,000 fans piling into Michigan Stadium. “I wish the students cared more and more came out to watch,” Chuck told me, “but as long as we keep winning, the fans will come.”

At least on this first Saturday of the new season, winning would not be an issue for the Mustangs of MWSU. On the second play of the game, Hondo stepped in front of a pass from Westwood’s quarterback, corralling an easy interception made possible by his textbook defensive positioning. From there, the defensive line started mowing down helpless receivers and running backs as Hondo maneuvered his way into the end zone for the first points of the 2016 season. In an impressive bit of foreshadowing during a linebackers meeting earlier in the week, Hondo had predicted that he would pick off their quarterback on this exact play. Little did he know that it would come on their second play from scrimmage and end in a touchdown.

Sloppy play and a bit of what they call ‘playing down to your opponent’ plagued the Mustangs through the first half, but the outcome of the game was hardly in question. Burke threw a second quarter interception, which a Westwood defender returned for a touchdown, but other than that, MWSU’s opponent displayed little resistance. Once it is clear the game is in hand, players and coaches start to loosen up. Practical jokes are plentiful on the sidelines.

The highlight of the game is the group of guys that sit in the front row behind the Mustang’s sideline. They had clearly enjoyed their pregame tailgate and I suspect they had snuck a little extra into Hughes Stadium to hold them over through the game. They seem to know all the players, especially on defense. Each time the defense made a stop and came off the field they

were greeted with cheers and high fives from these “superfans.” “My friends back there are loving life tonight,” Ace told me, “I hope they’re here for every game.”

The Mustangs would go on to win 50-13, a relatively stress-free opener before the competition cranks up in their second game when they travel to face SEC foe Summit University. Randy compliments his team while also challenging them: “It’s tough to win college football games. Period. But if we play like that a week from now, we will get run off the field. Learn from your mistakes. Come in and watch film, critique yourself, and get better.”

Noah Barker leads the team in the singing of the school’s fight song and then most of the players head back out onto the field, which after a few minutes is covered with dozens of mini-reunions. I wander the field a bit, talking with coaches, wives of coaches, a few players and their families, a few people that I recognize but can’t quite put a name to. Everyone is nice to the head coach’s son-in-law.

I am tasked with driving home Molly’s grandma, Laylah’s mother, and diehard Mustang’s fan. She asks me, “Boy, the firsts really loved it when the seconds got to play didn’t they?” By this, she means that the first string cheered hard and appeared to take pride in watching the second string play during the fourth quarter. She is right, the enthusiasm radiating from the sidelines was noticeable as the first string guys cheered on their second string backups. I tried telling her such but she is nearly deaf, so I end up screaming it at her. She looks over at me and smiles, happy that the players seem to get along so well. It’s the little things.

I take my spot on the couch in the living room, flipping through the evening slate of college football games and waiting to be joined by the rest of my in-laws. When they arrive a few minutes later, Randy joins me on the couch, lets out a long sigh and says, “Man, we stink.” I decide not to poke the bear, instead directing the conversation in the direction of the Eastview

State versus Prairie Valley game currently on TV. It's too early to tell if this is a classic Randy Murphy overreaction or if he truly believes his team is in for a long season.

@ Summit University Steelers (Game 2)

Over the summer Murphy had urged his team to believe that they could beat Summit. He repeated it often, attempting to convince anyone who would listen that the Mustangs, the team that had never beaten a SEC team and had lost to Summit 37-3 a few years back, could do it. Yet, when the seniors met at the beginning of fall camp and took stock of their goals as a team, winning the 'state championship' as they called it, did not include beating Summit. "No," Murphy told his seniors, "the state championship only includes FCS teams." Beating a SEC team on the road is a tall task for any FCS program, and I found myself torn on the confidence level of this squad. When prompted, the guys answered with cautious optimism. "Yeah, I think we can beat them," they would say, "but we'll have to play better than we did against Westwood."

Having only played about three quarters in the opener, most of the starters on both sides of the ball were fresh. Sunday practices are typically light, followed by a day off on Monday, then they crank it back up on Tuesday in what Murphy always calls the "ugly practice of the week." Wednesday and Thursday are used mostly to scout the opponent, and Friday practices are short, allowing the guys to get off their feet and be ready for Saturday. The starters will not go full contact against each other the rest of the season, a fact in which they rejoice. The coaches are looking to keep them as rested as possible during the week, especially with how their schedule falls this season. Starting with Westwood, the Mustangs play eleven Saturdays in a row. If they make the playoffs, their bye week would land the week before the opening round.

Just because Sunday practices are considered light, does not mean that the coaches will go light on the players. They still expect maximum effort in drills, sans the blocking and

tackling. When he thinks that two of his backups are getting a little lazy during a defensive line drill, Grant will instruct them to “run over and look in those garbage cans over there because that’s what you are playing like right now.”

As they run to the garbage cans as instructed, one of them turns to me and says, “I swear he comes up with this stuff the night before and just waits for the perfect moment to bust it out.” He is probably right. On the field, Coach Grant is never not intense. At a previous job as the defensive line coach at Highland State, he also taught a handful of activities courses, including tennis. He is self-proclaimed, “the fucking worst” at tennis, but that failed to stop him from screaming at his students the same way he does his players.

A thin secondary is forcing the coaches to consider possible emergency scenarios for backup safeties. Julius Stanley, the freshman quarterback talking to an empty phone line towards the end of the Westwood game, and Finley Barker, a freshman running back are both considered options to make the move to the other side of the ball. After meeting with coaches Murphy and Morris earlier in the day, they are immediately thrown into the fire at practice. Julius is a natural athlete and seems willing to accept a change in positions. Birch, at least on this first day of practice, appears more hesitant. When one of his teammates asks if he thinks he can deliver a hit, Julius responds, “Heck yeah, I can’t wait.”

The upperclassmen work with them on their footwork and positioning before practice as well as during drills. When the defense lines up against the scout team, coaches Morris and Solis tell them to get ‘mental reps’ by watching the first string player that they would be backing up. As practice wears on they only seem to get more confused. I ask Morris if he thinks Julius can cut it at safety. He looks me in the eye and says, “You see how athletic that kid is? He’ll figure it out.”

In preparation for Summit's grass field, the Mustangs will practice all week on their grass field adjacent to the stadium. The staff is less than pleased with their uninspired performance the night prior, and at least a bit anxious about their upcoming opponent. Coach Cobb, who often carries a calm, tempered demeanor, is on edge today. Most likely this is the result of a less than stellar performance from Burke in the opener. As he gathers the offense to huddle between drills he starts to lay into them about effort and desire. I am on the other side of the field, watching some defensive drills, but can hear his usually quiet voice boom across the field. "Hopefully that'll wake them up," he tells me. "We can't play like we did last night or we might lose by 40. We are gonna have to throw the ball well on Saturday to have any chance at beating them."

My mother-in-law, Laylah has made us scrambled eggs this morning, which Randy eats at his usual unhuman pace. As the rest of us eat our food like normal people, he reads through some text messages that he has gotten from his buddies in the world of college football. One in particular he wants me to hear. It is from a journalist he has known since his days at Southern State that covers SEC football. He has been making the rounds to each team in the conference throughout the early part of the season and has given Randy some tidbits on each team: *Southern State's RB is the real deal, defense stinks though, maybe three wins. Southern Tech looks better under Joey, they should make a bowl. U of A will be able to score.* Randy makes sure we hear the next line. *Summit is TOUGH. They'll struggle to score but their defense will win them some games.*

Randy and Summit University coach, Maximo Kelly share common paths to their current positions. Both were All-SEC linebackers that went into coaching and eventually wound up back at their alma maters. While Randy moved on to coach at MWSU, Maximo earned the head

coaching job at Summit. Both of them hang their hats on coaching the same way they played. Summit has gained success as a hard-nosed, blue-collared team; under Maximo's guidance they have had two ten-win seasons and appeared in six bowl games. Summit, known for their academic prowess far beyond their athletic achievement, has maintained success during his tenure using the mantra: *Football is not an excuse for academics and academics is not an excuse for football.*

When Randy reads that Summit is tough, a fact that he absolutely was already keenly aware of, a smile spreads across his face. Of all the coaches Randy talks about, Maximo Kelly and Callum Knight he seems to respect the most. Both Southwest and Summit have built programs around the same football principle that Randy has built his coaching career around: toughness. Last year, Knight's Southwest team handily beat the Mustangs in their opener, now Randy must face another one of his good friends in the coaching circle.

Tuesday's practice lived up to its billing. The players are on edge and a little pissed off. According to some players and coaches, the same pattern repeats itself every Tuesday. "I bet the most fights happen during Tuesday practices," Humphy tells me. "Watch, I almost guarantee there is one today."

Sure enough, not long into practice, Ace starts running his mouth about something. Having been around the team long enough, I have grown almost immune to hearing him talk because he does it so much. To hang around Ace for more than ten minutes is to be suddenly conscious of the lack of talking that you do yourself. I wonder how he has the energy to carry on the way he does, seemingly allowing every thought that enters his mind to pass his lips. There are times that it endears him to others and there are times that it get him in trouble; today it is the latter. Coach Cobb, still stewing over the offensive performance this past Saturday, continues to

be on edge at practice today. In between reprimanding Burke for underthrowing a receiver and chastising Daniel for a poor route, Cobb finds time to yell at Ace for, well, being Ace.

Cobb and Ace go back and forth for a while, exchanging verbal barbs filled with four letter words, before others step in. Murphy, seemingly unfazed, orders Ace to the locker room for the rest of practice. What I believed to be a rather egregious offense, a player going toe-to-toe with a coach, a coordinator at that, Murphy took in stride, mostly brushing it off. When I asked him about it later he responded as if he had already forgotten it had happened, “Oh yeah. It’s an emotional game, Ace likes to run his mouth, it’s not a huge deal.”

This Saturday afternoon has supplied us with yet another perfect day for football. Despite not necessarily believing in karma, I can’t help but think about what those late season games will have in store for us. As the Mustangs make their way onto the field, having already been satisfactorily hyped up, they do so with a starkly different air about them. Although no one will admit it, there are undoubtedly some nerves coursing through this team. The stadium they just walked into is three times bigger than their own. Summit is no Florida or Alabama, but they are still an SEC program. They have more money to spend on scholarships, facilities, and food – just about everything that football players care about.

The mass of purple jerseys entering the opposite side of the field appears far larger than the one dressed in all white on the Mustang’s side. They all say the right things – *we don’t play for moral victories* – but know that they are overmatched. To make matters worse, Summit is bound to be madder than hell after losing their opening game on a controversial call.

Murphy’s pregame speech was a summation of what he had been telling the media throughout the week: This team is built to beat an SEC opponent, and it’s about time they make

that happen. My mind told me two touchdown game, my heart thought the guys could get it done.

After a touchback the Mustangs start their first drive from the 25 and immediately put the ball in Burke's hands. A pair of completed out routes to Gill and Daniel sandwiched a short run by Johnson to give the Mustangs two quick first downs. The sideline cheered but were sure not to take it over the top – *act like you've been here before*. Another out route to Lowe set up a second and short as the Mustangs crossed midfield. I could tangibly feel the confidence building on the sideline. At least a half dozen voices came from the sideline in reference to Burke's hot start: "All day, all day!"

Two straight negative plays stalled the drive and forced a punt, momentarily deflating the sideline. After a strong punt downed inside the ten by Australian Brandon Soto, some of the guys seemed to still be talking themselves into believing. As Burke ran off the field he headed straight to the sideline phone to talk to Cobb in the booth, assuring him that he felt comfortable against this defense. The receivers lined up on a bench, offensive line next to them. Conversations about postgame parties and college girls, which were rampant during the Westwood game, were replaced with talks of strategy.

After a quick first down for the Steelers the MWSU defense bows its necks and forces a punt. As it turns out, the punters for both teams would earn their spot on the team today. A penalty, followed by a few strong plays for the Mustangs found them quickly in field goal range for tougher-than-shit kicker, Alfie Lane. A holding call on Hayden, however, forces them from the 20 to the 30-yard line, and a sack cost them another three yards. Turns out the three yard loss would be costly as Lane's 49-yard field goal, while directly on line, falls just a couple yards short of the cross bar.

Back and forth they would go, each Summit punt instilling confidence into an already assured group of defenders. They call themselves the ‘*mutts*,’ first coined by Coach Grant as a reference to their diversity as a group and their reliance on the group as a whole rather than one or two star players. Today, the mutts hold their own against the larger breeds from the FBS. In the first half they force three punts and a missed field goal, shutting out Summit in an ugly defensive battle: just how Murphy likes it. The offense is able to move the ball, but the missed field goal by Lane and an interception on a poor decision by Burke under pressure threaten to supply us with a scoreless game at halftime.

After Summit’s missed field goal with just under six minutes to go in the half, the Mustangs have the ball at the 20-yard line, 80 yards to go to break the scoreless tie. Three straight completions from Burke quickly get MWSU out to the 50. Facing third and ten from there, Gill hauls in a nine-yard reception at Summit’s 41-yard line. Now facing fourth and one, Murphy calls a timeout to talk things over.

“I wanted to show that we weren’t afraid of them,” Coach Buck would tell me after the game. “I wanted to shove it down their throat.” On fourth and one the Mustangs lined up in their power set and did just that. Alfonso Henson, the Mustangs powerful short yardage back, burst through the hole opened up by the senior-laden offensive line and picked up the first down. Two or three yards from the line to gain, a dogpile of purple and white jerseys encircled Henson and a rugby match broke out. On what should have been a three-yard gain, Henson gained ten thanks in large part to his big offensive lineman. The physical domination on that single play seemed to buoy the certainty along the Mustang’s sideline that they could hang with this team.

Three plays later MWSU found themselves in first and goal from the six and under a minute to play in the half. Another handoff up the middle broke the tie as Jay Holland broke two

tackles and carried another defender across the goal line. The sizeable contingent of Mustang faithful were finally given something to cheer about, and the Summit fans appeared, for the most part, stunned.

Lane trotted out to make the score 7-0, but shanked the kick badly to the left. This angered Murphy to no end, although he resisted from showing it on the sideline. It was already the second missed extra point of the season for Lane after already doing so well after the game against Westwood was already in hand. Nonetheless, the Mustangs led Summit 6-0 on the road at halftime.

The team split into every corner of the locker room based on position. Guys were bouncing off the walls with excitement, delivering words of encouragement to anyone that would hear it. *We can beat these guys* was repeated by at least a handful of them, which echoed the common sentiment in the room. If there were any doubt about the confidence of this team going into the game, that suspicion had been erased throughout the first thirty minutes.

Murphy gathered his team before heading back onto the field and urged them to stay the course. They were in this position because they deserved to be, not because of a fluke or accident. He repeated to them what he told them before the game: this team is built to beat a SEC team.

The third quarter unfolded like this: Summit punt, MWSU punt, Summit turnover on downs, MWSU interception, Summit punt. For anybody outside of Coach Grant and my father-in-law, the most boring football imaginable. For Grant, the show the mutts are putting on right now is like pure ecstasy. He is loving every minute of it, which he shows by letting loose strings of profanities in combinations I have never heard before. He uses these words as nouns, verbs,

and adjectives all in the same sentence after one play – I am still confounded if he was pleased or distressed about the outcome.

Despite Burke's two interceptions and Soto's three punts through three quarters, the offense has moved the ball decently against Summit's defense. They are frustrated to have only six points on the board, but thankful for their defense to have a lead. Each time off the field offensive players urge on the defensive unit to keep it up. "Get us the ball back, we got them figured out," yelled a lineman as they crossed the sideline.

The fourth quarter, fittingly, began with a punt. Summit had their best field position of the day, starting near the midfield line and full of built up frustration from their previous seven quarters of action. The Summit Steelers put together their most impressive offensive possession of the day, marching all the way into the red zone. The Mustangs twice forced fourth down, but Maximo gambled both times, each time paying off. The second fourth down, taking place at the Mustang ten yard line, resulted in a touchdown when safety Jenson Black slipped coming out of his cut and left a Summit receiver open in the corner of the end zone. The shutout was gone and so was the Mustang's lead after Summit converted the extra point.

Lane watched Summit's extra point sail through the uprights and then walked back to the kicker's net set up on the far end of the sideline. He kicked about a dozen kicks, seemingly trying to deflate the ball with each attempt. He was clearly upset with himself, especially after fully realizing the magnitude of his miscue. At the very least the game should be tied, had he made the field goal too, they should be up by three.

Thoughts spread across the Mustangs sideline about the devastation of losing a game on a missed extra point, but nobody dare spoke of it in the moment. Guys encouraged Lane, hitting

him on the shoulder pads, speaking positive words to him: “You’ll get your chance,” one of his teammates told him.

After surrendering the lead, the offense seemed to tighten up a bit. They gained one first down over their next two possessions, each time giving the ball over to Summit to finish them off for good. The Mutts stood up to the task, forcing Summit into back-to-back three and outs of their own. Four punts later the Mustangs had the ball on their own 13-yard line with just over three minutes to go in the game. The previous half dozen Mustang possessions did little to boost the confidence of the MWSU fans in attendance for this last ditch effort.

Burke connected with Daniel for eighteen yards on the first play of the drive and simultaneously surged energy back into a suddenly subdued Mustang sideline. Three more completions, spread out to Gill, Daniel, and Day earned MWSU another first down. Burke then found Gill again on back-to-back passes, crossing into Steeler territory and sending Lane back to his practice area. Sensing the Summit defense was on their heels, the Mustangs ran the ball on first and ten, catching the defense off-guard and leading to an eleven-yard rush by Holland. MWSU stopped the clock with forty-five seconds remaining, ball on the Summit 29-yard line.

A field goal from here would be about the same distance that Lane had missed from earlier in the game. Burke came out of the timeout firing, finding Lowe for an eleven-yard gain down the right sidelines and out of bounds. Now well within Lane’s range, the Mustangs centered the ball in the middle of the field with two consecutive runs and called timeout with three seconds to go.

Lane’s teammates left him alone – like a pitcher riding a no-hitter. He kicked a couple more into the net, trying to appear confident as he walked to the field. Chest out, shoulders back.

He ran out onto the field, ready to be the hero. Summit called a timeout. Back on the sidelines, he received words from teammates and coaches meant to boost his self-confidence.

Ask any kicker the most important trait for their position and, before having a strong leg, confidence will always be mentioned. “You have to be thick-skinned to play that position,” Murphy told me. “Because if you miss one kick you can get blamed for the loss. It’s not fair, but that’s the way it is.”

Having already missed two kicks earlier in the game, Lane’s confidence was fragile. He trotted back out, counted off his steps, and lined up again, only for Maximo to call another timeout; to let him think about that shanked extra point a little longer.

With Summit out of timeouts, everyone knew this was it. Before the field goal unit ran on the field, Murphy gathered them and said, “Hey, after this goes in, meet me at the 50.”

The guys linked arms on the sideline, ready for either outcome. The Summit players appeared shell-shocked across the field, unable to believe it had come to this. You could feel everyone in the stadium holding their breaths, for different reasons depending on the color of their shirt. One fan, directly behind the Mustang bench, was particularly confused as he had been wearing a Summit shirt and Midwest State hat all day.

The snap was perfect, backup quarterback Dustin Watson’s hold was good, and Lane kicked it right where he aimed. “That was such a nightmare trying to figure out that wind,” said Lane afterwards. “In the corner, there are those towers. So there's not a constant opening for the wind to come through. I'm no weatherman, but in my mind, I'd say that's what's making it swirl a little bit.” The kick hit the left upright and ricocheted through, giving MWSU their first ever win over a SEC team.

Most of the sideline – coaches, managers, and trainers included – sprinted onto the field and all met on the purple “S” in the middle. Taylor Morrell ran on with his arms out to the side like an airplane, Ace slapped his chest and pointed to the sky before picking up Noah Barker about four feet off the ground. Other players bent to a knee. Murphy pumped both fists in the air, still somewhat disabled by his surgically repaired hamstring. Adrenaline aided, he made his way to midfield to fulfill his promise. “You guys deserved this one,” Maximo told him as they met at midfield. He then made his way around and congratulated a number of Mustangs before leading his team off the field; the definition of grace in defeat.

Once back in the locker room, the team knelt in prayer. Murphy held Gideon Gill’s left hand with his right, and the game ball in his left. Whereas, ‘Amen’ customarily concludes a prayer, after an MWSU victory, prayer is concluded with Murphy standing and declaring loudly, “How ‘bout those Mustangs!?”

“Hey fellas, I can’t tell you how proud I am of everyone in this room. How hard you worked. How you never gave in. You fought right ‘til the last play, and we knew it would come down to the last play of the game. You believed. You had faith. The ball went through the upright and we won the game. We beat a SEC school on the road. That field felt different than the last time we played a SEC team. It felt a lot different. It felt like we belonged. We were shoving them around. We held our own in all phases of that football game and you got a lot to be proud of. Alfie Lane, here’s the game ball, baby!”

As Alfie made his way to collect the game ball he was mobbed by his teammates and finally picked up and hoisted in the air. He proved today why Murphy wanted him on the leadership council.

Discussion #4

The role of inspiration and motivation cannot be understated in the development of culture within the Mustang football program. Emotional inspiration has been associated with positive athletic related outcomes (Vargas-Tonsing & Guan, 2007; Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Additionally, past research suggests that motivational speeches often serve as a primary means of conveying cultural values and beliefs within an organization (Schein, 2010). The importance of inspirational tactics from coaches and players and its impact on player's feelings of motivation is crucial to better understanding Mustang culture.

The opening meeting of the year provided the first chance for Coach Murphy and Coach Floyd to deliver an inspirational message and set the tone for the season. Oftentimes attempts at motivation by the Mustang coaches are formed by pointing out the weaknesses of players and challenging them to improve. "I don't think we had great leadership last year," was among the first statements Coach Murphy made to the leadership council, challenging them to improve their leadership for the coming year. During the full team portion of the meeting he then says, "We had them [Canyon Ridge] on the ropes two years ago and then shit the bed this year." By pointing this out Murphy is making sure that his team understands the expectations for the season and that their performance the previous season against Northeast State was unacceptable.

The situation and setting of inspirational messages has been shown to be a crucial determining factor for the effectiveness of the message in motivating athletes (Vargas-Tonsing & Guan, 2007). The relationship between the individual delivering the message and those receiving the message additionally contribute to the efficacy of the message (Vargas-Tonsing & Guan, 2007). Indeed, Coach Watts, who delivers the most emotional speeches of all the coaches, indicates that in order for his motivational messages to be effective, that his players must first trust him:

It all comes down to trust and relationship building. When I scream at them, tell them how much they suck, or what they need to do better, they need to know that I am not attacking them as a person. I come from a place of love. So I can't bring a guy in here and immediately start yelling from day one. I gotta earn his trust first.

Each in their own way, the members of the coaching staff make concerted efforts to build relationships with the players, particularly from their position groups. The intent is to build trust in the player-coach relationship in order to make the inspirational messages more meaningful and effective. Vargas-Tonsing and Guan (2007) suggest that coaches who have built strong relationships with their players will be more successful in conveying emotion and inspiration than new coaches or disliked coaches.

Intrinsic motivation indicates a desire to perform behaviors because they are internally rewarding as opposed to extrinsic motivation through which individuals perform behaviors in hopes of receiving external rewards (DeCharms, 1968). Research in sport psychology suggests that intrinsic motivation is associated with far more positive outcomes such as maintaining a healthy desire to constantly learn and improve (DeCharms, 1968). Although the Mustang coaching staff makes a concerted effort to encourage intrinsic motivation, mixed messages are sent throughout the season. "We don't talk about winning around here," Murphy said to his team during an off-season meeting, "because winning takes care of itself." This message tells the team that so long as they focus on improving each day that wins will come. Coach Floyd echoed these sentiments by saying, "Embrace the process. The process should be done with great joy and enthusiasm." Focusing on victories (an outcome) is a form of extrinsic motivation, while focusing on the process -- working hard in practice, watching film, getting better each day -- promotes intrinsic motivation (DeCharms, 1968).

However, throughout the season it became apparent the importance placed on winning football games. The value of winning was reinforced in several ways as the season wore on.

Most notably the reactions from the coaching staff following games differed greatly depending on the outcome. Victories are greeted by celebration and affirmation of the positive performances executed during the game. Such behaviors suggest that winning the game is more important than even playing well in a loss. Following losses, coaches address the negative aspects of the game and focus on reasons for the loss as opposed to any positive qualities the team exhibited during the game. The concentration on the external reward of winning, according to past research, could lead to burnout or lower levels of satisfaction in playing the sport (Gould, 1996; Vallerand, 2007).

Despite the emphasis on winning, Mustang players indicate that they do not feel any less satisfied in their athletic experience. When asked, Hondo says, “We know that winning is important, but nobody wants to win more than the players. We understand that we have to stick to the process and trust that the results come from that.” Similarly, Jayden told me, “You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t competitive. We all want to win.”

While the desire to win is an important characteristic of this program’s culture, it is possible that it plays a role in the team’s midseason slide. Late in the season Coach Floyd admits that after beating Summit the team then felt pressure to win each game afterwards. Many players agreed, suggesting that they believed after beating Summit that an undefeated season was possible. Coach Floyd said, “I think they came out and focused too much on winning games after that [beating Summit] rather than winning each play.”

Other forms of inspiration serve to reaffirm cultural values and motivate players to uphold the principles of Mustang football. Most notably, the value of toughness is often challenged through inspirational tactics. Schein (2010) maintains that inspirational talks are among the best means of conveying cultural messages to a group. Prior to each game Coach

Murphy reasserts the three pillars he believes necessary for on-field success: Tempo, technique, and toughness. Before the Summit game he told his team, “The tougher team will win today. Are you willing to be the tougher team?” During practices and in meetings coaches will often applaud efforts they observe as tough and belittle players they perceive as lacking toughness. The persistent reaffirmation of the cultural value of toughness is a constant reminder to members of the team of the expectations of being a Mustang. Rituals such as the reassertion of cultural values before games can serve to provide meaning, enhance group solidarity, include and exclude others, signal commitment, and prescribe and reinforce significant events (Smith et al., 2012). Smith and colleagues (2012) additionally state that such rituals play a central role in organizations as,

...communication and learning systems, drawing attention to what is important and helping to funnel the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of organizational members. Organizational rituals are particularly important because they not only illuminate organizational behavior, but also entrench or challenge existing cultural values...rituals institutionalize inertia and long-standing ways of doing things (p. 139-140).

Players play a part in inspiring their teammates and reinforcing cultural values as well. Such behaviors being performed in lieu of an authority figure’s presence act to enhance group solidarity and stability (Smith et al., 2012; Schein, 2010). In the locker room prior to games several players stand out as those who make an intentional effort at inspiring the team. The way that players go about inspiring is markedly different. Chuck bounces throughout the locker room yelling and doing his best to motivate his teammates. Kolten Burke approaches his teammates individually, quietly offering words of assurance. As stated previously, individuals respond to inspirational tactics in a multitude of ways depending on personality type and preference (Vargas-Tonsing & Guan, 2007). The various ways by which individuals both offer inspiration and gain motivation through inspirational tactics demonstrate the diversity of the team and the

numerous personality types present. The challenge for coaches and team leaders is to manage the personalities and identify the most effective inspirational approach for each player.

Midwest Tech Cougars (Game 3)

In order to avoid the notoriously fickle Midwest State parking enforcement, and to save the Midwest State football program the \$5 daily parking pass, I park my Jeep on a side street a couple blocks off campus, half a mile from Hughes Stadium. So long as the weather cooperates I make the most of this time by taking in my surroundings. I blend in with the students by wearing Midwest State apparel, doing my best to act natural as opposed to a patron at a zoo observing the caged animals.

There are roughly four types of students on Midwest State's campus: The city folks, the farmers, the out-of-staters, and the athletes. Each of them can be easily identified by their uniform. The city folks tap into their big city fashion sense – guys in skinny jeans, girls in leggings – but maintain practicality out of necessity. The unpredictable weather oftentimes renders their fashion choices uselessly covered by a heavy winter coat. The farmers, possibly the largest population on campus, wear cowboy boots and baseball caps, oftentimes accompanied by well-worn blue jeans. Out-of-staters are mostly from Kansas, Missouri, or Iowa and blend in well with the farmers on every day other than when their favorite hometown sports teams are in action. The Jayhawk and Cardinal supporters are the most outspoken about their fandom, taking pleasure in outwardly expressing their sports allegiances. The athletes, too, are easily identifiable by their clothing choices, namely that clothing issued to them by the MWSU athletic department.

They travel in packs, most frequently with members of their own team, but occasionally intermingling with athletes from other sports. Football and soccer players are commonly seen on campus together, and sporadically some volleyball players are seen involving themselves in

these same social circles. Ace dates a soccer player who, actually, is quite pleasant. I wonder aloud around a few of the guys how this is possible for Ace to land such a catch and they seem just as miffed as I am. Chuck recently broke up with a member of the soccer team, resulting in him being banned from their parties for the time being. “Yeah I don’t think they like me very much right now,” he would tell me shortly after breaking the news to her.

Today, as I make my way across campus to Hughes Stadium there are noticeably more Mustangs shirts than normal. Undoubtedly a result of their recent victory. A few guys from the team agree with me that support across campus was buoyed following Lane’s kick off the upright.

The football office, on the other hand, is business as usual. In spite of more media requests for coaches and players during the week they try to move on to their upcoming opponent, rival Midwest Tech. Easier said than done for most. Gill had upwards of 100 texts waiting for him when he returned to the Summit away team locker room after the game. He has spent the week trying to respond to all of them. Lane receives more media requests this week than the remainder of the season combined. Even the holder, Dustin Watson gets quoted in several papers throughout the state.

Despite coming off of one of the biggest wins of his career, Murphy is in a foul mood. The reason is relatively easy to pinpoint and it has everything to do with this week’s opponent. He coached at Midwest Tech in his early coaching days but still despises them as much as any team they play. Matters are made worse when Midwest Tech’s coach, Rhys Ross, states that *when* they win on Saturday that it will be a great win for their program. Murphy is quick to point that out to his team.

Who gets married during football season?

I hear this question a lot. I am at the age where it seems like another one of my friends gets married every weekend. My roommate from freshman year of college and his freshly minted wife missed the opening weekend of college football season by a couple of weeks. I have RSVP'd as a definitive *NO* to four weddings this fall, each time feigning my disappointment in having to miss their big day. During fall camp I drove Molly through the middle of the night so that she could stand with her best friend as a bridesmaid and not miss a day of practice.

So trust me when I say that my good friend, Nick Ayre, was on the receiving end of his fair share of grief for scheduling his wedding for September 17th. I trust that he will never read this, so I feel safe to reveal that everybody seated at my reception table was watching college football on their phone during the speeches of the Maid of Honor and Best Man.

Midwest Tech was coming off of an FBS win of their own and sure to give the Mustangs a run for their money in one of the oldest rivalries in the state. So, it pained to me to be missing the game. The six and a half hour drive home felt longer knowing that it would be twice as long before I made the drive back. For fear of missing out on quality information (and in an attempt to be a good long-distance husband) I talked with my wife for the entirety of her drive home from work each night. As luck would have it, Nathan had smashed his truck up a few weeks earlier, forcing him to borrow Randy's car, leaving father and daughter to carpool to and from work. Lucky for me, I guess, as this allowed me to interview Randy during these conversations via speakerphone.

This conversation exemplified the way that most of them took place:

Molly: "How was work today?"

Me: "Good. How about you?"

Molly: "Good."

Me: "So, how'd practice go?"

This is where Randy enters, on cue.

Randy: “We were shitty. They are tired. I think I need to give them some more rest.”

Molly typically struggled to get another word in until they got home, a fifteen to twenty minute drive depending on traffic lights. I tried to change it up each night, asking about different players or coaches, how he felt about Midwest Tech, what their response has been to beating Summit, etc. He knows by this point in the season that I am not looking for the same answers he gives to the media. He has the clichés down to a science when he addresses them. When I first started hanging around the team I got the same treatment. Finally I told him and others, “Look, I don’t care that you think the team needs to ‘*take it one game at a time*’ or ‘*play the full 60 minutes*’. Give me the good stuff.” Over time they have loosened up, talking to me less like a reporter and more like one of them.

Receiving the practice report from the head coach and being at practice to witness it in the flesh results in vastly different perspectives. I realize that the things I look for could not be more different than what Murphy sees. I suppose our agendas play into this; I am writing a dissertation about the culture of his football team while he is trying to prepare his team to win football games. Both of these practices require attention to markedly different details. For instance, while on the field for practice I am often seen engaging a third-stringer in conversation or bugging an assistant coach. Murphy, on the other hand, diagnoses and interprets each repetition, witnessing details that I fail to understand, comprehend, or even care about. During one of our conversations he starts talking in lingo that I have heard but cannot define.

“So how would you describe the culture of your team right now?” I do my best to change subjects without making it obvious my disinterest in the technical side of football.

“I think that we have a long ways to go to be where we want to be,” he says. “We can get tougher for sure. That usually comes with time. I think they grew up a lot on Saturday. They faced some adversity and got through it, that’s usually the sign of a good team. Our leadership is much better than last year. We have some great leadership.”

Sure, it’s easy to say this after just beating a SEC team on the road.

“So what about when you thought the team stunk after the Westwood game?”

“I might have overreacted a bit.”

Despite being in different conferences, Midwest Tech continues to be Midwest State’s biggest rival. A short coaching stint at Midwest Tech early in his career fails to deter Murphy from buying into the rivalry full bore. As he and I discussed what type of crowd they expected for the game, Hayden Anderson told me, “If the students hate Midwest Tech half as much as Coach Murphy does, it should be full.”

I heard second-hand that Murphy confirmed his disdain for Midwest Tech after practice on Thursday. He repeated those sentiments to me on Thursday night: “This team loves to talk. They always run their mouth and try to get under your skin. I told the guys today not to fall for it, to just play their game.” A handful of the guys have told me about the Midwest Tech player’s tendencies to, as they call it, ‘chirp.’ Unfortunately for me it is rather difficult to pick up on this trash talk through the ESPN app that I find myself following the game on.

All of the groomsmen gather in the hotel lobby on Saturday morning to watch some college football games before the wedding festivities begin. We watch Canyon Ridge beat the thirteenth ranked FBS team on a last second field goal. They have now won five straight games against FBS teams and are receiving votes to be included in the FBS top 25 poll. A few of the

groomsmen comment on Canyon Ridge's dominant football program, most of them unaware of my father-in-law's competitive connection to the Warriors.

All accounts of the Mustang's game indicate that I was lucky to not be able to watch. Through my ESPN app I witnessed the Mustangs fall behind 3-0 after Henry Johnson fumbled in opposing territory. A few more stalled drives and mistakes later and MWSU was down 10-0 to their in-state rivals. "It was just sloppy, as sloppy as I've ever seen here," one of the guys told me. "It didn't help that we just had no energy."

As I stood beside Nick in front of his friends and family, tempted to reach into my pocket and check the score, the Mustangs continued their sloppy play. Each big, momentum-gaining play was promptly followed by a deflating turnover or penalty. The capacity crowd in attendance, I was told, grew restless – confused as to how their favorite team could handle Summit but not the Midwest Tech Cougars. The sideline was quiet. Some of the guys attempted to force energy back into their lifeless teammates with little success. Murphy was afraid this would happen – the dreaded letdown game. In the end, the final was 24-21.

Afterwards, Murphy addressed the media and said all the right things...*The better team won today...They deserved this one...We need to get better.* Inside, he stewed, as he always does after a loss but even more so this one. He visited and revisited each and every mistake, questioned decisions he made, decisions his coaches made, and decisions his players made. He sat in his office for a handful of minutes, considering the week ahead, before he headed home. He placed the blame squarely on his own shoulders, meaning that the week ahead would be a long one.

You'd have thought that you entered a funeral home if you walked into the Wright Football building on Sunday morning. After wins, coaches wear sandals, workout shorts or

sweatpants, and hoodies to commemorate ‘Victory Sunday’. They may as well have been sporting black drapes today. The world, as they knew it, was coming to an end. Not only did they lose to their hated rivals in their home stadium, but, to add salt to the wound, they limped away with some injuries to boot. The unofficial meeting spot around the Culligan water cooler remained dissonantly quiet and empty – particularly compared to the previous Sunday – as the coaching staff locked themselves in their given offices to pour over film. This was their self-imposed punishment; each of them were into the office early and would stay there until at least 11 p.m. that night.

@ Riverbank College Pioneers (Game 4)

In April of 2015, tragedy struck the Midwest State athletic department. On their way back from the men’s basketball national championship game in Indianapolis, seven men connected to MWSU athletics were killed in an early morning plane crash just a mile from the Chester airport. Included in the fatalities was Freddie Gordon, Deputy Athletic Director and beloved personality within the community. Many believed him destined to take over as Athletic Director in the near future. The deaths of these men struck the core of many within MWSU athletics; a memorial was constructed between Hughes Stadium and Mustang Arena in their honor. They are known across campus and throughout town as the ‘Mustang Seven’.

Freddie, one of the good guys in college athletics who always wanted what was best for the student-athlete, delivered the following quote not long before his passing:

“True success is much deeper than winning. It is important to earn a degree, grow as a person and be a servant leader. There are values one can learn from organized sport, from working to win the task at hand. There are lessons in winning. But sometimes it’s losing because you learn so much more from that.”

As the first anniversary of this tragedy approached, I walked laps around the field at Hughes Stadium last Spring with Randy, Laylah, and the two golden retrievers and reminisced

about Freddie. We shared how Freddie could always be spotted at Mustang football games, squatting near the 20-yard line on the home sideline, intently taking in the action on the field. Randy told me that he was as supportive of the football program as any administrator he had ever worked with. And then we talked about his quote: “Sometimes it’s losing because you learn so much more from that.”

Randy, ever the competitor, had to disagree with Freddie on this one detail. Sure, you could learn a lot from losing a game Randy argued, “But you only have to lose *once* to learn all you need to know.”

In my time away from the Mustangs they had experienced a roller coaster of highs and lows. “The good thing,” Coach Morris would tell me, “is that the kids forget about it quick. They move on. Coaches don’t forget. We stew about it all week long.” That may be the understatement of the year. ‘Stewing’ over the loss is a polite way to say it. Beat themselves up over it would be more accurate. As the week wore on they let up, understanding the importance of the week ahead: “It starts now,” said Coach Buck in reference to the upcoming Saturday being their first of eight conference games.

By the time Thursday rolled around the team and the coaching staff seemed in pretty high spirits. Buck told me, “You can’t beat them down now because you might lose them. You can’t go around m’fing guys and telling seniors that have been here four or five years that they stink. I think we gotta do a good job of being positive and upbeat especially now.”

By all accounts Thursday’s practice was their best of the season to this point. While I had now been around the team for almost nine full months I still had difficulty deciphering a good practice from a bad one. It was noticeable when the team’s energy level was high or low, and

like any casual football fan I noticed turnovers, missed tackles, or dropped passes. There were certain minute aspects that I was beginning to pick up on. For instance, it makes Coach Grant's blood boil when one of his defensive linemen lines up in a four technique instead of a five technique like he was supposed to. The attention paid to minor details, details that I would normally ignore when casually watching a game, is unimaginable.

On Friday morning I wander through the Wright complex, attempting to gauge the climate. The unofficial meeting spot is still unoccupied. All of the coaches are in their offices, watching film. Morris calls me in to watch some clips of the Mustang's upcoming opponent, Riverbank College, and their best receiver, a 6'6" 225 pound colossal with massive hands that seem to catch everything thrown in his general vicinity. "We had a lot of trouble with him last year. He torched us," Morris says as we watch the receiver snatch a ball in the back corner of the end zone. *Yeah, I can see why.*

I continue my lap around the loop of offices. I poke my head into Coach Cobb's office. He is simultaneously watching film on his laptop, diagramming plays, and writing plays on a spreadsheet. I realize rather quickly that he is in no mood to talk, so I excuse myself. Another couple doors down I stop to see Humphy. He too is watching film, but is a bit more inviting. He asks me about my writing, how it is going, and when I think it will be done. He tells me that he is looking forward to reading it when I am done, and then turns to me and says, "But I'm really looking forward to seeing what's in that notebook that you decide not to put in the final copy."

We agree that Coach Grant is the main reason for his anticipation in seeing my notebook. By this time in the season I have actually been through three 120-page notebooks, each of them full with my thoughts, scribbled on the page, front and back, in black ink. A few of the pages are smeared from withstanding inclement weather during multiple practices. As I look back at the

first notebook, memories start to enter my brain as I read what would be nonsense to an outsider (For instance, on back-to-back lines I write, ‘*Don’t give me any fucking shit*’ and, ‘*White board: communicate, alignment, assignment, technique, effort.*’ I recall exactly the scene when I wrote those words. I even remember the weather on the day that it was written.

Later that afternoon the offensive line meeting kicked off with an overly competitive game of Spike Ball between Sawyer and Cam. Spike Ball consists of a mini-trampoline and a ball, the two players attempting to bat the ball onto the trampoline and land on the ground before their opponent can return it to the trampoline. Both Sawyer and Cam have broken a sweat by the time I walk in. On the wall, sent forth from the projector normally reserved for game film, is an interview between Hillary Clinton and comedian Zach Galifianakis. The room explodes in laughter when Galifianakis tells Clinton that he would love to meet the person who makes her pant suits because “for Halloween I wanted to go as a librarian from outer space.”

Buck walks in, pauses to look around the room and take in some of the Spike Ball action, and then makes his way to his spot in the corner next to the projector. The running backs are joining this meeting. When Alfonso Henson enters, Buck points to Hawkins and Hayden, at this point dripping in sweat, and says, “You see that Alfonso? Their fucking sweating...competing. That’s because when you walk in this room you’re a winner.”

After a final point of Spike Ball, which Cam wins on a phenomenal shot off the wall, Buck and the rest of the room flip the proverbial switch. They are locked in – one minute watching spoof interviews and playing games, the next entranced in game film. They are watching yesterday’s practice in which the first and second team offenses take turns against the scout team defense. After one forgettable play for his offensive line, Buck rewinds the film and asks redshirt freshman Aden Wyatt if he understands his assignment on this play.

“Yeah,” replied Aden, which lit a spark under Buck’s seat.

He shouted back, “My 11-year old son says ‘yeah’. Yes or no?”

“Yes sir,” said Aden, a bit more upright in his chair than he was just seconds ago.

A nagging shoulder injury forces Elliot Burke to the sidelines for the upcoming game and thrusts backup quarterback and true freshman, Harrison Kaur, into the lineup. Coach Cobb sat with Harrison for over an hour of the two hour ride to Riverbank College’s campus, discussing the game plan but mostly instilling confidence into the true freshman quarterback preparing to start his first game on the road. I sit in the first row, beside my wife and across from the head coach. Bus number 1 contains the first team offense and offensive coaches. Bus number 2 is full of the first team defense and defensive coaches. Bus number 3 is everyone else. I find it odd that Murphy, eternally defensive-minded, assigns the offense to Bus number 1.

As we pull into the hotel players file out of the three buses systematically. Murphy had reminded them of the purpose of the trip earlier that afternoon, “This is a business trip, fellas. Let’s go take care of business, win the game, and come home. That’s what this is all about.” Their demeanor showed that they had bought in to the business trip mentality. What was normally a loud and rowdy group was quiet and stern.

Breakfast on Saturday morning consisted of, as it would before every game, steak, eggs, potatoes, spaghetti, waffles, pancakes, and bacon. At ten in the morning I find it difficult to even consider spaghetti, but opt to try a piece of steak with my eggs. Humphy delivers the pregame sermon in place of the Mustang’s usual priest, Reverend Gordon. He reads the book of James and speaks to the team about overcoming challenges in life. “Each individual in here has

overcome a great challenge. You wouldn't be here today if you hadn't. Our team as a whole must overcome great challenges as well."

The seniors are allowed access to the buffet first and proceed to finish their meals within ten minutes. Eating fast is a way of life around this team. The coaches are only slightly more deliberate, discussing the slate of college football games for the day. Coach Cobb is particular about his steak, complaining that these are too well done. "Wait until Lakeview though," he tells me, "they know how to cook 'em over there."

The next time I see the team they are all dressed in full suits, truly buying into the business trip notion. Burke, of course, despite being out with an injury, matches his red checkered shirt with an American flag tie. The guys' suits match their personalities. Wide receivers are flashy, wearing tailored bright colored sport coats or glitzy shoes. Offensive linemen stick to black, complete with bulky black dress shoes. Before boarding the bus to head to the stadium, the team executes their silent substitution ritual in the parking lot with no mistakes, typically signaling that the guys are focused.

Riverbank College's Memorial Stadium has bleachers on only the west side of the field behind the visitor sideline. The announced attendance for the game was 6,561 but I have trouble believing it was half of that. I wondered aloud to several Mustangs how they were able to get pumped up for a game in this type of environment. Apparently I was foreshadowing events yet to come. MWSU for the second game in a row came out flat. They were unable to get anything going offensively with Harrison at the helm. To get a spark, they turned to Andre Erickson, quarterback turned wide receiver turned running back. They had worked him in the wildcat formation in practice throughout the week and intended to implement it today if need be. I

wandered over to him on the sideline and asked if he was ready to go. “Hell yeah,” was his response.

Andre led the offense on their most productive drive of the day to that point, one that resulted in a Jay Holland one-yard touchdown run to tie the game at seven. The wildcat, however, failed to maintain its momentum on subsequent possessions, which, combined with multiple defensive mistakes, led to the Mustangs facing a 17-7 deficit at half.

Despite being down at half to what they deemed an inferior team, Randy remained positive throughout the day. He had made it a point of emphasis among his coaching staff to do the same. Early in the game Flynn Shaw allowed a crucial third down completion to keep a Riverbank drive alive. Coach Morris began to lay into him but Murphy stepped in before offering Shaw an uplifting message. He told him, “You’re the best corner in this league, you just have to go out there, play your game and prove it.”

Murphy’s halftime message was along the same vein as he attempted to boost confidence into his seemingly lifeless team. “You are better than the team in that locker room over there, but you aren’t playing like it right now,” he told them. “All I want,” he continued, “is for every man in this room to go out there and do your job and the result will take care of itself.”

Before the team returned to the field the seniors gathered their teammates in the middle of the cramped locker room. From the center of the mass of shoulder pads and helmets a voice cried out, “Win on two, one...two.”

“Win.”

The chant was new to my ears. I had heard *Mustangs, mutts, O and D* from the team or offensive and defensive units as they broke huddle, but never *win*. It indicated the sense of

urgency that this team felt. They were in an unfamiliar position, facing a two-game losing streak after having lost only five games the previous two seasons combined.

When sportswriters describe a team that played with a ‘sense of urgency’ it is typically in a positive manner and ends with a positive outcome. On this hot September afternoon, the Mustangs certainly played with urgency in my estimation, but failed to capitalize on Riverbank’s mistakes and in turn committed far too many mistakes of their own. Having missed the previous loss to Midwest Tech, many people among the team, coaches and players included, felt the need to inform me of the similarities between the two games. In the end, a strip sack ends MWSU’s hopes of a comeback and the Mustangs fall to 2-2 on the season that all of a sudden does not feel so young anymore.

I head out to the bus after the game to jot down some more notes and notice that at least 150 Mustang fans are waiting to greet the team, even in defeat. Although many of them are parents, the showing is still impressive. Sebastian makes his way to the bus shortly after I do and comments on their fans. “This is what makes this place special,” he says.

Coach Cobb, unlike Sebastian, enters the bus cussing and in a rage. He says, to no one in particular although Sebastian and I are the only other people on the bus, “Until we figure out how to handle situations we aren’t gonna win a fucking game. We fucking start slow every fucking game.” He goes on for a while as Sebastian attempts to talk him down. “Just get it out here,” Sebastian tells him, “before you go out there,” pointing to the fans.

The crowd lingers for about an hour after the final play of the game. As players make their way out of the locker room many of them stop for hugs and brief conversations that would be longer had they completed the comeback. I witness all of this from the front row of the bus without having the ability to hear any of the conversations. The scene takes me back to my days

as a college athlete and the dread I felt in realizing that I would have to make small talk after a loss. The parents and fans undoubtedly feel at a loss for words just as much as the players.

When Randy makes his way out of the locker room and towards the bus he accepts a few kind words from the crowd. It takes him a while to climb the steps of the coach bus, a combined result of his still healing hamstring and the weight of the loss. He falls into his seat across the aisle from me and lets out a long sigh. I have heard it before, though infrequently. He has the look of a man that is frustrated and confused by his team's play.

As we pull away from the stadium parking lot, the sun that beat down on us all day is starting to set. The assistant coaches behind me are already re-watching the game on their laptops, irritably commenting at each blown opportunity or missed assignment. Staring straight ahead Randy says softly, the first words he has spoken since getting on the bus, "This is a great year for you to write a book on us." Although he says this with a thick layer of facetiousness, I privately agree with him. Sure, I wish they would go undefeated, beat Canyon Ridge, and win the national championship. But the culture of a team is easy to build upon and sustain when you win games and everything is going well. With these losses comes adversity and the opportunity for me to witness how the coaches and players adapt, regroup, and move forward. The strength of a football team's culture lies not in winning games, but rather in how strongly they hold true to their values when everything seems to be falling around them.

To aid in the grieving process, both over the loss of Chase and the loss of their most recent two games, Laylah is headed to Ohio tomorrow to pick up their new puppy. He comes from the same bloodline as Chase, an important factor in their selection. As we would soon

realize he was every bit as stubborn as his older relative. The new puppy, who would serve to put football games in perspective as the season wore on, already had a name: Reggie.

@ Canyon Ridge University Warriors (Game 5)

In all regards the Canyon Ridge football program operates more like a SEC team than any other team the Mustangs will face this season, including Summit. As I stand on the field at the Rogersdome watching both teams warm up before the game, Marc Allen, MWSU's associate athletic director, echoes these sentiments by saying, "This feels more like a SEC atmosphere than Summit did." That was before we saw Cristian Davidson, the 6'5" quarterback selected number two overall in the most recent NFL draft, walk in. It's Homecoming weekend in Rogers, and as one of the stadium employees is quick to point out, that means that a lot of NFL players will be back in town.

Few cities embrace their hometown football team like Rogers. As the Mustang bus moves from the airport to their hotel it passes two billboards welcoming them to '*Warriors Country*' and at least a half dozen sports bars playing on their local team's nickname. A Midwestern Football Conference scheduling anomaly makes this the first time since 2013 that the Mustangs have played in the Rogersdome and the first time since the National Championship game that the two teams have shared the same field. After their win over Summit many within the MWSU program and across the country believed this could be a matchup of unbeaten teams in the top 5 of the FCS poll. After the previous two weeks, the Mustangs are clutching on to a spot in the top 25 and desperately trying to get their season back on track. The Rogersdome is simultaneously the best and the worst place to do that.

The Stanford versus Washington game is on in the living room of Randy and Laylah's suite in the downtown Radisson hotel the night before MWSU takes on the Warriors. After

Washington takes a 13-0 lead in the first quarter, Randy makes it known that the Huskies “are gonna kick Stanford’s ass.” His prediction comes true, when I check the final score the next morning Washington had won 44-6.

Randy makes no bold predictions that his team will beat the Warriors as we talk in his hotel room, but he also does not lack in confidence. Despite losing the past two games he is still high on this team. The players too carry as sense of confidence that seems rare for a .500 team. Contrary to nearly every other college football fan, the Mustang’s don’t see themselves as underdogs going into this game. Humphy, again delivering the morning sermon in place of Reverend Gordon, tells the team, “This is not a story of David versus Goliath. We belong on the field with this team.”

Molly and I head out on our ritualistic game day run at 6:30 am. The sun has yet to rise but there are already rumblings of blue and gold throughout town. Warriors fans are famous throughout the Midwest, and gaining recognition nationally, for their passion and fandom. On our run we talk about the upcoming game and what the Mustangs need to do to get back on track. “The sideline energy has just been so bad in the last two games,” she says. As for the Riverbank game I can agree, nowhere near the intensity we felt from kickoff to Lane’s kick during the Summit game. We struggle to identify the problem. By all accounts the leadership on this team surpasses that of the last two seasons – seasons that ended with the Mustangs near the top of FCS football – but it has not been on display over the last two weeks.

Many of the players have made attempts at rallying the troops, trying to pump energy into the team that appeared ready to overtake the Warriors earlier in the season. Molly and I agree that a win today would go a long ways towards removing the previous two losses from their

memory banks. Easier said than done. Since the Rogersdome opened, Canyon Ridge has won over 85% of their games there and lost only four home games in the past six years. Simply put, the Mustangs better identify and fix whatever their issue is before this afternoon's game.

By the time we slowly jog our way back to the hotel more gold shirts are flooding out into the streets. A Warriors fan stops me in the lobby to welcome me to Rogers and says, "I saw you guys beat Summit, good luck today!" I read straight through his attempt at Midwestern hospitality, reading his comment more as, *Good luck, you're gonna need it!*

The players devour their pregame meal – Cobb is impressed with the quality of the steaks – before heading back to their rooms to change into their shirts and ties. On the way an elevator containing a handful of the players cuts out between floors. Word spreads quickly throughout the hotel: A couple of them had sent Snapchats (a social media platform of which I am vaguely familiar) asking their teammates to tell their families they love them in their final moments of life. *My dying wish is that you beat the Warriors* says another. A few minutes later the trapped players are freed – a mere seconds before resorting to cannibalism -- but rumors surrounding the circumstances of the events live on. As they wait to start the defensive meeting I hear a group of them suggest that someone from Canyon Ridge was behind the 'attack'. "I bet they do that to every team. Fucking cheaters."

Coach Riggs offer a vastly different perspective, insinuating that it was an inside job as a means of promoting team cohesiveness. Either way, Coach Pierce is far from amused. "I would have been jumping up and down hoping that it would fall," he tells me, "I'd rather die than be stuck in that elevator with those guys right after they just ate those steaks."

Before boarding the bus to the stadium, for the first time this year the Mustangs watch a pump-up video produced by their video crew. Highlights include footage from the National Championship game two years ago and their victory over Summit. As the video wraps up the voiceover concludes with, “Make this time different.”

The players file out of the room as Murphy, like in his prediction of Washington over Stanford the night before, tells his team, “Let’s go kick their ass.”

While the players get ready I survey the locker room. By now I feel confident in my ability to gauge the so-called temperature of the locker room on game day. Many of the guys are proficient in saying the right things to motivate themselves and their teammates. Today, for the first time all season, I get the sense that those sayings are forced. I want to believe that this team and these guys feel confident that they will win this game, and surely many of them do, but today a sense of forged confidence fills the air, as if they are trying to talk themselves into believing.

Thinking back to two seasons ago, in Randy’s hotel room the night before the National Championship game I remember asking him how he felt about the game.

“We are gonna run right by them,” he said. “They haven’t seen a team like ours this year.”

The players throughout that week echoed a similar sentiment. I remember Nathan, exclusively a special team’s player at the time, telling me, “We’re just better than them.”

While they came up just short in that game, they no doubt believed that they would win.

Today, no such confidence exists. The locker room is filled with sayings like, “We gotta believe that we can beat this team” and “Don’t be scared when you go out on that field.” While they started much quicker than the previous two weeks, the Mustangs simply could not keep up

with the Warriors. After holding leads of 3-0 and then 10-7, MWSU allowed 24 straight points to fall to the Warriors 31-10.

Once it was clear that the game was out of reach, any positive energy remaining on the MWSU sideline turned quickly negative. Coach Watts held an impromptu meeting with his running backs during which a wide array of emotions were on display. Andre pounded his right fist into his left palm, frustrated by being used sparingly thus far in the season and repeatedly said, "I'm a playmaker. I make plays!" Alfonso Henson shook his head back and forth while looking down at the turf and Henry Johnson stared blankly past his coach, fixing his attention on nothing in particular. Freshman Layton Dominguez, who was quickly becoming the featured back for the Mustangs and who seldom showed emotion, sat quietly on the end of the bench sporting his signature scowl.

"Hey! Look me in the eyes!" Watts barked at his backs.

With the crowd dissipating and becoming quieter, those fans seated directly behind the Mustangs bench could hear him clearly.

"I don't want to hear any excuses from y'all. We are in this together. Don't point fingers. This is on all of us. If you quit on this team I will fire your ass!"

Henson's eyes turned red as he did his best to hold back tears. Each of these four running backs stayed put on the bench for the remainder of the game, silent and emotionless. Other emotional outbursts pop up on the sideline over the final few minutes of the game. Jayden Velez, following another three and out by the offense, threw his helmet in disgust before storming up and down the sidelines, pushing his teammates that stood in his way. Several coaches and teammates finally calmed him down but a message had already been sent. If the two previous weeks had not successfully deflated this team, the Warriors finished the job.

Stoicism, or stoic philosophy, arose from the Greek philosopher Zeno of Citium. The basic premise centers on the idea that a true indication of an individual lies in their behavior rather than their words. Further, to overcome destructive emotions, stoics advocated for self-control and fortitude. These concepts only seem obvious to us today because Greek philosophers in the early 3rd century afford us that knowledge. In practicing stoicism, an individual concerns themselves less with the occurrence of an event and more with their response. In turn, regardless of their present situation, a stoic does not alter their approach. Epictetus, another Greek philosopher influenced by Socrates and who later influenced Marcus Aurelius (of *Gladiator* fame), summated stoicism by saying “sick and yet happy, in peril and yet happy, dying and yet happy, in exile and happy, in disgrace and happy.”

The Mustangs, now losers of three in a row, find it difficult to be happy given their current situation. On its own, a 31-10 loss to the five time defending national champions on their own field should not be a doomsday scenario. Yet, the post-game locker room feels like a funeral home. Most of the guys sit by their lockers, heads down or staring straight ahead at the wall, expressionless. Several tears are shed. Nobody is yelling, throwing chairs, or hitting the metal lockers. They are soul-searching – unsure even of the questions for which they search answers.

As this team moves forward, once having aspirations of ending the Warriors’s streak, a common theme begins to arise. Over the following week every coach will speak of overcoming adversity, moving forward, learning from their mistakes and growing stronger. Unknowingly, they ask the team to be stoics – to forget the past three weeks and recover the sense of confidence they had going into the season.

Grand Mountain State University Rams (Game 6)

In an attempt to be impartial I am ready to say, if they are to lose this Saturday, that maybe this team just is not as good as we thought they would be. Because I am not impartial, however – I am even more invested in this team than in the past – I refuse to admit that as a possibility. Football is a funny game. At this point in the season I can look back on four or five plays and easily picture a scenario where the Mustangs are 4-1. The problem is that I can do the same thing and the outcome is 1-4.

I keep expecting to arrive in Chester, walk into the Wright football building, and witness a defeated team. Every passing loss is a reason for this team to quit on the season. Yet, as I sit in the wide receiver meeting room on Friday afternoon, which I have turned into my satellite office for the day, I hear through the divide in the walls some rowdy offensive linemen playing spike ball. I even recognize a familiar voice, my wife, joining in on the action. In the defensive backs room I hear laughter following an off-color joke. The wide receivers come into their hijacked meeting room in high spirits as well, giving Lucas Day a hard time about an art class he is taking.

“I told you not to take that fucking class,” remarks Coach Pierce, “That shit sucks.”

With that they get to the film. Again reflecting their position coach, the wide receiver room could not be more different than the linebacker room. The large projector displaying plays from Thursday’s practice is now showing Freddie Adams catch a twelve yard pass before standing up and spinning the ball in front of a scout team defender, showing him up. Pierce replays it several times and the guys laugh every time.

“I’m all for celebrating and shit-talking,” says Pierce, a line never before heard in any other position room, “but you just fucking cost us a first down by jumping offsides the play before. What the fuck are you thinking?”

While I spend most of my time around the football program in some capacity, there are times when I must take over duties as son-in-law. Today I am left with a chore list that includes doggy duty in the backyard (we call it poop-patrol), picking up prescriptions for Grandma Sally, who lives with the Murphys during the season, dropping our dog, Kirby, off at the groomer, and then picking him up when he is done, stopping by the house to pick up Reggie, and bringing them to practice. Kirby, Reggie, and I sit on the hill at the north end of Hughes Stadium, watching practice – a different perspective than that which I have grown accustomed.

From here I can't hear the chatter on the sidelines or coaches comments to the players. I am too far away to see expressions on the faces of players that have just been ripped a new one. The mumbled voices on the field make me appreciate my normal spot on the sidelines in the midst of the action. Even as the team goes through these trying times, the energy on the sidelines, even in practice, is contagious. I know that I hold no meaningful role in helping this team win on Saturdays, but adrenaline still pumps through my veins as if I am preparing to be called into the game.

As practice closes and the players make their way off the field, many of them call to Kirby or Reggie. Like Chase before them, these dogs have become well-known by the team. Terrell Norris comments as he runs off the field, "In my next life I want to come back as a Murphy golden." Before Chase passed away he was featured in the local newspaper, the Tribune, four times. Already in his few months of staying in Chester, Kirby has appeared on the front page of the Tribune. I watch as Kirby chases Nathan around the field while several other players get in on the action. Randy watches on from near the goalpost with a big smile on his face. These are his favorite moments on the football field.

To change up the karma or to start a new superstition or whatever else the reason, I drive Murphy into the office this game day. We go over the slate of college football games for the day and pick the winners.

“Oklahoma will beat Texas, it’ll be high scoring though. Ohio State will destroy Indiana, just too many athletes. Michigan will beat Rutgers by at least four touchdowns; he likes to run up the score. Purdue versus Illinois, oh man. Whoever wins it might be their only Big Ten win. I’m going with Purdue.”

No discussion about the Mustangs game occurs. I know that he appreciates this time to take his mind off of his own team before arriving at the stadium. Once there he immediately enters game mode. Seemingly the second we pull into the parking lot his demeanor changes. We walk into the office beneath a clear blue sky. The parking lot is already starting to fill with tailgaters on this Homecoming Saturday.

“I wish that the fans would come out like this every game. It’s gonna be full today but watch, next week it’ll be half full. I guess we should probably win a couple games first before worrying about the fans though,” Murphy says as we walk through the front entryway.

The office begins to fill with chaos shortly after we arrive. Each home game one of the coach’s wives is in charge of the family tailgate, a mostly over-the-top affair. I usually get roped into setting it up and today is no different. As I carry two large containers filled with ranch dipping sauce into the tailgate room I notice, too late, that one has a leak. While cleaning the ranch off my hands, Coach Cobb’s wife comments, “I bet you didn’t sign up for this, did you?” I respond, “I signed up for this the day that I married into this family.”

After the ranch fiasco I escape any more chores and make my way to the team's walk-through and then to their pre-game meal. Coach Morris, who sits to my left for pre-game meals, asks me, "What channel was the Cubs game on last night? I couldn't find it. I ended up having to watch *Law and Order*."

I watched the Cubs game and even know what channel it was on but cannot come up with any response but laughter for Morris, which happens to be my typical response to him. Reverend Gordon interrupts my laughter.

"Draw some strength from Jesus and his disciples in the storm," he says to start. It is optional for the players to attend this service, but each and every one of them is here. He continues, "Storms are inevitable. You cannot live life without going through a storm. There are things to remember when traveling through the storm. First of all, it was Jesus, the omnipotent Son of God that sent him into the storm. Sometimes there is a purpose to the storm. Have you ever felt alone? Remember, the darkest hour is just before dawn. When you are in trouble you need to have faith that Jesus will walk you through your troubles. When you go into a storm, you need to understand that you will learn a lesson by going through the storm. They thought they were going under, but Jesus said, 'let's go over.' He will see you through the storm. There are three things I want you to remember: Prepare for the storm, persevere through the storm, and then praise the storm."

He concludes the service by praying for the safety and strength of both teams playing today.

"And all the Mustangs said, 'Amen'."

"Amen."

The Mustangs, like last week, avoid the pitfalls of a slow start that plagued them during their first two losses. The defense carries a brunt of the workload, pitching a shutout through the first quarter. The offense, on the other hand, continues to struggle. Grand Mountain State breaks the 0-0 tie with a field goal at the end of the first half. Throughout the half, the sideline exhibits great energy, led by the injured Flynn Shaw. After hurting his knee against the Warriors, Shaw is forced to sit out at least this game and possibly more. As we left the locker room to take the field, he was visibly distraught. He stayed behind, trying to collect himself, but was unable to hide his tears as he took the field in his jersey and jean shorts.

As we walk through the tunnel and onto the field together I tell him, “You can still play a role today big guy, be a leader on the sidelines.”

While I would like to think that my words of encouragement inspired him to showcase his great leadership abilities, the fact is that he is among the best leaders I have ever been around. Despite being unable to have a direct impact today on the field, he no doubt left a mark on this game.

Down 3-0 at halftime, the locker room is optimistic. The defense played as well as they have all year and felt confident in shutting down the Rams further in the second half. The offense is frustrated but convinced that they will make the necessary corrections to exploit GMSU’s strong defense.

Coach Buck barrels into the locker room straight for his offensive linemen. Without even taking a second to collect his thoughts he bellows, “They will break! They will. Bottom line is that you must be tougher than them. If you are then we win. It’s that simple!”

Before taking the field for the second half, Murphy reaffirms Buck's prediction. "We have to out-tough them. We are in a good position right now. We are gonna run it down their throat this half. Make plays when it counts and be tougher than them on every single down."

Getting the ball first in the second half, the offense finally starts to click. A strong kickoff return sets MWSU up with good field position near midfield. A 12-yard rush by Johnson puts the Mustangs in GMSU territory. Two plays later, Dominguez, who the coaches now refer to simply as 'The Young Back' breaks through for a 43-yard run down to the five. The sideline was ready to explode with pent up excitement and frustration if he were able to complete the run. Instead, the Mustangs are unable to taste the end zone, now going on four plus quarters without doing so. A Lane field goal makes the score 3-3, but a sense of disappointment courses across the sideline.

The defense continues to stuff the Rams thanks in large part to – no bias here – Nathan's best game of the season. Nathan starts off the next possession with a tackle for a loss that eventually leads to a GMSU punt. Again, the Mustang offense shows signs of life, marching the ball back in the red zone and down to the ten-yard line. Again, however, they stall, settling for a field goal. Despite having a 6-3 lead, many guys on the sideline walk around as if they are losing. The defense that had, for the most part, kept MWSU in the game all afternoon, finally breaks. The Rams find the end zone after a marathon drive of 18 plays and 91 yards, capped off with a 20-yard touchdown pass. Immediately after the referees hands signal touchdown all energy remaining on the Mustangs sideline dissipates. It is at this point that I know that this team has been defeated. The long drive that ended, seemingly inevitably, in a touchdown broke the spirit of this Mustang team. Now down in the fourth quarter for the fifth game in a row, there is little faith remaining among the guys that they can win this game.

The Mustangs have chances to regain the lead, particularly after Noah Barker picks off the GMSU quarterback on the positive side of midfield, but fail to do so. The defense allows ten more points as the Mustangs fall 20-6.

Murphy has grown accustomed over the past few years to screaming his patented, “How ‘bout those Mustangs!” after the post-game team prayer. Today, he delivers a vastly different message. “I feel like a broken record, gentlemen. It seems like the same thing every week. We are in position to win these games but it comes down to three or four plays that we don’t execute. This is a good football team, but we haven’t shown it recently.”

I am never in danger of going hungry when in Nebraska. Between the pre-game tailgate and post-game parties, game days are a never-ending feast of delicious food of which I try my best to ignore the calorie count. Between my mother-in-law’s barbecue chicken, Goose’s wife Mia’s calzone, and Buck’s wife Elizabeth’s deserts, I have exceeded my weekly calorie count by 11pm on Saturday night.

In spite of the food, the so-called party is more of a get-together, a gathering so to speak. There is certainly no partying going on after four straight losses. The coaches do their best to avoid talking football, but it inevitably enters the discussion.

The Murphy’s throw these parties after every home game, win or lose. The past couple of years as the Mustangs have gone undefeated at home they have been a highlight of a successful weekend. Tonight, the coaches seem to be here out of obligation rather than desire. Having had a three month stint as a bartender at a country club a few years back, I rekindle some of that flame by schmoozing the donors and administrators in attendance while fetching them drinks. While

doing so, I overhear Humphy and Cobb solemnly discussing recruits. They have another strong recruiting class coming in, but a four game losing streak magnifies everything.

“We gotta find some athletes, some length. I like a few of our guys coming in but some of them are just guys. We need some difference-makers,” said Cobb.

Humphy simply nodded in agreement, seemingly thinking similarly about the defensive side of the ball.

As the crowd thins I find Buck and ask him how he’s doing. He considers his answer for a few seconds before saying, “I’ve been better.” The offensive line that everyone considered the cornerstone of a potentially lethal offense has been underwhelming. Sacks at crucial moments in each of the past four games have highlighted the struggles that the unit has had. Now Buck is faced with a predicament that no coach envies.

“Offense, what did we do well yesterday?”

Murphy leads off with the same question every in-season Sunday staff meeting. Today, the response is both comedic and depressing to those in the room.

“Nothing,” says Coach Cobb.

Sebastian sits in the corner, closes his eyes and shakes his head back and forth. Buck looks down at the table and does the same. Derrick puts his hands over his head and lets out a prolonged sigh.

“I know we sucked but we had to do something well,” Murphy responds, looking for a silver lining that the offensive coaches refuse to concede.

“I guess the young back played well,” Cobb says. It’s true, Dominguez rushed for over 100 yards for the first time in his young career and had a possibly game-changing kickoff return to the forty.

“Okay, what did we do well on defense?”

“We played well for three quarters,” Grant responds.

“Well, football is a four quarter game, we could have won that game 6-3,” says Murphy. All of the defensive coaches seem to agree.

“Alright, this week is business as usual. Players get down, coaches get up. People in this community are stunned that we are this bad right now, but we’ll bounce back, that’s who we are. The guys are probably hearing how much they stink right now, don’t let them believe that. Coach Wright used to tell me that when things aren’t going well to change something even if it’s the wrong thing. I think we might have to do that on offense.”

At this last line I look at Buck who knows that it was directed at his position group. Following the meeting I give him a few minutes before heading to his office.

“I’m gonna join your meeting today, is that cool?” This is the first time that I find it necessary to ask permission to any position meeting.

Following a long sigh he responds, “Yeah, it’s gonna be an ugly one.”

A few hours later I walk into a half full meeting room and for the first time all year it is entirely silent. The spike ball game that has become of staple of this room is stored on its side, conspicuously in the corner where I find a seat. Each of the seniors, all starters, is already here in the front row. The underclassmen make their way in, still over five minutes early. When Buck walked in there are no wise cracks or subtle jabs that I have grown accustomed to from him.

Without greeting, he makes his way to the opposite corner of the room from me next to the computer and projector. Two offensive linemen get beat on the first play they watch, a play that had it been blocked well, may have been a big one.

“Coulda, woulda, shoulda...I’m gonna be saying that a lot today.”

The meeting lasts thirty-six minutes. As it wears on, Buck ventures from the technicalities of the position (“Get your feet in the ground and reposition your hands”) to a more emotional plea to his guys.

“Jayden, I’m prouder than hell of you for staying in there and battling, but we just got no push all day.” Jayden had played most of the game with various injuries to his knee and ankle. “I’ll never question your fucking heart, you’re effort. I’ll never question that out of anybody in this room.”

The last clip of film was followed by a long period of silence. What felt like five minutes most likely lasted thirty seconds. Buck lifted his chair up and placed it at the front of the room in front of the now blank wall where seconds ago tape from yesterday’s game proved what the guys in this room already knew.

“I’ve never been more sick after a game. Now, do I think that you wanted to go out there and play like shit? No.”

He looked around the room at each of his guys, spending longer on those in the front row. As he did so, tears began to swell in his eyes.

“We will learn a lot about character over the next few days. We are going to have to play some more guys. You know I will fight to the very end with you. Everybody is confused right now, trying to figure this out. This is real life right now. In real life you have to perform to keep your job. Something’s gotta change. Now, are you gonna mope around? I fucking hope not. I

would be really disappointed if that's the case. Guys in the second row better get moving. I'm not worried about anything other than this week and this game."

Buck, again, sits in silence for several seconds, this time looking down at the floor. When he looks back several tears roll down his cheek.

"We gotta do better. We expect more. We all must expect more. Fight for each other. This front row has been around a lot, and you know I'll fight for you. I'll fight for every guy in this room. But when we watch that film, it's clear that we gotta make changes. All I want from here on out is everybody's best every single day. Attitude on three."

In a subdued murmur the lineman responded, "Attitude."

Discussion #5

The extent to which organizational politics are present and impactful within Mustang football is far-reaching and multifaceted. All constituencies take part in what could be termed political activity in attempts to advance either their own standing or the standing of individuals whom they closely associate with. Attempts to sway opinions, advance in the organization, or endear oneself to others through power or persuasion constitute political behavior (Pettigrew, 1977; Tushman, 1977; Allen, Madison, Porter, Renwick, & Mayes, 1980). Most importantly for the present study, the use of political devices by individuals within the organization contributes to the circuit of culture at each level. Political behavior takes place at all three levels of analysis within this project: individual, organization, and institution. In addition to implementing political strategies for their own gain, members of the Mustang program use political behavior to influence the culture of the organization.

Hyper-competitive men, most seeking to attain their goal of becoming a college football head coach, dominate the world of college football. Nearly every member of the Mustang

coaching staff hopes to become a head football coach during their career. In turn, they seek to move up the proverbial coaching ladder by implementing politically skilled behavior. When offensive coordinator David King left before the season, both Coach Cobb and Coach Buck lobbied to step into that position. The natural progression for head coaches is to move from position coach to coordinator to head coach. When the coordinator position opened, both potential internal candidates saw it as an opportunity to move to the next step of the ladder. “It doesn’t change my day-to-day duties all that much,” Buck told me, “but the title of coordinator is great.”

The opportunity to take over as coordinator led to both Coach Cobb and Buck implementing political strategies in hopes of impressing Coach Murphy. Such behaviors would fall on the assertive-strategic dimension of organizational politics as each perform political behaviors in response to a perceived opportunity, and do so over a longer time frame (Ferris et al., 2006). Out of necessity and with the intention of self-promotion, both coaches began speaking up far more during offensive meetings as well as during full staff meetings. Although mostly the norm, both coaches additionally spent late nights at the office, making a point to stay later than Coach Murphy. Buck said, “It always looks good for assistants to be here later than the boss. That should always be the case.” When Murphy decided to name them co-coordinators he did so to ensure that he would not upset the continuity or familiarity he felt existed within the offensive staff room. In addition to naming co-coordinators, Murphy also promoted Coach Pierce from offensive assistant to wide receivers coach. Pierce is among the most politically savvy on the staff. He is quick to offer assistance to those on the staff ‘above’ him, such as the coordinators and Murphy. His work as offensive assistant certainly earned him the promotion to receiver’s coach, but his ability to endear himself to others on the staff did not hurt his cause.

As the season wore on and the team faced adversity, political tensions rose among both players and coaches. Much of the blame for the midseason struggles of the team is placed on the offensive side of the ball, fairly or not. Coaches and players engaged in tense discussions and shared harsh words for each other, most often across sides of the ball. On several occasions coaches or players from the defense blamed the offense for the struggles of the team. In many ways this was used as a defensive political strategy to deflect blame elsewhere – although the offense certainly had their struggles throughout the season, the defense was far from guiltless regarding the team’s struggles. Such confrontations could be termed defensive-tactical political behaviors due to their intention of deflecting blame in an attempt at achieving short-term goals (higher standing among the staff) (Ferris et al., 2006; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). Coach Murphy’s history and standing as a defensive-minded coach did little to help the cause. At various times throughout the season the offensive players and coaches felt as though they were unfairly blamed for what was a full-team issue. The political tension between the offense and defense – players and coaches – was undoubtedly an issue as the season progressed.

Recruiting is additionally a highly political arena from several perspectives. Research suggests that politically skilled coaches are better able to leverage their on-field success for the recruitment of a prospective athlete (Treadway et al., 2014). Recruiting is indisputably political in nature as sometimes upwards of a dozen coaches attempt to woo the recruit and his parents in order to convince him to play for their program. A coach high in each of the four dimensions of political skill (social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity) has a far greater chance of landing a recruit (Ferris et al., 2005). Coach Murphy often tells his coaches the importance of trust and relationship building in recruiting. When one of the Mustang’s most coveted recruits called Humphy during a staff meeting, Coach Murphy insisted

he take the call, saying, “You better talk to him. Tell him how excited we are for him to get here. Tell him how great he looks in red.”

Recruiting can also become political with the coaching staff. Because so much of recruiting is subjective in nature, there is much ambiguity and disagreement among the coaches concerning who should be offered scholarships. Each coach advocates strongly for the players they are recruiting – if their recruit comes to MWSU and performs well their status as a strong recruiter grows, which boosts their status in the eyes of Coach Murphy. The importance of recruiting cannot be understated, and coaches known for their ability to recruit are often highly considered for promotions. In turn, Coach Murphy, who has the final decision on which recruits to offer scholarships, must evaluate recruits objectively to select those that he truly wants to become Mustangs.

Southwest State University Saints (Game 7)

“Hey Jim, how’s it hanging today?” Says Coach Morris as he approaches Colton Floyd, who I am having a pleasant conversation with on the Mustang at midfield of Hughes Stadium. This seemingly harmless question leads to a humorous exchange.

“Low and to the left,” Floyd responds, “How about you?”

“Short and shriveled here,” says Morris.

These small, innocent comedy routines have yet to grow old to me. Morris has perfected his delivery of one-liners and often several of the coaches work in tandem to deliver the biggest laughs. There is a difference between the intentional, like the previous exchange, and unintentional comedy. A handful of these coaches are so ridiculous that oftentimes they provide the greatest sources of humor without intending to do so.

Later in practice as the first team defense practiced against the scout team, Robert Macdonald drops what should have been an easy interception.

“Hey great job, that’s a great read,” Grant tells him, encouraged that Macdonald was in proper position. “Next time, just catch the ball.”

Macdonald, who injured his hand during the Grand Mountain State game, turns around and puts it in the air, showing off a heavy wrap around his fingers that essentially turned his hand to a club. This display lit a fire under Grant.

“I don’t fucking care, guy,” Grant snapped, starting his tirade. I, along with several around me, burst into laughter. ‘Guy’ is used by the staff to be either positive or negative. In the staff meeting earlier in the day, Humphy refers to a recruit as a ‘guy’ meaning that he can really play. Then again, during film they watch a linebacker make a tackle before celebrating the play he had just made. “Good fucking job, guy, you made a tackle. Who cares? That’s your job,” is Coach Murphy’s response. The tone and delivery of ‘guy’ tells you all you need to know. In this instance, Robert knows it is not a good thing.

Coach Grant ends his tirade turned comedy show by screaming, “I don’t care if you don’t have any fucking arms!”

The shakeup at offensive line begins immediately at Sunday’s practice. Cam Hawkins and Sawyer Hayden remain, Gage Booker and Matthew Combs are replaced for the time being, and Jayden Velez sits out with a bum ankle. As a group they talk less, although the same can be said for nearly the entire team as their losing streak reached four games. During the only period of Sunday’s practice when the first team offense and first team defense took the field against each other, Cam Hawkins summarized the frustrations of the entire team.

On the first play, Burke dropped back and dropped in a perfectly thrown deep ball to Day, who collected the pass and trotted into the end zone. The entire offense, having not scored a touchdown in seemingly an eternity, sprinted the length of the field to join in on the celebration. Even some of the defensive players seemed happy for them. Cam slowly jogged back to the sideline near where I was standing and, still out of breath, told me, "I just hadn't celebrated a touchdown in so long I had to run all the way down there." In total it was about an 80-yard run. "But then I got tired," he admits, laughing at himself.

As a whole, this beaten-down and demoralized team practiced hard considering the circumstances. Their energy stayed high and relatively positive. An outsider may have mistaken them for a 5-1 team. That started with the coaches, who refused to allow their players to pout or feel sorry for themselves. "We pride ourselves on toughness. Tough times don't last, tough people do," Murphy would tell them. Despite the tough times that had befallen them, the Mustangs continued to display their toughness.

Murphy's post-practice talk to the team was longer than usual. He hit on all his normal talking points but emphasized each one just a bit more.

"This team can win," he said, willing the group of men kneeling in front of him to believe what he was saying. "We can make the playoffs. This team started the season wanting to make history. This team can still make history. Everyone is questioning you. Ignore that. You can only trust the people with you in this huddle. This is your family."

Peter "Goose" Lloyd played fullback and tight end at Southwest A&M. "I've never lost four games in a row. Ever. So this is tough," he would tell me when I stop by his office on Tuesday morning. Goose is different from the other coaches. I have never heard him swear or

even get visibly upset at his players. Being from Georgia he speaks in a Southern drawl and addresses everybody as *sir* or *ma'am*. Even during this losing streak, as some of the other coaches burst out in animated tirades on the sidelines, I never see Goose lose his temper.

“Dr. Mays, how are you this fine morning?” he asks as I peek into his office on the east wall of the Wright building. Although I tell him that he is jinxing me, he continues to refer to me as *Dr.*

After exchanging pleasantries I ask him, “So what do you tell your guys right now?”

Almost before I complete the question he says, “Details, details, details. We just gotta keep pressing.”

I then ask him, “Is it tougher losing as a player or as a coach?”

“My sophomore year [at Southwest A&M] we weren’t very good. It’s harder as a coach because you don’t know what going through your player’s heads. You have very little control.” As much as coaches like to be in control, the fact is that they simply are not. Each minute of practice is accounted for. Every single play is broken down on film.

“This is ten hours’ worth of work here,” Coach Morris would tell me as he drew every single route each of Southwest State’s receivers have run so far this year, “So my guys better watch it and study it and know it.” Morris self-diagnoses as OCD and it is glaringly obvious.

“You know that half your guys won’t even look at this right?” I tell him, just to get under his skin.

He replies, resigned to the truth, “Yeah...I know.”

By no means am I suggesting that the players are disinterested in the outcome of the game or that they are unwilling to put in the work to succeed, but these are 18-22 year olds with other responsibilities and other things on their mind. There is no way that a coach can control for

a player's girlfriend breaking up with him the night before a game or for their poor grade in an Art class. For the coaches, football consumes their entire life. For the players, football is one of many things on their mind at any given time.

Later that afternoon in Goose's meeting room with the fullbacks and tight ends is a perfect case in point. Before Goose arrives several of them discuss their favorite light beer. Busch Light, miraculously, is the consensus pick among them. While that discussion takes place, others tell a story of a near road rage incident after tight end, Dane Wolf is cut off. After some pleasantries are exchanged between the two cars, the antagonist of the story thinks better of their pursuit once he sees Wolf, with Niko Sexton in the passenger seat, pull into the Hughes Stadium parking lot.

"I can't imagine what Goose's reaction would be if he peeked out his window and the whole football team were in the parking lot just beating the shit out these guys," commented Hayden Anderson.

I get the sense that if you are wanting to get Goose fired up, that would be a good way to do it. Despite the lack of yelling and cussing, Goose still finds ways to motivate his players and hold them accountable. If any one of his position players screws up – by missing class or tutoring, being late to practice or a meeting, or any other infraction – the entire position group is subjected to punishment. So when he starts the meeting by saying, "If targeting (mandatory study hall for those players struggling in a certain class) isn't done by tomorrow we will have some reminders before practice tomorrow," they know exactly what he means. He expects them to hold each other accountable. If one of them missteps, it is on all of them.

"They need to watch after each other," he tells me, "we're all in this together."

I chuckle to myself the following day when I walk out to practice and see all of the fullbacks and tight ends doing up-downs in the south end zone.

“It’s weird, this team,” says Randy, out of the blue over breakfast Wednesday morning. “I’ve been around bad teams before, but this isn’t a bad team. Those bad teams, you know you’re bad during the season. You just go, ‘Well heck, this isn’t our year.’ That’s not the case with this team. They just haven’t made the plays when it counts. They practice well. They practice hard. They practice and play with a lot of energy. It’s just been a weird season.”

With that, he says good-bye to Kirby, Reggie, and Laylah in that order and is out the door, off to try and solve the mystery.

Murphy and the Mustangs use competition to breed toughness. They are encouraged – no, forced – to compete in nearly everything they do. It is the reason for the plaque in the Wright Football Complex announcing the grade point averages of each player on the team whose GPA is above a 3.0. *Compete in the classroom*. The ‘All-In’ club, whose membership is attained by not being on any ‘lists’ – academic probation, social misconduct, police reports, etc. – again highlights the need to compete in this program. “If you love football,” Murphy has said on numerous occasions, “you won’t be on any lists and you will be on that wall.” He points at the list of ‘All-In’ members on the north wall of the meeting room, visible the instant you enter and full of first-stringers and fourth-stringers alike.

As I write this I am watching a Cubs postseason game with Randy, a die-hard Cubs fan. The broadcast flips to an old clip of the Cubs starting pitcher tonight, John Lackey. In the clip, from game seven of the World Series his rookie season, a game in which he started, he is shown

pleading with his manager to keep him in the game. You can see him mouth the words, “You told me this was mine,” as in, *Let me finish what I started*.

Randy turns to me and says, in an enamored tone, “Man, what a competitor. That’s a tough pitcher right there.”

He has a knack for delivering content right on cue.

A portion of Wednesday’s practice is titled ‘Competition Wednesday’ during which the first-team offense and defense battle one-another. It is not full contact – no tackling – but it is full speed. When this session starts the coaches yell out “Competition Wednesday” which is then echoed by the players. While this part of practice can certainly get intense, it fails to compare to ‘Mustang Bowl’.

Mustang Bowl is the only time that the team will go full contact during the season. Nobody that will play a significant role in meaningful games will take part, but it is the most compelling event to take place outside of Saturday’s during the season. Mustang Bowl consists of twenty-five plays of full-contact, full-tackling, full balls-to-the-wall effort between freshman offensive players and defenders. The entire team watches and cheers them on. This is the only time these guys have a chance to impress the coaching staff in a meaningful way and also, more importantly to some of the guys, their only chance to hit somebody.

These freshman are used to being treated as human blocking sleds or tackling dummies during scout team practice. When the moment comes to let loose, they do just that. I watch as running back Henry Rogers plows full speed into a pair of linebackers. The cheerleaders on the sidelines, fully clad in their practice uniforms, jump up and down, hooting and hollering. Chuck makes his way over to me, possibly sensing how much I enjoy watching these youngsters, and says, “Man these guys play hard. This is so much fun to watch.”

When I sit down at the nearest table to the entrance in McKinneys dining hall on Friday night I am greeted by Coach Morris. There are three tables of coaches. Unbeknownst to the table that I occupy, it is known by the other coaches as ‘The A Table.’ It consists of Coach Murphy, Cobb, Grant, and Morris. There is no B or C table, just two other tables of coaches. Goose, Humphy, my wife, Coach Riggs, and the student assistants make up one, and Sebastian, Trystan, Buck, Derick, and Frankie the other. It has been this way for years. I inducted myself to the A team unknowingly before the first game and have joined them ever since. I sit to Morris’ left at the square table; he has Coach Murphy to his right. Coach Cobb is to my left with Coach Grant next to him. I spend the season trying to make sense of the seating arrangements, developing multiple theories.

“You should have brought your notebook tonight,” Morris tells me as I sit down, “because I’m about to put on a display with this fried chicken. I’m going for a record.” He does so with twelve pieces, beating his previous record by a single piece of greasy chicken. Despite his impressive ability to eat, thanks in part to a digestive issue, he weighs no more than 160-pounds.

I had yet to touch my food by the time Murphy had finished his and was addressing the team.

“Tomorrow night might be the last time you get to play under the lights in your life. Remember when you were a kid and you dreamed of Friday night-lights? And then you realized that you might be good enough to play in college and you thought about Saturday night-lights? This may be your last chance. Enjoy it. Have a heartbeat and play with one heartbeat. The most important game of the season is tomorrow night.”

Sixteen hours later I found myself in the same seat at the A table, talking with Coach Cobb about the Duke versus Louisville game that had been played last night. Duke, a monumental underdog, had its hopes of an upset dashed when their best player was flagged for a roughing the kicker penalty, giving Louisville a first down and the victory.

“If I were that head coach, I would have gone crazy. Just absolutely lost it,” said Cobb. Murphy, listening in on the conversation, chimed in, “You know why he didn’t? Because that’s his best player, and nobody feels as bad as that kid right now. He didn’t want to do that, he was just playing hard.”

I get the sense that a decade ago, Murphy would have agreed with Cobb. Maybe it is just a part of growing older, maybe it is his experience as a head coach, but he has shown an ability to empathize with players to a greater capacity than in the past.

Four hours later I again found myself in my assigned seat at McKinneys, listening to Cobb’s detestation for quality of the steak (“This is supposed to be rare?”). As Reverend Gordon makes his way to the front of the room to address the team, I find myself replaying his previous messages to the team in my head. In recent weeks this team has been through the wilderness and a storm, each time Reverend Gordon had urged them to continue fighting and they will emerge as victors. After a four game losing streak I imagine he is struggling to find many more parables from to Bible to compare this team’s struggles. Alas, the book of James provides him with the necessary message for this beleaguered team, likening their losing streak to James being lost at sea (“Each of you must believe that the streak will end”); however, I must believe that Reverend Gordon, possibly as much as Coach Murphy, desperately needs a victory this evening.

Murphy follows Reverend Gordon by repeating the goals for each position group to the team.

“The wide receivers have a goal of having over 250 yards receiving,” he says, before looking over to the running backs, who were seated at their own table. “I’d rather have 250 yards rushing, what do you guys think?”

With that the receivers were in an uproar, booing and jeering at their head coach. The running backs and offensive linemen are cheering. It isn’t long before the entire offense and most of the defense has joined in, creating a somewhat surreal environment of screaming football players in an otherwise quiet campus-dining hall. Although we had a section to ourselves, we were not entirely disconnected from other student diners, who by now were interested in the uproar.

Murphy laughed and quieted down the group, glad to see some friendly yet fiery competition within his team. His comment had the intended effect.

After performing their silent substitutions ritual I noticed Murphy do something that he had not done before this season. As the players exited the field and headed toward the locker room, he gathered all of the coaches together near the corner of the end zone.

“I’m sick of this team being dead and quiet on the sideline during games. If they get that way today I’m counting on you guys to pick them up.” He looked at Derick and Trystan before he said, “Especially you young guys need to bring some energy. For whatever reason this team feeds off of energy more than others and they might need us to pump some life into them.”

As the Mustangs finished warmups and headed back to the locker room for their final game preparations – loud screaming, jumping up and down – I settled into what had become my game day locker in the corner of the locker room. Every few minutes Coach Floyd would come in and yell reminders to the team about how much time they had left. It was the same routine each week. When the countdown clock struck ten minutes, the coaches cleared the locker room,

handing it completely over to their team. A minute later the game captains reported to Coach Murphy for instructions on the coin toss. After that, Floyd announces, “Seniors, you have the locker room!” If anybody does actually hear him over the speakers and screaming not much changes. By this point the guys fall into one of two camps: silently listening to music in their headphones, seemingly oblivious to the world around them, or in a complete frenzy. While this time is meant for the seniors to address the team as they wish, that rarely happens.

On every game day Jayden Velez falls into the second camp. Today he picks up a stool and throws it on the ground while he lets out a primitive roar typically reserved for wild animals. While this time is supposed to belong to the seniors and be void of coaches, Sebastian enters and stands up on the couch in front of the team. This is, to my knowledge, the first time a coach has come into the locker room during this time all season. I imagine it has to do with the directive ordered by Murphy nearly two hours earlier.

While I struggled to decipher Sebastian’s exact message to the team – none of the screaming from the guys subsided, it just grew louder – I could make out several key words: tough, fight, and heart among them.

Based solely on the intensity of their pregame routine I expected the Mustangs to come out firing on all cylinders. Instead, their misery continued as the Southwest State Saints jumped out to a 10-0 lead in the first quarter. The offense started with four straight three-and-outs that led to punts, not exactly the kind of start that infuses confidence into an already struggling team. Frustration mounted on the sideline and threatened to end the beating heart of this team. In what happened to be an immensely necessary tactic, the coaches managed to keep them going just long enough.

The offense finally broke through at the end of the first quarter with the help of a 55-yard run by *The Young Back*. He completed the drive with a 14-yard touchdown run and the sideline was back in it. A Kolten Burke interception on the Mustang's next offensive possession momentarily deflated the sideline, but a huge special team's play followed that was exactly what this team had been looking for all season.

With the score 10-7, the Saints threatened to extend the lead as they drove inside the Mustang's 25-yard line. An Arthur Wood sack forced them into a third and long situation that quickly turned to fourth and long and a lengthy field goal attempt. Wood, who without a doubt has emerged as the team's most effective force on the defensive line, got the push he needed and extended his hand to block the field goal. On cue, the sideline was alive, ready to capitalize on Wood's huge play.

The offense would do just that. Six plays and 57-yards later they were in the end zone on the back of Gideon Gill, who collected two passes for fifty yards and the go-ahead touchdown on the drive. In what had been a frustrating year thus far for Gill, this touchdown brought with it a sigh of relief. The Mustangs, now holding a 14-10 lead came up with another huge play on defense to maintain the lead going into the half. The Saints, facing first and goal from the 1-yard line, failed to convert as Noah Barker forced a fumble that was recovered by Hondo in the end zone.

Murphy's message to the team at halftime was as positive as it has been all year. "This team has been working hard all year. This team deserves to win. This team is ready to win. Let's go out there and finish the job!"

The second half, much like the first, was a back and forth affair. The Saints cut into the Mustangs lead with a field goal on their opening possession, but MWSU answered with a 51-

yard touchdown pass to Lowe. On the drive, Burke showed his toughness by refusing to slide on a 10-yard quarterback scramble. He delivered a blow to a Saints defender that prompted Gage Booker, the lineman that had been benched earlier in the week, to say, “Sliding is for baseball. Not for Elliot.” Although he had yet to break out and have a game that truly demonstrated his capacity as the Mustang’s quarterback of the future, Burke’s teammates recognize how badly he wants to win for them.

Connor Armstrong and Chuck share an apartment with Burke, but swear they could go weeks without actually seeing him there. As I walked into their apartment with Chuck earlier in the season he told me, “I bet Elliot isn’t here, he’s probably at Wright.” Sure enough, his room, which was decorated with Peyton Manning and Tom Brady jerseys, was empty. “Even when he is here,” Connor told me, “he watches YouTube videos of Tom Brady all the time. He’s got a huge crush on him.” When they told me this I tried to think back to a time when I was in Wright and Elliot was not. No instances entered my mind. While the coaches need to beg some players to come in and watch film, that will never be the case with Elliot. In fact, he often stays in the office later than many of the coaches.

Burke has certainly shown flashes of the quarterback that the coaching staff hoped he would be entering the season. Orchestrating a game-winning drive on the road against a SEC team would certainly qualify as promise. Yet, there have been plenty of mistakes that, because he is the quarterback, are magnified. Multiple fumbles, interceptions, or unnecessary sacks have discouraged his teammates and coaches at times. From my perspective, Elliot is the victim of high expectations for a first-year starting quarterback. Although it is his third year in the program, the jump from backup to starter is immense, even without the extra element that he is replacing an All-American. To his credit, I have never heard Burke complain about the criticism

he or his offense has received, which has been plentiful. However, the MWSU football program has grown accustomed to winning, a statistic designated only for the starting quarterback. At 2-4, while no one has questioned his toughness or dedication, Kolten Burke has fallen short in the only category that matters.

Burke's most recent display of toughness elevated the energy on the sidelines and seemed to invigorate the hometown crowd. Nonetheless, a feeling of restlessness remained on the sidelines. A Southwest State touchdown and two-point conversion tied the game, but another touchdown pass to Gill on the heels of a Blaze Meyers interception regained the lead going into the fourth quarter. Doing what they had been unable to do too often throughout the season, the defense stiffened and preserved the victory for the Mustangs.

After what felt like forever, the team finally had a chance to sing the school's fight song with their student section, a ritual performed only after wins. In a poignant moment for the head coach and his family, including myself, Nathan led the team from atop a platform.

*"Go you Mustangs onto battle; fight for MWSU.
Raise the banner, red and white; to this emblem we'll be true,
So let us cheer the Mustangs onto victory; every voice proclaim!
'We've got the fight, we've got the might,' we won this game!"*

@ Lakeview University Hawks (Game 8)

More so than any other sport, the highs and lows of a football season are greatly exaggerated. Because teams only play once a week, they either brood over a loss or celebrate a win for six long days. Coaches like to say that starting on Sunday, the team moves on to the next game. While that may be true in practice – teams often only spend one film session reviewing their most recent game compared to five full days watching film of their upcoming opponent – the mindset, demeanor, and behavior of players and coaches is noticeably different.

Victory Sunday is accompanied by a day off for the team from practice and a far more upbeat coaching staff than they had seen over the past few weeks. As the week wears on their mood does not fade. Come Thursday Murphy is back to cracking jokes at the full team meeting. “The quarterback’s goal is to score more points than the other team,” he says, as he reads through each position group’s goals for the week’s game. After reading the quarterback’s goal he looks up at Burke, and says with a slight smile on his face, “You’re a dick, Burke.”

“It wasn’t me,” Burke responded. “It was Dustin!”

Murphy’s eyes scanned the room for his third string quarterback guilty of writing this sarcastic goal. He finds him and then says, this time with a straight face, “You’re a dick, big red.”

“Hey Coach Morris, I’m sitting in on your meeting today,” I say as the staff filters out of the offensive meeting room on Friday morning.

“Oh man,” he responds, and I prepare myself for a wisecrack. “Prepare to be inspired.”

The defensive backs and defensive linemen switched rooms earlier this season, leaving the defensive backs in one of the partitioned off rooms in the corner of the large meeting space. On the wall is a poster that says ‘SAVAGES’ down the left side. Each letter in the word represents another word:

S peed
A ggressive
V iolent
A ttitude
G rimy & G ritty
E ffort
S wagger

“Make sure we are paying attention in practice today. Excellent concentration out there. This game is gonna come down to five big plays. If we win those plays we will win the game.”

I am seated in the back left corner of the impermanent room, the muffled yells from Grant two rooms over and the intermittent raising of Derick's voice are both audible through the felt walls. Coach Morris' meeting is more analytics based than the others. He goes over every plausible down and distance scenario and the tendencies of their upcoming opponent, the Lakeview University Hawks. Unlike other rooms, there is no hierarchy in the seating chart for the defensive backs. Flynn Shaw, a junior, is in back; Leon Jenkins, a freshman, is in front. Even after changes were made to starting lineup, had a freshman attempted to sit in the front row of the offensive line room a brawl would likely have occurred.

I think about the sign outside of the locker room directly below me. *Those Who Stay Will Be Champions*. The seniors on the team *are* champions. But they have also been through a season like this. The year before they advanced to the national championship game the Mustangs were 5-6, the Mustangs' only losing season under Murphy. The juniors and redshirt sophomores, however, are experiencing something new. All they know, at least in an MWSU uniform, is success. Until the third week of this season they had never been on a team ranked outside the top ten in the nation. Perhaps they have learned how to win, but they have yet to learn how to bounce back from a loss. Although this version of the Mustangs is sprinkled with senior leadership, the relative youth and inexperience in certain positions – quarterback and running back most noticeably – may help to explain the struggles of this team.

Those involved in sports, from fans to coaches, enjoy discussing the experience of players and the perceived advantage it bestows on them. Because a senior has been on the team for several years they are assumed to have attained the attributes necessary to be better than they were as a freshman. If two players are seemingly of equal ability, an upperclassman is believed to hold an edge because they have 'been there before'. To my knowledge little empirical

evidence hints at the so-called experience factor holding true. Then again, football coaches and players alike, despite oftentimes obsessing over analytical details, will sometimes ignore the facts in favor of tradition.

“He’s a freshman, so get after his ass. This guy shouldn’t get a catch on you,” Morris says to Shaw as he wraps up the meeting. “You’ve played a lot of games in this uniform. Take pride in that.”

Add Morris to the list of believers in the experience factor.

It’s Friday and we have a full schedule of meetings, practice, travel, and more meetings. The special teams meeting that precedes practice starts with Murphy setting the tone for what he hopes to be a lighthearted and successful business trip. “It’s football, these guys should be having fun, even if we do suck,” he would tell me after the meeting.

“That is the worst beard I have ever seen,” Murphy tells Kevin McGuire. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Yeah, haven’t you seen Facebook, coach?” someone exclaims from the front of the room.

McGuire, the Mustang’s special team’s captain, recently entered into a relationship with someone his teammates have deemed, “a *hottie*.” Murphy, having heard through the grapevine of this, decided to let McGuire know that he knew.

Moving on from McGuire, the head coach then goes in on James Holland. “You get special team’s player of the week and you think you can be late?” Murphy says as Holland walks a couple minutes early. “Everyone boo him.”

The team obliged with an extended, facetious boo.

Finally, after a few clips of film, Murphy decides to land one final comedic insult directed at his wide receiver, Lucas Day. “This is bad here, you gotta stay on your feet to make a play. No feet means you are defeated,” Murphy said before delivering the punch line. “I put nursery rhymes together for people like you, Day, so that you can understand it. I make it easy on you.”

As it always would on Friday afternoons, practice started with Polish Football. For the first time all season I joined a game and proceeded to display the lack of athleticism that I am constantly reminded of in my chosen profession. My team split the two games I played despite my best efforts to sabotage them. Thankfully, they did not patronize me, adequately making fun of my abilities as they would any of their teammates. Because of it I feel both worse about my athletic talents and closer to the team. I’ll take it.

Murphy’s good mood carried over to practice where he decided to make a wager with McGuire: If the team has any penalties or dropped balls today, McGuire would be subject to 200 yards of Mustang Reminders. If the team completes practice without a single penalty or drop, McGuire could wear tights the rest of the year. The ability to wear tights under their uniform is a big deal to these guys -- in part to protect what would otherwise be exposed skin from turf-burn but mostly for aesthetic purposes. Murphy refuses to allow them to wear tights during practice regardless of the weather because “We are football players, not ballerinas.” The bet raises the stakes for McGuire and raises the energy level of the entire team. Without a doubt today’s practice is the most lively I have seen this season. The Mustangs are loose heading into their matchup against Lakeview despite the likelihood that a loss would end their hopes of making the playoffs.

Unfortunately for McGuire, Connor Armstrong drops a kickoff. Fortunately for McGuire, Murphy offers him double-or-nothing and he accepts. With the help of borrowed gloves, a hat, and sunglasses, Armstrong makes the catch and is promptly mobbed by his teammates. McGuire is absent from the celebration, left on his knees on the sidelines thanking a higher power that he is not subject to 400 yards of Mustang Reminders.

Shirt and ties are the attire for the flight. “We always get compliments from the flight staff for the way we dress,” Murphy tells me on the way to the airport. “We do that for a reason.”

Traveling with the Mustangs is a stress-free endeavor for everyone except my wife. I do my best to stay out of her way as I board the plane. She runs around with her hair on fire, cell phone perpetually attached to her right ear. I find my seat, 6C on the aisle, and watch as the players file in behind me. Murphy has already boarded. He sits in the back row of the plane because, “I like to make them nervous.” The high energy mood of practice just an hour ago is replaced with silence. Large headphones cover the ears of most of the team that will be asleep within minutes of finding their seat.

Upon landing we spend a half hour loading and boarding the buses before taking off for the hotel. There are rumblings among the team that some of the guys are planning a late night trip to the casino across the street from the hotel. Nobody was able or willing to confirm to me the next morning if these plans came to fruition.

As the season has worn on the coaches start to recruit me to sit in on their meetings. Tonight I choose defense despite the best efforts of Coach Buck. Coach Grant is relatively mellow tonight, which is typical for a Friday night film session. This time is used mostly for

review and to keep guys from doing something irresponsible, such as blowing money at the casino.

“I don’t care if you get beat for a long pass,” Coach Grant tells the team as I wonder where he is going with this statement. “But nobody on this team will ever give up on a play. We expect great fucking effort on every fucking play.” The play that momentarily fired Grant up is from the Lakeview versus Northern Tech game in which a Northern Tech defender appears to give up on a play. Many times during this season I have seen Grant and other coaches get on players for missed assignments or mental errors. There is a noticeable difference between those types of outbursts and the “butt-chewings” received by players for a perceived lack of effort.

Being a football team, the Mustang’s daily schedule revolves around eating. Following their meetings, the players head to the lobby for their late-night snack. What they call a snack is a full-blown meal for most. Every type of deli meat imaginable, four types of cheeses, pasta salad, cookies, and brownies cover the buffet style table. The five senior offensive linemen arrive first and promptly make fun of themselves for being the fat kids. Each player makes their way through the line with one or two to-go boxes, reminding me of kids on Halloween night.

The steaks that Coach Cobb has been talking up do not disappoint the following morning. Reverend Gordon, finally given a win from which to draw content, urges the team to not give into negative temptations, but rather to insert positive influences into their lives. For the first time in four weeks the Mustangs are not finding their way through a forest or battling the wicked winds of a storm.

“This may be the last flight this team ever makes together tonight. I want to be celebrating on it.”

Murphy has drawn upon this narrative recently, hoping to raise the urgency, particularly among the seniors. Coach Murphy's good mood would deflate rather quickly as the Mustangs fell behind early 17-7 following the first quarter. The Hawks would inflate their lead to 24-7 early in the second quarter before MWSU finally caught their breath. Ten straight points to close the half cut the lead to 24-17.

Two things that football coaches hate would contribute to Coach Murphy's nightmare of a second half: turnovers and officials. The Mustangs would go on to outgain Lakeview by over 100-yards. In every facet of the game they were superior to the Hawks apart from the final score. Two fumbles inside the five-yard line sprinkled with some questionable calls would translate into a 27-24 loss. The final whistle perfectly captured the emotion of Murphy, who by that point was boiling over like a teapot.

"When you are fucking undisciplined in your personal life this is what happens!" Randy screamed at his team, enraged mostly by the two fumbles but also taking his frustration with the referees out on his team. "You won this fucking game. You did. But you fucking blew it. If you are undisciplined in life, you will be undisciplined in football."

Murphy stormed out of the locker room as the players remained in silence. After some time, what I assume to be a defensive player yelled at no one in particular although the offense was the obvious target, "What the fuck is wrong with you guys!?" Tempers flared but it diminished quickly. The team, now sitting at 3-5, was likely just eliminated from playoff contention. All of the frustrations of the season had finally reached a boiling point with this loss.

I waited near the bus and chatted with Coach Floyd, who rarely allowed his emotions to run too high or drop too low. Even today was no exception. In one-on-one conversations Floyd is soft-spoken to the extent that I struggle to hear him at times. When coaching I can hear his

booming voice from the opposite side of the weight room. This afternoon we both speak in hushed tones as if we worry about someone dropping in on our conversation.

“How do you recover from this?” I ask him, half hoping for consolation but also legitimately interested in his response.

“We’ve been here long enough to have established a program, a foundation, and when things don’t go your way you have to lean on that and know that the program is in place and that you can sustain this and recover from this.”

“But how do you keep guys from giving up on the season?” I push.

“That’s all part of the program. These are proud guys. Trust me, nobody in that room wants to lose a football game. We built this program on toughness and that doesn’t just show by running people over and playing when you’re hurt and lifting heavy weight. It shows when you are tough enough to show up and practice hard because it’s what we do. It’s what you do as a Mustang. You show toughness by caring enough to set a positive example for those that will come after you because that’s what those before you did. That’s what we hope for at least. Let’s face it, we aren’t Canyon Ridge. We might have seasons like this, but it won’t last long. I wouldn’t be surprised to see this team bounce back this season.”

Eastview State University Cardinals (Game 9)

Murphy had yet to cool off by Sunday morning. As I typed up my notes in the team meeting room I heard him erupt in the defensive staff room across the hall.

“We fucking kicked their ass! We gave it away!”

The rest of the defensive coaching staff sat in silence. The offensive staff room door was closed but they no doubt heard the outburst. It was, for all intents and purposes, directed at them. As the offense continued to struggle throughout the season Murphy had made it known his

displeasure with their inefficiency. He was the one that encouraged a move on the offensive line. He too has been critical of the lack of production from their receivers and the at times poor decision-making from Kolten Burke. Now two fumbles had effectively lost them a road game and cost them a shot at the playoffs.

Both the offensive coaches and players felt that at times Murphy was unfairly harsh on them. The defense *had* allowed 24 first half points to Lakeview, digging the team into a deep hole. Yet the blame fell squarely on the shoulders of the offensive side of the ball.

“Coach is always all over our ass for pretty much everything,” Conor Daniel told me earlier in the season.

It was less a complaint as simply a matter of fact statement, as though it had just become a way of life for the offense. I may recognize the minor subtleties in Murphy’s demeanor towards the offense more than others because of the nature of my assignment. Small things such as referring to the offense as “you guys” and the defense as “us” catch my attention. I find it hard to believe that these coaches – who obsess over the smallest of details – miss these subtleties.

As the season wears on, the type of season the Mustangs had never envisioned occurring, Murphy’s attention to the offense has grown. He sits in on offensive staff meetings, spends more time on the offensive side of the field in practice, and has dedicated more time in staff meetings to that side of the ball. Today, after the Mustangs allowed a winnable game slip through their fingers, Murphy dismisses the defensive coaches after the staff meeting, leaving just himself and the offensive staff, and closes the door. His message to the offensive coaches is simple: In his words, “something must change or something will change.”

Murphy kicked off the full team meeting with a one-word sentence: “Dependability.” He looked around the room for a while. The level of frustration shown on the faces of the players could be gauged by their location in the room. The seniors, seated in the front row, appeared either ready to cry or scream in anger. The freshmen, most of whom have yet to see the field this season, were mostly indifferent. Many of them laughed and joked as they entered the meeting while those who played a role in the game on Saturday entered in silence.

“When you love somebody and are part of a family, like we are a football family, those people count on you. You’re teammates count on you. The coaches count on you. When we can’t count on you, that’s when things like yesterday happen.”

Most weeks during this Sunday full-team meeting the coaching staff half-heartedly listens or wanders back to their office to continue watching the film they had started earlier in the morning. Today, each one is locked in on Murphy, taking in his every word as if they understand it is directed at them as much as the players.

Murphy concluded his speech by demanding that someone step up as a leader on and off the field. “We must continue to fight. We can still finish with a winning record. Who knows what can happen, but we can’t do that unless we focus this week in practice and take care of business in the game in front of us. Somebody needs to come forward as a leader and put their foot in the ground and say ‘This shit stops here.’ If it’s gonna be, it’s gonna be me.”

Talking with Randy later that evening he had finally begun to cool down from the loss. “This is still a dangerous team,” he would tell me. I could tell he was baffled as to how they found themselves at 3-5 overall and 1-4 in the conference. “We can beat anybody in the country. If we play well we can win this game.” The biggest concern for a head coach during a season like this is losing his team. With the playoffs now a long shot, there is admittedly not much to

play for in their final three games. A winning record would certainly help ease the pain of a difficult season, but with such high hopes heading into the year the team already seems defeated.

To the left of the reception desk in the Wright Football Complex stand two mannequins. One is dressed in the Mustangs all white road uniform and the other in an all red home uniform. On the table between them is the national runner-up trophy from two seasons ago, rings from their back-to-back Midwestern championships, some football cleats, and gloves. “Recruits love all the flash, they want to see what kind of gear they get to wear when they come here,” Coach Grant says in reference to the exhibit. To the left of the mannequins is an enormous banner that previously hung in Frisco, Texas at the site of the national championship game between the Mustangs and the Warriors. Beneath the banner is an l-shaped black leather couch with the Mustangs logo stitched into the cushions.

Behind the mannequins are three framed jerseys. They are the only three players to be honored in the Mustang football hall of fame. Quinn Jenkins, Kieran Thomas, and Adam Jackson. Their framed jerseys are barely visible behind the mannequins and the display set up between them displaying the Mustangs recent accomplishments and current gear. To me, the message is clear: The past is the past, focus on the present. This message applies to several pertinent cases. For one, the Mustangs football history is far from spectacular. The previous half-decade has been undoubtedly the most successful in school history. Murphy rarely mentions the tradition of MWSU football because he believes that they are currently in the process of *creating* MWSU’s football tradition. Further, the message is relevant to the current season and the position the Mustangs find themselves in at this very moment. “There is no use dwelling on

those games,” Coach Murphy told his team following their most recent loss, “the present is all we can control.”

Early in the week the Mustangs remained stuck in the past. Tempers flared during Tuesday’s practice when Alfonso Henson, the running back who fumbled twice against Lakeview, fumbled again during practice. Nathan and Hondo berated him, “Hold onto the fucking ball!” A few plays later, well after the whistle blew the play dead, defenders were still pulling on the ball trying to pry it from Henson’s hands. This led to a scrum that nobody, including the coaches, seemed too keen on breaking up.

Around the office the silence is deafening. Coaches walk through the hallways on tiptoes, afraid to make a sound. Most of them are, by necessity due to their profession, loud people. On rare occasion I will spend more than ten minutes in the Wright complex without hearing the booming voice of a member of the staff. On the practice field, however, they are their normal selves, if not a bit fierier. The only thing they hate more than losing is being embarrassed. After losing five of their last six, they feel embarrassed. Their solution is simple. According to Coach Buck, “We gotta win this game. For my sanity, we better win this game.”

Football coaches are notoriously insane. As the head coach at Nebraska, Bo Pelini once wrestled a recruit in his living room to prove his toughness. We all know the story of legendary Ohio State coach Woody Hayes punching Clemson’s Charlie Bauman during the 1978 Gator Bowl. Finally, maybe the craziest of them all is Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh, who has been known to walk into team meetings with a samurai sword in one hand and a shovel in the other and proclaim, “With one hand we’ll fight, and with the other we’ll build!” While this level of insanity has yet to be reached within the MWSU program, the coaching staff is clearly reeling from their most recent loss.

Mustaches have been appearing on the upper lip of many students around campus this week, including some of the Mustang football players. Some are thick and burly, resembling true lumberjacks and pioneers, while others, such as Conor Daniel's, are less impressive. One theory put forth by, coincidentally, a man named Nigel Barber, suggests that mustached men appear more attractive to women. Barber arrived at this conclusion after data he collected showed a strong correlation between the number of males sporting mustaches and a perceived lack of 'available' women, calculated as the difference between currently single women to men. He contends that, due to a lack of single women, men decide to grow mustaches in an attempt to stand out and woo a possible mate. Another explanation for the increased mustaches on MWSU's campus is that this coming Saturday is the Murphy Stache Bash, an annual tailgate party intended to raise awareness for men's health.

Many players sport mustaches and give their best Coach Murphy impression after Thursday's practice, which at times has me on the verge of tears. Hayden Anderson incorporates Reggie as a prop in his impression, elevating him to the number one spot in my rankings, although Chuck was not far behind. Come game day the MWSU marketing staff will be handing out fake mustaches to every fan in attendance. Coach Murphy's mother-in-law, always the life of the party, refuses to take hers off until well after the game.

The Mustangs welcome to town the seventh ranked Eastview State Cardinals, the only conference team to defeat MWSU the previous season. The Cardinals recently knocked off Canyon Ridge in the Rogersdome, a rarely accomplished feat. "These guys are *goood*," Randy tells me, "Wait 'til you see their quarterback, receiver, and tight end. You'll wonder why they aren't playing for the Gophers." Their tight end is a surefire NFL prospect, all 6'5", 250 pounds

of him. The quarterback gave MWSU nightmares all game last year, scrambling on broken plays and finding receivers for timely first downs. For the Mustangs, this matchup seems to be coming at the wrong time. In a must-win game to keep hopes for a winning season alive, as well as a distant, remote shot at the playoffs, they are set to face possibly the best team in the conference.

Now in game nine of the season, between my chaotic travel schedule, work in Kansas, and research in Nebraska, I start to feel like a character in *Groundhog Day*. By design, game days for the Mustangs are repetitive and regimented, so much so that if not for my notebook I would struggle to keep track of these shortening fall days. Week after week, the team conducts the same meetings, eats the same meals, and walk through the same plays as the week previous. When someone asked him what time a meeting was, Coach Riggs responded, "It's been at the same time for the last eight years. You should know it by now." The routine allows the guys to stay focused on the task at hand. Rather than thinking about what comes next they can focus their attention on their opponent and their assignment. Coach Murphy rarely throws his team any curveballs. Schedules are regimented down to the minute and the team rarely deviates.

Today is more of the same. A 9:30 walk-through followed by 10:30 meal at McKinneys. Steak, eggs, hash browns, and spaghetti are on the menu once again. Offensive and defensive meetings occur at 11:40 followed by silent substitutions on the field. Afterward, the team heads to the locker room to finish preparations on their own. Coach Floyd and the assistant strength coaches can be heard yelling times into the locker room to announce to the guys when they must be dressed and on the field. They will enter the field and warm-up at a certain time based on their position group. Kickers and long-snappers first followed by quarterbacks and returners.

Athletes receive criticism when they compare their sport to war. Critics suggest that by doing so athletes trivialize the life or death reality of the battleground and minimize the heroic

efforts of the military. There is, however, a certain temptation to compare the two. Gathering a group of people together in an attempt to physically dominate their opponent could summarize either war or football. Throw in the tactical aspect of both and the comparison becomes that much easier. Mass media and big business marketing campaigns further encourage the comparison. Nike mass produces t-shirts with simply the word “Soldier” on the front. Apparel companies have even gone as far as dressing full teams in camouflage uniforms. Even if this is meant to honor our troops, the symbolism is conspicuous.

While I have never heard any MWSU coach directly compare the game of football to war, the program operates in a militaristic manner. Randy enjoys reading historical war books and watching war documentaries. He has studied the tactics and strategies of some of the great American war generals throughout history. So while he appreciates the distinction of sport and war, he has borrowed the tactics of one to teach the other. After all, leading a group of over one hundred 18-22 year old men would prove difficult without implementing some sort of strict regimen and militaristic discipline.

The Mustangs special teams personnel, known as special ops, even uses military language to distinguish their different units. Delta Force (Kickoff Return), Night Stalkers (Kickoff Coverage), Ghost Recon (Field Goal), Force Recon (Field Goal Block), Rangers (Punt Return), and Seals (Punt Coverage) make up the special teams units. Although many of the players occupying these teams will rarely play offensive or defensive snaps, they take pride in executing their assignments in hopes of one day attaining a starting position. Great attention and detail are paid to special ops by the coaching staff despite only making up a handful of each game’s plays. Each week their goal is to win the ‘battle of hidden yardage,’ referring to yardage

gained or lost as a result of special teams play. So far, this season and throughout Murphy's tenure with the Mustangs, they are among the best in the league. Today would be no exception.

The Mustangs started fast against the high-powered Cardinals, scoring touchdowns on their first two possessions to take a 14-0 lead. Following the first touchdown a wave swept the sideline that seemed to transform the team back into the one that beat Summit earlier in the season. Through the first six games of the season the Mustangs had managed to score a total of just ten first quarter points. With 14 today both sides of the ball felt rejuvenated.

Following the second touchdown Sawyer Hayden sprinted off the field screaming, "This is who we are! This is who we can be!"

As the defense prepared to take the field with a 14-0 lead several of them encouraged the offense to keep it up. "All day," Flynn Shaw shouted, "Don't take your foot off the pedal."

The camaraderie between offense and defense was greater during the first quarter than it had been all season. Whatever ill-will had been created and taken out over the past week appeared gone, or at least subdued. After Alfonso Henson rushed for a gain of four yards, Mustang defenders could be heard cheering him on from the sideline.

While the fast start was a positive sign, MWSU's response to adversity would tell the tale for this game. In all but one game this season the Mustangs have held a lead. In each of those games the Mustangs confidence was punctured once their opponent fought back.

"We haven't been able to respond to a scoring drive with a scoring drive of our own on offense. And on defense, we can't seem to string together enough stops in a row to gain momentum," Trystan would tell me, summarizing the team's inability to make the big play when they need it. "It's always one or the other. Last year we would follow up a big touchdown with a

strip sack or an interception and then be rolling. This year, we score and then we let them go down and score on us, or we get a stop and then we go three and out right away. It's frustrating."

Their first chance at combating adversity came early in the second quarter when the Cardinals took advantage of good field position and scored on a six-yard touchdown pass to their star wideout. With the score now 14-7, the Mustangs started their next possession on the 20-yard line, eighty yards to drive to match their score.

A systematic, ten-play drive that ended in a fourteen-yard Henry Johnson touchdown run made it clear that this team believed it could win. Facing the number seven team in the country, the Mustangs had built a 21-7 lead. With the defense unable to come up with a big stop that had plagued them all season, the lead shrunk back to seven before the offense answered again. The halftime score of 28-14 indicated that the offense had figured something out.

"That is how this offense should run every single game. Nobody can stop you when you play like that," Murphy would tell them at halftime. "Defense, let's help them out now. We've flipped the script a little bit."

Despite their coach's urgings, the defense came out flat to open the second half, allowing the Cardinals a relatively easy opening possession that would end in another touchdown pass caught by their NFL caliber receiver. Every person on the sideline and in the stands seemed to have the same reaction: *'Here we go again.'* The defense, however, had different thoughts. With the score now 28-21, they got together on the benches on the north end of the sideline.

"No more! Play with pride!" Chuck told his teammates, "We're better than this."

From there the defense stiffened and was able to come up with big plays that had been so elusive throughout the season. They forced two straight three and outs then Noah Barker intercepted a pass in the end zone at the start of the fourth quarter. A Mustang field goal pushed

the lead to ten before the Cardinals were driving again, this time getting inside the MWSU 20-yard line. An Arthur Wood sack followed by another interception, this time by Blaze Meyers that was returned 92 yards for a touchdown, would seal the deal. The offense only mustered up three second half points, but the defense would not concede another point after EVSU's opening drive of the half, and contribute seven of their own. The total team effort, truly their first of the year, pumped life back into the team and re-opened the playoff conversation.

“This is what this team can do. This is what this team is capable of when we play together. There are two games left in the regular season. The *regular season*,” Coach Murphy repeated, adding emphasis to it the second time around. “That is how we must play the rest of the way to give ourselves a chance.”

@ West Grove University Spartans (Game 10)

The Econolodge in Jackson, Nebraska does not have Wi-Fi, gets five channels to the 19-inch tube television, and offers two deadbolts, which does little to ease your mind. I know these things because I had the pleasure of spending the night after my Jeep refused to drive another mile. The belt tensioner had completely worn down from the thousands of miles of use over the past few months. Because it was a Sunday night there were no options for mechanic services, which sealed my Econolodge fate. A week and a half later I still found myself trying to kick the head cold that resulted from my stay.

Coach Murphy's message this week has been *effort*, *energy*, and *enthusiasm*, of which I lacked due to the congestion in my head, but the team boasted thanks to their recent victory. Even with the win, the Mustangs were still just 2-4 in conference play and 4-5 overall. However, two of their four victories had come against either a SEC team or a top ten FCS team, which combined with the reputation gained over the past two seasons kept their playoff hopes alive.

“At the very least, I want to finish the season strong, get a winning record that we can hang our hats on, and see what happens,” Nathan would say.

After my stay at the Econolodge, it was a quick turnaround – more of a pit stop in Kansas than anything – before heading back to Nebraska. This week brought another tall task for the Mustangs, which would work to their advantage if they could pull out another victory. We were headed down the road to play the West Grove Spartans, the twelfth-ranked team in the country. “These guys are like us,” Murphy told me. “They are tough, they take pride in being the tougher team and running the ball and playing defense.”

“What do you call a deer with no eyes?” asked Blaze Meyers as we waited for the special team’s meeting to start. He looked around with a grin on his face waiting for a response.

“I have no *eye-deer*,” responded Owen Fox, “And I’m sick of that shitty joke.”

Blaze chuckled to himself but was quickly cut off by Murphy starting the meeting. There would be no easing into this meeting.

“This is shitty effort here,” he said as the first clip of film played on a portable projector screen. He was referencing the scout team, who was not present in the room, but that failed to temper his anger. “If the scout team guys don’t want to work then go run their ass over.”

Murphy is in a great mood but won’t let his team see it. The team practiced as well this week as they have all season, but he continues to find details to nitpick. Their win over Eastview State healed some of the wounds that were opened the week prior against Lakeview. Although Murphy refused to show it, he felt good about the way his team was playing. They had dominated Lakeview despite walking away with a loss, and had just soundly beaten the number

seven team in the country. The players, too, seemed to have gained confidence and energy from the win. Seemingly everyone was in a great mood Thursday after practice except Elliot Burke.

Undoubtedly, Elliot receives the most criticism on the team. Coaches and players alike voice their displeasure with him over the smallest mistakes. However, nobody places more pressure on him than himself. By most standards, Thursday's practice was solid, particularly for Burke. He looked sharp, confident, and as comfortable as he has all season.

Thursday's practice includes a 2-minute drill session of first team offense versus first team defense. Within this two-minute drill came Burke's only hiccup of the day, a mental lapse that ended in a sack. The two-minute drill practices have frustrated Burke all season despite executing a near flawless two-minute drill to beat Summit. "I've never been happy leaving here on Thursday, but then I just go to Fiesta, get a burrito and I'm all good," he says. His attention to detail simultaneously allows him to be as good as he is at times while also handcuffing him as his body attempts to catch up with his mind.

Before Friday's practice I had a chance to redeem myself after my poor showing in Polish Football, this time in Spike Ball. Teaming up with Chuck, I was at least able to show that I had been an athlete at one point in my life, although we still lost to the formidable duo of Cam Hawkins and Harrison Kaur. Friday Spike Ball games are lighthearted in comparison to Mondays, when about two dozen guys gather on their day off to play for hours at a time. Some of those games grow more intense than football practice in shoulder pads and helmets. Even outside of their sport these guys are as intense as they come. Cam, one of the most athletic 320-pound men I have ever seen, hates to lose more than he enjoys winning.

Each Friday the team runs through a series of scripted plays in every phase of the game: special teams, offense, and defense. Coach Floyd keeps track of ‘penalties’ committed by the team including substitution errors, dropped balls, bad snaps, and so on. Any of these mistakes counts against the team’s time for the week, which they will make up for by doing Mustang Reminders after Tuesday’s practice. The previous week prior to Eastview State had been their best yet this season. Today they managed to best that time despite several glaring penalties. Murphy compared their effort today to the entire season.

“Today was a microcosm of this team: Potential to be really good but one too many mistakes. Joe Maddon said when the Cubs were down three games to one that now is the time to panic. Well guess what, guys? Now is the time to panic for us. I would love to see what this team can do if we win our next two games and they let us in the playoffs. But we gotta win tomorrow. None of that happens without winning tomorrow. I want to win, but I don’t just want to win. I want to kick their ass. I want to kick their ass in their own stadium. That’s what this trip is all about.”

After detailing the schedule for the evening (shower, dinner, meetings, load the bus, snack at hotel, lights out) Murphy left the team to allow one of his players, whoever chose to step up, to have the final word.

Nathan stood in the middle of the huddle and said emphatically, “Win on two, one...two.”

“Win.”

Two interactions stand out to me from the Eastview State game. Following the Mustangs’ second touchdown, which put them ahead 14-0, Buck and Grant met near the 40-yardline and

pounded their fists together. Later in the game after Blaze Meyer's returned interception for a touchdown, essentially sealing the victory, Goose and Grant embraced in a hug. The animosity between offense and defense during the Mustangs losing streak extended beyond just the players. Coaches exchanged words across the two sides and grew frustrated when the other would underperform. In my opinion, it was the tension between the coaches that allowed the players to cross the line and point fingers. While no coach blamed the other side for the team's struggles, several made it clear their frustrations, oftentimes in front of the team. These positive, although seemingly insignificant interactions, marked a turning point in the season.

In the defensive meeting that night Coach Grant told his defense, "The offense will do their job and put points on the board, let's do ours and shut them down. Make sure you take care of each other and hold each other accountable." The ability of the coaching staff to trust each other encouraged the players to do the same. While the divide between offense and defense only revealed itself on a few occasions, the tension between the sides could be felt. It is often said that '*Time heals all wounds*'. In the Mustang's case, '*Winning heals all wounds*' as a noticeable difference existed in the interactions between offensive and defensive players and coaches following their big win last Saturday.

As was tradition, Burke ate breakfast this game day morning at a table with the five senior offensive lineman. Backup quarterback, Harrison sat with the backup offensive lineman making the trip. Gage Booker, the senior lineman removed from the starting lineup following the Grand Mountain State game, did not allow his demotion to affect anything outside of the playing field. His seniority outranks the fact that he is no longer starting. As Coach Buck had asked when the move was made, Booker has refused to mope around, opting rather to make the most of the

situation and help the team when he can. Seeing them interact at breakfast this morning one would be hard pressed to detect the turmoil that the unit has been through this season.

Murphy has entered game day mode, where nonsense is not tolerated. As he walks into breakfast two players have headphones around their neck and another has on a hat. “Take your headphones off, it’s a team rule. It’s right there on your itinerary,” he says, referencing the weekly itinerary that has fifteen team rules detailed across two pages. “And take your fucking hat off too.”

The trek from the visitor’s locker room at West Grove to Hanson Field, home of the Spartans, covers approximately a quarter of a mile. The team must alter their pregame warm-up times to accommodate for the extended time needed to reach the field. Such deviation from the script adds to Murphy’s agitation. Their entire pregame routine felt rushed; by the time they entered the locker room after warmups, Murphy hardly had time to talk to his team about the three T’s, *Tempo, Technique, and Toughness*, before they had to return to the field. As we entered the stadium the pregame clock struck zero and the captains had to hustle out to midfield for the coin toss. Thankfully, none of this prevented the Mustangs from once again getting off to a fast start.

For the second straight week the first quarter ended with the score 14-0. “I thought we were gonna blow them out after the way we started,” Murphy said afterwards. A Spartan field goal and punt return for a touchdown got them back in the game, unfortunately, in large part to some key mistakes by the Mustangs. Murphy thought back to the talk he had given his team the previous evening on their own field. The Mustangs were thoroughly dominating West Grove, but a few costly miscues prevented a blowout. Midwest State would make the long walk back to the locker room with a slight 21-16 advantage.

“We should be beating this team by three touchdowns,” Murphy told them before they took the field to start the second half. “Who is gonna be tough enough to take this game over? Who’s it gonna be?”

As they walked back to the field many coaches took the added time as an opportunity to coach up their players. Humphy walked with some linebackers, discussing defensive adjustments while Coach Solis talked with his defensive backs. These coaches seize any opening to impart their knowledge on their players whether they ask for it or not. After Coach Morris finishes explaining an adjustment they might make in the secondary to his freshman, Leon Jenkins, Noah Barker sneaks in and asks, “Hey, what did he just tell you?”

“I dunno,” Leon responds as he shrugs his shoulders.

The second half is full of penalties from both sides, sloppy play, and general slovenliness, but in the end the scoreboard favors the Mustangs for the second week in a row over a top-15 team. The Spartans come out fighting, trimming the MWSU lead to 21-19 with a field goal on their first possession. In a sign that the Mustangs would not go away, the offense marched right back down the field and expanded their lead on a Burke 7-yard touchdown pass to Aaron Lowe.

“Way to go offense! Way to respond,” Nathan yelled out as the offense came back to the sideline. “We needed that.” What a difference a week makes. As Henson trotted off the field Hondo is there to greet him with a slap on the helmet. Ten days ago they were facemask-to-facemask on the practice field.

The final score is 31-26 in favor of the Mustangs as the two teams filter off the sideline to shake hands and reunite. Many of them are high school teammates or otherwise friends with players in the opposing uniforms. As I wander around the field I hear many of them ask about family and friends or reminisce with old memories. Before the game each team entered the

stadium amongst their own kind; as we exit, red and white jerseys intermingle with purple and gold ones for the quarter mile walk back to the locker rooms.

Coach Murphy catches up to me during the walk and, laughing, says, “It’s incredible how we can beat each other’s brains out for three and half hours, talk trash, yell names at each other, and then after the game we are all buddy-buddy.” We laugh about the absurdity of the game for a bit and as we enter the locker room he comes to the conclusion, “Yeah, we’re all a little nuts.”

The scene in the locker room proves his statement correct. They calm down just long enough for Murphy to tell them how proud he is of them for staying the course this season. The offensive line then leads a majority of the team in a karaoke rendition of Pearl Jam’s ‘I’m Still Alive’ referencing their suddenly growing playoff hopes. Another section of the locker room chants the name of a popular bar back on campus, referencing their intentions to visit the establishment upon arrival back home. I decide that I have worn out my welcome when Ace sprints at me full speed in the nude on his way to the showers.

It is nearly dark by the time we board the bus for our two-hour trip back to Chester. Murphy is already aboard when I climb into Bus 1. He is obviously in a better mood than this morning. We briefly discuss his team’s playoff chances, of which he says, “I’ll tell you what, I don’t know if they are gonna let us in or not, but I wouldn’t want to play us right now. Nobody wants to see our name on their side of the bracket.”

Big Valley State University Knights (Game 11)

The Big Valley State Knights have resided in the basement of the Midwestern for several years. A new coach, however, has begun to change their fortunes and Murphy has taken notice.

“We gotta get their attention fast this week,” Murphy told his staff Sunday morning. “This team is way better than last year. As coaches, we gotta be smart about this and let them know that this is a completely different team.”

The Knights, who went winless in the conference last year and won a single game overall, have improved their overall record to 4-6 and 2-4 within the Midwestern Conference. Big Valley State has additionally put up strong fights in several other contests including a recent three-point loss to West Grove. Ollie Holmes, the Knights’ second-year coach, tweeted just before their game against the Mustangs, *Keep digging, you never know how close you are...Never give up on your dreams.*

At the moment the Mustangs’ dreams consist of crushing the Knights’ dreams and in turn giving themselves a fighting chance at the FCS playoffs. Even with a win the possibility of a playoff bid is unlikely, but compared to where they stood three weeks ago the Mustangs were at least cautiously optimistic. Following the early season highs and mid-season lows the team was finally playing loose and free as if they now had nothing to lose. To epitomize their mindset moving forward after their 3-5 start the offense had established a new chant for breaking the huddle. As Tuesday’s practice started the offense broke as Sawyer called out, “Fuck it on two, one...two.”

“Fuck it.”

As a unit the offense had engineered this chant with the intention of fostering a more pressure free environment. Following the Summit win several players admitted that thoughts of an undefeated season started creeping into their minds. After turning around and losing the following week at home the pressure to get back on track grew each week. “To me, our biggest problem this year is that we got too high and low,” Floyd would tell me. “We beat Summit and

they got really high and you see what happened after that. Then we lose a few in a row, get really low, and can't get out of it. I think now we realize that and can control our emotions throughout the week much better.”

Coach Floyd is undoubtedly the steadying force throughout this program. Each Sunday three groups of players – split into freshman, offense, and defense -- come in for workouts. Regardless of the outcome from the game the day before, Coach Floyd's demeanor never changes for these sessions. While being as competitive as they come, he does not allow losses to affect the end goal of this program, which, as he puts it, is to “turn boys to men.”

“The biggest thing I have learned from Canyon Ridge,” he tells me, although it clearly pains him to give them credit, “is that they are steady. They don't get too up or too down. I watched them at the national championship game two years ago. Archer went down and scored with a minute and half left to give us the lead, but you look at their sideline and they hardly react.” As we talk on the Hughes Stadium field he moves over to a yardline and mimics the Warriors coaches and players on the sideline during that moment. “Nobody is yelling or screaming, they are just getting ready for the next possession.”

In life, Coach Floyd is always ready for the next possession. His goal is to make sure these young men are as well.

The first thing I noticed as I climbed into Jayden Velez's rusted out Ford Explorer was a picture of his family, all dressed in Mustangs gear, his mom wearing one of his jerseys.

“Is your family making it to the game tomorrow?” I ask.

“Oh yeah, the whole crew is making the trip,” he responds with pride in his voice.

Tomorrow is Senior Day and it is impossible to prepare for the emotions that come with the possibility of playing your last football game. Jayden attempts to suppress his emotions by holding out hope for a playoff invite or a chance at professional football next spring, but still struggles to cope with the reality that his days in a Mustang jersey are numbered. “It’ll be weird when I don’t have to go to meetings, practices, and weights anymore,” he tells me. “It’s been a great ride.”

We are heading across town to his barber shop in order for him to get his pregame cut. Aside from a couple of sideways glances, I feel right at home as we enter Empire Barbershop. Two separate sports debates fill the shop as one patron suggests that Ezekiel Elliot will go down as the best running back of all time, while a few younger kids argue over the better player: Steph Curry or Kevin Durant. I offer my two cents but mostly enjoy the aura of this old school barber shop. Jayden, an avid Giants fan, disagrees vehemently with the Cowboys fan in the room but doesn’t say anything. He avoids confrontation except when on the field. Later in the offensive line meeting, Coach Buck will tell him to “get damn fucking nasty with this guy,” but I can’t imagine Jayden even raising his voice when not in shoulder pads and a helmet.

Jayden is confident about the game tomorrow, as are most of his teammates, but that won’t stop him from watching some last minute film of his opponent. As we watch the Knights’ early season game against the Warriors, which they managed to keep close at least for a while, Jayden offers me details on each of their defensive linemen.

“They have a couple of long, athletic guys that aren’t real strong,” he says. “Then they have big, slow guys that are harder to push around.”

I ask him which one he will line up against most of the time.

“This guy,” he shows me with the laser pointer. “He’s a freshman, he’ll be a pretty good player.”

“Do you get excited when you line up against a freshman?” I ask.

“Hell yeah, cause there’s so much shit that they just don’t know yet that you can take advantage of. As a senior, especially on senior day, you take pride in dominating a freshman.”

Jayden and I talk through another fifteen minutes of film – by this point in the season I feel almost competent during sessions like this – before falling silent. Another ten minutes pass during which we watch film of the Knights from several of their past games. As I reflect on my last days as a student-athlete over five years ago and consider the types of emotions these seniors must be going through, I realize that as the season comes to an end so too does my time being so closely involved with this team. While Jayden watches the Knights play Western State I search online for the so-called *expert’s* opinions of the Mustangs’ playoff chances. I do so in hopes of finding evidence that their season would not end the next day, meaning that my excuse to hang around the guys would be extended. I fail to find the answers I am looking for so I ignore the experts and try to remain optimistic.

“We’ve made some good strides the last couple of weeks,” Coach Murphy told his team during their final meeting Friday night. “Let’s keep that going. Tomorrow could be the last game of the season. I don’t think it will be, but play like it is. Let’s get after their ass tomorrow from the start. Offense, start like you’ve been doing the last two weeks. Defense, gotta play fast and tackle tomorrow. Special teams, win the battle of hidden yardage. Let’s send these seniors out the right way.”

The Mustangs know they must not only win but win convincingly tomorrow in order to convince the selection committee of their place in the playoff bracket. In the locker room after beating West Grove, Murphy told his team that their magic number was 21, as in they must win by at least 21 points. Tonight, following the offensive meeting, Coach Cobb tells his side of the ball, “We are going to score a lot of points tomorrow. We will not let off the pedal.”

Kickoff is scheduled for noon, the Mustangs earliest game of the year, resulting in an early wakeup call Saturday morning. After rolling out of bed at a little after five I was quickly thrust into dog duty. Kirby and Reggie had managed to find a mud patch in the backyard and were now keen on greeting Randy, dressed in his lucky game day suit, at the back door. Despite the early hour the Murphy house was fully awake. Two dog baths and two cups of coffee later, Randy, Molly, and I were out the door and on the way to Hughes Stadium for possibly the last time this season.

These weekly car rides contribute greatly to this project. Twenty minutes of valuable time with the head coach is hard to come by even if I live under his roof five days a week. It is now that I can get the treasured information that will provide meaning and context to the inner workings of this football program.

Today the groundbreaking progress I make consists of a better understanding of the history of Pearl Jam and their lead singer, Eddie Vedder. Randy likes to quiz us on our knowledge of Classic Rock history, so when *Black* is playing as his Chevy Impala starts up he tests us.

“Who is this?” he asks.

“Black, Pearl Jam, Ten,” I answer confidently.

In response Randy claims, “This is probably the greatest grunge album of all time.” He then asks if we have heard the recent song that Eddie Vedder wrote to commemorate the Cubs World Series victory. Of course we have because he has played it for us no less than a dozen times since the Cubs clinched the Series in Game 7 a week earlier. My research is progressing nicely.

Throughout the season I eventually grew accustomed to eating steak for breakfast, but steak at 6am pushed the envelope a bit too far for my liking. Pregame conversations at the A table were wide ranging but nearly always circled back to the same subject: football. Today, Cobb and Grant harass me about the Jayhawks losing to the Hoosiers in their first basketball game the night before. I had predicted a KU victory and a big game for stud freshman Josh Jackson, who turned in a lackluster nine points in the defeat. The first thing I hear from Coach Buck is, “He stinks!”

“The sign of a good basketball coach is how much they improve between now and February or March,” Murphy chimes in.

“Izzo is the best at that,” Morris responds, referencing Michigan State’s hall of fame coach. “They’ll start the year 2-5 and then come out of nowhere and go to the Final Four.”

Three people at the A table have ties to Southern State – Coach Murphy, Cobb, and Morris – so naturally the conversation tends to drift that direction more often than not.

“I think the Jaguars could win the conference this year,” Coach Cobb proclaims, receiving mixed reviews from the table.

This comment opens the door for Southern State stories, which are always entertaining. They provide insight into how college football used to be and how much things have changed.

Earlier in the season after two Mustangs picked up drinking tickets and got off easy with some Mustang Reminders, Coach Solis suggests, “If this was the 80’s you’d be asked to come into coaches’ office and they’d shut the door behind you, if you know what I mean.”

“Back in the day we had some *real* tough guys,” Randy says. “Too many guys in football nowadays are fake tough.”

“There were some *rough* guys when I first got to Southern State,” Cobb tells us. The former Sunshine Bowl MVP says, “I stayed out of the way my freshman year, I didn’t want to get the shit beat out of me.”

“The toughest guy we had was Zaid Burton,” claims Randy. Zaid would go on to play nine seasons in the NFL for four different teams and appeared in the 2012 Super Bowl for the Patriots. “He got in so many fights,” he says, laughing.

Murphy tells us a story from Zaid’s freshman year of a conversation he had with Coach Wright.

Murphy: “Hey coach, Zaid got arrested last night.”

Wright: “What’d he do?”

Murphy: “Got in a fight, beat someone up.”

Wright: “Good, sounds like you might have a player on your hands.”

“I had to go bail his ass out of jail,” Murphy tells us. “I thought I was gonna get fired. Coach Wright was happy about it!”

The chairs in the large meeting room in the Wright building were still arranged in rows from their morning meetings when the Mustang offense gathered for their pregame walkthrough. The seniors got to work, savoring their last days of football by stacking the chairs around the perimeter of the room, a job that was normally reserved for underclassmen and student coaches. I stand in the corner as the offensive starters go through their script. Next door Coach Grant can be

clearly heard giving an impassioned speech to the defense. A few offensive players look at each other and laugh. “He’s fucking crazy,” one of them says.

It was another beautiful day for football – by kickoff temperatures would be in the sixty’s with the sun shining and just a slight breeze. We had, miraculously, made it through the season without playing a game in rain, sleet, or snow. I got the sense as I talked with Floyd on the field that he was at least mildly disappointed by that.

Buck, Floyd, and I stood near the twenty-yard line closest to the Mustang’s locker room and watched the redshirts walk one by one up the ramp and through the glass doors into the Wright Football Complex. Each one would prompt a new discussion on their value moving forward.

“He’s gonna be good, tough son of a bitch,” Buck would say.

“That kid loves to work. He wants to get better,” said Floyd about a linebacker.

“This will be a big spring for him,” Buck comes back about one of his lineman as he crosses the field behind the north end zone. “First fifteen practices we will know if he is a starter or a lifetime backup.”

Buck gets animated when one freshman walks by. “He could be so good but he’s too pretty. He’s too good looking to be a lineman.” He gets in an athletic stance, impersonating a blocking lineman. “You’re gonna get hit in the face! Bend your knees, lock your jaw, and get back in there. Nathan was begging him to fight him this week in practice and he turned and walked away. Motherfucker he gave you the chance!”

After getting worked up Buck walks away, still steaming. I ask Floyd if he thinks we’ll get in with a win today. His answer is quick and to the point.

“No.”

We watch the kickers warm-up while standing side by side in silence, both preparing for the season to end in a few hours regardless of the outcome.

Murphy kept his pregame speech short, getting to the point and allowing time for the seniors to reflect.

“This is gonna be a great way to send out our seniors. Let’s go out there and kick their ass.”

The entire team formed a tunnel covering nearly forty yards onto the field as the seniors and their parents lined up and prepared to make their way through it. By the time the seniors exit the locker room many of them have red puffy eyes. One by one their names are called over the loudspeaker along with some of their accomplishments on and off the field. Based solely on wins it is among the most prolific senior class ever to don the red and white. With their parents by their side and teammates lining the way, the last thing most of them think about is the 33 total wins they have accumulated over the last four years. “I thought about my guys, hanging after games, chillin’ between meetings and practice in the locker room. That’s what I’ll miss,” Jayden told me.

Once the game starts and their eyes clear the Mustangs get down to business. A lackluster first quarter finds MWSU’s lead only 3-0 despite completely dominating the Knights in every aspect of the game. They pick it up in the second quarter and take a 20-0 lead into halftime.

Murphy’s halftime message to the team was clear: “Show no mercy,” he told his team. “I want to score on the first possession out of the half and stay after their ass until the whistle blows.”

The first possession of the half did not end in a score, rather it ended in an ugly three and out highlighted by dropped passes and missed blocks. When the offense got back to the sideline

Sebastian gathered them into a huddle and delivered another one of his patented emotional speeches.

“You young guys are playing selfish! This game is for the seniors. This game is for Jayden and Saw, and Booker, and Cam, and MC, and Harv, and Hay, and Gill, and ‘Henry, and BC.” He pointed at each offensive senior as he listed them off. The underclassmen started nodding their heads. Several young guys put their hands on the shoulders of the seniors.

“They’ve given everything to this program. Fight for them. Go beat this team by forty. Beat them by fifty. Put that on me! Prove me wrong!”

Hayden raised his fist in the middle of the huddle and said, “Fuck it on two ... one ... two.”

“Fuck it.”

The next two offensive possessions resulted in touchdowns, the first of which a fifty yard run by senior Henry Johnson. With the game well in hand the coaches went against their word and let off the pedal, substituting seniors for underclassmen or seldom used starters.

After the Mustangs final touchdown, Senior Freddie Saunders played his only snap of the season on the ensuing kickoff. He made the tackle.

Coach Solis sprinted forty yards down the sideline to hug him as he came off the field. Coach Watts cut off a conversation mid-sentence when he heard Saunders’ name announced over the loudspeaker. “Did my boy Freddie made that tackle?” he said as he made his way through the mob of players trying to greet Saunders off the field.

The five seniors along the offensive line were reunited as Gage Booker rejoined his teammates for the final offensive possession. After gaining a first down Coach Buck substituted five underclassmen in and the five seniors soaked in their walk together off the field for maybe

the last time. Buck met each of them before they got to the sideline and wrapped them in a hug. Hayden was first and each of the other waited for their moment with their coach.

Once back on defense, the three senior linebackers, Nathan, Hondo, and Taylor were given the same treatment. As Nathan trotted off the field he took his helmet off and lifted it in the air as he looked into the crowd. I glanced down the sideline and saw my wife wipe a tear from her eye.

As the final seconds drained from the clock, the score fixed at 37-0, Sebastian once again brought the offense together.

“This is not the end. Believe that we will get in. Everyone else is hoping that we don’t get in. If they let us in you better believe we are going all the way.”

When the game ended the team filtered off the sideline and made their way to the band in the northeast corner of the stadium to sing the fight song with the students who had come to support them.

Like his pregame speech, Murphy kept his postgame speech short. “I’m proud of this team for finishing the season this way,” he told them. “You showed just how tough you really are.” He didn’t mention the playoffs. “I just wanted the seniors to have that moment without having to think about getting in or not,” he told me afterwards. The fight song sounded louder and more enthusiastic as each of the seniors stood at the front of the locker room and led the team.

Some of the guys took their pads off, others didn’t waste the time before going back out on the field to meet their families. I lingered in the locker room longer than I had all season, soaking in the energy still pouring out of the team and reminiscing about the season that had come and gone far too quickly. I made my way upstairs to Coach Murphy's office and walked

out on his balcony to take in the scene below on the field. Randy joined me a few minutes later and did the same.

“After we went through that stretch I thought about how much it sucked that you picked this year to write about a winning culture,” he said to me after a couple of minutes. “But then we went on this run and I look back now and think about it. This is probably the best coaching job our guys have done since we have been here. To not lose them after losing four in a row, and then to bounce back and beat Eastview State after losing to Lakeview, these coaches deserve a ton of credit. And these guys are tough. People said we didn’t have great senior leadership when we were going through that rough stretch. I think they proved them wrong. This is a great group of players and leaders but they are just great guys. Man this season was frustrating at times but it is so rewarding to see them finish this way and fight back. I’m glad we could get a winning season for them, they deserve it.”

Discussion #6

Schein’s (1985) conceptualization of culture occurs at three different levels ordered based upon the extent to which the cultural phenomenon is visible to the observer. The three levels: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions, are observable to varying degrees dependent on the extent to which the individual is rooted in the cultural environment (Schein, 2010). Throughout the process of this ethnography, all three levels of culture became evidently clear. Even still, processing and discerning the complex nature of culture within Mustang football is a difficult and mostly subjective task. As with this entire analysis, my own past experiences and beliefs are central to my perception of the Mustang culture. Additionally, the extent to which I was able to embed myself with the program allowed

me to discern some of the cultural artifacts, symbols, and rituals that may have appeared foreign or indiscernible to outsiders. Schein (2010) offers,

Some culture analysts argue that among the artifacts, you find important symbols that reflect deep assumptions of the culture, but symbols are ambiguous, and you can only test a person's insight into what something may mean if the person has also experienced the culture at the deeper level of assumption (p. 24).

Many artifacts are seen and heard within the Mustang football program, which serve to reinforce cultural values and beliefs. Language and discourse are among the most readily observable artifacts within a given culture, and reveal the values of the program (Schein, 2010). Most notably are the three words that Coach Murphy reiterates before every game: Tempo, technique, and toughness. The constant echoing of these words hint to their perceived importance by the coaches to the success of the program. "We want every one of our players to be tough," Coach Murphy once told me. "Tough on the field, tough in school, tough in their social life. Those are the most successful kinds of players we have had here."

Visual artifacts include the infrastructure of the organization, signs and pictures, and fashion (Schein, 2010). Again reconfirming the cultural value of toughness is the refusal of many players (or coaches) to wear sleeves in cold weather. Another artifact is the presence of helmet stickers on the Mustang helmets, which are awarded after every game to players who achieve specific goals throughout the course of the game. Every player that dresses for a Mustang victory receives a helmet sticker, signaling the importance of winning. Finally, the sign outside of the locker room stating 'Those who stay will be champions' hints at two cultural values: perseverance to stay on the team for four or five years and the emphasis on winning championships.

Cultural values are those beliefs shared by members of the organization that are then passed on to new members (Schein, 2010; Smith et al., 2012). Occasionally individual values

differ among members of the group, forcing the conflicting parties to reach a consensus on how to move forward within the present culture (Schein, 2010). The outcome is dependent either on empirical testing proving the efficacy of one value over the other, or the overruling by a more powerful figure among the program (Hatch, 1993). Oftentimes in recruiting a decision must be made whether to take a chance on a player with any number of either on-field or off-field issues. During a staff recruiting meeting the coaches were discussing a highly talented player who had been involved in a number of off-field incidents. Several coaches urged Coach Murphy to take a chance on him because of his potential to help the team. After speaking to the recruit and his parents, Murphy eventually decided not to offer him a scholarship. “Guys who have character issues off the field are typically liabilities on the field,” he would say. Murphy reiterated this value twice during postgame speeches: First following the Lakeview loss and also following their playoff loss.

Basic underlying assumptions are those beliefs that have become so engrained into the organization that its members think of them as second nature (Schein, 2010). The most prominent cultural assumption present within the Mustang football culture is the hierarchy of power and authority regarding the player/coach relationship. This assumption is questioned by only a handful of players throughout the season and quickly handled with discipline. Schein contends, “if a basic assumption comes to be strongly held in a group, members will find behavior based on any other premise inconceivable” (p. 28). Another cultural assumption is the masculinity needed to play football. Many references were made throughout the season to football being a ‘man’s game.’ A prime example occurred about midway through the season when a player wore tights to practice and Coach Murphy told him, “Take those ballerina tights off, this is football. Men play football.” These basic assumptions at play within Mustang culture

are so engrained into the thought processes of its members that they become difficult to change even with intentional effort (Schein, 2010). He states,

...we tend to want to perceive the events around us as congruent with our assumptions, even if that means distorting, denying, projecting, or in other ways falsifying to ourselves what may be going on around us. It is in this psychological process that culture has its ultimate power. Culture as a set of basic assumptions defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various situations. After we have developed an integrated set of such assumptions...we will be maximally comfortable with others who share the same set of assumptions and very uncomfortable and vulnerable in situations where different assumptions operate because either we will not understand what is going on, or, worse, we will misperceive and misinterpret the actions of others (p. 28-29).

November 20th, 2016

Everything that the Mustangs needed to happen during the last week of the regular season happened. As MWSU watched from home, their bye week falling as most other FCS teams wrapped up their season, they kept their eye predominantly on two games. First, Southwest State versus West Grove and afterwards Eastview State versus Northern Tech. If Southwest State and Eastview State were both to win the Mustangs would find themselves alone in fourth place in the toughest conference in the country. In that position they felt confident that the committee would select them for the playoff despite other FCS teams throughout the country having better overall records.

As the day's events unfolded, with Southwest State pulling off the upset and then the Cardinals holding serve over Northern Tech, Randy felt more and more confident. Yet, when he looked online after the games were over he still found the Mustangs being left out of most everyone's playoff predictions. All of the most prominent FCS sportswriters believed that the stretch of games that found MWSU losing four of five would be their undoing.

He had decided long ago that there would be no watch party for the selection show as there had been the year before when the team was a shoo-in and earned the number two overall

seed in the bracket. Murphy had allowed the team to go home for the weekend and had not practiced since Friday, but requested the team be back by 8 o'clock Sunday night if they were selected. As the show started at 10 o'clock Sunday morning the Murphy family gathered in the living room eagerly awaiting the news. Randy, however, was absent. To calm his nerves he took the dogs for a walk. As he returned back to the driveway he need not ask about the results.

“I could hear the screams coming from the house as I walked up the driveway,” he said.

The Mustangs were the last team selected for the field. To add to the drama, the television coverage decided to announce their name last as well, forcing Mustang fans to sit in agony as other at-large teams were announced ahead of them. When their name was finally called and Randy heard the news through the ecstasy of his family he was happy for his team and immediately drove to the office.

Within an hour of the announcement the entire coaching staff occupied the Wright building and had already begun watching film of their first round opponent, Coral Shores. Molly frantically made phone calls and sent emails as she planned the team's travel arrangements to Coastview, California. The coaches bounced from office to office as they all broke down the same film on their own before doing the same together as a group later that evening.

When the players arrived their excitement could be felt throughout the building. Many of them had opted to stay on campus in hopes of making the playoffs, thus cutting down travel time and increasing preparation time. By the time their team meeting started that evening some of the starters were already well acquainted with their Saturday opponent. As they took their normal seats in the meeting room most of the chatter surrounded the nerves they had felt earlier that day and the fresh start they had been given.

“I’m happy for you guys,” Murphy told the team once they quieted down. “Especially these seniors in the front, they deserve this. This is the first team in school history to go to three straight playoffs. You guys should be proud of that, but this isn’t the end. I’m sure that you guys heard the analysts talking about how we were the last team in the field. We may have been the last team selected but I’ll tell you this, we are the best team in this field.”

He then went over the schedule for the week, which will vary drastically due to the Thanksgiving holiday and school being out of session all week. “Freshmen, you’re not gonna pack up your bags and go to Wally World,” he said sternly. “This is big time college football. You want to be a big time college football player? Well sometimes you gotta practice on Thanksgiving. Tell your family I’m sorry but if they want to see you then you don’t have to play on this team.”

@ Coral Shores University Sharks (First Round)

By the time I arrive at the office at 8am on Monday morning the coaching staff is nearly two hours into game planning for the Sharks of CSU. I set up shop in the offensive staff meeting and get my first in-depth glimpse of the Mustangs’ upcoming opponent. The first thing I notice, aside from their obnoxious candy-striped field, is the size and athleticism of CSU. The Sharks enter the playoffs with a record of 9-2 and, like MWSU, have a victory over an FBS opponent on their resume. Their speed and length is evident on film, even still the coaches feel confident. “They don’t see teams like us during the season,” says Sebastian after watching a play that resulted in a CSU interception. “They don’t like this,” he says as he punches his left hand into his open right palm to mimic the smash mouth football that MWSU likes to play. The Mustangs hang their hats on their toughness and believe that they play in the toughest conference in the

country. “The difference between our league and every other FCS league in the country is our front lines,” says Coach Murphy.

The cold weather has finally hit Chester. After being spoiled for a majority of the season we are finally being punished, much to Coach Floyd’s delight. He heads out for 7 o’clock practice about an hour ahead of time in order to breathe in the crisp air. I, on the other hand, spend the hour before practice searching the Wright building for extra layers to wear. Temperatures dip into the 20’s as I step out onto the Hughes Stadium field, but I find it hard to complain about another week that I get to spend with these guys.

Spirits are high as the team takes the field and Coach Grant quickly finds it necessary to knock them down a few notches. The first team defense is running through plays against the scout team when Grant sees some of the mutts walking on the field – a true cardinal sin.

“Get back to the fucking sideline,” he yelled at them in his raspy voice. It had only grown more so throughout the season. “I’m sick of seeing motherfuckers walking around out here. Get back to the motherfucking sideline and motherfucking run back out here motherfuckers.” The defensive starters sprinted to the sideline, briefly huddled and sprinted back out to their positions. Coach Grant is in postseason form.

The postseason brings with it an extended workday for the coaching staff if that is possible. Once practice ends tonight the offensive and defensive staffs both watch film independently and then together of the practice we just lived through on the field below. Each play is dissected close to a dozen times from multiple angles. The coaches sit with their laptop in front of them, taking notes on messages they want to relay back to their position groups. They were pleased with how the team practiced, although the offense played sloppy at times in the cold weather. One of the more promising developments of the week was the progress of The

Young Back, Layton Dominguez, from a hamstring injury that had kept him out of the previous three games.

“How’d the young back look today?” Murphy asked Sebastian as he dropped into the offensive meeting.

“He was alright,” Sebastian responded, indicating that he was still not back to full strength.

“Well he’s fucking playing, so get him ready,” Murphy said as he left the room.

You never quite know exactly when the moment will come, but you know that it will happen at some point. Coach Grant’s famous profanity-laced tirades really must be witnessed in person to have the full effect. Coach Grant can go from joking around and laughing to swearing and yelling at the flip of a switch. Today he is addressing the entire defense when he decides to send his message. He starts in a voice not much higher than a whisper, detailing minute, and seemingly irrelevant facts about the Coral Shores University.

“Located in Coastview, California, CSU was first established in 1907 and they first started playing football in 1908. They have 11,487 students and their notable alumni are Charles Pearson and Jadiel Barrett,” he tells the defense.

Grant carries on for another minute as if he is giving a lecture on the university to a group of prospective applicants. Once he gets to the football details, he flips.

“How are we gonna win this fucking game?” he screams, before answering his own question. “Right down there on the fucking line! We’re gonna fucking hit these motherfuckers right in the fucking mouth right out the fucking gates. That’s what Midwest State does and that’s what the Midwestern is fucking known for and that’s how we will fucking win this game.”

He calmed down long enough to introduce each of the Sharks' offensive starters and provide some of their stats and tendencies. Before releasing them to their position meetings he delivered the lasting message for the week.

“It’s about us. It’s about the fucking mutts. We control this fucking game. We stop them fucking right away and we will steal their motherfucking soul. Play fucking tough. The Midwestern Conference way. The motherfucking ‘Stangs way!”

The team is in shoulder pads and helmets for Tuesday’s practice, as close to being fully outfitted as they get for practice outside of Fall Camp. The intensity gets cranked up a bit as there are significantly more contact drills today than yesterday. My favorite drill takes place in the north end zone every Tuesday and Thursday during the season. It pits the offensive line against the defensive line in live individual competitions. The goal for the defender: get to the quarterback. The exact opposite applies for the offensive lineman. Coaches Buck and Grant watch over their position groups intently, inserting either sarcastic insults or pointed suggestions when they see fit. When Cam Hawkins stands up Ace on a pass rush, Grant lets him know about it.

“That was straight manure,” he says matter of factly.

The cold weather turned to cold, rainy, and windy for today’s practice. Many of the linemen continue to refuse to wear sleeves in a display of toughness. Arthur Wood goes so far as to pour cold water through his long hair and lets it fall down his back.

Henry Rogers, a freshman running back from Texas, comments, “Man, I don’t know how y’all play in this cold weather.”

“It’s not even that cold bro,” Julius tells him.

When practice begins to wrap up those who will travel this weekend are sent to the North end zone to stretch while the rest of the team, consisting mostly of freshman, competes in live action at the south end. Leon Jenkins, a freshman who has played sparingly for the Mustangs as a result of various injuries to starters, seems displeased to be among those competing rather than stretching.

As the coaches discuss practice the following day, Leon receives much scrutiny for his toughness. “He could be really fucking good, but he’s just a soft freshman right now,” Grant says.

“He didn’t like being included in Mustang Bowl very much did he?” Murphy asks, having seen the same body language I did the day before.

After practice concludes the team gathers around Coach Murphy on the Mustang at midfield. The players take a knee while the coaches stand behind them in a semicircle.

“This team is ready to make a run. That’s what we expect here at MWSU. Getting to the playoffs is great, now we need to prove we belong. A lot of people out there think we aren’t good enough to be here. Let’s prove them wrong. One game at a time.”

The Stairmaster in the Mustang Arena weight room offers the perfect view of the entire room. As I step my way to a decent sweat on Wednesday morning I take in the group of guys lifting across the way. They walk with their chest out, shoulders back, and chin up, their confidence boosted by a playoff berth and the testosterone coursing through them. The freshmen are put through a rigorous workout as they prepare to take on greater roles in the years to come. The traveling squad’s workout is a bit more relaxed, focusing more on maintaining strength and

staying sharp than anything else. Some players are exempt from the workout entirely. Gill spends his time on a foam roller laughing at the poor chumps working up a sweat.

The first person I see when I get back to Wright from the weight room is Coach Grant.

“How are you this morning?” I ask.

“I’m fucking awesome,” he responds without breaking stride. Then he turns around and tells me, “I can’t fucking wait for your mother-in-law to make you show up in a pilgrim costume tomorrow.”

“I’d still look better than you in that Jordan jumpsuit you got on,” I snap back and we share a laugh. I’m getting the hang of this.

My presence among the Mustangs has become so normal, even expected, that I am questioned when I miss a meeting. This is the case on Wednesday afternoon as I am summoned to run errands and let the dogs out over lunch, forcing me to miss sitting in on a position meeting. When I return I am hazed and scorned for taking the afternoon off.

“Where have you been?” Coach Buck asks. “You think you can just come and go?”

I make up for it by staying late, and make him pay for his sarcasm by utilizing the offensive staff room as my pop-up office while he tries to prepare for the following day. My absence raising eyebrows is yet another sign that my presence in the office is natural. The members of the Mustangs – coaches, players, and support staff – no longer are thought of as research subjects despite the intent of my task. Silent observations have been replaced with candid conversations. I join in on lighthearted banter and am included in inside jokes. In short, with each passing week I feel more and more like a Mustang.

Thanksgiving morning starts at 5:15 when Molly and I head off to pickup breakfast for the team. Like zombies searching for human flesh, the guys wander through the Wright building following the scent of breakfast sandwiches. Coach Grant greets many of the players with an enthusiastic *Hello*, which they respond to with different versions of grunts.

Due to the holiday, Thursday's schedule is moved up, allowing those who live nearby to visit their families for dinner. Players from further away are either adopted by a teammate's family or their position coach for the night. Coaches hope for a high-energy practice later this morning but don't necessarily expect it. "They are just ready to play," Murphy says. "They are sick of practicing. I don't blame them."

The coaches bring enough energy to their meetings to make up for their lethargic players.

"Happy Thanksgiving fuckers," Grant says to start the defensive line meeting. "I know all you are thankful for me and I am thankful for very few of you fuckers."

Laughter fills the room and the players seem a bit more awake.

"Now, let's cover a few matters of business first. Ace, have you registered yet?"

"For what?"

"For what! For the fucking army, guy. What do you think I would ask you about registering for? Let's try this again. Ace, have you registered for classes yet?"

"No, but I have a meeting set up."

Coach Grant and the Cadillacs honed in and studied film from yesterday's practice before focusing on an early season game between Coral Shores and Southwest Tech. The game was one of the two losses on the season for the Sharks and Grant looked to show his guys where they could be exploited. He broke it down to a simple answer.

"Stop the run, stop the fucking screen pass, game fucking over."

As expected, Thursday's practice was sloppy and lacked energy. The holiday and early morning paired with being late in the season nearly guarantees at least one bad practice a week. They are clearly sick of beating each other up and ready to move on to their next opponent after two straight weeks of practice. "It feels like fall camp all over again," some of the guys said on the sidelines late in practice. Showcasing their feelings towards practice, Billy Carter and Tyler Barrett get into a scuffle about midway through and tempers flared briefly between the offense and defense. Unlike fall camp, fights like this are broken up quickly. A couple hours later they are sitting next to each other at the team Thanksgiving dinner.

Hosted in the Hughes Stadium club high above the field, the team gathers Thursday afternoon, as "one big disjointed, fucked-up, happy family" according to Grant. They would go through twenty turkeys, thirty pounds of mashed potatoes and gravy, and forty pumpkin pies. Adding to the family atmosphere was the presence of the coaches' wives and children, running throughout the stadium club and pestering the players. Afterwards the team was in high spirits as they concluded their Thanksgiving Day with a team meeting.

At the meeting a representative from each position group would stand and tell the team their unit's goal for the game.

Henry Johnson stood first and said, "One hundred percent ball security."

Hayden Anderson was next, "One hundred percent effort grade." As he sat down he announced the offensive motto from the second half of the season, "Fuck it."

The offensive side of the room laughed and cheered.

Burke stood and said, "Ninety-two percent grade." He sat down as Coach Murphy stared at him from the front of the room. After a few seconds he stood back up and said, "Fuck it." The offense cheered louder.

Gill stood with a smile and said, “Six explosive plays.” The team waited in anticipation. “Fuck it.”

Finally, Hayden stood as the representative for the offensive line and simply said, “Win the game. Fuck it!”

The whole room applauded, yelled, and laughed.

“I want to read you two quotes from their head coach,” Coach Grant told his defense. “First, he says, ‘Their defensive front is pretty small, and they aren’t a very fast team.’ No shit guy, we’re the motherfucking mutts! He goes on to say, ‘We plan to punch a hole through them with our run game.’ The only hole that’s gonna be punched is the one we make through their motherfucking necks!”

Grant’s face nearly matched the red tie around his neck as he delivered his most impassioned pregame speech of the season. The defenders filed out of the hotel meeting room with stern looks on their faces as they made their way to the row of buses that would take them to the campus of the Coral Shores University and Seashell Stadium. For the past two weeks they had been told by the media and others around college football all of the reasons that their season should never have been extended. The Mustangs seemed ready to prove them wrong.

What had been predicted to be a warm November day turned out to be rather chilly, but the Mustangs failed to notice after preparing in worse conditions during the past week. Over a hundred Mustang supporters made the eight-hour drive, filling the bleachers in red and white behind MWSU’s bench. NCAA rules prohibited more than sixty players on the sideline, meaning that senior, Hayden Anderson would have to watch the game from the stands with those that made the trip.

Hayden, a seldom-used senior, had taken the field for warm-ups thinking he would dress for the game. When the trainers decided that James Holland's foot was healed enough to play, he was given the go ahead and Hayden was told to change to his sweats. Despite the disappointment he handled it well when Goose delivered the news, shaking his hand and heading back to the locker room. Once there, he took a seat and collected his thoughts. While he knew that playing a single down was unlikely, he was not ready for his last college football game to take place while he watched from the crowd. When he took the field again with his uniform traded for a Mustang sweatsuit, his eyes were puffy and red.

Hayden watched the remainder of warmups from the sideline, mostly in silence. Several of his teammates assured him that this would not be his last game. When the other fullbacks and tight ends huddled near the thirty yard-line, Hayden remained on the sideline. Goose quickly noticed his absence and motioned for him to join them.

"Get over here," he told him, "we still need you."

He joined his teammates and listened to fellow senior fullback Harvey McCarthy.

"All we got for sixty minutes," Harvey told them.

Hayden stepped in with the final word. "Play with your heart and leave it all out there!"

The Mustangs started fast, jumping out to a 10-0 lead as the defense dominated CSU's offense throughout the first quarter. Energy and confidence ran high on the sideline.

"Welcome to The Midwest," was a common taunt coming from the MWSU bench after Mustangs delivered big hits on the field.

After scoring the first touchdown for the Mustangs, and then setting up the second one to reestablish their 10-point lead at 17-7, Alfonso Henson was greeted by Coach Murphy when he

returned to the sideline. After his two fumbles had cost them the game against Lakeview, Henson was in Murphy's doghouse. After running hard over the last three games of the season and more importantly holding onto the ball, he had managed to escape.

"Tell them you want forty carries today," Murphy told Henson as he nodded his head in agreement.

They slapped hands and Murphy slapped him on the helmet. Turns out The Young Back's hamstring still wouldn't allow him to be at full strength, but Henson was ready to carry the load.

The Mustangs entered halftime with a 17-7 lead and a glut of confidence. The defense that had been called out by the Sharks' head coach had allowed just six yards rushing and no first downs until well into the second quarter. The halftime message to the team was simple: Don't let up.

The MWSU defense continued their domination through the third quarter, but the offense struggled to regain the momentum they had established in the first half. Despite wildly outgaining the Sharks through three quarters, the score remained 17-7. The confidence on the sideline began to dwindle as players became frustrated by their still delicate lead.

The Mustangs of Midwest State had relied on their energy and enthusiasm to put them in position to make the playoffs. Those within the program believed that with their season renewed they were in position to capitalize on the final three weeks of the season, bottle up that energy, and take it on the road to make a run through the playoffs and back to Frisco. As the NCAA sanctioned commercials played between the third and fourth quarter on the Jumbotron at Seashell Stadium, a clip of a Canyon Ridge player raising the national championship trophy flashed.

“Will you be there to see who hoists the trophy this year?” The voiceover asked.

“I want to be the one to hoist the trophy,” Arthur Wood responded.

With one quarter to play the Mustangs still had that dream fresh in their sights.

When the players huddled around Coach Murphy before the start of the fourth quarter he told them to finish the job. He encouraged the offense to run the ball and the defense to stop the run. The sun had set and temperatures dropped into the lower forties. The Mustangs had possession of the ball and a chance to crush the spirits of the home team that was hosting a playoff game for the first time in school history. If they could maintain the energy that had carried them this far, they would be headed to the second round of the playoffs for the third consecutive year.

Three plays gained MWSU only two yards and they were forced to punt from deep in their own territory. As Brandon Soto caught the snap he took two steps and dropped the ball towards his right foot. He struck the ball but it was blocked by a hard-rushing Sharks’ defender. The ball caromed backward and bounced perfectly into the hands of another CSU player who trotted into the end zone for a touchdown. Players on the Mustang sideline appeared shell-shocked. I peeked into the suddenly quiet section of MWSU supporters and spotted Hayden with his hands on his head, looking almost sick to his stomach. The Mustangs still held the lead after the extra-point, 17-14, but the energy had been sucked from the team.

The offense was unable to move the ball and were forced to punt it back to the Sharks, who suddenly found their offensive recipe and marched down the field for a touchdown to take the lead. A 21-17 deficit felt more like a two touchdown deficit as I stood helplessly on the Mustang sideline. The Sharks coach decided to capitalize on their newfound momentum and tried a successful onside kick, giving them the ball back at the MWSU thirty-six yard line and

sucking even more energy from the Mustangs. The defense reset their jaw and held CSU to a field goal, making the score 24-17. In a miserable fourth quarter not even halfway complete the Mustangs had already been outscored 17-0.

Sticking true to their calling card and following the script of their entire season, the Mustangs refused to give up. Their toughness on full display, the offense picked up two quick first downs to nearly reach midfield. On the ensuing play, Burke narrowly evaded a sack, stepped into his pocket created by the offensive line, and floated a long pass to Gill who brought it in and trotted into the end zone to tie the score. It was a shot of life for the previously lifeless ‘Stangs.

After trading punts the defense took the field, needing a stop to give the offense a chance to extend their season. The unit that had been the steady force most of the season and most of this game was unable to continue that trend. It took the Sharks just two plays to cover forty-three yards and regain the lead 31-24 with one minute and twenty-two seconds remaining.

Burke was sacked for a loss of six yards on the Mustang’s first play of the drive, and then was unable to connect with Aaron Lowe to set up third down and sixteen yards to go. Again under pressure, Burke was forced to scramble for three yards before Coach Murphy took a timeout facing a fourth and thirteen with one minute and one second remaining in the game. The defense looked on from the sideline, in shock by how the fourth quarter had transpired. When the offense ran back on the field, every player toed up to the sideline, many of them whispering to themselves.

“Come on guys, one time.”

“Please make a play.”

Burke dropped back and again faced pressure. He avoided one sack but was grabbed by another defender. As he attempted to throw a last-second attempt his arm was hit and the ball fell

hopelessly to the ground. Burke, who had been knocked over by the hit, lay on the ground for several moments. The defense, although they had to go back out on the field for the final meaningless possession, stood motionless on the sideline. Several of them dropped to their knees. Hayden sat still in the crowd, expressionless.

The Sharks ran out the clock with three kneel downs and celebrated by showering their head coach with an ice bath. Both teams took to the field to exchange pleasantries before the Mustangs retreated back to their locker room.

Coach Murphy waited an extra minute before taking his place in the middle of the locker room.

“Every man in his own way,” he said as they all dropped to a knee and held hands in prayer. The band cheering and home team crowd cheering still failed to drown out the sounds of running noses and stifled tears.

“What happened tonight does not change how proud I am of this team. Our senior leadership this year was as good as it has ever been. I think we could have won that game, but you have nothing to be ashamed of,” Murphy told them.

He wanted to send his seniors out the right way but he also wanted to send a message to his returning players. “I have told you this before. When you are undisciplined off the field it will show on the field. To be a great player and a great team every person must be disciplined in each area of their life. Nearly all of you are. I want to thank the seniors for all they have done for this program.”

The message targeted a select few players, and they knew who they were.

Everyone responds differently to monumental moments in their life. The conclusion of a football season, particularly for those seniors who would never play again, is significant. Some

of the seniors dressed quickly and left the locker room to hug their parents. Others lingered, refusing to take off their jersey for the last time. Nathan and Hondo sat next to each other in silence. Both remained fully dressed in their pads and jersey for almost twenty minutes.

Underclassmen circled the locker room offering condolences to the seniors.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t get it done for you,” Alfonso told Henry Johnson, who held a towel over his face to hide his tears.

Hugs were exchanged amongst coaches and players. An hour and a half earlier this team sat in this same locker room full of confidence. Instead of cheers and singing filling these walls, tears were shed and many of them wondered, out loud even, “How did that happen?”

I wandered through the locker room and much like the other players and coaches, offered my condolences to many seniors and thanked them for letting me be a small part of their season. I tried to find the right words despite the failed existence of those words. In those moments I felt as much a Mustang as I ever had despite my assignment being all but over. I felt sorry for the Mustangs, who had shown courage, toughness, and pride all season, but had fallen short of their ultimate goal. I was saddened that these seniors would never put on a Mustang jersey again and that I would not be a part of the team in the same way moving forward. I was the most insignificant member of this program throughout the season, yet I felt a giant void the second Burke’s pass fell to the ground. What these seniors must have felt was inconceivable.

I lingered as players filed out of the locker room. The sting of the defeat was far from wearing off. They collected their food, talked briefly with their families, and then boarded the buses, which were facing the scoreboard that still read: Sharks: 31 Mustangs 24.

The next morning I walked into the kitchen at the Murphy house and was greeted by Kirby, Reggie, and Randy.

“Look at that, the sun came up this morning!” Randy exclaimed. “On to 2017.”

Postscript

“We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect.”

-Anaïs Nin

It has been over a month and a half since the Mustangs played their final game of the season on the candy cane striped turf at Coral Shores. The Midwestern was represented in the FCS championship game, not by Canyon Ridge, but by Grand Mountain State, who lost to Northwestern A&M. Returning Mustangs are enjoying their last week of winter break before beginning preparations for next season. Since the day after their final game the coaching staff has been tirelessly recruiting, traveling throughout the country to visit prospective Mustangs in hopes that next year, the year after that, or five years in the future, will be their year.

I have read and re-read chapter five of this dissertation nearly one-hundred times to this point, finding laughable errors, replacing mundane words with seemingly less mundane words, and on the whole reliving the season each time. Like a painter who must eventually step away from the canvas and appreciate the end product for what it is, I must soon submit a final draft, allowing the words written to become absolute. I admit to the incurable anxiety that comes with that, which is why I continue to tinker. It is here where I am tasked with reflecting on my experiences over the past year – to draw meaning and implications from twelve months’ worth of observations and interviews. In fact, to diminish this analysis to observations and interviews feels somewhat cheap. Because really, what is life but an endless series of observations and interviews (and reflections)?

Having been involved in athletics in some capacity for most of my life, I was rarely surprised by what I experienced. It was, however, eye-opening because of my changed perspective. I have acted as an athlete, a coach, and an administrator in college athletics, each time approaching the team from differing viewpoints. As a researcher I sought, noticed, and

reacted to considerably different events than in any of those other roles. It was both refreshing and frustrating to spend so much time with the team and all the while not have a meaningful role to play. In a way, it allowed me to take a step back and see this football team for what it was: a collection of incredibly distinctive personalities sharing a common athletic goal. They bashed their heads into one another literally and figuratively. They were imperfect in more ways than one both on the field and off. They failed to reach many of the goals they had set out to accomplish to start the year. Nonetheless, it was my privilege to be along for the ride.

To fully reflect on the varying personalities I encountered during this research would require another 300 pages. In fact, the spectrum of personalities, from Matthew Combs to Noah Barker, is what made this experience so remarkable. To establish, mold, and institute a shared culture -- founded on *brotherhood* -- among such a large and diverse group of individuals is nothing short of astonishing.

As a whole, the coaches work harder than any group of individuals I have ever encountered. Their passion for football is unmatched. Randy had told me before that all football coaches are a little crazy. I can now confirm this to be true. I challenge anyone to watch the same power-run play eight times in a row in a dark room without nodding off. Now do that for sixteen-hour days over twenty-plus years. Many players are equally crazy, while some are not. Most of them play for the simple fact that they refused to stop playing after high school. They care about football but not like the coaches. They have lives outside of football, which the coaches do not; classes, girlfriends, bars, and future careers outside of football to worry about. For most, their existence as a member of this team occupies an enormous portion of their identity. For some, it is just a small part of who they are.

The culture created within Mustang football is grounded in the shared experiences of these boys, young men, and men. The barrier dividing these three groups is real only in perception, which makes it quite real. Each comes from a different background, but they share common beliefs that were revealed throughout my time with them. It is with unmistakable confidence that I can say that each of the coaches believes in the *Power of Football*. Quite obviously, football has changed each of their lives dramatically. Each will tell you that it has had a positive impact on the person they have become; the *man* they have become. They coach because they hope to spread that impact, to make men of boys, and to be a positive influence in the lives of each player they coach. Football is the vehicle through which they believe that they can have the greatest impact. Each coach approaches it differently, but the intent is still the same. Most of the players believe in the *Power of Football* as well, although not as unequivocally. Some of them play to pursue a playing career beyond Midwest State. Some play because they could hardly bare to let go of it after high school. Some play to be social, some play simply because they are good enough to do so, and some play because of other pressures they face. Most of them enjoy it, some of them do not.

Their flaws, or at least what most of society would perceive as such, are passed off as a consequence of football, a byproduct of sorts caused by what many recognize to be an ugly game. Swearing, belittling others, crude comments, and so on, are all said to be fallouts from the greater football culture. I discussed these behaviors at length with many coaches and players, and unanimously they were dismissed as *just football*. If what was said on the practice field were repeated in a corporate office most of the coaching staff would be left unemployed. The type of behavior exhibited by football coaches and players is simply not seen outside of sports. Even within sports, football lies at the extreme. I struggle to apply meaning to this in the greater

context of society and life. I am not naïve to what some may think upon reading the more explicit and offensive quotes from this project (*This is why football players do such terrible things!*). I have read the stories, seen the videos, and heard the commentary. Football players and coaches have indeed done some terrible things. Football players and coaches have also done much good.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

A modified circuit of culture serves as the foundation for better understanding the cultural environment present within the Mustang football program. Specifically, the ways in which cultural products are produced, represented, and consumed by members of the program is central to this analysis. The circuit of culture model assumes a fluid process underlies the production, representation, and consumption of culture as opposed to a more static, linear model (Hall, 1980; Leve, 2012). To better organize the massive amount of information gathered over the past year, the following discussion is organized to assess the institutional, organizational, and individual levels of the organization at each of the three phases of the circuit: production, representation, and consumption.

Production of Culture

According to Coach Murphy, his intention in developing the Mustang culture is to create a brotherhood based on discipline, respect, and toughness. It is through these foundations that he believes a winning culture is built and maintained year after year. The production of culture in this context is best thought of as a social construction of ideas and principles (Leve, 2012). The subsequent cultural product is the result of predominant institutional ideologies, core organizational structures, and dominant individual philosophies.

Institutional Level

Several institutional forces drive the production of culture within the Mustang football program. These forces include the overarching culture of masculinity present in the world of football, the overarching emphasis on winning in big-time college football, and the prevailing notion that successful football teams function as a family unit. Furusten (2013) asserts, “We, as individuals and as a collective, cannot isolate ourselves from what is going on around us” (p. 5).

As much as college football coaches -- the Mustang coaching staff is no exception -- seeks to create a controlled environment within the walls of their stadium, their beliefs and behaviors are shaped by their surrounding environment. Such societal processes have been normalized into the college football environment, so much so that they have become institutionalized as part of the Mustang football program (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

The most prominent theme emerging from this project is the overtly masculine environment created within the MWSU football program. This topic serves as a broader glimpse into the culture of college football. Within days of being involved in the Mustangs program it became apparent that toughness and masculinity were necessary characteristics for Mustang players and coaches to possess. During the first meeting of the year there were constant reminders regarding the role of masculinity in their culture, first from Coach Floyd: "I am my brother's keeper. I will make sure my brother does not get in trouble. I will make sure I do the right thing and that my brother will do the right thing...Every man is important. Every man has a role. No man can sit around and wait." Coach Murphy followed Floyd by discussing the manner in which off-season evaluations will be conducted: "Be on time and be prepared. It'll be five bravado men in the room and you." The overarching environment surrounding college football is one of overt masculinity, which has been adopted by the Mustangs as a guiding social structure (Christensen, 2014).

The calling card of the Mustang program, according to Coach Murphy, is their toughness. Toughness, in our society, is a masculine trait (Messner, 2002). Males are most often assigned the gender rules of physical, mental, and emotional toughness, courageousness, and competitiveness. Being assigned these gender roles carries with it prescriptions for ways to act and not to act, ways to look and not to look, and attitudes to hold and not to hold (Messner,

2002). In essence, these instructions for masculinity serve as the foundations of toughness, the most important quality of a Mustang football player. They are trained on how to act (“This team must get tougher if it wants to win”), how not to act (“Quit fucking crying”), how to look (Coach Floyd wearing short-sleeves in the sleet), how not to look (“You look like a girl with that haircut”), attitudes to hold (“Do your job”), and attitudes not to hold (“Don’t be a soft-ass”).

Toughness and masculinity are synonymous with one another; while the team’s calling card is toughness, the qualities they truly value are socially masculine qualities. Smith and colleagues (2012) assert,

Sport generally displays rigid gender-role behavior, often personified by a widespread, fundamental belief that males and females should behave with specific and stereotypical conduct. Images such as rugged, tough, strong, and courageous exemplify traditional, stereotypical masculinity... Failure to behave within specified gender boundaries may create dissonance within the organization, and undermine the sanctioned ideology (p. 109).

In addition to toughness and masculinity being prevalent themes present within the MWSU program, winning was also a dominant theme. As a Division I program able to offer scholarships, although not at the FBS level, winning is an assumed priority. As Washington and Karen (2010) suggest,

Simply by virtue of the fact that the two schools [Division 1 versus Division 3] have very different locations in this organizational field, their orientations to “winning at all costs,” as opposed to “developing the scholar-athlete,” are radically different (p. xvi-xvii).

When any member of the coaching staff discussed the culture of Mustang football it was always referenced with the prefix ‘winning.’ It was as if it were nonsensical to establish a culture within a football program if it were to be anything other than a winning one. Clotfelter (2011) simply states, “Winning is the athletic department’s primary aim” (p. 123). The reason for this can be found in the institution of college football – the environment most of the coaching staff has occupied for several decades – and its emphasis on winning football games (Duderstadt, 2003).

In many ways, the production of a winning culture at the organizational level is representative of the hypercompetitive culture of college football as a whole. This is evidenced by Coach Watts' statement during Hell Week: "If you don't like Canyon Ridge winning every year, go beat their ass."

The Mustang's status as a football program is measured by their success on the football field. When Coach Murphy arrived he suggested that Midwest State is a "sleeping giant" in the world of FCS football. In mentioning that, he was not referencing their ability to recruit highly academic students, build expensive facilities, or develop high-character individuals. While those are important features of the Mustang program, Murphy was strictly referencing the potential of the Midwest State football program to win football games, conference championships, and national championships. This competitive nature can be traced to the earliest of sport-like contests, as Blanchard contests, "sport is by definition a type of activity that entails aggressive behavior and some form of competition, and in any given cultural setting it can be viewed as having social conflict dimensions" (p. 57). As such, the desire, and ultimately the need, to win can be attributed to the overarching social structures present in the realm of competitive sports (Blanchard, 1995; Washington & Karen, 2010).

The measuring stick for the past half-decade has been the Warriors of Canyon Ridge. It is against their program that the Mustangs compare their success and measure the distance they still have to go. Two driving forces of institutional theory are legitimization and isomorphism, which provide explanation for this phenomena (Furesten, 2013; Dimaggio & Powell, 1983). As much as they talk of worrying about themselves only and controlling what they can control, the thought of dethroning the Warriors drives much of their behavior and decision-making. As stated previously, many of the coaches' and players' thoughts and behaviors are directly affected by the

unheralded success of Canyon Ridge. The manner in which the Warriors recruit, scout, practice, and play have all been legitimized into the environment as a result of their success (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983). As such, other members, particularly of FCS football and more notably of the Midwestern, look to their program as a sort of “blueprint for success” in an attempt at legitimization.

Finally, the notion that the Mustang football program should be considered a family is a commonly held perception of how a football team should function (Messner, 2002). During a fall meeting Coach Murphy tells his team, “The team is the strength of the team. Everyone in here comes from a different background. There’s some sad stories in this room, but we are a big happy family now. These are your brothers.” The attempt at forming a family atmosphere is commonplace in college football programs. At his recent news conference introducing him as Minnesota’s new head coach, PJ Fleck states about his former players at Western Michigan, “they’ll always be my sons” (Derlan, 2017). It is a widely held notion that to be successful as a group of eighty-plus young men that a familial environment must be formed (Finn, 2000). However, a wide divide exists between intention and execution of this cultural value.

Organizational Level

The production of culture at the organizational level is the attempt at unification of individual cultural values into a single cultural product (Leve, 2012; Schein, 2010). Establishing culture, after all, is fundamentally an effort in changing the way that members of the organization think and behave (Schein, 2010). Schein (2010) contends, “When we are influential in shaping the behavior and values of others, we think of that as “leadership” and are creating the conditions for new culture formation” (p. 3). The single most influential producer of culture within Mustang football is Coach Murphy, however he is far from the sole member of the

organization responsible for producing culture. Assistant coaches and players also contribute to the production of culture, occasionally leading to struggles for power regarding whose cultural beliefs and values become adopted among the rest of the organization.

The production of culture is not a one-time occurrence taking place when a coaching staff first arrives on campus or at the start of each season. Rather, it is an on-going and fluid process that constantly evolves as new members are introduced and others leave (Johnson, 1986). Coaches and players alike struggle to assert their own cultural beliefs and values that arise from their own cultural backgrounds. A fine line must be walked in order to allow individuals to hold onto their past while simultaneously compelling them to buy into new cultural beliefs. Newcomers to the group or established group members entrenched in their own ways oftentimes become deviants of culture, whether intently or not (Schein, 2010). Additionally, natural subcultures, created through a variety of social structures, exist within the organization (Schein, 2010). The existence of subcultures does not pose an immediate threat to the strength of the overarching culture, “because they often reflect the primary occupational cultures of the organization members” (Schein, 2010, p. 55).

Subcultures typically manifest around the functional units of the organization (Alvesson, 2013; Schein, 2010). Joint tasks create shared assumptions which bond a group of individuals into a subculture (Schein, 2010). For example, each position group resides within their own subculture under the umbrella of a greater cultural environment. The position group largely reflects the values and beliefs of their given position coach, which is consistent with literature suggesting that group leaders play large roles in establishing shared values, beliefs, and practices among subcultures (Alvesson, 2013). Each group maintains their own beliefs, values, practices, and rituals that contribute to the production of culture within their group and to the program as a

whole. Further subcultures exist based on age, standing on team (starter/backup), and race. Within each of these subcultures exists noticeable and distinct cultural artifacts, values, and behaviors. Seniors sit in the front row during team and position group meetings, are released first to eat at team meals, and lead the team in chants as they break the huddle. Starters and backups are easily recognized as such by the amount of wear and tear on their practice jerseys (starters are given new jerseys much quicker once one rips). Finally, racial subcultures exist separating Black and White. Fashion, music choice, and language are all noticeable cultural artifacts that divide these two cultures within the program. For the team to be successful, all subcultures must be in alignment in terms of key cultural values and practices (Schein, 2010).

To produce culture at the organizational level for the whole of Mustang football, several mechanisms are implemented. First and foremost Coach Murphy works closely with his assistant coaches to ensure the entire staff buys into the vision for the program while also having a say in implementing cultural practices and artifacts. Coordination among leaders is essential for reaffirming and strengthening of cultural values (Schein, 2010). During an off-season staff meeting in May the staff discussed ways to reinforce their pillar value of toughness among the team. “We should send out motivational messages each week to the team,” Grant offered. “Things like ‘Eating glass and kicking ass’ or ‘Toughness is in the soul and spirit.’” The staff bought in and each week a new coach would be in charge of sending out a new motivational message to the team.

An informal meeting back in February involving several members of the coaching staff provided another example of cultural production. Following the morning session of Hell Week the coaches made their way back from Watson Fieldhouse to Wright while discussing their thoughts on the day’s effort. Coach Murphy said, “I think for the most part the effort was good

but there are some guys with really bad body language. They are entitled. They've never been allowed to fail before." Coach Morris responded by saying, "We need to get in their face a little bit. Don't let them pout because they did something wrong. Get over it." The issue of entitlement was addressed on several occasions throughout the season. The coaching staff often worked together to establish the cultural value of gratitude rather than entitlement. Entitlement, as noted earlier, is a commonly cited characteristic of the current generation of college students (Alsop, 2008).

The other manner in which culture is produced at the organizational level is through the formation of the leadership council. As stated earlier, several members of the council wished for input on more pressing team matters, but the council still played a part in producing culture. The creation of the leadership council alone symbolizes Coach Murphy's willingness and interest in receiving input from players regarding the culture of the team. This precedent allowed for more open dialogue between the players and head coach and gave members of the team assurance in knowing that their teammates were involved in several aspects of decision-making within the program. Organizational structures such as the leadership council contribute to the overall production of culture and positive environment by allowing feedback and contribution from organizational constituents (Alvesson, 2013).

One of the primary uses of the leadership council was to both establish and enforce team rules. Organizational rules act as cultural artifacts by alerting the organizational members to what is allowed and what is not, thus informing members of encouraged and discouraged cultural practices (Schein, 2010). When a member of the team broke team rules they were put in front of the council to tell them their side of the story. The council then decided the punishment for the player. Past literature suggests that a cultural practice such as this is constructive in encouraging

organizational members to more quickly and fully accept cultural values and practices (Schein, 2010; Alvesson, 2013). The council was also used as a means for players to express their thoughts or concerns to Coach Murphy. He ensures that they feel comfortable coming to talk to him or any other coaches on the staff by saying, “We have an open door policy, we want to help, but we can’t help if we don’t know. You guys come first.”

Individual Level

The production of culture at the individual level is influenced largely by the political skill of the parties involved. Individuals competent in the four facets of political skill hold a decided advantage in their ability to be producers of culture. Ferris and colleagues (2005) identified the four dimensions of political skill to be: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Coach Murphy, who would not be head coach of a Division I football team if he were not politically skilled, holds the greatest amount of power in producing culture. In addition to political skill, the status of individuals within the program dictates their influence over the production of culture. Schein (2010) contends, “...they [leaders]...shape the kinds of responses that the group will make in its efforts to succeed in its environment and to integrate itself” (p. 219). He goes on to state, “they will typically have their own notion, based on their own cultural history and personality, of how to fulfill the idea [the mission of the organization]” (Schein, 2010, p. 220).

As head coach and a politically skilled individual, Murphy defined the core values and guiding principles for the program. As noted above, Murphy’s values have been indoctrinated through years of playing and coaching college football. It is through these past experiences that he has shaped a vision for what he believes to be the best way to run a football program. His personal belief that football is a game played by tough men establishes the foundation for the

program. Murphy's political skill was on display at times throughout the season, although he used his status as head coach to implement culture far more often. "I'm the head coach," he said at a preseason meeting. "I say dumb shit everyday but that doesn't matter. Coach is always right. People in authority positions don't like to be questioned." Standing within the organization allows individuals to leverage their title or power in order to impose their cultural views on the group (Smith et al., 2012; Alvesson, 2013).

Other coaches utilized their political skill to a greater extent in order to make their mark on the culture of the program. Coach Grant's interpersonal influence allowed him to control the defensive staff and exercise his influence regarding the cultural values of the defense. Interpersonal influence refers to an individual's ability to regulate behavior for a given situation and convincingly influence others (Ferris et al., 2005). When Coach Murphy was not present, Coach Grant dominated the defensive staff room. In a similar manner, Coach Buck often took control of the offensive staff room, even though he and Coach Cobb shared co-coordinator responsibilities. His interpersonal influence and networking ability allowed him to win favor of the other offensive coaches, which permitted him to then instill the offensive side of the ball with specific cultural values that he found worthy. Individuals high in networking ability are often able to position themselves well for when opportunities arise, such as the opening of the coordinator position (Pfeffer, 1992; Ferris et al., 2007). Finally, Coach McLain, although soft-spoken, held considerable sway regarding the production of culture within the program. Because of his apparent sincerity, Coach Murphy named him Associate Head Coach, giving him a title (status) and a greater voice. Ferris and colleagues (2007) argue, "This dimension of political skill is crucial if influence attempts are going to be successful because it focuses on the perceived intentions of the behavior exhibited" (p. 293). Murphy believes Goose to have no ulterior

motives through his actions, an important qualifier of trust and confidence, which allows him more control over the production of cultural products (Jones, 1990; Ferris et al., 2007). When the offense met as a whole for the first time back in August, it was Goose that led off the meeting. He told the offense, “Accountability is a core value in life and on this team. Being responsible and being prepared are both aspects of accountability.” Throughout the season accountability would continuously be referred back to by Goose and the other offensive coaches.

Players too took part in the production of culture. Prior to the season, Sawyer Hayden (Offense), Terrence Daniel (Defense), and Kevin McGuire (Special Teams), were voted as captains for the year by their teammates. The process of voting for captains is political in nature, as group members vote for individuals who they are closest to or who they believe will protect their best interests (Allen et al., 1980; Gandz & Murray, 1980). It was glaringly obvious that each of the three captains were selected for different reasons. Sawyer, a senior, was a first-team all-conference player as a junior and the heart of the offensive line. He was respected among his teammates but someone who would hold them accountable as well. He was often the first to speak up in meetings and on the field and was unafraid to lay into a teammate when he felt necessary. Terrence Daniel, a junior, gets along with everyone on the team. His teammates enjoy his presence on and off the field and he rarely got after anyone during practices or games. Kevin McGuire, a sophomore, is undersized and far from the most talented player on the team. He makes up for it with hard work and constant positive energy, which his teammates notice. ‘Bump’ rarely talks during practice but is respected for his relentless work ethic. As captains these three players, along with other upperclassmen, would contribute to the production of culture in ways the coaching staff could not. The extent to which cultural behaviors and practiced

and cultural values are discoursed outside of the presence of authority figures dictates the degree of success an organization will have in implementing culture (Schein, 2010; Alvesson, 2013).

The production of culture is a fluid process, one that requires the contribution of many organizational members (Hatch, 1993). The Mustang culture is first and foremost a product of the cultural environment of college football (Furesten, 2013). Further, Coach Murphy and his assistant coaches, most notably Coach Grant, Coach Buck, and Coach McLain, are the primary producers of culture within the program. Players contribute as well, however their role is more closely related to their ability to reinforce and strengthen culture than to produce it. Players enter the program strictly as consumers of culture, throughout their time as Mustangs they learn the culture, and as upperclassmen contribute to producing culture. Hence the fluidity of the circuit of culture.

Representation of Culture

The production of culture allows those influential members of the program to establish the cultural values and beliefs which they wish to see manifested among the team (Johnson, 1986). The manner in which those values are represented within the program is crucial to their acceptance and eventual transition from value to assumption (Hatch, 1993; Johnson, 1986). It is through their representation that members of the Mustang football program are made aware of the cultural expectations being placed upon them. Leve (2012) asserts that cultural representations are implemented as a way to, “create and maintain particular shared understandings” (p. 5). In turn, the idealized beliefs and values of Coach Murphy and other influential members of the organization only become cultural products through their representation (Leve, 2012). Much like the production of culture, the representation of culture is best dissected at the institutional, organizational, and individual levels.

Institutional Level

The institutional environment surrounding Mustang football impacts the representation of culture in several important ways. Among them are the incessant comparisons to other college football programs and the use of outside media as a motivational tactic.

The Canyon Ridge Warriors logo is among one of the first images one sees upon entering the Wright football complex. The cultural artifacts present within the organization act as visual representations of cultural values (Schein, 2010). Hanging from floor to ceiling is a banner from the 2014 national championship game; the Mustang and Warriors logos face each other near the center of the banner. This is not the only place that the Warriors logo resides in the Wright building. The presence of the logo is a reminder to the team of what they are chasing. The Warriors are the gold standard in FCS football and intentionally or not, the Mustangs are reminded of it every single day. By placing the Warriors logo out in the open, this reinforces the cultural value of winning through the use of visual artifacts (Schein, 2010). In fact, Coach Murphy, his assistants, and several players utilize other college football programs throughout the country to reinforce the cultural values they hope to instill among their team.

When Murphy addressed the team at the back to school meeting back in January he reiterated the toughness needed to win a championship by referencing Canyon Ridge. "I was in Frisco a few days ago and it fucking sucked," he said. "They are tougher than we are. They were without their starting quarterback most of the season and still won. That's what they do. That's what we need to become." His insistence on referring back to the Warriors serves as a reminder to his team what is expected of them. By telling them that Canyon Ridge is the tougher team he is suggesting that they must become even tougher this year to be successful. The use of

inspirational tactics such as this is an effective method to instilling cultural values to the group (Schein, 2010).

Murphy and other assistant coaches compare the Mustangs to other teams as well, specifically this season to the Summit Steelers. Throughout the offseason coaches and players alike discussed the potential of being the first team from MWSU to defeat a SEC opponent. “It’s about time this team beat a SEC team,” Murphy said. The members of this program, from the coaches to the players, act like they are an SEC team. They compare themselves not with Midwest Tech and West Grove, but with Southwest, Southern State, and Summit. When Summit scored forty-five points against Southern State later in the season Murphy proudly reminded me, “We held them to seven.” By comparing their program against others at a higher level, the MWSU program seeks legitimization through mimetic isomorphism while additionally conveying important cultural values (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Furusten, 2013; Smith et al., 2012).

On several occasions during the season coaches implemented pieces from the media to motivate their players and further represent their cultural values. The diffusion of materials from outside the organization indicates an acceptance that the external environment is a key player in the immediate cultural environment of the MWSU football program (Furusten, 2013). A season preview suggested that MWSU would take a step back this year with the loss of Rory Johnson and Archer Moore. Murphy utilized this as competitive fuel for his team. “This article is BS,” he said. “This should piss you off. In my opinion this should be our best football team since we have been here. The only person who can put restrictions on you is you.” By drawing upon the outside opinion of media members Murphy creates an ‘us versus them’ environment and seeks to further instill cultural values by drawing upon the competitive nature of his players. Despite

constant please to the team to “control the controllables,” the reliance of outside materials signals an admission to the role that the environment plays in the circuit of culture (Scott, 2004; Leve, 2012).

Organizational Level

At the organizational level, culture is represented in a variety of ways. Cultural artifacts such as pictures and signs throughout the Wright building, the Mustang’s uniforms, and other organizational practices all represent the cultural values of the program. Schein (2010) labels such artifacts as, “the product of some of the underlying assumptions and [are], therefore, a manifestation of culture” (p. 24).

The sign that reads ‘Those who stay will be champions’ is a prime example of a cultural artifact present within Mustang culture. The cultural values of success and winning are manifested in this visual representation. Several other artifacts exist throughout the program that serve the same purpose. The ‘SAVAGES’ sign in the defensive backs room and the ‘Cadillac’s’ sign in the defensive line room serve to represent the cultural expectations of those two subcultures. It is through these cultural artifacts that the coaching staff visually represents the deeper underlying cultural assumptions of the football program (Smith et al., 2012; Schein, 2010).

Further, a whiteboard in the weight room dons a new message each week. Included in the message is ‘Beat the [upcoming opponent]’ and a motivational message for the team. During the week of the Southwest State game the board read: ‘Beat SIU. Hard work is its own reward. Work hard to be hard.’ Coach Floyd told me early in the season that he believed a primary function of his position was to reinforce Coach Murphy’s message to the team. Indeed, Smith and colleagues (2012) suggest that a crucial role of subordinates for implementing culture is to

emphasize, support, and reinforce the cultural messages of authority figures. This particularly message written on the weight room white board represents the cultural values of hard work and embracing the process.

The Mustang's uniforms themselves are a cultural product that represents the value of toughness. Fashion choices and organizational uniforms or dress-codes are oft-cited representations of the underlying cultural values of a group of people (Alvesson, 2013; Smith et al., 2012). As several coaches gathered around the defensive staff room one Saturday afternoon to watch Southern State play Nevada, the topic of alternate uniforms was brought up. The Jaguars were wearing non-traditional uniforms that were not representative of their school colors. Randy said, "We will never wear alternate uniforms. We aren't a flashy program. We are a run it down your throat program." The Mustangs have two uniforms: home (red) and away (white). To Randy, the addition of alternative uniforms to a football program signifies that they are more concerned with style than substance. He added, "If a recruit doesn't want to come here because we don't have alternate uniforms then we don't want him anyway." The rules about sleeves and tights during practice further represents the toughness that Coach Murphy seeks to instill in his players. By wearing sleeves you are displaying weakness, which is looked down upon. Smith and colleagues (2012) state about the role fashion plays in establishing and identifying culture,

The business suit reveals the uniform of the contemporary workplace, and being typically dark, conservative, and sober, it exemplifies a commitment to hierarchy, discipline, rules and conformity. In contrast, casual sports-wear signals the opposite...Furthermore, the simple addition of club colors, such as a scarf or cap, can immediately signal commitment and tribal belonging (p. 150).

The lack of flashy uniforms exemplifies the straight-laced environment present within the team, the lack of sleeves is a sign of strength and masculinity, and the presence of Mustang logos on most of the apparel worn by coaches and players indicates commitment and belonging.

The representation of culture is manifested additionally through subtle organizational practices. Such practices, also referred to as rituals, serve to express and affirm collective beliefs and values (Smith et al., 2012). The practice of seniors sitting in the front row during team and position meetings is representative of their status on the team and the respect they deserve. Indeed, research has suggested that certain organizational practices are carried out solely for the purpose of maintaining and reinforcing hierarchy (Schein, 2010; Smith et al, 2012; Hatch, 1993). Seniors are also released to eat first during team meals. During Hell Week, extra opportunities are granted to groups that were deemed to have not lived up to their expected effort. Naming these ‘extra opportunities’ exemplifies how the coaching staff believes the players should view this time as a chance for improvement rather than as punishment. Subtle nuances of language and verbiage are important components of conveying cultural messages (Schein, 2010). Other similar examples are the expectations to run between drills during practice, to sprint through the endzone on touchbacks, and to spend time during the week to watch film on your own outside of team film sessions. Behaviors where individuals “go the extra mile” signal commitment to the group and elicit feelings of trust from other group members (Smith et al., 2012).

Individual Level

Cultural values and beliefs are most directly represented at the individual level of analysis. Through speeches, everyday discourse, and dialogue during games and practices, cultural values are presented to members of the Mustang program. Smith and colleagues (2012) state, “Words and their meanings are contextually fluid, so the ability to draw on common

cultural interpretations influences successful communication” (p. 10). The coaching staff is intentional and repetitive in the messages that they convey to the team. The foundational values of the program – toughness, respect, and discipline – are consistently repeated to the team in numerous ways. For members of the team to comprehend cultural messages and subsequently draw knowledge and meaning from them, they must be fluent in the specific cultural literacy of Mustang football and identify the contextual nature of the message (Smith et al., 2012).

As has been referenced thoroughly throughout this project, the importance of toughness to the Mustang football program cannot be understated. Coach Murphy repeats it before every game: “We hang our hat on our toughness.” He goes so far as to tell his team during a meeting in March, “Toughness is our calling card. If you don’t like that, you’re in the wrong room.” The importance of toughness is reiterated in a multitude of ways throughout the year. Each coach mentioned toughness at least a handful of times during meetings or practice, some more than others. The consistent and repetitive use of this particular cultural value indicates the perceived importance of toughness to the program (Schein, 2010). For Coach Grant, it was a daily occurrence for him to publicly question the toughness of one of his players. One of his favorite lines was to call a player ‘Depends’ or ‘Pampers’ because they were playing soft. In the week leading up to their playoff game, Coach Grant tells the team, “Play fucking tough. The Midwestern way. The motherfucking ‘Stangs way!”

Respect is another value that was reiterated often throughout the year. By insisting that players take their hats off and sit up in their seats during meetings he is teaching them what he believes to be two lessons in respecting others. Such cultural practices were misunderstood by many younger members of the team early in the season. They were interpreted as unnecessary and excessive, until instructed cultural learning took place, at which time players understood the

cultural significance of the practice (Tomasello et al., 1993; Smith et al., 2012). Several times throughout the year Murphy would voice his frustration over people from outside of the program wearing hats inside during meetings. To him it is a sign of disrespect. Furthermore, coaches oftentimes would emphasize eye contact with their players. While Coach Humphrey taught a drill he told Leon Rivers, “Look me in the eyes when I talk to you.” Murphy would often deliver various versions of a speech that included, “Stay away from things that destroy you: Drugs, alcohol, and disrespecting women.” He demanded the players be respectful in other ways as well. “Being on time is a sign of respect,” he told the team. “If you’re cleats aren’t on that field when the whistle blows then you don’t love football.” To cognitively understand the significance of these rules, a deeper level of cultural understanding was necessary. Smith and colleagues (2012) state, “every organization holds a body of contextual knowledge required for the proper understanding of the traditions and values that underpin [organizational] practices” (p. 11).

Finally, discipline, another cultural value, was represented often throughout the year and became a central theme for the 2016 Mustang’s team. Following a series of off-field incidents during the off-season, Coach Murphy along with several other coaches would reference the player’s lack of discipline off the field as a reason for on the field mistakes. Starting with Coach Watts’ outburst during Hell Week where he tells a group of players, “You guys would rather fucking smoke dope, go out drinking, skip class, than bust your ass on the football field.” His message to the team was simple: In order to be successful on the field you must exhibit discipline off of it. While the coaches lack evidence to prove the truthfulness of this claim, it has become a specific cultural belief nonetheless. Regardless of the efficacy of a cultural statement or belief, the communicator (an authority figure) determines its place as a cultural practice (Schein, 2010; Furusten, 2013).

A similar message was sent by Coach Murphy following both the Lakeview and the Coral Shores games. Murphy was upset after both games for mistakes made by players who had also been undisciplined in their personal lives outside of football. He delivered a similar message in the locker room after both games. He was as upset as I saw him all season following the Lakeview game when he told the team, “When you are fucking undisciplined in your personal life this is what happens!” The team had outperformed Lakeview in nearly every aspect of the game but still walked away with a loss due to crucial mistakes. The Mustang’s playoff game versus Coral Shores followed a similar blueprint and Murphy delivered a similar message: “I have told you this before. When you are undisciplined off the field it will show on the field. To be a great player and a great team every person must be disciplined in each area of their life.” Each of these instances are sure to be remembered by members of the team moving forward due to the emotional nature of the moments. Smith and colleagues (2012) assert,

...memorable ideas and recurrent concepts in stories take advantage of two particular aspects of memory in order to enhance recall and subsequent transmission: repetition and arousal. The former is straightforward in the sense that the more exposure leads to better recall. The latter is important because the more emotionally stimulating a piece of information or event, the easier it is to remember (p. 181).

Consumption of Culture

The consumption of culture occurs throughout the year as individuals become aware of the cultural expectations, values, and practices of the Mustang program and assimilate them into their preexisting cultural practices. Terni, as quoted in Hall (1980), asserts,

By the word *reading* [consuming] we mean not only the capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs, but also the subjective capacity to put them into a creative relation between themselves and with other signs: a capacity which is, by itself, the condition for a complete awareness of one’s total environment (p. 135).

Consuming is thus a multifaceted and complex process through which meaning is given to cultural products and subsequently adopted or discarded by the consumer through conscious

decision-making (Leve, 2012). As with the other branches of the circuit of culture, the consumption of Mustang culture is explored at multiple levels below.

Institutional Level

The cultural product fashioned by the Mustang coaching staff spreads far beyond the borders of the MWSU football program. In addition to the players and staff members involved within the program, the MWSU campus, and the Chester community are influenced by the cultural products circulated within the Mustang football program.

Members of Midwest State's campus, including students, faculty, and staff members, consumed the culture of Mustang football through cultural artifacts as well as promotional videos and social media content. Coach Murphy's status on campus, and more notably, his mustache's status on campus, was that of a tough, hard-nosed football coach. During an early season game a fan in the student section held a sign that read '*Our coach's mustache could beat up your coach.*' His toughness and the toughness of the team was reinforced through promotional videos and social media content produced by members of the football staff. A series of mini-documentaries highlighting fall camp focused on ways the team builds toughness throughout the offseason. In this case, the product being sold to the external environment matches that being consumed by the internal environment, which is not always the case (Furusten, 2013). For example, the Notre Dame Football is often seen as a beacon of all that is right with college football, but recent academic misconduct cases reveal a different story.

The product being marketed to members of the MWSU community capitalized on the notion that a successful football team raises the status of the entire university. Doug Chung, Assistant Professor at the Harvard Business School says, "The primary form of mass media advertising by academic institutions in the United States is, arguably, through their athletic

programs” (Silverthorne, 2013, para. 5). Any reference to the school’s football team directed toward the MWSU campus assigned ownership to the members of campus (Here come *your* 2016 Mustangs, etc.). Assigning ownership creates a sense of responsibility and obligation for support (Schein, 2010). Their consumption of Mustang culture is based on a manufactured product intended to contribute to their feelings of pride towards the team. When Coach Murphy arrived at MWSU it was undoubtedly a “basketball school.” Upon noticing a football specific t-shirt in the campus bookstore one day, Murphy commented, “They didn’t have these a few years ago.” It could be argued that the football team now garners more student support than the basketball team.

Outside of MWSU’s campus, the Chester community is an additional institutional factor to consider. With two universities with major fan bases within a two hour radius, along with several professional sports teams, the Mustang’s must compete for fan support with a myriad of other sports teams. Community supporters seem to be Mustang fans for one of two reasons: (1) they are Midwest State alumni, or (2) they know somebody who is. Unlike within the football program where they operate with the mindset that they can compete against larger schools, few attempts are made at breaking into competing markets for ticket sales or other marketing campaigns. While the size of the fan base may not be where they like, the fervor with which MWSU’s fans connect with and support the team is impressive.

Organizational Level

As culture was consumed within the program, a few notable observations assist in our understanding of the Mustang football culture. First, the perpetuation of stereotypical gender norms played a crucial role in the consumption of cultural practices. Additionally, Mustang culture epitomizes an ‘old-school’ approach to the operation of a football program and rejects

many of the new trends emerging in the industry. These observable phenomena are both products of and reasons for the underlying cultural values of the organization.

As mentioned above, the value of toughness within the program is best characterized using stereotypical male gender qualities. To be successful within this program, it is assumed, one must uphold the societal virtues most often assigned to men. Contributing to this trend is the presence of only two female staff members, a microcosm of the male dominated world of college football (Christensen, 2014). It is assumed that players, via participation on the Mustang team, will transform from boys to men. Beyond explicit mentions of gender roles, which are present, cultural practices can additionally,

...have varying underlying significances beyond their apparent meaning and nature. A culture that supports a character-building assumption would expect players to act within the confines of certain stereotypical gender boundaries that may not be reinforced via other means. For instance, male players should not reveal pain or discomfort” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 109).

As a member of the organization one is conditioned to place individuals into roles based on their gender. The two females in the organization, while they break the gender barrier into college football, remain steadfastly entrenched in ‘female’ roles. Pam Merna, the Wright building receptionist, is often referred to as the ‘Mother of the Mustangs’, even having an article written in the local paper featuring that as the title. Molly, the director of operations, manages the travel plans, food arrangements, and scheduling for the team, all stereotypical female tasks.

Another noticeable feature of the organizational culture was their intention on remaining an old-school power football team both on the field and off of it. Coach Murphy would rather run the ball effectively and play great defense than winning games in shootouts. Their 9-7 victory over Summit gave him great satisfaction not only in beating a SEC team but for the fashion in

which it was accomplished. This victory typified the essence of Coach Murphy's vision for the Mustang program.

Other cultural practices additionally highlight MWSU football's insistence on being an old-fashioned, traditional program. Their insistence on removing hats inside, wearing suits when traveling, partaking in two weeks of Hell Week, and wearing simple Penn State-like uniforms all contribute to the old-school culture encompassing Mustang football. Members of the program take pride in operating the 'old-fashioned way'. When we arrived at the Coral Shores' field, which is striped in their school colors of purple and grey, Kian Riggs commented, "This is fucking stupid, I like the old-school look like we have." This was one of many instances through which members of the program expressed their appreciation for the Mustang's old-school culture.

Individual Level

The consumption of culture at the individual level is largely dependent on past cultural experiences (Hall, 1980). As members of the organization are introduced to new cultural practices, they are processed through the lens of an outsider with, at times, a vastly different understanding of how society operates (Schein, 2010). In this vein, consuming Mustang culture is an effortless process for some and an arduous one for others. There are individuals who accept the cultural practices, values, and beliefs wholeheartedly (more so than not), while others resist, content to hold onto conflicting values.

Because most of the players on the team played high school football for coaches with values remotely similar to Coach Murphy's, the transition to the Mustangs and consumption of their culture for a majority was quite seamless for the most part. The marked differences between high school and Division 1 college football, however, posed challenges for many players. During

summer conditioning, the first college level workouts for most of the freshmen, Coach Floyd told me, “Most of these guys don’t know what it means to be tough.”

A common complaint throughout the season coming from the coaching staff referred to the sense of entitlement and lack of discipline of incoming freshmen. As referenced in earlier chapters, the current generation of incoming freshmen is believed by many to be one distinguished by entitlement and privilege (Alsop, 2008). Whether true or false, the coaching staff perceived them as such. During their first few months on campus, many freshmen seemed averse to discipline coming from either the coaching staff or their elder teammates. A handful of freshman openly defied seniors on a few occasions, leading to several near altercations. As the season continued the number of such instances diminished significantly.

It is important to note here that the consumption of culture is not equivalent to the acceptance of cultural values. As individuals consume culture they simply apply meaning to cultural practices (Leve, 2012; Johnson, 1986). Leve (2012) suggests,

“Through articulation with the other key moments of the cultural circuit, the production [of cultural goods] does not simply begin with production and end with consumption – not a beginning and an end but a continual process of mutually constitutive ‘meaning making and meaning taking’” (p. 7).

A member of the Mustang football program can thus apply meaning to cultural practices, understand the values meant to be drawn from them, and still not accept those values as their own. For instance, the team rule of no hats inside is meant to represent the cultural value of respect. In consuming this cultural practice, players will attach one of two meanings to it: (1) just another one of Coach Murphy’s rules, or (2) a gesture meant to show respect to others in the room, which is always expected from members of this team. After attaching meaning to the practice, each individual can then accept or reject the value (either follow the rule because they have to or remove their hats out of respect).

A majority of players cognitively attached meaning to the cultural practices being performed. Most understood that Hell Week served a purpose far greater than physical conditioning, for example. At times a disconnect existed between the representation of culture and the consumption. In relation to the production of television content, Hall (1973) asserts,

“Television producers who find their message ‘failing to get across’ are frequently concerned to straighten out the kinks in the communication chain, thus facilitating the ‘effectiveness’ of the communication...No doubt misunderstandings of a literal kind do exist. The viewer does not know the terms employed, cannot follow the complex logic of argument or exposition, is unfamiliar with the language, finds the concepts too alien or difficult or is foxed by the expository narrative. But more often broadcasters are concerned that the audience has failed to take the meanings as they – the broadcasters – intended. What they really mean to say is that viewers are not operating within the ‘dominant’ or ‘preferred’ code. Their ideal is ‘perfectly transparent communication’. Instead, what they have to confront is ‘systematically distorted communication’.

Such ‘systematically distorted communication’ manifested in various ways on several occasions.

The coaching staff’s representation of the program is intended to be a tough, blue-collared football team, which is reiterated countless times throughout the season. By putting the team through a long and difficult fall camp, the coaches hoped to instill the cultural value of toughness into their team. Instead, several members of the team understood the unusually long fall camp as punishment or as simply unnecessary. Their understood meaning of the practice varied greatly from the intended message.

Further, a handful of players rejected the Mustang’s cultural practices all together. Such detractors of culture either refused to accept the coaches’ meanings applied to toughness, respect, or discipline or were unwilling to change their behavior to match the desired values. An important distinction to account for here is that these players were not necessarily weak, disrespectful, or undisciplined. Their meanings of these values and the subsequent behaviors attached to them were simply not congruent with those of the coaches.

Finally, most of the players on the team effectively attached meaning to cultural values, accepted them as part of their own identity, and consequently became a producer/representor of culture. Many examples could be witnessed of this phenomenon throughout the year. When Sawyer and Nathan yelled at underclassmen to increase their effort level during Hell Week they at that point had fully attached meaning to the cultural practices they were performing and in turn were representing the cultural values the coaching staff had produced. Members of the leadership council were selected to that role in large part because of their acceptance of cultural values; through their position on the leadership council they then become producers of culture.

Leve (2012) states, “Consumption is not the end of a process, but the setting off on another – with increased understanding” (p. 8). Through this we gain a greater understanding of the necessity to analyze culture as a fluid, rather than static, process. Particularly within a college football program, where turnover is substantial, it is essential to study culture as an ever-changing, transformable, and variable phenomenon.

Self-Reflection

I want to acknowledge that this dissertation breaks a mold of sorts. Not that I have written some groundbreaking analysis that will forever change our field (it won't), but it is a break from the traditional. I do not intend to use anything that I have done for this project for future research purposes. I also do not plan to pursue a career in academia as most in my position would. The knowledge gained through this research, however, has greatly impacted my view of football and the research process, among other things. I imagine that it will continue to influence me in whatever career I pursue. It has not so much *changed* my view of football or research, as it has forced me to ask different questions and approach those institutions from a different perspective.

This project has taught me that we do not see the world as it is; we see it as we are. There truly is no world, just seven and a half billion understandings of it. As each of us maneuver through life, we draw upon our experiences to shape our definitions of the truth. As Goodall Jr. (1989) puts it, "truth is always partial, always dependent on where you are standing when you perceive it, and tangled up in the language you use to describe it" (p. 150). From where I stand, football (and sport in general) is a positive institution that brings out more good than bad. That is *my* truth because of my lived experiences. I have seen the good that playing, coaching, and enjoying football can bring. To be fully honest, Saturday afternoons in the Metrodome with my Grandpa make it so that convincing me otherwise would prove a monumental task. The past year has only served to reinforce my beliefs.

I have also seen the negative consequences that football is responsible for, or at least plays a part in. Football is not an absolutely good or evil institution. Like most things in this world it lies in the uncomfortable space between good and evil, where most of us must either

ignore or justify that which does not match our system of beliefs. I admit to conflicted feelings and hesitation regarding the place of football in our society. Ultimately, I still believe in the *Power of Football*. John Locke (1836) once said, “No man's knowledge here can go beyond his experience.” I make no claims of knowing *the* truth, simply *my* truth.

The purpose of this project was not to comment on the place of football in today's society. My opinion on that matter is based solely on my unique perspective. This project's intent was to convey to you, the reader, what I, the researcher, experienced as part of a unique culture. I aimed to diagnose the culture of Mustang football using an interpretive ethnographic approach that ultimately left me with more questions than answers. No great mysteries were solved or secrets discovered. The results from my investigation and my subsequent thoughts on the matter are not generalizable to any other football team or collection of individuals. The data collected and reported was often ambiguous, indefinite, and unclear (*Why even do it then!?*).

The answer to that question lies in my self-interested intentions. This project forced me out of my comfort zone and allowed me to grow as an individual. It challenged me to question my beliefs, ask necessary questions, approach research (and life in general) from an inductive perspective, and push my boundaries as a researcher, writer, and human being. I now recognize subtleties in human and organizational behavior that I would have overlooked a year ago. I understand that transferring what I see or hear to words and sentences greatly impacts how my experiences are consequently experienced by the reader. I appreciate the intricacies of language (both written and spoken), the implication of context to discerning discourse, and the role of communication as it applies to culture (in short, it means everything). I grew personally and professionally over the past year, but ultimately, the best answer I can give for why I undertook this project and conducted it in this manner is that it makes sense to me.

APPENDIX B**LETTER OF SUPPORT FROM COACH [MURPHY]**

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing to express my consent and support for Jonathan Mays' research project proposal titled 'Creating a Culture: An Organizational Ethnography of Intercollegiate Football.' The proposed project will serve to increase the overall body of knowledge surrounding the culture of college football as well as the specific culture of the [Midwest State University Mustang] football program. I believe that this project will not only fill a void in the literature on culture in college football, but also provide myself and my staff with a greater awareness and understanding of the inner workings of our program's culture.

As part of my support for this project, I am granting Mr. Mays unrestricted access to all facets of our program, including the coaching staff, players, and support staff. He will be given access to all practices, team meetings, position meetings, strength workouts, games, and any other events he deems necessary for successful completion of the project.

I look forward to working with Mr. Mays on this project and anticipate a mutually beneficial relationship.

Sincerely,

[Randy Murphy]
Head Coach
[Midwest State Football]

APPENDIC C
IRB APPROVAL

APPROVAL OF PROTOCOL

January 26, 2016

Jonathan Mays

j407m242@ku.edu

Dear Jonathan Mays:

On 1/26/2016, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review: Initial Study

Title of Study: Creating a Culture: An Organizational Ethnography of Intercollegiate Football

Investigator: Jonathan Mays

IRB ID: STUDY00003624

Funding: None

Grant ID: None

Documents Reviewed: • Information Statement, • Initial Submission Application, • Letter of Support, • Clarifications, • Sample Questions

The IRB approved the submission from 1/26/2016 to 1/25/2017.

1. Before 1/25/2017 submit a Continuing Review request and required attachments to request continuing approval or closure.
2. Any significant change to the protocol requires a modification approval prior to altering the project.
3. Notify HSCL about any new investigators not named in original application. Note that new investigators must take the online tutorial at https://rgs.drupal.ku.edu/human_subjects_compliance_training.
4. Any injury to a subject because of the research procedure must be reported immediately.
5. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 1/25/2017 approval of this protocol expires on that date.

Please note university data security and handling requirements for your project:

<https://documents.ku.edu/policies/IT/DataClassificationandHandlingProceduresGuide.htm>

You must use the final, watermarked version of the consent form, available under the "Documents" tab in eCompliance.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Dyson Elms, MPA

IRB Administrator, KU Lawrence Campus

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE INFORMED CONSENT

Creating a Culture: An Organizational Ethnography of Intercollegiate Football

The Department of Health, Sport, and Exercise Science at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this unit, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to identify key elements involved in creating and maintaining an organizational culture within a college football program.

PROCEDURES

You will be asked to participate in one-on-one interviews, both formally and informally, as well as focus groups conducted by the researcher. Some interviews and focus groups sessions will be recorded. You have the option to have taping stopped at any time. The researcher will be transcribing all recordings himself, and no one else will have access to them. The recordings will be erased immediately after they are transcribed. No names, nicknames, uniform numbers, or other identifying information will be used in the publication. Each participant will remain anonymous, with pseudonym's taking the place of any unique identifiers of any individual.

RISKS

There are no anticipated risks by participating in this research project.

BENEFITS

Anticipated benefits of the research include a better understanding of how the culture of a college football program is created and maintained.

PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research project.

ANONYMITY

Your name will not be associated in any way with the information collected about you or with the research findings from this study. The researcher will use a pseudonym in place of your name.

REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to: Jonathan Mays [1301 Sunnyside Ave. Lawrence, KS 66045]. If you cancel permission to use your information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information from you. However, the research team may use and disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation, as described above.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION

Questions about procedures should be directed to the researcher(s) listed at the end of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study and the use and disclosure of information about me for the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may call (785) 864-7429 or write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7563, email irb@ku.edu.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. I further agree to the uses and disclosures of my information as described above. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

If you would like to participate, please fill in the lines below:

Printed Name

Signed Name

Date

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jonathan Mays grew up in Bloomington, Minnesota but claims the Green Bay Packers as his football team. He was a Jaguar at Thomas Jefferson High School before playing basketball and golf and studying Psychology at Lawrence University. After a brief coaching career he earned his Masters of Education degree in Sport Management from the University of Kansas in 2014, where he met his wife, [Molly]. In the spring of 2017, he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sport Management from the University of Kansas.