



(2008) HANDS ON: Local coaches and players annually pitch in at Manning camp

By Paul J. Letlow

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THIBODAUX – Even with vast resources at their disposal, the Manning family relies on Louisiana talent to help put on their annual football camp.

The headliners at the Manning Passing Academy are always NFL quarterbacks Peyton and Eli, along with their dad – Saints icon Archie.

But doing much of the heavy lifting are guys we know just as well from northeastern Louisiana.

Former Neville and ULM quarterback Bubby Brister has been a regular Manning camp instructor since he retired from the NFL in 2001.

"Archie and I have been friends," Brister said. "It goes back to when I was being recruited out of high school and he was talking to me about Ole Miss. Then I went to Tulane (before transferring to ULM) in New Orleans.

"I played against him and Peyton and have been a friend of that family for a long time. Archie told me when I retired to pencil in the second weekend of July for the rest of my life."

Louisiana Tech coaches make an annual pilgrimage to work. Assistant Conroy Hines, another Neville product, has been with the program for more than a decade. Frank Scelfo, Tech's offensive coordinator and a former ULM baseball player, came on board as an original staffer when he worked at Tulane. Joining them this year was Tech defensive backs coach Terry Joseph and transfer quarterback Taylor Bennett, who served as a counselor last year when he was at Georgia Tech.

"I enjoy working it and being associated with the Manning family," Hines said. "The class act you think they are on TV, they are in person. That's the thing. They are great people and great to be around. It makes it worthwhile."

Mangham coach Bo Meeks, who played college football as a quarterback at ULM and Northwestern State after his prep career at Ruston, was also back to teach this summer.

"It's exciting for me," said Meeks, after his 12th year of involvement. "I make sure I've got my calendar open. It's fun to see all the coaches from different levels, from high school to college to the NFL. You get to sit down and talk football, and have a good time. It recharges my batteries."

Active college players like Bennett are typically part of the instructional mix. In the past, Tech quarterbacks Tim Rattay, Luke McCown, Matt Kubik and Zac Champion have participated. Kubik, now working at Northwestern State, returned to the staff last week too.

The academy annually draws more than 1,000 campers from as far away as Alaska. Although future NFL or college stars could be scattered among the throng of quarterbacks and receivers, most are simply working to become better high school players.

"I get to work with younger quarterbacks, and I enjoy that," Meeks said. "It's a fundamentals camp. One of the things the Mannings stress when you get down there is that this is a camp where fundamentals are important. That's what makes you a better player."

Brister, who played with a swagger during his career, likes to help instill confidence in the young quarterbacks.

"Sometimes you get kids who are backup quarterbacks at their high school," Brister said. "They're nervous and shy and maybe embarrassed. I want to make sure that when they're in that huddle, they have confidence and good fundamentals. They may not be Peyton or Eli, but they can go to their respective high schools and have confidence.

"You try to give them a foundation, and that's the key."

Despite the remote location, the Manning Passing Academy draws an impressive contingent of football stars and coaches, along with national media like ESPN's Chris Mortensen. NFL legend John Elway once brought his son to the camp. This season, Jaguars coach Jack Delrio was spotted in a golf cart near the stadium.

Yet despite that charged atmosphere, the mission is remarkably simple.

"There are always big-name people there walking around," Hines said. "There are not a ton of major Division I prospects there. It's really a camp focusing on high school players becoming better high school players."

The Mannings themselves are accustomed to repeat customers and talk about the satisfaction of seeing those youngsters improve. Eli Manning participated as a player when he was a schoolboy coming out of Newman High School in New Orleans.

Recent Super Bowl participation didn't make Peyton or Eli any less active either. Both are hands-on instructors to all the offensive skill players as they roam the practice fields.

"You try to talk to them during the downtime and find out where they're playing, where they live," said Eli Manning, reigning Super Bowl MVP. "You get guys from all over the country. It's very entertaining and fun for me. I know the kids enjoy it also. Some kids are back for their second and third years. That means they're enjoying it and having fun."

Added older brother Peyton Manning: "We've had a number of players who come back year after year. They were here as a freshman, now they are back as a senior. It's fun and exciting to see how they've developed.

"We're going to show them the drills and mechanics that can make them into a better player if they go back to their respective high schools and work on those drills. It's hard to make them a better player in three days, but these are a lot of the same drills Eli and I did in high school. The fundamentals and basics of playing quarterback, playing receiver, running back and tight end."

When they aren't coaching in the blanket of tropical heat that covers the Nicholls State campus, the instructors enjoy after-hours camaraderie and swap ideas.

Hines said he looks forward to seeing his fellow Neville product Brister, who was a senior when Hines started high school. Brister still marvels at Hines' ability to jog four miles after the blistering workday.

During skull sessions, a young coach like Meeks said he soaks up knowledge like a sponge. A few years ago, Hines benefited from visiting with Colts offensive coordinator Tom Moore.

"You get to bounce ideas off different people," Hines said. "Even though you're there coaching, you do end up sitting down and talking football. You can improve yourself as a coach just by watching somebody else work a drill."

Courtesy of:

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