

SPORT

NO EXCUSES: BUILDING CULTURE



Bob Stoops

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: One of the primary things that a leader does is to set the culture for the organization or the team. You had a phenomenal run across your coaching career, especially at the University of Oklahoma. Can you talk a little bit about your approach to creating culture on your teams? You have a lot of dynamics that you are dealing with, so how do you set the culture that you want for your team?

Stoops: To me, it is an ongoing process. First and foremost, it starts with what you promote. Is it positive or negative? I feel you get much more done with a positive culture. For example, how you relay your message. If you have to pass on critical information, how do you do that? Anything you do, even if it is discipline or corrections, you need to find ways to do it positively or to be taken in a positive manner. My experience is that it is accepted much more when it is done that way.

I think another part of creating the culture is that there is no substitute for the work. Everybody needs to know that up front. It doesn't matter how talented you might be. We had a saying in our weight room forever that said, "Hard work beats talent, when talent doesn't work hard." That was our mindset. We were going to put the work in. It consisted of two parts. When I first got to Oklahoma, we didn't have a culture. Or, if we did, it was incredibly negative and poor. We sold that we were going to outwork everybody so that we knew that when we took the field, we deserved to win. There wasn't ever the attitude that we didn't deserve to win. Our mentality was that we worked too hard to not win. That was the first part of developing it. Then, once you we had it, we knew that we still needed to outwork everybody with the toughness, sacrifice, and effort that we put in through the year. Whether it be daily, weekly, or monthly, we were willing to do the work necessary to win. You also have to be smart on how you continue to motivate your team. All teams are different so it is continuing to work on that.

Bob Stoops is a former football coach at the college and professional levels. He coached numerous places, but culminated his collegiate coaching by spending 18 years as the head football coach at the University of Oklahoma where his teams played in four national championships and becoming national champion in 2000. From 1999-2017, his teams won 10 Conference Championships, an amazing .798 winning percentage, and he won numerous coach of the year awards. During the inaugural season of the XFL, he was selected as the head coach and general manager for the Dallas Renegades.



Another thing that was big for me, so big in fact that I titled my book after it, was no excuses. You either succeed or you don't. You either win or you don't. An excuse is just trying to justify failure. At the end of the day, there are good excuses out there, but they really don't matter. You either won or you didn't. That was the other thing that was plastered all over our weight room and other places in our facilities...No Excuses. You went to class, or you didn't. Your car may have broken down, but you still found a way to get to class. When you were on the field, you either made the play or you didn't. It's pretty cut and dry. Those are really the things that I focused on regarding setting the culture that I wanted.

Lindsay: I appreciate you sharing that perspective. You had an incredible amount of success, but that didn't always translate into a win. For example, even when you go to the National Championship Game, which you did four times, and fall short when the buzzer goes off there, isn't a reason to have a pity party about why you didn't win. The answer is to get back to work and we are going to take another run at it.

Stoops: Exactly. It doesn't matter. It's a continuous fight and struggle to keep improving. That is what you are trying to do.

Lindsay: As the leader of the team, you are promoting that idea. Did you find that your players and the leaders on your team picked it up and repeated that message?

Stoops: Definitely. With the number of people we work with, like assistant coaches, it is important to make sure that they have a clear understanding of the message and that you continually update them on that message. That is important because it can change from week to week. In fact, during the season depending on who you are going to play that week, you could be a heavy underdog, you could be favored, you could be going into a huge stadium, it could be loud, or it could be quiet. The leaders under you have to be continually updated

on what you want the message to be and be able to get it to the players clearly. You also have your older players who know what you expect and you need to empower them to deliver on the culture and the message as well. It takes everybody. It is your job as the leader to make sure it is coordinated and the right message is being pushed and heard.

Lindsay: That clear understanding is important and not always easy to get to. For example, right now there is a lot of talk out there in the college football realm about which conferences are playing, which aren't playing, when will the season start, how is the playoff going to work, will players opt out, can players transfer, etc. That is a lot of uncertainty. To your point about having the right culture and clear understanding, that is a challenge in such an uncertain landscape. However, even in spite of the challenges we are seeing with respect to COVID, it seems like a coach's job is to deal with uncertainty every day. When you think about different teams every week, things like injury and travel, it seems like your normal is to balance large uncertainty from week to week and day to day.

Stoops: It is constant. Even during the season, different people are hurt and you have to adjust and keep moving forward in a positive way. COVID has created whole new obstacle to continually work and fight through with respect to safety, which is paramount, and the resulting uncertainty.

Lindsay: Do you get to the point where you ever get comfortable in that uncertainty? Where you settle into that. How do you get the mindset of whatever happens, we will move forward?

Stoops: It goes back to what I said earlier that there are no excuses. You play with what you have and you expect to do well with what you have. You expect people to step up and work. As an example, in the 2006 season, we removed our quarterback from the team the very first day of practice. As a result, we moved a receiver



to quarterback. Midway through the year, and we had already lost a game on the road to Oregon, we lost our best player, Adrian Peterson, to a broken collarbone. I say all that to say, my Monday meeting to the team after that was, if you are looking for an excuse to not win the Big 12 Championship or not have a great year here, you have it. If you choose to grab that excuse. Or, we can go with what we have, say the heck with it, we are still going to win. That is what we did. We went on, didn't lose another game and won the Big 12 Championship. We beat our rival Nebraska and went to the Fiesta Bowl. We did it and we beat our rival to do it. Point being, there aren't any good excuses. You just need to find a way to win.

Lindsay: At the end of the day, you don't get the Championship for accepting an excuse, even if it is understandable.

Stoops: If you take the excuse, someone else is going to get the Championship.

Lindsay: Along those lines, something that I have noticed over the years, is that programs across all sports have suffered from character issues among their players. That is something that I noticed about your teams, was that you didn't really have a lot of that. Do you attribute that to what you mentioned about you culture of not making excuses and doing the work?

Stoops: We had a few from time to time over my 18 years. I think everyone does to varying degrees. Overall, as a team and as a program, we had a very hard-nosed attitude. We weren't going to relinquish that for anything. It didn't matter if a five-start recruit wanted to act like he deserved something or not. We never promised anything other than an opportunity to play on a great team and to compete for championships. We were going to be tough minded in how we did it. So, I think overall, players knew that. We sold that in recruiting so that we knew we were recruiting people who came in knowing it was going to be tough, hard-

nosed work and the best person is going to play. Nothing is going to be given to you. If you think you are going to set your own pace, then this isn't the place for you. I told them that in recruiting, so if a kid was looking for an easy road, he might go somewhere else and not come to us. We weren't going to change the way we did things for anybody. I think it also attracted great players like Adrian Peterson and Tommy Harris because they knew that they were going to be challenged.

Lindsay: That's what winners want, right? Winners want to have that opportunity to prove themselves and earn their spot. That way, when they get that roster spot, they know they have done the work, earned it, and can feel good about it.

Stoops: Exactly, and at a place like Oklahoma, there is always going to be someone going after your spot, so you better keep it up.

Lindsay: People don't get too many passes in life and they need to be willing to do the work. We see that willingness to do the work at our Service Academies. I remember in 2010, Air Force went to Oklahoma and had a really close game. The Academies know they don't always have the size of some of the other Division 1 programs, but they are always willing to do the work.

Stoops: One of the best experiences I ever had was playing Fisher DeBerry's team at the Air Force Academy in 2001. We played well and won the game. But, we knew going into the game how difficult it was going to be because you don't see the option offense all of the time. Our guys were ready. We prepared them. After the game, we were celebrating. To us, it was a big game because we always did the work to win regardless of who we were playing that week. As we were leaving the field, everyone on our team was yelling because of the win. As we were walking off the field, we noticed the Air Force players standing in front of the student section singing their anthem. All our guys stopped and were quite while that was happening. We quit



our celebration out of respect for the cadets and just watched. When it was over, we headed into our locker room. Fisher DeBerry came over to me shortly after that and thanked me. He said, “Bob, nobody has treated us with that much respect.” Our guys get the commitment and the service these guys and gals are going to do. That was pretty cool.

Lindsay: That speaks to the culture of your team. Some teams get into trouble because they often will go into a game where they are favored but don’t always appreciate the preparation. They don’t always show up ready to play at the level they normally do. They may be looking past the present game to the next game.

Whoever does the best wins. It doesn't matter what year in school you are. It doesn't matter what rank recruit you were. You either get it done or you don't.

Stoops: I was always big on, not just the Friday before the game, but all week long about what to expect. We prepared all week like that so hopefully there were no surprises. All week our guys were hearing and digesting what they were going to experience. I think that is why we were so consistent because very little took us by surprise or came up that we weren’t ready for. To your point about some teams not being prepared because they expected to win or that they were heavily favored so didn’t prepare the same way, that didn’t happen to us because we were always ready for it and prepared mentally and emotionally for what was about to happen.

Lindsay: I think that is a key point because if the mentality is just to win, then that can potentially cause someone to do just enough to get above where they think the bar is going to be. But, if the work becomes the mission and the focus, then you know you are going to go out there the best that you can to execute. So, it doesn’t become about trying to beat the option that week, it is about playing Oklahoma football. It keeps the mentality on the work.

Stoops: Exactly. It was always centered on the work and not who or where we were playing. It was on us

to prepare, work, and be ready for what we are about to do that day. I didn’t just start that on Friday. I was talking to them all week, so that they would be familiar with it.

Lindsay: I was going to ask a question about how do you handle a member of the team who gets a little bit beyond themselves, but I think you addressed that through your culture and work comments. If the culture of the team is to work hard, then it isn’t about an individual. It is about the team. Kurt Warner has talked about how

some athletes will often stagnate because they find out what they are good at and just keep doing that. Whereas the elites athletes find out what they aren’t good at and are willing to work on that to better themselves overall and also the team. It is the idea of if I focus on the work, then it takes the focus off me and puts it back on the team.

Stoops: It does. Earlier, you brought up the idea of privilege or someone who thinks they are better others. How we deal with that is that we constantly evaluate and we lay it out honestly. We watch every step that you take. If another guy has taken 10 steps better than you, why would you be playing in front of him? My job is to win. You think I am actually going to play someone who isn’t better? It is really simple. Your actions on the field are evaluated, graded, and scored and the best evaluations are the ones that get the most time. They understand that the second that they walk in our building. If you say you are the best, then let me see it. We practice every day, so what are you seeing that I am not?

Lindsay: What I like about that is the idea of working it out on the field. Are you better than them or not? It is not whether you think you are better than another



person. It is your actions and your habits. That focus on the work keeps egos out of the way.

Stoops: It keeps everything out of the way. It is the great equalizer. Whoever does the best wins. It doesn't matter what year in school you are. It doesn't matter what rank recruit you were. You either get it done or you don't.

Lindsay: In today's environment of recruiting, that approach, at least in the beginning, could be seen as a bit risky because you are focusing on people who want to work and not necessarily on just talent.

Stoops: It's not risky if you want to establish the right culture. You can have a true winning culture, which that is. Or, you can have a phony culture that won't last or be consistent. We weren't too worried about protecting anyone's ego.

Lindsay: You don't get 18 consecutive Bowl game berths or 10 Big 12 Conference Championships without a culture of winning.

Stoops: I think there is no question, that since 2000, during those years, we were more consistent than anyone else in the country, and still are. Lincoln Riley maintains the same type of culture. We won a National Championship and played for three more. We were consistent. Since 2000, there were only a couple years where we didn't have at least 10 wins.

Lindsay: You stepped away from Oklahoma in 2017 and then decided to come back and coach in the XFL with the Dallas Renegades. What was it that intrigued you about that opportunity and to come back to coaching?

Stoops: At lot of it just fit me at the time. It was a combination of my family situation, time of year, and being in Dallas worked for my family. I was also intrigued with working with older players that don't

have to go to school. It is all football. I don't have to go to academic meetings in the morning. I don't get an update on who missed class. It was just all football. It was fun and it was fun working with older players who knew a lot about football and picked things up quickly. So, all of that just kind of fit. We will see what comes next.

Lindsay: I appreciate you taking the time to have this conversation.

Stoops: No worries. Anything for the Air Force Academy. Big respects for all those involved with the Academy and what you all do.