

**Sunday, August 30, 2009**

### **Men of steel**

Kansas' Mark Mangino, Oklahoma's Bob Stoops and Nebraska's Bo Pelini share more than a conference. Youngstown, Ohio, shaped who they are and pushed them forward.

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The Kansas City Star

YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio | The neighborhoods in the shadow of the steel mills produced tough little boys.

On Detroit Avenue, when it was bedtime and the four Stoops brothers wouldn't stop roughhousing, they'd hear their father coming up the stairs, belt in hand. During the day, they'd use his belts to play a game called "hide the strap." The kid who found the strap first had the right to whip the others' legs until they made it back to base.

A few miles south on Forestridge Drive, Bo Pelini grew up wanting nothing more than to play football at Cardinal Mooney High. He'd heard about the practices that raged into the cold nights, the fathers who pulled their cars close to the field as the sun went down and turned on their headlights.

Twenty miles east in the Mahoningtown district of New Castle, Pa., Mark Mangino also found a way of subverting the dark. He and his friends attached a basketball hoop to a utility pole under a street lamp so they could play all night. No fouls were called.

It was a different time. In the mills that lined the Mahoning River, men took shift after shift in the furnaces and helped build a nation. At home with their families, they used the same equation: What you put into your kids, you get out of them down the road.

The result was a generation bred to be leaders. Some, like Bob Stoops, Mike Stoops, Bo Pelini and Mark Mangino, left. Others stayed and planted roots.

City officials, with a population of 170,000, were banking on growth. They hoped to reach 200,000, so they mapped out a plan to create new neighborhoods on the far east side of town. They dug water lines, paved roads and put in street signs with names like Vittoria and Josephine.

Then they waited.

III

For more than three decades, before every Cardinal Mooney football game, Don Bucci would talk to the boys about the future. Bad things were going to happen in football, just like they would in life.

The other team could score first. They could lose a starter to an injury. They could lose their father, their mother. They could lose their job.

When Bucci made his first pregame speech to the Cardinals in 1966, he was a 33-year-old who had chosen to come home after leaving for college. He missed the blue-collar edge of the people and the importance placed on football.

Bucci quickly realized that the parents were his greatest allies. Boys emulated their fathers, and these men were worth emulating. Dads came home from the mill after a double- or triple-shift, their clothes stained with sweat, their fingers black. Sons had only one way to be like Dad: Play sports all day, returning home for dinner with grass stains on your clothes, scuff marks on your shoes and scrapes on your skin.

"You've heard the old theory of when you get yelled at and you went home and told your dad and you got yelled at again?" Bucci asks. "That was 100-percent true in the kids we dealt with."

That discipline wasn't limited to families whose dads trudged home from the mills. Anthony Pelini, a father of eight, sold pharmaceuticals. He installed a basketball hoop in the backyard for his boys, and when they lowered the rim so that they could dunk, it made him angry. Youngstown men didn't take shortcuts.

Tom Mangino was the director of child and youth services in New Castle, one of the few men in the neighborhood to have earned a college degree. He certainly didn't have to live in steel-driven Mahoningtown, but he wanted to raise his family in the safety net of the old neighborhood.

Ron Stoops was a history teacher and defensive coordinator at Mooney. Stoops, like Bucci, had the chance to leave Youngstown but came back. A baseball player, he was drafted by the Washington Senators. After a year in the minor leagues, he returned to teach. He hated being away from his young family.

Around the school, Stoops' little boys would follow him everywhere, watching him. No work was beneath him. He'd wash the uniforms, sweep the floors, paint what needed painting. At home, Ron, Bob, Mike and Mark would play all day in nearby Pemberton Park. Ron Sr. and Dee Stoops would keep tabs from the porch. Of course, there were times when Ron would be watching film on the projector in the dining area instead.

"It wasn't just coaching for us, Ron and I," Bucci says. "It was life."

So when the 1973 state semifinal game against Cincinnati Moeller arrived, Bucci knew what to tell his team: the same damn thing he always told them.

Moeller was the top-ranked team in the state. Of course, they scored first, taking a 7-0 lead. Bad things happen. Cardinal Mooney won the game 37-7.

Mooney would go on to win the state championship the next week, 14-3 over Warren Harding in front of 35,000 fans in Akron. A week later, city officials attended a formal celebration at Mooney's gym.

Outside, American-made cars packed the parking lot. Steel production was at an all-time high, and the future was as secure as the price of their product. Inside, the applause bounced off the walls. It felt like the cheers would never end.

### III

All over Youngstown, American flags flew in front of thankful homes.

"Extremely patriotic," says Carmen Policy, the former general manager of the 49ers who grew up there. "For so many of them, the American dream came true. They were living it, and they were not as far removed from whence they came to not be able to appreciate it."

Their work had raised the infrastructure of a superpower and fed its front lines in World War II with a never-ending supply of metal. In return, they expected a fair wage, a pension and the same thing they'd given when their country called: loyalty. The agreement was understood, implicit in those flags hanging on their homes, one they never thought would break.

Then, on Monday, Sept. 19, 1977, Youngstown Sheet and Tube locked its doors, announcing the loss of more than 4,000 jobs. The desolation after Youngstown's "Black Monday" was compared to Pearl Harbor. Whether your pop worked in the factory or not, you felt something.

"All of our families were involved in the mills one way or another," says Bo Pelini, who was 9 at the time.

Suddenly, the promise had been broken. Bob Stoops, the second son of Ron Stoops, was a senior in high school. Former classmates of his and his older brother, Ron Jr., had gone directly into the mill after graduation and lost their jobs.

Bob Stoops had better options, though. He had a scholarship offer to play at Iowa. In the summer of 1978, at age 17, he became the first of Ron and Dee's kids to leave Youngstown.

During his first year away, Bob yearned for home. On the phone with his mother, he talked about wanting to transfer. One time, Ron Stoops grabbed the phone.

He reminded Bob that, before he left, they had made an agreement. The boy would give it one year. Until that year was up, he wasn't going anywhere. Truth was, Ron couldn't tell the boy to make the same decision he made back in the '50s, to come back to Youngstown.

"He pressed them into a better life," Dee Stoops says.

Bob would work his way onto the field for the Hawkeyes. Back in Youngstown, Dad and coach Bucci kept hammering away at Mooney, the town beginning to disappear around them.

"It inflicted a lot of pain," says Mike Stoops, Ron's third son, who would follow Bob to Iowa. "The crime was going up, houses were being boarded up. It just started consuming the whole inner city of Youngstown. It got devastating."

Still, inside the walls of the school at Indianola and Erie, an old worldview prevailed. Mooney operated with no frills and won three more state titles in '80, '82 and '87.

On a Friday night in October 1988, the stands were filled at Boardman Stadium for the annual Boardman-Mooney game. Sitting across the field from Ron Stoops in the Boardman coaching box was his firstborn son, Ron Jr., a Boardman assistant. Bob and Mike were in the infancy of their college coaching careers, but Ron Jr. had stayed in Youngstown just like him. When Ron Sr. stared into the opposing box that night, he might as well have been gazing into a mirror.

Hours later, in the fourth quarter of a classic back-and-forth battle, Ron Jr. got a call in the booth.

"Ron," the voice said, "your dad is not feeling well. They want you to come down to the field."

Ron Jr. knew it was serious. His dad had coached hundreds of games, and this had never happened. He stormed down the stairs and onto the field, where he ran to the Mooney sideline. Ron Sr. had collapsed. He was lying on a bench, conscious but pale. An ambulance approached. As he laid there, Mooney scored and took the lead. Ron Jr. squeezed his hand.

"There, you scored," he said. "You guys are going to win again."

Ron Sr. was taken away in the ambulance. When Dee, Ron Jr., and his sister, Kathy, arrived at the hospital, Ron Sr. was already dead, the victim of a massive heart attack at age 54.

A few days later, the mourners at St. Dominic's Church overflowed into the balcony and along the sides of the sanctuary. Dee Stoops had made sure that her husband's favorite song, the patriotic anthem "Battle Hymn of the Republic," was played on the organ. The deep melodies stirred the massive old building, a tribute to a man and his fallen era.

III

The smell stuck with the boys for years after the mills had closed. If you knew it, if you

could taste it, you were one of them.

"It will stay with you for life," Mike Stoops says. "Every day."

Mark Mangino knew the smell. He took off for Youngstown State after graduating from high school. Within a year, he was back in New Castle because of academic trouble. He began coaching as an assistant at New Castle High and found out he loved it. He had to go back to school. Mangino got a job as a graduate assistant at Division I-AA Youngstown, which paid his tuition.

With two young children and a family, that wasn't enough. Mangino worked night shifts driving an ambulance on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. When his shift was over, he'd catch a few hours of sleep in his office. Here he was, scraping at the bottom, when his head coach, Bill Narduzzi, was fired. Mangino, a pragmatist, thought he was done, too. He packed up his office.

Soon, he got a phone call from Youngstown athletic director Joe Malmisur, an Italian from the eastside of town. He was not going to let an Italian from New Castle lose his job. Mangino went back to his office and unpacked. He'd join the staff of the new guy, a young buck named Jim Tressel. It was a Youngstown story.

"Some of the best friends I'll ever have are from Youngstown," Mangino says.

With its economic structure decaying, all the Mahoning Valley had was its people. The ones who were successful had to save the ones who wanted to be saved.

In 1993, Bo Pelini was looking for help, too. He had been a captain as a safety at Ohio State, but he spent the fall as Mooney's quarterbacks coach. Would he be one of the lucky ones who got a shot? Youngstown made sure.

Pelini was a year behind a kid named Jimmy Policy at Mooney. Jimmy's dad just happened to rise to the top of the 49ers organization and win a few Super Bowls. Jimmy put in a word, and before long, a high-school assistant was on the phone with Carmen Policy. Pelini was hired as a scouting assistant, and, within a year, promoted to assistant secondary coach.

"Now," Policy says, "you know the rest of the story."

Today, four boys who grew up in the Mahoning Valley are big-time college coaches. Bob Stoops brought back Oklahoma. Mangino lifted Kansas to sights unseen. Bo Pelini at Nebraska and Mike Stoops at Arizona appear on the right track.

Don Bucci, now retired and still the athletic director at Mooney, is happy for all those guys. It's good for Youngstown to get some positive press, and their success seems to be the only way to get it. He looks outside his school and sees a neighborhood once full of positive energy now separated by a fence for security.

"I am proud of the things that Youngstown accomplishes," Bucci says, "but I'm really pissed at the crime. It hasn't gotten any better."

The scene on the ground can be sobering. A city that believed its destiny would be a population of 200,000 now houses around 70,000. When you drive east of town toward New Castle and head north on Jacobs Road, much of the infrastructure from the city's plan to expand decades ago remains uninhabited. Entire city blocks intended for new neighborhoods and the grooming of new leaders sit empty, the street signs still standing tall from a period fueled by false optimism.

The 2100 block of Vittoria is a forest.

"For 30 years, we sat in denial," says Phil Kidd, a Youngstown community organizer.

In this wilderness, can Youngstown find a way out?

### III

Ron Stoops Jr. has been driving visitors through his old neighborhood for years now. A right at the fork of Lucius and Detroit, and three blocks later he's there where it all began, trying to answer the same question each time: What was it about this place that produced success?

Ron has some ideas, but he doesn't really know. How could anybody know? He is much more concerned with a different question, the one he has control over: Given everything we've gone through, how can we do it again?

More than two decades after he watched his father die on that sideline, Ron is a history teacher and defensive coordinator at Mooney. Just like Ron Sr. He has never tried to take over for his father -- "I'm just doing my thing," he says -- but he has anyway because Ron Sr.'s thing naturally became his.

"He's just like his dad," Dee says. "He loves his life. He would never change it. Never."

Today, that is the ethos of Youngstown. Those who stayed would never ask for another life. They're making the best of the one they have.

"Don't come here and call this a beat-up steel town," says Joe Cassese, a 30-year-old fourth-generation native with a young family, an official at Youngstown State. "This is what I see: I see a \$34 million building being built in the middle of my town. I see old buildings being knocked down to make room for the new. I see the positive stuff."

The city's mayor, Jay Williams, is a 37-year-old native who has received national recognition for his bold plans to forge a new Youngstown that acknowledges reality: The steel mills aren't coming back, and neither are the 100,000 people who left. In the coming

years, Youngstown plans to downsize, to demolish its failing neighborhoods. The people, after watching the town they loved slip through their fingers, are finally looking forward.

"We're the first generation that doesn't remember the mills," says Kidd, 30, who runs the Web site [DefendYoungstown.com](http://DefendYoungstown.com). "I chose this place."

Every man who stayed or came back had a choice. Ron Stoops Jr. made his decision final in 2001, when he returned to Mooney to coach on the same sidelines as his father. Since that moment, Ron has been eyeing a major renovation of the school's athletic facilities. There was never any money, but he knew who to call.

A few years ago, on one of his visits, brother Bob saw the football locker room was the same as when he played. He decided the kids deserved better. Bob headed up fundraising, tapping Youngstown's success for donations. Former 49ers owner Eddie DeBartolo Jr., Mike Stoops and Bo Pelini all contributed.

Ron Stoops is happy to be the man on the ground. This summer, he spent just about every day in the basement of Mooney, painting lockers red and putting in yards of tile. Other fathers chipped in, combining for about 1,000 man-hours.

"That's the way we do it," Ron says.

As the team gets ready for a scrimmage last week, pounding around their new domain, Ron brings a poster into the locker room. It's a rendering of a \$1 million wellness center for Mooney, a vision that hasn't even been announced.

"What's that?" one of the players asks.

Ron looks beat up. There's a fresh red scar under his right eye from a painting mishap -- he cut his cheek on a piece of wood -- and blotches of paint on the back of his calves. What's that? It better be a future.