



GAME DAY AT NEBRASKA! GO BIG RED!

Coach Tom Osborne, The Head of Psychology
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LINCOLN - Before beginning this exercise, Tom Osborne wants you to know that he never studied B.F. Skinner on the sideline. He never invoked Alfred Adler's inferiority complex during a halftime speech.

The Nebraska athletic director, who owns a doctorate degree in educational psychology, won three national titles because he could coach, not because he understood Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

But winning 255 games is no easy job - Adler couldn't have won half that many - and a coach calls on all of his educational experiences during the course of 25 years.

Personality might have dictated Osborne's coaching style, but his roots in psychology launched him ahead of the curve in a profession once reserved for yellers and screamers.

Osborne's answers during an interview, shared here strung together sans reporter questions and transitions, illuminate how his understanding of the mind helped make NU the preeminent program of the last quarter of the 20th century:

"There is that boot camp mentality. You humiliate, you beat people down, and if you

beat them down enough, then they'll run through that brick wall for you. I remember talking to General (Charles) Krulak, who was the commandant of the Marine Corps at one time.

"He said, 'You know, we had to change our training. In the Marine Corps, we finally figured out the reason that people would go up a hill into a machine gun nest wasn't because we had humiliated them in basic training, beaten them down to where they'd follow an order blindly. It was because they cared about people in their unit and didn't want to let them down.'

"I guess I came to believe that, too. If players really cared about each other and they felt connected to the coaches, then they'd play for you because they really wanted to, rather than because they had to or because you told them something.

"I remember Lou Holtz came up here one time and visited us. He was down at Arkansas at the time. And he said, 'The thing that really struck me here was how positive your coaches were in the film room and on the practice field. I've never been around that before.'

"Coaches are sometimes afraid. They might think there might be a better way, but they're afraid to try it, because they think you've got to be a tough guy. . . . I don't mean to say that players were treated like choir boys, because we were really intense. We really played hard. We really played physical. I think there's the idea that you've really got to be a taskmaster and be nasty to get them to do that. But I didn't find that to be the case.

"What I drew from my graduate studies and teaching of psychology was that behavior is generally caused. If somebody's dogging it on the practice field or somebody appears not to be concentrating, he probably isn't doing it just to make you mad. There's probably a reason behind it. Maybe there's trouble at home. Maybe there's a physical malady. . . . I tended to try to look behind the behavior a little bit more than most.

"I came to believe that to be understood is really important. Their basic needs are food, air and water, and probably next is to feel understood. So I was maybe a little bit more willing to sit down and listen and really try to hear what somebody is saying, maybe walk a mile in their shoes before I came down on them. And maybe even more out of my spiritual background, I also believed that no one was beyond redemption.

"Some people would say, 'Well, it bit you with Lawrence Phillips.' We understood why he did what he did, to some degree, because of his background. We gave him another chance. The way it's played out, seemingly over the last several years, he didn't really benefit. But on the other hand, there were probably a dozen or two dozen guys, the great majority of whom responded very positively.

"I always felt that catching somebody doing something right and reinforcing it was a better way to change behavior than to punish, humiliate. So we really tried to never

make criticism or correction personal. If a guy tackled with his head down, you'd say, 'Here's how you do it right.' Often people criticize, but they don't tell the person clearly what they did wrong and then how to do it right.

"I think it's very true that if a coach rants and raves all the time, pretty soon they do tune you out. When I did raise my voice, I tended to get their attention.

"I remember one time down at the Liberty Bowl, we were playing North Carolina, and we weren't playing well. I think it was at halftime that I got on the players pretty good. (NU rallied to win in the second half.) I think the only time you get on them is when you see lack of effort. You don't punish a mistake. Nobody wants to fumble. Nobody wants to jump offside. But if you see a lack of effort, if you see somebody being selfish, those are things I used to tend to get upset about."

"I remember one (assistant) coach came in here and he'd had a very different background. I had to tell him we didn't do certain things here. Once in awhile, he'd revert back, but as time went on, we got on the same page.

"I had one or two (assistants) that came in here, and I don't think ever quite bought in. Sometimes they'd make comments to players, 'Well, now that your savior's not around, we're going to do it this way.' Of course, I didn't hear about that until they were gone. I wouldn't have been real happy with that

"We always told our players 'Try to be the most physical team. Keep coming at them. Those 2-yard runs in the first quarter are going to be 6-, 7- and 8-yard runs in the fourth quarter, because you'll wear them down.'

"We had a series of 12 offensive goals, 11 defensive goals and seven kicking goals. For instance, in the running game, we wanted to average six yards a carry or more. Defensively, we wanted to hold the opponent to three yards a carry or less. So you say, well, big deal. But I think it made a difference in how we practiced on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday. We would evaluate our performance not on the final score, whether we won or lost. We evaluated our performance on how we did with those goals.

"The first thing we would do when they came in on Monday, we'd sit down, the whole team would be there and we'd go over the goals. . . . We tried to break the game down into all these measures. We might've won by 40 points, but sometimes they'd leave that room with pretty long faces.

"The thing that has changed is that a lot of kids have more difficult home circumstances. They've got more scars when they come here. I saw that over the years. Kids at one time, if you told them to do something, they just did it. Now if you can give them a good reason why you're doing it, say, 'we're doing these agility drills, not because we want to punish you, but we've got to get quicker. This is a speed game.' If you can convince them that what you're doing makes sense, they'll do it more willingly.

"I think I probably began to sense as time went on the importance of relationship and

chemistry. Early on, I probably leaned a little bit more on X's and O's.

"Bo's very direct. I don't think he tells people things that he doesn't really believe. I think players in the long run really appreciate that. They appreciate somebody who levels with them.

"I think over time some of the defensive players thought I was too nice. . . . You have to coach to your personality. You can't be somebody that you're not. For me to go out there and be a screamer-type guy would come off as being phony.

"I know coaches sometimes would eat an earthworm or he would ride in on a horse, do all kinds of crazy stuff, and this would supposedly fire you up. You come out in black uniforms. I didn't believe much in gimmicks. I felt that a steady approach to the game is more important. Once you start getting into gimmicks, pretty soon you run out of them.

"I always felt that pregame speeches and all that stuff were really overrated. I know what it's like to line up for the kickoff, and on the kickoff, you're not thinking about what the coach said back in the locker room, or whether you walked down the steps through the crowd, or if you're wearing different colored jerseys. It's just you and the other team out there.

"As I told players all the time, 'a pep talk isn't going to do it. I can't get you ready on Friday. It's got to start on Monday.'"