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Frei was a man of principle, he stood firm against money

GUEST COMMENTARY
George Beres

There may have been a time when outside money had limited influence on collegiate sports. But the Feb. 16 death of Jerry Frei, an Oregon football coach of high principle, was a reminder of how pervasive and important the role of donors has grown in organized athletics.

Back in Frei's day (1967-1971), donor influence was more subtle, involving smaller gifts than those that dominate mushrooming budgets today. The most obvious current example is the \$30 million gift for the Autzen Stadium expansion, which was later withdrawn by the donor, Phil Knight, over a disagreement with the University about a non-athletic issue. At Oregon State, pursuit of money to sustain athletics resulted in a sacrifice of tradition as Parker Stadium was switched overnight to Reser Stadium in return for a multi-million dollar corporate gift.

Although the gifts of a generation ago were smaller, donors still wielded inordinate influence, as Frei discovered. Frei was not fired. He resigned after the 1971 season rather than follow orders from Athletics Director Norv Ritcheny to fire some of his assistants. Ritcheny, desperate for funds to keep his varsity program afloat, was under pressure from influential donors in the Portland area.

While Jerry's action may seem an excessive gesture of loyalty to subordinates, maybe he also recognized the potential of the men under his command: John Robinson, later a national championship head coach at USC, then head coach of the Los Angeles Rams. George Siefert, later head coach of the San Francisco 49ers, then the Carolina Panthers. Bruce Snyder, later head coach of Cal, then Arizona State.

Gunther Cunningham, later head coach of the Kansas City Chiefs. Don Read, later a national championship head coach of Division II Montana. Rarely has a coaching staff anywhere matched the subsequent head coaching achievements as the men under fire while serving under Frei at Oregon.

Robinson took the bulk of the flack from disenchanted backers. A member of Len Casanova's 1958 Rose Bowl team, Robinson had a brilliant football mind. But he was also a big-talking optimist. When he predicted victory at Oregon Club luncheons in Portland and the Ducks lost, he became a prime target for critics.



FREI

Frei probably irked conservative donors with his willingness to allow individuality among his players, some of whom wore beards in an era when facial hair was resisted. Frei's overall record was a bland 22-29-2. But in his last two seasons, the Ducks were 11-10-1, with the 1970 team finishing second in the Pacific Coast Conference. That team was paced by two future professional stars, Quarterback Dan Fouts and Halfback Bobby Moore (Ahmad Rashad). They, along with Tom Blanchard and Bob Newland, led the team that produced one of the legendary offensive explosions in league history, scoring four touchdowns in the closing minutes to edge UCLA in Los Angeles, 41-40.

Those heroics were not enough to satisfy parochial fans who couldn't live with the reality of Frei's teams losing five straight windup games to Oregon State. The potent 1970 team lost the closing game, 24-9. When the Beavers beat the Ducks, 30-29, in Eugene the next year, some big

Jerry Frei memorial service

The University will host a service commemorating the life of former football coach Jerry Frei beginning at 3 p.m. Thursday in the Len Casanova Athletic Center.

Frei, who served as Oregon's assistant football coach from 1955 through 1966 before becoming the Ducks head coach for five years, died at his home in Englewood, Colo., Feb. 16.

The memorial service, which is open to the general public, takes place in the Casanova Center's Pittman Room and will include University administration, former Oregon players and Frei's sons, David and Terry.

For more information, contact former Oregon assistant coach Joe Schaffeld at (541)346-5585.

donor boosters tried to make up for losing bragging rights to the Beavers. They wanted the scalps of some assistants, mainly Robinson. Frei refused and left the college game for a career with the pros, becoming offensive line coach of the Denver Broncos in 1972.

The Ducks paid a stiff price for that donor mutiny, going 19-58 under three different coaches the next seven seasons. The year after Frei's departure, Oregon gave up 133 points in two successive games. The complainers salvaged small consolation as the Ducks beat the Beavers, 30-3, their first victory over OSU in nine games.

Even though they know better, cynics might ask what that portends for Oregon's popular and successful current coach, Mike Bellotti. His teams have lost two of their last three games to the Beavers.

George Beres is a former Oregon sports information director. Retired, he now writes on the history of college sports. He can be reached at gberes@oregon.uoregon.edu.

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