



Tarboro High Football Coach Talks Team And Upcoming Season

Written by JENNIFER HINES

When the lights come up on a Friday night, the helmets and shoulder pads come out and Jeff Craddock, the head coach for Tarboro High School's football team, is in the zone.

"To be honest with you, during the course of a game, good or bad, I don't really hear the crowd too much because I've got my head-set on. I'm focused in on what we're trying to do," said Craddock.

Craddock moved to Tarboro in 1995 after coaching in Ohio for two years. He became the defensive coordinator in 1997 and has been the head coach of Tarboro High School's football team since 2004.

Even with over 20 years of experience, Craddock said he still gets both excited and anxious at the start of every game but the feelings soon reside as soon as the first hit happens.

"As a coach, once you start calling the game, you get in the flow of the game, you're just kind of doing your job. You just settle in," he said.

With football as his passion, Craddock said he has always been drawn to the idea of being a coach.

"Just coming up in a sports environment, knowing the impact that coaches had on my life, and I just always, from an early age, knew that education and coaching was in my bones," he said.

Craddock and Tarboro High have produced several players that went on to play in the NFL including Todd Gurley, Shaun Draughn, Takoby Cofield and Tyquan Lewis. While it has been a while since these players played football with a Vikings jersey on, they still manage to come back home where it all began.

"I try to keep in touch with all of them. I try to see them all play but it gets difficult because I'm rather busy here trying to get Tarboro ready," said Craddock. "Todd put on a camp this summer which was a big time hit. And Shaun was back for that."

This past April, Gurley sponsored a football camp for kids in grades 1-8. Craddock said his varsity team ran stations there where 250 kids and 10 NFL players were in attendance.

"The alumni came back so I had a whole bunch of other ex-Tarboro football players [and] it really was a fantastic event, Craddock said. "It was free of charge for all the kids and it was a Saturday and it was just a really, really cool event."

While Craddock is proud of all his players, he doesn't like to single one out more than the other.

"Todd's awesome. He's an NFL star and I'm proud of Todd. But there's so many other kids that people don't know about and obviously they're not in the NFL," he said. "They may be in the military now. They may be working in a factory right now. But I know what they're not doing. They're not involved in gangs or selling drugs. And they're positive members of our society."

Craddock has seen many players come and go through the halls of Tarboro High but he cares for every one he coaches like they are his own.

"I love them dearly and I think they are fantastic young people," said Craddock. "Some of them may be lacking some guidance at home or maybe some discipline at home and so I just really love the day to day interaction of getting to know them, getting to love on them, you know. Just seeing them grow as people and seeing them progress."

His favorite part of coaching is getting to guide his players and help them grow as people.

"There's been many examples where I've seen troubled kids who nobody really gave a chance and you get them through football and you get to teach them a thing or two about life and see those types of kids go on to be successful," he said.

Craddock instills several important character traits in his players like integrity and responsibility while teaching them that it is important to not only be a good person on the football field, but to be a good person in the classroom and the community as well.

"I always tell our kids, first of all, it's not just about them. It's not just about us. We're representing this community," said Craddock. "We try to win every game we play, that's important, but I also want our kids to understand we are representing Tarboro, Edgecombe County, and no matter what, win or lose, we're going to do that the right way."

A key point Craddock likes to remind his players of is that kids look up to them. He can often be heard telling his players to "stay off the streets."

"That just means do what you're supposed to do," Craddock said. "I don't want you involved in things that you know you shouldn't be involved in. I don't want these kids seeing you driving by and seeing you hanging out on the corner with a bunch of people you shouldn't be hanging around with."

After winning the state championship three years in a row then missing out on playing for the state title for the past four years, Craddock said that he and his team are more than ready for another shot this season.

"We've had a great off season," he said. "They're focused. I've had a great summer with them. It's just a really tight group of kids who are focused on putting Tarboro High School back on top of the NAA football world. They're purpose driven to be state champs. They want to get us back to that place again and they know it's been a while."

Craddock said that this year's team is good enough to get to the state championship. He pulled most of them up when they were

sophomores after there was a big void left by that year's senior class.

"We've been through a lot together," Craddock said. "[Sometimes] you don't know how we're going to perform when the lights come on. With this team, I kind of do know since we're so experienced. I expect us to go out and play hard and play smart and play really, really good."

While the start of football season is less than a month away, Craddock is looking forward to the support of the Tarboro community.

"We have great crowd support," he said. "It doesn't matter where we play. They're going to travel to support the Vikings and I don't ever take that for granted."

Craddock believes that Viking football has brought the Tarboro community together, something he thinks is important especially when Edgecombe County isn't always painted in a positive light.

"It doesn't matter what background you come from. It doesn't matter the color you are. It doesn't matter how much money you make. It just matters that, come Friday night, we are all Tarboro Vikings and we're very proud of the football team," he said.

After being Tarboro High School's head football coach for 13 years, Craddock doesn't see himself going anywhere any time soon.

"I've loved my time here," he said. "People ask me all the time, 'when are you going to move up to a bigger school? Why don't you want to coach college? Have you ever been contacted for other jobs?' and the answer is yeah, I've been contacted many times. Some nice schools have wanted me to come in for an interview. But I just believe that the Lord's put me here. I'm a firm believer that you bloom where you're planted and I've been planted here in this community. I love it here. It's my home."

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