

Tribute to Coach DeLane Pankratz

By James K. Voyles, Class of '77

I spent the weekend completely bummed out over something that should not have this much effect on me – my high school football experience. It is not that I wish I could relive the “glory days.” I am not suffering from the syndrome that my children sometimes accuse me of: “The older I get, the better I was.” It is nothing like that. Rather, I am mourning the loss of a person who has been a central figure in my life all my life. A person who had more influence on me than almost any other person on earth. He was my high school football coach, DeLane Pankratz. He passed last Friday, July 24, 2020, at the age of 90.

Why is his passing having such an effect on me? It is because his life had such an effect on me. Let me tell you how that happened.

From the time I can remember anything about life, I knew two things for certain: 1) I would go to Borah High School in Boise, Idaho, and 2) I would be a Borah Lion and play on a championship football team. Dad took us to Borah’s games in the old wooden Bronco Stadium (years before the turf was blue) when I was as young as five or six. Borah’s first string would run up the score on its opponents, and then the second string would take over and you could not tell the difference – they scored just as easily. Borah’s defense was an iron curtain. Occasionally, usually against Boise or Capital, the games would be close, and maybe Borah lost one or two. But I was going to Borah. And as Coach Ed Troxell moved on, De Pankratz took over as head coach and led the team to a 34-game winning streak. So, the third thing I knew was that the legend De Pankratz would be my coach and he was the best there was.

My brother Terry played two years ahead of me at Borah, so Pankratz knew who I was by the time of track season at the end of my freshman year at South Junior High School. Pankratz watched a meet. Terry introduced me. Pankratz said he was excited to have me play at Borah and he liked the way I ran. He must have been recruiting me because I was a skinny little thing of under 150 pounds and while I was fast for a lineman, I was no competition for the running backs. I had played starting center on the heavyweight team at South Junior High, where I was the smallest guy on the team. I would try out for center again at Borah (although sophomore year I would switch to left (quick) guard because of my speed as a lineman).

Sophomore year – 1974 – went well. I started for the whole year at left guard and I considered it a successful season. Then finally, as a junior, I would be a Borah Lion and I would play on a championship team for the best coach in the country!

In August of 1975, the entire incoming junior class quickly learned that Pankratz meant business. Two-a-day practices were brutal, and they always followed the same pattern. Stretching followed by twenty minutes of the first-string offense and defense playing full speed against each other at the goal line (there was a reason we almost always scored when we got into the red zone). The best offense and the best defense in the state pounding each other in pitched battle. After that, we experienced an hour or so of fundamentals. And since Pankratz knew his team largely failed or succeeded with the offensive line, he was our coach. The same drills over and over again. Blocking through the chutes to learn to keep our heads down when we came off the ball, keeping our feet moving, learning techniques for blocking the opponent in all different line ups, keeping our feet moving, driving the blocking sleds as

individuals and groups, keeping our feet moving, open field blocking, keeping our feet moving, pass blocking, keeping our feet moving, learning blocking schemes and defensive lines ups, and did I mention keeping our feet moving? Every practice. In fact, we were doing the same drills both years before the championship games, as if we had forgotten the fundamentals that late in the season! It was relentless.

And your heart had better be in it. If you were holding a dummy, you had better be holding it to the best of your ability like a champion or incur the risk of a very animated Pankratz yelling something about a “lackadaisical attitude” or just “going through the motions,” both cardinal sins. Practice required both physical and mental exertion, and if the team or a player slacked in either, there was hell to pay. Frequently, the threat was to have to go to the hospital to have a size 9 shoe surgically removed from our buttocks!

Then came practice for the upcoming games. If you were lucky enough to practice with the starting offense, you ran the plays over and over and over again, sometimes with full speed contact, until Pankratz was satisfied with every detail. He was rarely satisfied with every detail. When I was a senior and just coming back from a serious ankle injury, the left tackle was out one day, and Pankratz put me in the position. He was determined to get the timing on tackle trap exactly perfect. My ankle sore and I was angry and frustrated as we ran that play what seemed to be at least 100 hundred times with me pulling to block the defensive tackle on the right side of the line. It was not even my position! Why did I have to go through this torture!?! I never said a word, I just endured. And in the end, my ankle was no worse for the wear, and I learned a valuable lesson.

Junior year, Pankratz seemed to have it out for me. He yelled at me during the drills. He yelled at me while preparing for the opponents. He yelled at me in the film room. I liked going to bed at night because for a few hours, Pankratz was not yelling at me.

“Voyles, how much do you weigh?”

“155 pounds,” which was an exaggeration – I weighed that with my pockets full of bricks.

“You better block better than that or those huge defensive linemen on the other team will destroy you.”

Ugh. But an undefeated season made it all worthwhile.

Senior year, he yelled at me one time. In the regular season, the fullback from Highland of Pocatello had just fumbled the ball right before crossing the goal line for what would have been the winning touchdown. Rex Pickett recovered. I was not sure if I was supposed to be in the game. I asked Pankratz. With great energy and some words I would never repeat in polite company, he invited me to get on the field.

Why did he ride me Junior year? He knew I could do better. He knew I had to be better if I wanted to start as a senior. I played that year probably more than any other junior that was not a starter because he used his left guards to run in plays. And he had to get the best out of me the following year.

Why did he not yell at me Senior year? I cannot say for sure, but I think it was because he trusted me. Although I was injured at the start of the year, I attended every practice unless I had a doctor’s appointment. While the team did drills on the field, I rode my bike up and down the hill next to

the school to keep in shape. I paid attention to what was going on, and in the first few games, I would carefully watch the offensive line play. If I saw a linebacker cheating over or some other misalignment in the defense, I would tell Pankratz. He frequently called a play to try to take advantage of what I told him. When I came back to playing full speed, he did not start me at my position. No, I either ran in plays at left guard or I was the back up for the whole line. Walt Manwill, the huge left tackle who got a Division 1 scholarship, came out of the first Highland game with a pinched nerve in his neck. Pankratz put me in at right tackle, which was hilarious. I was tiny compared to the opposing player. Good thing that was right before half time and Walt recovered, otherwise, I would have been in deep trouble in the second half. The left tackle was having serious trouble with his man in Twin Falls. Pankratz put me in. The opposing tackle pulled my face mask on the first two snaps and then got in on the play. After a quick conversation with the ref, the yellow flag came out on the next play, and that ended the problem at left tackle for the rest of the game. Then Pankratz came up with a new scheme – a lineman as a blocking back. I would line up as wingback behind the guard and tackle and either double team down toward the center, block a defensive end, or lead a play out to block the corner back on a sweep. That lasted until the championship game when Pankratz put Rick Martin in the blocking back position. The championship game was the only one I started at my regular position.

What did I learn from Pankratz? Too much to write here. But here are the key lessons.

1. **Mental Toughness.** Being mentally tough was more important to Pankratz than being physically tough. Mental toughness was the basis for becoming a champion. It was not enough to do the drills, you had to love the grind, the discipline, and the practice to get as close to perfection individually and as a team as you could get. The team chant: “All for one and one for all, the team that won’t be beat can’t be beat.” We would not be beaten. We assumed we would be champions. He assumed we would be champions. Then we set about doing the work it took to get there and continued to do the work until the job was done. We respected our opponents. In team meetings, they were always bigger, stronger, and faster than us. They would kick our butts if we weren’t at our best every second of every game. We respected them, but we would beat them!
2. **Preparation.** Preparation did not begin with two-a-day practices. Preparation is a year around endeavor. First is the physical preparation. In the weight room. Every day. I can still hear Pankratz’ booming voice shouting Rurrrrrready! Then the whistle blew and the next set in the circuit training began. On other days, he wrote in scratchy handwriting on a chalk board the long list of weights that were to be lifted that day. And he was there, every day. When the season began, there were the fundamentals, the analysis of the opposing team, the special teams’ practice, and the endless repetition of the plays until the timing was perfected and assignments became automatic. In short, we were prepared in every detail to win!
3. **Fundamentals.** The fundamentals are everything. You must learn your trade, your position, the positions around you, and most of all, you must perfect your technique, practicing it every day. If you can do the basics better than anyone else, you can beat everyone else. As mentioned above, at the end of the season, we were still doing the same drills on fundamentals that we were doing during two-a-days in the summer. Tedious. Annoying.

Maddening. Irreplaceable. During my senior year, he backed off the fundamentals a bit as the season wore on. When we beat Capital and headed for the championship game, he knew we were a bit soft. The week of practice before the championship game was one of the worst ever. We practiced blocking technique until we were exhausted, both the line and the running backs. It seemed we were back in two-a-days. But on that Friday night in Pocatello, we went in as underdogs since we had lost two games and Highland had only lost one (to us). We scored 42 points before half time and before Highland scored a single point. We won 42-16, with backups playing nearly the entire second half. The opening line in the Idaho Daily Statesman said it all: "It wasn't supposed to be so easy." When I was at BYU, I had a friend who had played for Highland that year. After almost beating us on our home field, they were so confident of beating us on their home field in the championship game that their Wednesday practice was a trip to Lava Hot Springs for swimming and fun. Apparently, fundamentals matter.

4. **Learn from your mistakes.** When he saw mistakes in practice and in the film room, Pankratz corrected them in two ways. One was encouragement to do better next time; the other was through very loud, very public, and very clear instruction on how to do it right or being sent to the hospital to have that size 9 shoe removed.... And Pankratz always seemed to know which method to apply. My junior year, the correction was very loud and very public and at times, discouraging. My senior year, it was encouragement and trust. We watched film of the previous week's game on Mondays at lunchtime and then turned to film from opponents the rest of the week. In the second game of the season my junior year, we beat Caldwell 63-6. By the time lunch was over on Monday, we had reviewed only a handful of plays, maybe three. He yelled at each player on the offense about something, anything, and noted that if we had been playing a good team, we would have been slaughtered. By the time it was over, we wondered who won the game. But individually and collectively, we made fewer mistakes as the year went on.
5. **Care.** Pankratz cared about us. He was interested in each one of us and wanted us to be our very best. Because of his caring, and his sometimes odd and loud way of showing it, he made great talents greater (think Cedric Minter who became a legend at Boise State, won two Gray Cups in Canada with Toronto, and played a couple of seasons with the New York Jets before retiring) and average and small players just good enough to be part of a championship team (think Jim Voyles). His passion for football was paralleled only by his passion for developing youth into the best they could be. His pre- and post-game locker room talks were completely inspiring. I cannot remember details, but I knew if he asked, I would run full speed into a brick wall. He also in a way cared for our spiritual wellbeing. A player or a minister prayed before every game, and after each game, a player was called upon to recite the Lord's prayer. I think that was illegal by then, but we did it anyway.
6. **Know when to back off.** Part of what made Pankratz great was that his passion – for both the game and the players – and his passion was always on the edge of control. He walked a fine line between passion and excess, with excess bleeding out occasionally during a bad practice or in a tight spot in a game. As the years passed, demographics changed, and

championships became more difficult to achieve. Borah no longer had the talent base of growing neighborhoods. Expectations of how a coach should interact with players changed as well (what wimps the new generation of players were!). And Pankratz' passion seemed to cross the line more frequently. Rather than retiring at the time of his choosing, he was forced to leave coaching in 1986. He kept his job as a teacher, but his coaching days were done. I was sad at the time, and I am still sad, that such a great man with such a great influence over youth was denied, at too young of an age, the ability to exercise that influence. But so it was, and so we must learn.

This list could go on indefinitely. I cannot sing the praises of DeLane Pankratz enough because of the direct influence he had on me and those around me. I took his lessons to college. I took his lessons on my church mission. I took his lessons to Law school. And I still try to live his lessons in my family, my career, and my life generally. Like all of us, his time on the earth was finite, but his influence on those of us who had the privilege to learn from him is infinite. These words are inadequate, but to the greatest coach I have ever known, and wherever you are, "Thank you. Thank you in so many ways that I cannot begin to express my gratitude." You never told us we were a great team until after we won the championship. You were a great coach regardless of whether we won the championship. Because of you, we could proudly cheer: "Hey world, we're from Borah...We are..Borah..We are..Borah..." and we always will be!