

John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to 'Cuse Conversation podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University.

Dino Babers:

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John Boccacino:

Our guests today on this Father's Day themed 'Cuse Conversations podcast is the head coach of the Syracuse University football team, his name is Dino Babers. You know him well, he's a charismatic, energetic leader of our football team. Dino, we appreciate you joining us on the podcast, how are you doing these days?

Dino Babers:

I'm doing good, John, thank you for inviting me.

John Boccacino:

It's our pleasure, and as you could tell by the intro we're doing a really special topic here, Father's Day, and I want to go into you and your football team, and you always preach family, the value of being a family with our football team. Why is that important to you, and how do you try to embody that with our team?

Dino Babers:

Well, I think the game of football, there's so many members, I have 104 stepsons on the football team, and there's so many members that you have to operate in a family atmosphere. And I think everybody has an understanding of what family's all about, and based off of that foundation we try to make it grow and we try to make it better. The one thing I tell these young men all the time is that these guys that you're playing football with, they may not be your brothers, but they're just like your brothers, and when you get married some of these guys are going to be in your wedding. They may not be your best men, but they're going to be in your wedding party, and we need to treat it like that. It's a special, special situation, it's a special, special game, football, and to be around so many different individuals striving to do something together that they all want to achieve is extremely, extremely special.

John Boccacino:

How did you develop that attitude towards coaching and football, that it's, obviously it's X's and O's you want to win on the field, but it's also about the character, the bond, where did that attitude towards family and football come from for you?

Dino Babers:

It's always been a part of my nature, it's just how I grew up. The teams that I've been on that were good, they were close knit, and they're different, you know what I mean? It takes a whole bunch of different personalities to field a football team, but the underlining thing is that they're all working towards one and they're working for the betterment of their brothers.

John Boccacino:

And you mentioned you've got 104 stepsons, that's a lot of responsibility with that many guys on the team you're watching over. How do you get them to all buy into that family attitude?

Dino Babers:

Well, you keep throwing it out there and you make them a part of it. I mean, as the seniors and the juniors and the sophomores, they're bringing those brothers along. The whole family structure is just not mom and dad, it's also the older brother and the older sister bringing the younger brothers and the younger sisters in line with what the family values are, and that's why we try to keep it to the family, la familia ohana structure.

John Boccacino:

Now when you say the word family, family means many things to many different people. What does family mean to you?

Dino Babers:

Family means to me loved ones, loved ones, and you don't get to pick your brothers and your sisters. You don't get the opportunity to pick your mom and your dad, but you do get an opportunity to love those guys within the structure. And in all families there's a bah bah black sheep, and in all families there's a person that everybody's trying to identify with and everybody's trying to emulate, but that's what makes the family reunions so cool, is that you've got all types, you've got the white hats and the black hats in the western movies, and together they form a family, together they form a team.

John Boccacino:

What was your role in your family growing up?

Dino Babers:

Oh, I was middle born, middle child. The oldest always got his way and the youngest always got whatever they wanted, and I was stuck in the middle and I couldn't understand it at all.

John Boccacino:

How did you go about fighting for yours, trying to make sure that you weren't left out when it came to food time, and just getting what you needed?

Dino Babers:

Well, when it came to food I just hung around in the kitchen all the time and tried to be a mama's boy so I could eat as much as I could. And gaining attention or praise from mom and dad, I mean, I came from a family of six, we were the Brady bunch, three boys, three girls, middle middle for me, and you had to work really hard. There was a lot of games to go to, a lot of academic things to go to, and if you wanted to stand out, you had to perfect.

John Boccacino:

You've prided yourself, and so as the football team, on having a strong relationship with IVMF and our military connected students, and our great resources here at Syracuse's campus. You have a personal tie to the military. Your father, Luther, was in the Navy for more than 20 years. How did you first develop an affinity for the military based on your father and his service time?

Dino Babers:

We grew up, I grew up on military bases, and when my dad started to move up and rank and stuff you'd have an option of whether you wanted to live in town or live on the base, and it almost seems like he would alternate back and forth. He probably had a reason for it, but he's passed away, I'm not quite sure what that reason was. But it really makes you understand, when you're growing up in the sixties and the seventies, and there's certain things that are going on on military bases that's not going on in the real world, you're not having an issue with what water fountain you want to drink out of in the sixties when you're on a military base, everybody drinks out the same water fountain, then you can go through the gates and go into town and you better know exactly what water fountain you're going to drink out of.

Dino Babers:

So we used to have what we called base rules and town rules, and as a young person, and I'm talking about 6, 7, 8, 9 years of age, you had to know the difference and you had to make sure your brothers and sisters knew the difference as well.

John Boccacino:

How can you describe the relationship you had with your father?

Dino Babers:

I'll tell you exactly what I told my football team, I said 50% of all the good in me came from my dad, and 50% of all the bad from me came from my dad. You can learn from both situations, you can look at a situation and say, that's exactly what I want to do with my son or my daughter. And you can also look at a situation and go, when I get my opportunity, that's not what I'm going to do with my son and my daughter. Both are learning experiences, you need to take the positive out of both.

John Boccacino:

I've read some stories about your relationship with your dad, and I did want to talk, if you don't mind, about discipline and how, I hear there's a story about making your bed that really taught you a valuable life lesson.

Dino Babers:

Yeah, he came in and he showed us, first of all he showed us how to make a bed, and then after he showed us how to make a bed we were supposed to be able to copy that. And so we'd make the bed in what we thought was good, and then he'd come in and flip a quarter and the quarter didn't bounce twice on the bed. And if it didn't bounce twice on the bed, obviously the sheets and the coverings weren't tight enough. And he came in and the quarter didn't bounce and he ripped our tail, ripped my tail, I remember me, I don't know if there was anyone else standing there. And then he gave me a quarter, he told me to stop wasting his time, that I need to test the bed before he comes in here, and I better not ever spend the quarter. That was hard for a little kid. I could spend the quarter if I knew it was

made exactly right. So yeah, that quarter got old and dusty, I don't know what happened to that quarter, but that was the thing you used to test your bed on.

John Boccacino:

I'm just curious, do your student athletes on the football team know how to make their own bed with as much diligence as you had to?

Dino Babers:

This is what I tell the guys, and I tell the moms and dads this is well in recruiting, I say, "I've got a military background, but I don't necessarily run my team that way." I want to be able to communicate, I want them to be able to come to me with issues. I don't want them to be necessarily intimidated of me, I want them to respect what I do, and we want to take this journey together. They're 17, 18 year old men turning into 21, 22 year old men, and there's some growth. Us men, we're still maturing mentally during that stage, where the ladies are a lot more mature than we are at those ages, but we want to grow all that stuff together.

Dino Babers:

And the military part of it, if you weren't raised up. And then all of a sudden at 17 and 18 you get that put on them, they may not digest that well. So we do it a different way, but if we can't get things done right after asking them to do it the correct way in a normal period of time, then sometimes the military part bubbles up. And it's there, it's there, and it can rise to the top, but we try to keep that thing suppressed for the most part.

John Boccacino:

I'm glad you mentioned the recruiting road. It's such a tough task, you're going down the road, meeting up with family members who are protective of their son, their 17, their 18 year old son. You're trying to find student athletes that'll come help your football team, what do you say to the family members, to the parents, to try to let them know that hey, your son is in good hands when they come to Syracuse, your grandson, whoever it happens to be?

Dino Babers:

I just tell them the truth, they're coming to a great academic institution, somewhere where if they graduate their degree is not only going to be an east coast or west coast, north and south degree, it'll be an international degree. The S is Syracuse is international. To me there's two S's that are international, one's west of the Mississippi, and it's in Palo Alto, the other one's east of the Mississippi in Syracuse, New York. When someone's wearing those S's, not only is it good in the United States, it's good abroad as well. So the academic part is showing them exactly what this school can do for you academically, with a private school institution, and how it's going to make you better, and how the alumni are going to take care of you, and you're going to take care of other alumni when you get this degree.

Dino Babers:

And then the other part of it is I'm a dad. I'm the father of four daughters, two son-in-laws, and I don't believe I'm perfect, in any shape, form, or matter, but the big thing is I'm going to treat your son the right way, I'm not a big cuss guy, I'm not going to be cussing him, I'm not going to be grabbing him, they're not my son, I'm not going to put hands on him, but I'm going to ask them to do some things in

the king's language, without using profanity and derogatory things to get them to do it. And then if they do wrong I'm going to tell them the truth, and I'm also going to tell their mom and dad the truth, that they did wrong. And then if the three of us, or the three of them see it differently than I do, then we can talk about it.

John Boccacino:

Accountability is a valuable skill that you're teaching, and I also feel like they're entrusting you to take these young men and help them develop down the road to being a man, and with football, of course, a vital component of that transformation. What was your football story? How did your dad get you into football?

Dino Babers:

He wouldn't let me play. My dad was a semi-pro player, he played, back in the sixties the Navy, Army, Air Force, Marine, they had football teams on basis, so even though they were in the military, their sidekick was they actually had a football team. And I used to go to the games and hold the chains and watch my dad play. And I would watch him play, and then I'd come back and I'd want to join Pop Warner, and all that other stuff. My dad was like, "No, I'm not going to pay money for you to go join some team." And so I constantly, kindergarten, first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade, sixth grade, I was never allowed to play organized football, and then the eighth grade came and he said, "Okay, you're in California," really two years from high school, but he said, "Okay, it's the eighth grade, I'm going to sign you up and you can go play football."

Dino Babers:

And I signed up, and all the other kids had been playing, I don't know, 5, 6, 7 years, so they all had their positions, and I was the new kid that had never played before so they put me at center. So I played center, I was a lefthanded center, which if you know anything about football you really don't want a lefthanded center, it's like having a lefthanded catcher, it's really not productive unless you have a lefthanded quarterback. So I played center, and played on a losing football team. And then ninth grade we turned around and he signed me up again, and the coaches changed. So the coaches changed, it was a thing where the coaches stayed with their kids all the way up to a certain point, and so when it came to ninth grade it was a brand new set of coaches, and I went from playing center the year before to playing quarterback, and we won a championship and didn't lose a game, with the exact same personnel.

Dino Babers:

And that's when I realized that coaching matters, and you have to be unbiased. One of the things I'm always big with our coaches is everybody has an opportunity to start, everybody has an opportunity to play, and just because a guy started one year doesn't mean he starts the next year. Every year is a clean slate, every year is something different, and you have to give the players an opportunity to develop past where they were before, you got to give them an opportunity for growth, and you have to see that growth if you're going to be an evaluator of talent.

John Boccacino:

People, if they look at your resume, you were a decorated college player, you had a lot of accolades to your success, and you've had a lot of success in the coaching game, but you came from very humble beginnings, and that proves that with hard work, with determination and putting in the effort, anything

can be achieved. And I think that's what we love about our Syracuse football team, we root for Syracuse because your student athletes embody those values, it's great to hear the message you're trying to teach in these young men and their lives. You mentioned being a father, you do have four girls, and you're a proud father, we have Brianna, Tasha, Jasmine, and Paris. What has it been like being a father? How did that change your life?

Dino Babers:

It is to have something greater than yourself. I talk about, there's a spiritual side to me that we're not allowed to talk about because of political things and being representatives of the universities, and stuff like that. But when you have an opportunity to have a child, what a gift, what a blessing. And then you get an opportunity to raise one, and not only do you get an opportunity to raise yours, but when you're a coach I think you get an opportunity not necessarily to raise other people's children, but you do get an opportunity to influence them, either positively or negatively, and I think, I'm a teacher by trade, having a profession where you can make others better, and they can carry that through generations, is something that excites me. So I've always wanted to be a teacher, and a definition of a coach is just a teacher that teaches athletics or a very specific sport, and I think that's always been my calling and something I've always wanted to do.

John Boccacino:

Can you take us back to when you became a father for the first time, what was that like for you?

Dino Babers:

It was unique, it was special, it was different. My Brianna, I call her, she's my oldest and first born of the Babers clan, and I say that a lot to her, and she just that's the way it is. And she was number one, and she had to teach number two how to, mom likes this, dad likes this, you need to understand. And then I don't know, one and two had to teach three, and one, two, and three had to teach four, but four, man, she was a handful. Those youngest, they always think they're special, and they'll tell you that, even though you're not treating them special.

John Boccacino:

Oh, that's great. No, and every child has it differently, I mean, I was the first born, I had it a lot harder on myself than my younger brother did, and you being a middle child, you had it differently than the first or the last born, but it's such a blessing, and you can hear it in your voice, Dino, just how proud you are of your daughters, and I'm sure they're very proud of you. Do you know how they might be celebrating you this Father's Day?

Dino Babers:

Oh, they're all coming back, everybody's coming back. We had our first two grandsons happen in the last three months here, so they're having a reunion at my house, and they were nice enough and kind enough to invite me to the Father's Day extravaganza at my house. So I'm very fortunate, I'm glad they still like me enough to include me in those things.

John Boccacino:

Well Dino, before I let you go, it's hard to believe but we're less than three months away from the start of the football season, Louisville coming to the Loud House on September 3rd. What makes you so excited about this team coming up this year?

Dino Babers:

I'm excited about where we could go with this. This is the toughest schedule we've ever had, and that's awesome, we wouldn't have it any other way. But I really think this team's coming together, I'm excited about the new coaches, our new special teams coach, our new quarterback coach, our new offensive coordinator tight end coach, and I'm excited about the new attitude. I really think the culture's good, I really think the young men have bought in, and they're ready to do something different. Five and seven last year was, it's almost okay, but I think they're ready to do something different and see if they can't surprise some people.

John Boccacino:

You have a lot of great opportunities, a lot of great home games to go out and cheer on the Orange this fall in, again, the JMA Wireless Dome. Dino, you have been a treat to have on the podcast, I really appreciate you making the time. Happy Father's Day, and enjoy yourself on the recruiting road.

Dino Babers:

John, thank you so much, this has been awesome. I wish I could do stuff like this all the time, but I am busy, but Happy Father's Day back at you as well.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations podcast.