

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Fran Brown:

I think it was a lot of the coaches I had, like a lot. I've always come across some good positive men. And when you come across good positive men and they were teaching me the right things and wanting to see me be successful, it kind of poured into me. You always take all the good that everyone gives you and you want to be able to give back. You want to be able to help. You want to be able to push young men to go and be successful in life. Football has changed everything. It's helped me be where I'm at today because of team. Because if it's bigger than just yourself, then when you're able to do some things and go give it everything you've got. For us, not for I, then it becomes about everything. It's about everybody. And then now that I'm in the position I'm in, I can take football and I can help people literally change lives. I can be a blessing to others.

John Boccacino:

The Fran Brown Era got off to a fantastic start this weekend as the Syracuse University football team defeated Ohio University 38 to 22 in the season opener before a raucous crowd in the JMA Wireless Dome. Since being hired as the program's 31st head coach, Fran Brown has been busy making his mark on the program. Bringing in a slew of talented student athletes and coaches with an eye on once again turning the Orange into national championship contenders. But this job is about much more than football for Brown, who came to Syracuse as the nation's top recruiter. He uses football to transform his players into men who are invested in their community and put the needs of the team above their own needs.

With excitement building around the Orange football team. Brown stopped by the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast to discuss how he's making his mark on the program, why he's all in on Syracuse University football and his vision for how he will transform the Orange into perennial contenders.

Coach, I want to start off with the emotions of, there's been so much buildup and anticipation in Central New York and Syracuse. You get into the Dome on Saturday, you take care of business with the W over Ohio. How can you describe the emotions of this past weekend?

Fran Brown:

It was cool. It was more so emotional just because of family, getting them to have the opportunity of me becoming the head coach. But it's more so a milestone thing just when it comes to the entire family, my wife, my children, and then my siblings, and then my aunts and uncles and things of that nature.

Extremely happy for them. But then it was more so happy for all the buildup from this community and how since day one we've gotten there. Myself and staff and just everyone's been behind, the community, faculty staff here. I mean, other coaches, everybody in the athletic department. I mean everybody's just been open arms just wanting to see us be successful. And it was more for everyone. It was just like everyone deserves to start it out the right way.

John Boccacino:

How would you describe the experience in the Dome? You've got the student section going nuts. You got the community members coming out to support. How cool was that for your first game day experience?

Fran Brown:

I was happy. I was very thankful. I was impressed. Just happy for them, too. It's like both, like it's "us." I know I'll get to be the head coach, but it's their team, too. When your team wins... I love the Eagles. When

the Eagles win, I'm excited. I'm happy that the Eagles won. So I was just thankful for them. I'm happy for everyone. I'm just happy that everyone got to have an opportunity to enjoy their Saturday night and not have to say, "God, we lost." Of course there's some things they're going to critique on me. And give me all the critiquing that you possibly can. I'm good with it. It's part of the game. But just thankful and happy that everybody got to enjoy their Saturday.

John Boccacino:

Now I got to ask you to be real with me for a second. How nervous were you before kickoff? Were there nerves?

Fran Brown:

Yes, there were nerves. There was uncontrollable nerves. Guys are lucky it wasn't like, a restroom on the sideline. Yeah, I were extremely nervous. But in the same tense, when you prepare, it's a little bit of anxiety, so that's a part of the game. But I knew we were prepared. I didn't lack preparation, so it was just football. And just because you prepared doesn't mean that you have to come out with a W.

John Boccacino:

What was your message to the team after the victory? Again, you know, got Georgia Tech coming off that big win over Florida State, coming up this Saturday. So what did you say to the team after the win?

Fran Brown:

I congratulated them. It was that first time all being together. So I congratulated them. I told them I was thankful for them and I'm so happy to be the head coach. And then I also told him that wasn't our best football. We have to pick it up. We have to play better football. You have to start fast, and there's certain things that we have to do. But I told them, I kept reminding them that I was so happy for them. I was extremely happy for them, but there's a standard that has been set here that we didn't reach. But we still were able to win. And sometimes that happens, but there's a standard that we must reach on a regular basis and it just starts in practice. So that's kind of what I told them.

John Boccacino:

What did you learn about yourself? This is your first time being the head coach at the D1 level. Any takeaways for yourself after game one?

Fran Brown:

Just how I got to control my composure a little bit more on certain things. I was still at practice. I was in a practice mindset a lot, but I would say control my composure, trust my coaching, the coaching staff. And they did a good job. I'm not saying I didn't trust them. But I learned that I was able to trust them and just let them call and do what they needed to do. And they helped us get a W. Keep the players involved, keep them actively gone. If I see guys that may be dressing but aren't on the field. They kind of could lose interest sometimes because 18 to 22 years old, and they're thinking of all these other things. And mind's going negative, mind's coming back, being positive, thinking about what they're going to do afterwards. Now I'm back there. So it's just so much thing and getting them to just focus on this right here. Be where your feet are. It's mental toughness.

So just trying to still develop that during a game you're still coaching at. Because it's bigger than just a football game. This game of football teaches us about life and teaches us how to take care of all those

little things. And then our core values, we are DART, so we need to be able to live DART at all times. So being detailed? Are you accountable? Are you relentless towards being able to concentrate on a game? And when things are going the wrong way, are you displaying toughness? Can you do that? Are you showing that you're tough?

John Boccacino:

Where did you get influenced for that DART philosophy? I love it. I mean you're basically teaching, like you said, detail, accountability, be relentless and be tough in everything you do. How did you come to that philosophy?

Fran Brown:

I just think that any man that's going to lead a business, lead a family, just be positive. They need to be detailed. They should be accountable. They should be able to hold others accountable and be comfortable with others holding you accountable. You're going to have to be relentless after what it is you want to be in life. And then you should be tough. And if you're detailed in your faith, if you're DART in your faith, if you're DART at your job, if you're DART with your family. And if you just look at everything, if you're DART in the community and everything you do. Because how you do anything's how you do everything. So if you're DART in everything you do, you're probably going to be a successful man.

So I figured out what can I give these young men outside of trying to get them closer to faith that they can take with them the rest of their life. And no matter whatever happens, this tool is going to get them in and out of some of the toughest situations in their entire life. And to me that's DART. Just being detailed, accountable, relentless and tough. Do that with your marriage, do that with your children, do that with your faith, do that with your job, do that with your career. And if you do that all the time, then it's no way you won't be successful.

John Boccacino:

And that really ties into the theme I love that you've brought to this program, of you're using football to mold our student athletes to become better men, better citizens, and better contributors to society. Can you elaborate a little bit more on how football, what important role that has played for you? Because obviously you played in Camden, you played in college, now you're coaching young men. How did football help you reach your full potential beyond the game?

Fran Brown:

I think it was a lot of the coaches I had. I've always come across some good positive men. And when you come across good positive men and they were teaching me the right things and wanting to see me be successful, it kind of poured into me. You always take all the good that everyone gives you. You want to be able to give back, you want to be able to help, you want to be able to push young men to go on and be successful in life. So football has changed everything. It's helped me be where I'm at today because of team, because of it's bigger than just yourself. Then when you're able to do some things and go give it everything you got for "us," not for "I," then it becomes about everything. It's about everybody.

And then now that I'm in the position I'm in, I can take football and I can help people literally change lives. I could be a blessing to others. I can go and change a whole, like I got 115 players on a football team that God gave me an opportunity to be responsible for while they're here on campus, and I get a chance to do that. And then just being an ambassador, one of the bigger ambassadors at this university. I got a chance to do that. One thing the Chancellor said to me when he first called me, he said, "Coach Fran, I know you'll go get all the other players. You can prove, you can do all these things." He said, "But what about the diamonds in the rough? There's a lot of them and that's who I truly want to save." And I said,

"That's why I'm coming here because that's who I was." And he meant it. And most people don't just talk that way.

But he didn't want to... I mean, he's a Chancellor. So just think of all the education and the degrees and what he can be talking to me about or just, I mean he said, "All that stuff is great. What are you going to do with the diamonds in the rough?" He said, "Because there's a lot of people that have come to this school that just need to be shined up." And I was just like, "That's me." And that's why you coach. That's why he's a Chancellor, because he's thinking about that. You know what I mean? And that's, when you really think of it, to me that's powerful.

John Boccacino:

And I'm glad you bring up, because that "diamonds in the rough" comment during your introductory press conference was pretty powerful to hear. And you've obviously stayed very close to your hometown of Camden. You've brought a bunch of really solid football players and even better men from Camden to come to Syracuse. That upbringing in Camden, how did that shape and mold you into the leader that you are today?

Fran Brown:

Just because of the environment. The environment itself. You easily knew what you wanted to do. You want to go the right way. What you want to do? There was no in-between. You can't play both sides. So you instantly just understood and knew what side you had to be on. Not saying that we weren't all friends, we didn't all go to the same schools together, be in the same classes and do things. But when school let out, some dudes went to the left, some went to the right. And you had to understand that and you just got to be comfortable enough. It didn't work for a lot of people because they're uncomfortable staying in that lane. I knew what my lane is. I understand my lane, and I respect all the lanes.

So if I had to come close to that lane, I know what to and what not to cross. So I never crossed that line. That way, it was always a respect level of like, "Okay, I'll mess with Coach Fran. Well, I mess with Fran. Fran work hard. I like what he about." And then now I go back and get their kids that I grew up with. I can go back and I can recruit, and I can go back to a community. Everyone moves all over the Camden County area. Or just in New Jersey itself because they understand and know he came up like us. He from the same cloth we're from. He went through the struggle the same way we went through the struggle, but he knew how to stick to it. So I want my son to go do it with him. It's not like fake. Everybody wants to say from that and they wanted this and, "I could do that and I could do this."

I went through so many things and I'm still in this position and I give it to God. I give it to my education, to the coaches that coached me and things of that nature. To my wife of sticking by me, helping me through things, that... Education and going to school and sticking with when things aren't going the right way all the time. And don't get drafted to play in NFL the way I planned it out to be that way. Just through things of that nature. So I mean they just seen a guy that stayed focused. So when you get a guy from Syracuse that stayed focused, locked in and done everything you were supposed to. But was able to go hang with those dudes in the street that were considered dangerous and also could hang with those guys that are guys that go to college, that done it the right way. And you could go hang with both of those guys and still be yourself.

Not a lot of people could do that. And I always looked in that mirror and I knew who I am. I know I'm a Christian, I understand and I know that I'm a man of God and I respect people. So when you respect everything and they know that, you accept it everywhere. That's why I could go anywhere in the country. I mean Cali, I go out there. And wherever I go at any state, it doesn't matter where I go, I can go to the most dangerous neighborhood or I could go be in the suburbs. Because I understand and I know who I am. And I think that every parent truly wants their child to be well-rounded that way.

John Boccacino:

Yeah, I would agree. And the fact that it's a carryover where you have no problem resonating that relationship message. And you talked so much about the importance of building those relationships. Whether it's with the aunt, the grandmother, the church leader, whoever you're recruiting after, relationships are everything. How do you say to the recruits, so it's not just about like, "Hey, I'm here for you," but "You can trust me. I'm going to take your son and really mold them into the person that we want them to become when they leave Syracuse." How do you emphasize that?

Fran Brown:

I just could feel it. It's always a feeling, right? You could tell them whatever you want. It's the feeling and it's consistency. They feel it, they understand it, they know it. And then it consistently happens. And I consistently do the same thing. Whatever I say I'm going to do, I'm going to do it. If I say something, I have to do it. And I stand on my name. So when I'm saying it and I don't do it, then I'm messing my name up. Why would I mess my own name up?

And then I got Fran Brown, Junior. So everything I do, I have to do it the right way so that way his name's not messed up. One of the things, a lot of guys always want to have children and when they have children they just naturally name him a junior. They're such and such. You willing to protect his name for him now. It's not just you protecting it for you. Now you got to make it right for him. So I got to make this world a little bit easier for my son by continuously doing the right thing, but making it hard and teaching him. But I need some doors to open up for him that probably weren't open for me. That he can now, they naturally be in because of the hard work that I'm going to continuously do.

John Boccacino:

This has been evident from day one. You want the city of Syracuse to buy into this football program, but you want to be a part of the community, the community service. And I loved your quote I read on one of the local news stations. Where you said, "You need to give me 30 hours of community service, but that's for the team. The rest, what are you going to do for yourself to go above and beyond just that number, just that threshold I place out there?" How has your team responded to that and how have you really been able to give back to our community so far in your first nine-plus months here?

Fran Brown:

Well, everybody already got their 30 hours.

John Boccacino:

I'm not surprised.

Fran Brown:

Yeah, everybody got their 30. They're working on their own hours now and they did that. We had those 30 hours done within three months. So everybody got their 30 hours and they're working on their own time now and just doing different things to give back.

John Boccacino:

I want to go back to when you were hired for this job. What made this the right position and the right fit for you and your family to come and be all in like you've always mentioned?

Fran Brown:

I grew to truly like the athletic director really fast. Talking to the chancellor was another piece. It was like he told me they would be behind football and they feel that this could be a driving force for the athletics in this school. And then this is the first college I've ever really known about, knowing someone that was going to play football, got to know Donovan Darius, because he was from where we're from. And they sent us all the games and we got a chance to go watch them play in the Meadowlands.

And it was just like, everything was just fitting. There was already a few kids here from the city I'm from. It just all fit. You know how it's just certain things that just fit together. And as it fit, it was perfect. And I wanted it, though. This is something I talked about. I spoke on this, I spoke it into existence. I spoke on it about three, four years ago. And I said, "You know what, I'm going to be the head coach at Syracuse." I said this three years ago. I said, "I'll be the next head coach at Syracuse." And I lived it and I worked for it and I just kept going and God gave me what I worked for. He just knows the time.

John Boccacino:

Now I know you mentioned the reverence for the tradition. I know in your office you've got the 1959 team photo of the National Championship team that won the Cotton Bowl. So with success... I know you want that title, you want to get Syracuse back to the top. What's it going to take and how are we building day by day to get to that vision?

Fran Brown:

This time I'm really really locked in and focused on the day. I mean, we already know who we play this year. So we got to truly one week at a time. Just keep building it one week at a time. But staying focused on our prayers, staying going to class, sitting in the first two rows, getting good grades academically, doing community service. Just becoming a better man on a daily basis. And then that will happen.

That 1959 team, they had a lot of good men on the football team. They were mature and did what they were supposed to do. So the more men we get on the team, it's going to help us. I mean of course NIL and all those things of that nature, you're going to be able to get some really good talent. So just hoping that we'll be able to get some great donations and things of that nature to be able to help us continue to bring in talented players. Because they don't all have that mindset. So to get some of them to be on, they like what I'm saying, but they still want to be compensated for it. These kids can play football. So as long as we would be able to compensate them and be able to play them, I'll turn them into men. And as I turn them into men, men win games.

John Boccacino:

And how about the connection with the past? I know there were a lot of alumni on the sidelines for the win over Ohio. You've emphasized connecting with the past Orange greats. How has that gone so far to get these current student athletes with the alums?

Fran Brown:

It's going well. I mean they come up, they pop up at practice. I'm really pleased, man. Most impressed with Keith Bullock. He's came up several times and just talk to me all the time. Dwight Freeney is another one. Donovan McNabb... Just, those dudes are really on it. Of course I could reach out to Donovan Darius whenever I want.

John Boccacino:

Oh, sure.

Fran Brown:

But it's so many guys like PJ Alexander, you know what I mean? I mean, just so many of those dudes that are just always, "Hey, Coach. You need anything we here. We got you. Just let us know anything you need. We got you." So they're always around, man. It's an honor to have all those dudes around. I get opportunities to have those guys reach out to me all the time. I mean, and it is good because the players get to know like, "Hey, you understand the defensive line that was here? The Four Wheelers? All of them got drafted." I'm saying they all went to the NFL and played a long time. And you got Winters who's going to come up and do some stuff with us. Who's amazing when it comes to just come back and hand things and that nature. So I mean, I'm just thankful that they all locked in and just helping us. They don't have to do it. And then by them doing it, I appreciate it and it means a lot. Which is why I work all the time. They deserve to be laughing and talking trash about their college team. They put the work in when they was here. So they're like, "Nah, this is how it's supposed to look."

When the 1987 team be talking trash to me and saying it's a certain way it's supposed to look. Because that's what they did. A quarterback was extremely talented, all that stuff. So it's a certain way, a better look. And when I go back now, all them ballgames and all that stuff they was doing 2000, 2001. Somebody told me the other day, he said from 1980-something to 2001, they won 70% of their games. From 2003 to 2023, they won 40%. It's like 70% of the games then, and then now. You just look at how many Hall of Famers they got. Nine guys in the Hall of Fame, National Football League.

So I mean there's so much tradition here that I'm honored to be able to be at the head of this here. But I got a lot of work to do. Too many good big time players play here. Too many guys that will do anything for this program. You call them at the drop of the dime, they all up trying to help and they want to get stuff done. So there's a lot that I have to do. There's a lot that, to whom much is given, much is required. And it's required for me to lead this team the right way. And I'm very thankful that I get to put all that weight on my shoulders and do it.

John Boccacino:

I loved hearing about how before camp you had all the guys in one building, you wanted them to live together to get that cohesion, build up the teamwork. What are some other traditions that you're trying to instill, besides winning of course, with our guys?

Fran Brown:

Just be together and win. Be together. Be together and win. That's really what. Be together, win, and just live DART. I know that's not a form of tradition, but it really is. We always talk about being committed. Are you committed? Do you care? Can he trust you? They did the same thing. It was on the same thing. Committed care, trust. That's something that's important to us. So think going, but listen, I appreciate you having me on here. It means a lot. I'm very thankful. But we're going to keep trying to shine these diamonds in the rough. And I got a team meeting coming up in 10 minutes and I got some notes to study, but I'm so thankful.

John Boccacino:

I appreciate, it's been a pleasure to have you on, honestly. Because there's so much excitement and buzz for you and for the program, but for the student-athletes too, to play before a packed house in the Dome. We're going to pack the Dome week in and week out. I know we're in good hands with you at the helm of the program. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Fran Brown:

Thank you, and I'll see everybody Saturday. I know they're going to have fun. Be loud. I don't want to be able to hear myself. Go Orange.

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.