

Southern Voices Oral History Project
Florida Southern College

Interviewee: Harold "Hal" Smeltz, Class of 1977

Interviewer: Zachary Wheeler

Date: : So I understand that you are Hal Smeltz, the first baseball coach here at Florida Southern.

Smeltz: Well, first they had baseball for quite a few years, uhh, well it dates back quite a few ways but

middle of a Chicago snowstorm, Sarasota and St. Petersburg, well I started thinking it might be a good place to play baseball among other things. But seriously I checked out Florida Southern and it seemed like a really nice place to try so I showed up.

Wheeler: Did you see a lot of potential in this program when you came here?

Smeltzly: You'll have to say that again.

Wheeler: Did you see a lot of potential in this program when you came here?

Smeltzly: Well I can't say I saw that far down the road, when I just saw it as an app, a young guy who

players and baseball teams. And so, I just kept pecking along for a while, and we had pretty good success, but then suddenly we got very successful.

And it became more and more apparent first of all, that as the father of three daughters and I learned a great deal about how competitive young women can be, and Florida Southern at the time had two or three women's teams, if you want to call it that. There was absolutely almost no interest in women's athletics. And so if we're going to, you know, go ahead and have women's sports programs, the athletic director left suddenly, called so, and so I found myself with President Thrift. He asked me if I would be fine temporarily being the athletic director. So ...

Wheeler: How long were you the athletic director?

Smeltzly: Well for 43 years. Twenty-three actually, I was the baseball coach officially for 20, and then coach Green left suddenly, and President Thrift asked me if I would pick up the reins the way he put it. So that was also about the time that Title IX came and I just decided we should get them opportunities. We certainly did not, but you know it wasn't just Florida Southern either I don't want to lay it all down. Just across the board there were very few significant women's athletic programs around athletic teams, and so I remember going to, a well, it was a transition to Dr. Davis. Dr. Thrift retired and the new president Dr. Davis who was just terrific to work with. I went to him in his first year and told him pretty much what I'm telling you that we need to, we need to do a better job of being out front, and we need to do something, and he agreed and off we went.

Wheeler: So Hal, what did you do to get the women's program started?

Smeltzly: Well first of all, he, we had to figure a way to pay for it. And from your standpoint I might realize that you know, having not been in the business and just getting started myself, that you can't appreciate what a huge problem it ca

few days, but what is happening with women's lacrosse with all the picture headlines, with a sport really nobody knows a whole lot about here with golf ...

Wheeler: I actually know a few players on the women's lacrosse team

Smeltzly: I beg your pardon

Wheeler: I actually know a few players on the women's lacrosse team

Smeltzly: Well, it was very much like that in those days, and we built on it. And we upgraded our

Wheeler:Hm-hm.

Smeltzly:

meant. And this place had liberal arts and they had other programs too like science we ~~didn't do~~ I wanted something that I could ~~live~~ live with, so I headed to the education department ~~and~~ then after walking on as an athlete, they shifted me to the physical education and I tried to become a certified teacher, so that I had something.

Wheeler: Other things, how many championships did you ~~win~~ win as a coach when you were here?

Smeltzly: Well in baseball, three national championships.

Wheeler: What were your best memories of the first one in '71?

Smeltzly: Well it was a bit of a miracle. We were out in Springfield, Missouri. And ~~at~~ ~~the~~ ~~school~~ school down in Florida, and we ended up playing teams like the University ~~of~~ ~~Florida~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~state~~ ~~of~~ ~~Florida~~, the University of California ~~Riverside~~, and we played, umm, Western Michigan and Central Michigan. We played the people that survived and got to the ~~College~~ ~~World~~ ~~Series~~ College World Series for Division II schools. Of most of the universities, we were the only private college ~~audible~~. And you could only play nine people at the time, but on the other hand they had resources and a lot of money to begin with that Florida Southern didn't have. So I would have to say that the most exciting thing was that we were able to survive that process in those days, and we won the national championship on, really on the backs of donors who had really helped me put the money together ~~really~~ to fly out to the College World Series. And in those days in the '70s the NCAA didn't reimburse you for expenses when you went to a tournament, they ran the tournament, but it was up to you to get there. That's changed now, you get some money ~~to~~ ~~take~~ ~~your~~ ~~transportation~~ and so on, so really it was in the backs of a lot of really friendly alums and donors and we were able to get out there, and we won. And when the tournament moved to Springfield the next year, I basically had the same ~~play~~ ~~and~~ ~~we~~ ~~won~~ ~~again~~. And so we went out to Springfield and won that championship, and we knew what it was going to take from our previous year, and we did it, and we were successful and we came home and won. So then we did it again in '75, by the ~~way~~ ~~in~~ '74 we got knocked out in the regional here ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~southeastern~~ ~~United~~ ~~States~~, and then in '75 we won it again. So you know that was a big deal.

Wheeler: So were there any strategies that you had that helped your team win that s

Smeltzly: Well yeah. So I say that. And the other thing that I have to comment on is my involvement with international sports, because it did impact when I went about managing baseball in Cuba, and here at Florida Southern. I learned with my experience that I was involved with the U.S. Olympic effort for about 14 years.

Wheeler: Absolutely, and I heard that you used to coach there and what was your experience coaching at the Olympics from what I heard about you?

Smeltzly: Well I got involved with this story that is long and I won't worry about it. Umm, people found out that I was a pretty good coach and I was able to teach some things and manage the players pretty well, and they gave me a chance. And so my very first experience was as an assistant coach in the Dominican Republic, and I went down there and I was an assistant coach, umm, for a world championship team. And the ball clubs in the United States at that time were literally the best college players in the country from Southern California anywhere where we could find somebody who was going to be as baseball player, umm, professional baseball player but they were still in school. So we went about picking players in that circumstance and we put them to work and as a team we got better and better at it and we were able to compete. We started in the Caribbean, and that included Cuba, and

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you, I was here before these buildings were here. All that was here when I first showed up here in January of '52 with a suitcase was this pond out here and it was a reflective pond.

Wheeler: Umm-hmm.

Smeltzly: That's all it was, with some lily pads in it.

Wheeler: And the Frank Lloyd Wright buildings.

Smeltzly: And quite what's now the administration building. I guess down there was the library. The building that is right over here was the admissions department. And when I showed up here in a cab, [inaudible] I flew into Tampa, took a bus, Greyhound bus to Lakeland, and Greyhound buses to where the Ledger