



THE MAN IN THE SWEATER VEST

BY JOSHUA COOLEY

January/February 2009 Joshua Cooley The Man in the Sweater Vest Jim Tressel Ohio State University

So, let's talk about the man in the sweater vest. What are we to make of this model of straight-laced propriety? He patrols the hallowed sidelines of the Horseshoe with the air of a great military commander, mowing down foes like Patton and his tanks. But five-star generals never go to war in V-necks and an AT&T headset. And what of the slightly tinted spectacles, neatly trimmed hair and pressed slacks? It says more "professor" than "football coach."

Many mock the sweater vest. The naysayers and haters (mostly Michigan fans) lampoon it as stuffy, strict and other less-tasteful adjectives. But do they really know the man? Do they know that, unlike many of his peers, he does not define himself by final scores? Do they now he starts training camp sessions by asking each player to write down something they are grateful for? Do they know about his quiet evening visits to the local cancer ward, where death has a large fourth-quarter lead on life?

What about the rest of us? It's easy to get lost in his wins and losses (mostly wins). He owns five national championships, and no one would be surprised if the collection grows. It's easy to ogle at his playground in Columbus, a veritable mecca for Ohioans, and the extraordinary amount of NFL-ready talent he churns out each year. And gracious, the assumptions we make about that sweater vest!

It's so easy to misjudge The Ohio State University's famous head football coach. So let's be honest: Do we really know Jim Tressel?

Answers often lie buried in the past. So, it's time to dig.

The shovel breaks ground in the town of Ada, a northwesterly blip on Ohio's radar and the hometown of Tressel's father, Lee, a man who unduly gets lost in conversations about the state's great football coaches. Lee, like Ada itself, was quiet, unassuming and small-town. Personal fame mattered little to him. Otherwise, he wouldn't have coached so long at obscure Baldwin-Wallace College in the Cleveland suburb of Berea.

He came there from Ohio State, where he had shown great promise as a freshman fullback in 1943 before being assigned to Baldwin-Wallace through the U.S. Navy's V-12 program during World War II.

After setting the Yellow Jackets' career scoring record as a player and coaching a decade at the prep level, Lee returned to Baldwin-Wallace as head coach in 1958. He led the Yellow Jackets for 23 years, compiling a 155-52-6 record and winning the 1978 NCAA Division III championship. All three of Lee's sons — Dick, Dave and Jim — played for him.

Lee was a softy for Baldwin-Wallace. He served many years as the athletic director and a health and physical education teacher, often working 17-hour days. His wife, Eloise, kept the school archives, washed jerseys, tutored players and never missed any of Lee's games. On mornings before home games, the Tressels would host pancake breakfasts for the team at their home on 396 Beech St., two blocks from the stadium.

"They were kind of like Ozzie and Harriet," said Larry Van Dusen, who coached under Lee for six years. "They were constantly helping others."



Coach Jim Tressel

Born: Dec. 5, 1952

Hometown: Mentor, Ohio

Playing Career:

- Baldwin-Wallace College, Quarterback

Head Coaching Career:

- Youngstown State: 1986-2000
- Ohio State: 2001-present

Championships:

BCS: 2002

Div. I-AA: 1991, 1993, 1994, 1997

Big Ten Conference: 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008

Awards:

- American College Football Association National Coach of the Year (1991, 1994, 2002)
- Chevrolet National Coach of the Year (1993, 1994, 1997)
- Eddie Robinson Award (1994)
- 2002 Bobby Dodd Coach of the Year, Paul "Bear" Bryant Award winner, Eddie Robinson Coach of the Year, Touchdown Club of Columbus National Coach of the Year
- Woody Hayes Trophy winner (2002, 2006)
- Baldwin-Wallace College Athletic Hall of Fame inductee (2007)

In 1979, doctors told Lee, a heavy smoker, that death was near. But Lee treated lung cancer like a blocking sled, blasting into it with all his strength. He coached for two more seasons, retiring on Nov. 25, 1980. Five months later, he died at age 56. Jim was only 28.

"He was extremely caring," said Tressel, who turned 56 in December. "Everyone knew he cared for who they were at that moment and who they would become. Winning was important, but it was secondary."

Eloise lived 20 more years, succumbing to cancer at age 76 on Aug. 19, 2001. She missed her son's debut as Ohio State's new head coach by 20 days.

The sweater vest isn't so surprising, really. Lee, after all, used to favor a bowtie and plaid sports jacket.

Tressel's conservative look mirrors the man himself, according to those close to him. He is a traditionalist in many ways, but he's also sharply determined and remarkably unassuming just like his dad.



Jim Tressel's .820 career winning percentage at Ohio State is tops among any coach in the last 60 years, including legend **Woody Hayes**.

"What you see is what you get," said 2004 Ohio State graduate Craig Krenzler, the starting quarterback of the 2002 national championship team that went 14-0. "You see the sweater vest, and you're probably pretty close [with assumptions about him]. He's even-keeled, straight-laced. There's not a lot of flair. He's passionate about a lot of things, but he likes to show it through his work ethic."

Tressel's quiet steadiness stems from a deep faith and a strong family. His father served on the Greater Cleveland FCA board of directors and took his family to the First Congregational United Church of Christ in Berea.

In 1969, before his junior year of high school, Tressel placed his faith in Christ at an FCA Camp at Valparaiso (Ind.) University after the speaker, former New York Yankees great Bobby Richardson, asked the crowd if they would be winners or losers on judgment day.

"That made perfect sense to me because I know the finality of winning and losing and being successful," Tressel said. "That evening was the beginning of my journey."

After college, Tressel immediately followed his father and older brother Dick (head coach at Hamline University (Minn.) from 1978 to 2000) into coaching. He spent a combined 10 years as an assistant at Akron, Miami (Ohio), Syracuse and Ohio State before starting a 15-year head coaching tenure at Youngstown State in 1986. Within five years, he had led the Penguins to the Division I-AA championship, a feat he would repeat in 1993, '94 and '97.

He arrived at Ohio State as head coach in 2001, sparking a return to glory in central Ohio not seen in more than 30 years. Entering the 2008 season, Tressel owned a 73-16 record in Columbus, highlighted by a 6-1 advantage in the all-important Michigan rivalry and seven straight bowl appearances. His 2002 Bowl Championship Series title gave the Buckeyes their first national championship since 1970.

The Buckeyes reached — and lost — the BCS title game the last two years and stumbled only slightly this season. And, true to form, Tressel has remained level-headed throughout.

"I don't think you can ever lose sight of what you've been able to accomplish," said Tressel, who, with Lee, forms the only father-son college coaching duo to win national championships. "But you're never satisfied in competitive situations unless you accomplish all that you think you can."

His success is readily apparent to anyone with a television, but what's it really like to be Jim Tressel? That's a deep question. It's leading a 118-year-old program whose tradition and success has few rivals. It's walking in the vaunted footsteps of 21 predecessors, of which only two finished their tenure with a losing record (the last being in 1897). It's carrying the enormous weight of an entire state's expectations — millions of hard-working Midwesterners who go ga-ga over their beloved scarlet and gray — every single year.

"There's really nothing else like it," said Central Ohio FCA Community Director Joel Penton, a former defensive lineman for the Buckeyes. "The culture of Ohio State football is incredible."

In a state that produces legendary sports figures like wheat crops (see: Havlicek, John; Nicklaus, Jack; Young, Cy; etc.),

"legacy" is not a trite word. You've got to earn it. And as Ohio State's football coach, you've got to earn it in the shadow of one man: Woody Hayes.

Yes, *the* Woody Hayes — the man who won five national championships and 13 Big Ten Conference titles from 1951 to 1978. He is the benchmark against which all other Buckeye coaches are measured.

***"...I could be as happy now if I was still at Youngstown State. But it's indeed a thrill to be at Ohio State."
— Jim Tressel***

While Tressel would need to average 10 wins for 13 more years to reach Hayes' 205-61-10 record at Ohio State, he certainly can stand on his own. His career winning percentage in Columbus entering the 2008 season (.820) tops that of any predecessor in the last 60 years, including Hayes (.761). Through 2007, Tressel owned a 208-73-2 mark in 22 years as a head coach.

Look again at each man's career record. Virtually identical. Will Tressel's stoic countenance one day grace the Mount Rushmore of Ohio sports legends?

"That's probably a difficult question to answer right now," Krenzel said. "He has obviously left his legacy in east Ohio. He's in the midst of leaving his mark in central Ohio. When all is said and done, I think, yeah, you've got to put him there — not just for his accomplishments, but for the way he tried to do it."

All this legacy chatter doesn't force Tressel to reach for the Tums bottle at 2 a.m.

"First and foremost, it's a blessing," he said of his job. "Culturally in Ohio, football is something almost everyone is involved in. It's something everyone in Ohio has an affinity for. Honestly, I could be as happy now if I was still at Youngstown State. But it's indeed a thrill to be at Ohio State."

Tressel's influence in Buckeye Country feels all-pervading, and his success, altruism and native-son status (born in Mentor, played in Berea, and coached 31 of 33 years in the state) have made him a celebrity.

"Jim Tressel is probably the biggest icon in the state of Ohio and probably has more influence than the governor," said Kent Zanon, FCA's multi-area director in central Ohio. "He's a very powerful, influential man."

Like a superhero, Tressel uses his powers for good. While his Web site lists 11 different charities, he focuses much of his attention on the Tressel Family Fund at Ohio State's medical facility, nicknamed "The James." Since his mother's death, he and his wife, Ellen, have sacrificed countless hours and have raised more than \$500,000 for cancer prevention research. He occasionally brings players to the bone marrow and hematology wings to hearten cancer patients.

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— FCA's Kent Zanon

"He's a very generous man," said Cynthia Anderson, The James' director of development. "And Ellen is divine. I love working with her."

Ohio State's entire football program has reaped the rewards of Tressel's spiritual leadership. He is actively involved with FCA through financial giving and multiple speaking engagements each year. According to Zanon, all of Tressel's assistant coaches attend a Friday Bible study "because of his leadership," and attendance at the weekly players' chapel has skyrocketed from "15 to 20 percent" pre-Tressel to "75 to 90 percent" currently.

Said Zanon, "When he was interviewed by Ohio State, he told them plainly, 'I'm not going to bury my faith in Christ, so if I coach this football team, I won't make my faith hidden. I won't impose my faith on my players and coaches, but I will expose them to my faith.' He wears his Christianity on his sleeve."

Last summer, Tressel published a book, *The Winner's Manual: For the Game of Life*, which details what's most important to him.

"Throughout the whole book, it's about his faith in Christ and about how he walks the walk," said former Ohio State quarterback Rex Kern, who led the 1968 team to a national championship and started FCA in Columbus the following year (see

below). "I can't find the words to describe what a wonderful man and testimony and witness he is."

Those who know Tressel extol his tireless concern for his players. He encourages Christian virtues and often brings in a wide range of speakers — from former NBA forward and Ohio State star Lawrence Funderburke to Iraq war veterans — in order to broaden his players' outlooks on life. Sunday mornings are off-limits for football-related activities so players can "find a place to



worship," according to Penton.

"He has us concerned with things like family, academics, our careers, strength and fitness, and our football family," senior tight end Brandon Smith said.

This, more than all the Big Ten titles and national championships, will be Tressel's enduring legacy. For him, life is about people, just like it was for his parents. It's about providing direction to young men who also happen to be good football players. It's about extending a compassionate hand to the sick and dying. It's about showing an entire, football-crazed state how to win, lose (occasionally) and ultimately live with high standards.

"What I enjoy in this game is the process," Tressel said. "Some years, the process ended up 2-9; some years 14-0. What's fun in all of them is not the end result but the process. I've been fortunate to be head coach in nine national championships — I've won five, lost four. And what's most real to me is that the process is over and that group of people who worked so hard together would never be together in that fashion again."

There you have it. Now you know a little about the man in the sweater vest. No more assumptions needed about Jim Tressel. It's quite clear who he is.

Perhaps Penton sums it up best: "He's just a great ambassador for Christ." **STV**

OHIO FCA

The late 1960s to early '70s was a dark period in Ohio. While social unrest was mounting nationwide in the shadow of Vietnam and the civil rights movement, it turned into fatal violence with the infamous Kent State University shootings on May 4, 1970.

But that period also produced plenty of good in the state. During the 1968 season, Ohio State quarterback Rex Kern led the famous "Super Sophomores" to a 10-0 record and a 27-16 win over O.J. Simpson's vaunted Southern Cal team in the Rose Bowl, marking the Buckeyes' last consensus national championship before current head coach Jim Tressel's undefeated 2002 squad.

Then, early in 1969, FCA came to Ohio State. Inspired by the first FCA Weekend of Champions in Dallas, Kern returned to Columbus and started the state's first FCA Huddle outside Cleveland. In 1973, during the penultimate season of his injury-shortened NFL career, he became the first full-time paid employee of FCA in central Ohio.

"I still try to keep my hand involved whenever they call," said Kern, 59, a 2007 College Football Hall of Fame inductee.

Forty years later, his vision has blossomed into a thriving ministry. With a staff of 28, FCA in Ohio now has Huddles in every major city, reaching thousands of athletes and coaches each year. Recently, Kent Zanon, FCA's multi-area director in central Ohio, helped fellow staff member Joel Penton coordinate "The Main Event," which drew more than 6,000 people to hear the testimonies of Tressel and several of his players.

Said Zanon: "Rex has always given his time, talent and treasures. He took my very first phone call 16 years ago and still takes them to this day."



FCA pioneer **Rex Kern** and his grandson, **Chase**

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