

The Massillon “Coaches House”

by Carter E. Strang

From 1954 – 1964, a trio of consecutive Massillon head football coaches -- Tom Harp, Lee Tressel, and my father, Leo Strang -- and their families lived at 818 17th St., earning it the nickname the “Coaches House.”

If its walls could speak, they would recount tales of Massillon Tiger football triumphs, perseverance, achievements, tradition, and rich history.

As one of the seven children that lived in the Coaches House during those 10 years, I will share some of my recollections about it, after first discussing the legacies of the three coaches.



The Coaches House

Harp, Tressel, and Strang Coaching Legacies

Coaches Harp, Tressel, and Strang had a major impact on Massillon football, collectively achieving an 87-13-2 record, two national and four state championships, a seventh-place national ranking, and three state runner-up finishes.

All three went on to success at the college level posting a combined head coaching record of 231-156-12.

The Coaches House was home to what is one of the nation’s greatest family football coaching dynasties: Lee Tressel and sons Jim and Dick. They collectively won six college football national championships, and they are the only coaching family in which each coach has over 100 college football victories.



Tom Harp

At just 26 years old in 1954, Tom Harp became Massillon's youngest head coach. He and his wife Anita, along with daughters Marcey (age 5) and Peggy (age 2), moved to 818 17th Street. Prior to joining Massillon, Harp had an impressive coaching record of 20 wins, 6 losses, and 1 tie at Carrollton High School.

Now at 98, Harp stands as Massillon's oldest former head coach, having achieved a remarkable 17-2-1 record over two seasons -- winning the state title in 1954 and finishing as runner-up in 1955. He revived Massillon's tradition of presenting newborn boys with miniature footballs.



A Future Tiger

In addition to serving as an assistant coach at West Point and the United States Naval Academy, Coach Harp held head coaching positions at Cornell University, Duke University, and Indiana State University. He is a member of the Muskingum University Athletics Hall of Fame.

Coach Harp's stepson and grandson followed in his footsteps. Stepson Cam Cameron was head coach football coach at Indiana University and the Miami

Dolphins. He served as offensive coordinator with the San Diego Chargers -- where he was named Sports Illustrated NFL Offensive Assistant of the Year -- and the Super Bowl Champion Baltimore Ravens. Cam's son, Danny, is an assistant college football coach.



Lee Tressel

Coach Harp recommended Lee Tressel as his successor and was asked to see if Tressel was interested. Lee was the runner-up in Massillon's 1954 coaching search and had an impressive 34-game winning streak at Mentor High School.

After telling Coach Tressel the reason for his call, Harp jokingly told Tressel a precondition to being considered for the job was agreeing to purchase Harp's house. After a good laugh about the fictitious precondition, Lee said he was interested in the job and the house.

In 1956, Lee Tressel bought the house and moved in with his wife, Eloise, along with their young sons: Dick (8), Dave (5), and Jim (3). Thereafter, locals began referring to 818 17th Street as the Coaches House.

During his two-year tenure at Massillon, Coach Tressel was 16-3-0, and his 1956 team was state runner-up. He established the Sideliners organization and initiated the Massillon/McKinley Victory Bell tradition.

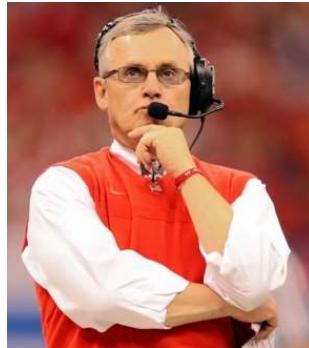


The Victory Bell

Coach Tressel left Massillon in 1956 to become the head football coach and athletic director at Baldwin-Wallace (B-W). Over 23 seasons (1958-1980), he achieved a 155-52-6 record, led B-W to the 1978 NCAA Div. III National Championship, and was named National Coach of the Year. Coach Tressel, who died in 1981 at 56, is a member of numerous halls of fame, most notably the College Football, National High School Football, Ohio High School Football Coaches, and the Greater Cleveland Sports Halls of Fame.

All three of Lee's sons played for him at B-W and became successful coaches:

- Jim Tressel, Ohio's 67th Lt. Governor, is the only coach with national titles at both Division I AA and Division I levels, earning four championships at Youngstown State and the 2002 title at Ohio State. With over 100 wins at two schools and eight National Coach of the Year awards, he achieved a 229-79-2 record before moving into university administration as vice-president at Akron and president at Youngstown State. Jim is a member of numerous halls of fame, most notably the College Football, National High School Football, Ohio High School Football Coaches, and the Greater Cleveland Sports Halls of Fame



Jim Tressel

- Dick Tressel was head football coach at Hepline University (Hepline) from 1978- 2000, achieving a 124-102-2 record and earning National Coach of the Year honors. He also served as its athletic director. From 2001-- 2010 Dick was as an assistant coach at Ohio State under his brother Jim. He is a member of several halls of fame, including the Minnesota High School Football Coaches, Hepline, and B-W Athletics Halls of Fame. Dick's three

sons, Luke, Ben, and Mike, have coached football at the high school and college levels, and Mike's son Logan is a college sports administrator.

- Dave Tressel excelled as a swimmer and diver at B-W. He was inducted into the B-W Athletic Hall of Fame for his athletic achievements and more than 50 years of service as an alumnus, coach, and volunteer.



Leo Strang

In 1958, Leo Strang became head coach of the Massillon Tigers after leading East Cleveland Shaw High School to a 16-3 record, two league titles, and an 8th state ranking.

That same year my family -- Dad, Mom (Bettie), my brother David (2), and I (7) -- moved into the Coaches House after buying it from Coach Tressel. We were the last Massillon coach to live there.

Coach Strang had a 54-8-1 record at Massillon over six years, winning state titles in 1959, 1960, and 1961, plus national titles in 1959 and 1961. His 1960 team ranked 7th nationally. Regarded among the nation's top 50 high school coaches alongside Paul Brown and Chuck Mather, Strang was Ohio High School Football Coach of the Year in 1959.

Nationally recognized as a football innovator, Strang was the first in the nation to use vinyl helmet awards (small stars), team logo decals (the "Leaping Tiger"), and white football shoes, all of which he started at Massillon.



Decals and White Shoes

In 1964, Strang was appointed as head coach at Kent State University (KSU), leading the Flashes until the conclusion of the 1967 season. Since that time, only one KSU football coach with an equal or longer tenure has achieved a higher winning percentage -- Massillon's Don James, who later secured a national championship at the University of Washington.

Coach Strang is a member of several halls of fame, including the Ohio High School Coaches, Ashland University Athletics, and the Stark County High School Football Halls of Fame.

KSU commemorated Strang's legacy by creating the Leo Strang Award, which is presented yearly to a junior or senior football player who demonstrates outstanding performance both in academics and on the field. Additionally, the NCAA recognized his impact on college football with a formal resolution in his honor.

Coach Strang, who died in 1993 at age 73, is the last Massillon coach to live in the Coaches House. He moved to Kent in the summer of 1964, and Earl Bruce, his successor, did not buy the Coaches House.

My Coaches House Memories

Over 65 years ago, my family made our first visit to the Coaches House as we were preparing to move in. The Tressel family, who were soon leaving for Berea, welcomed us warmly, showed us around, and their sons, Dick and David, helped me get to know the neighborhood and introduced me to their friends. I truly appreciated their kindness and hospitality.

Our family found The Coaches House to be our best home yet. With its spacious backyard, screened porch, dishwasher, roomy interiors, two-car garage, and a basement office, it offered both comfort and practicality. For my father, it was an

ideal retreat—shielding him from public attention and allowing him to focus on his role as a father and husband. Taking care of household projects like installing paneling in the basement office helped him unwind from the pressures of leading what many view as the nation's most high-profile high school football program.

The coaching staff regularly met in the basement office for film reviews and player evaluations. After each meeting, my mother -- an excellent cook and hostess -- served everyone a home-cooked meal.

I attended several film reviews and player evaluations, marked by the repetitive click of the projector. Although learning about the game and players was exciting, I rarely stayed long due to the constant replays and exhaustive analysis. Only later did I appreciate that the coaching staff's meticulous attention to detail contributed to the team's success.

The Coaches House staff meetings happened so often that David once asked my mother, "Who are those men living in our basement?" One evening, David tried unsuccessfully to ambush the arriving coaches with his toy cannon, prompting a good laugh by all.



Coaches House Christmas Card

The Coaches House housed the "Tiger Car," a vehicle provided just for the Massillon football coach by a nearby dealership. Adorned with tiger emblems symbolizing Massillon football, it stood out. Riding in it during trips to Canton -- which was "enemy territory," particularly during football season -- made me feel a bit uneasy.



The Tiger Car

My father did not experience many losses during his tenure at Massillon. However, when Massillon lost, a For Sale sign was always found planted in our front yard the next morning, courtesy of anonymous Massillon fans. The warning was clear: Don't make losing a habit or at some point you really will need to move. I'm relieved to hear that the For Sale sign tradition has ended.

The morning after a season ending with a win over McKinley, I discovered someone had placed the "Blarney Stone" -- a huge concrete obelisk formerly used for conditioning drills on the Tiger practice field -- against our front door. Players especially dreaded running to it during the blazing summer months. Dad figured his players were behind the prank. After much effort, the stone was put back where it belonged before the start of the next season.

In fall 1962, dad won his 100th high school football game, and at a party at the Coaches House to honor the occasion, he received an engraved award that he always cherished.

Coaches Harp, Tressel, and Strang were regulars at the Ohio Football Coaches Clinic in Columbus, where they made it a tradition to play poker together. During these games, Coach Harp would tease Tressel and Strang about getting a significantly better bargain on the Coaches House than they had.

Our family felt the Coaches House neighborhood was ideally situated, given its proximity to the stadium, the high school, Massillon coaches, and supporters.

Four of dad's assistant coaches -- Jack Robb, Nick Vrotsos, Hap Lillick, and Dale Walterhouse -- lived nearby. Dad had coached Dale at Upper Sandusky High School and was especially fond of him. Robb and Lillick later worked as assistants under dad at KSU. Augie Morningstar, a former Massillon football coach, was also a neighbor.

Maurie and Katie Basler, known as two of the greatest Massillon football supporters, lived behind the Coaches House and became close friends with our family. Their basement, dubbed the "Tiger Den," served as an informal museum honoring Massillon Tiger football and gained national attention when it was featured in a 1961 Sports Illustrated article.



The Tiger Den

I regularly visited the Basler Tiger Den on the eve of Massillon games to perform a "good luck" ritual that I was told would help the Tigers win. Katie had me press a heated coin into wax that covered a large bottle and say, "Go Tigers." It was very mysterious and exciting at the same time.

Dad accepted the KSU job when I was in 7th grade at Longfellow Jr. High School. I was excited that dad was getting his chance to coach at the college level but disappointed I would never play football for the Tigers.

Instead, I played at Kent Roosevelt High School, where former Massillon assistant coach Dave Grosse was my backfield coach. A highlight of my senior year was receiving a letter from Coach Lee Tressel inviting me to play for him at B-W. However, I chose to stay in Kent and play football and ice hockey at KSU.

Dad never pushed David or me to coach, but we did:

- I coached football and ice hockey at Shaker Heights High School (SHHS) prior to becoming an attorney. I was honored to have been inducted into the SHHS Ice Hockey Hall of Fame for my coaching contributions. Two of my sons, Steven and Carson, coach soccer and ice hockey, respectively.
- My brother David is a top-ranked table tennis player who owns and operates Connecticut Table Tennis where he coaches players of all ages.

More about the author: Carter E. Strang is Leader-in-Residence at Cleveland State University College of Law and a retired founding partner of Tucker Ellis LLP. He has served as president of several bar associations in Cleveland and is a member of the

CSU Law and Kent City Schools Halls of Fame. Strang has received the CMBA Living Legacy and Kent State University Distinguished Alumni Awards.