

**INTERVIEW WITH ROGER NEISWENDER
CONDUCTED BY TOM SCOTT
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TS: We're interviewing Roger Neiswender now. Why don't you tell what years you were at Tennessee and what you did?

RN: I came in 1963 as a high jumper. I was the Alabama state champion twice and had the highest jump in the South. Chuck liked it because I had beaten the SEC record. When I was a junior and a senior, I jumped higher in Montgomery than the SEC championship winners did. But I blew a knee out playing basketball my senior year. Chuck gave me a scholarship and honored it. I was totally amazed. I thought for sure this was the end of the line, and that I was not going to college. But Chuck honored it, and when I got up there I think I won the SEC as a freshman in the high jump at about 6'5", but I never jumped like I could before. They had a freshman division totally separate from varsity, and the freshmen couldn't compete in the varsity events. After that, I never could plant and jump. So, I changed to hurdles—I had been a hurdler and made the state finals a couple of times in Alabama as a hurdler—and then became a better hurdler, ultimately, than I ever was a high jumper.

TS: You came in the fall of 1963. So 1964 was your first track season at UT.

RN: Yes, 1964, 1965, 1966, and 1967 were my outdoor seasons. I was captain in 1967.

TS: How did you know the Bill Skinner story [and the moustache controversy in 1970 and 1971]? Were you assistant coaching at that time?

RN: I was a student coach with Chuck in 1968. Then I got drafted in [’68] out of graduate school. I was in urban planning graduate school, and they drafted me out, and hauled me off to Fort Benning [Columbus, Georgia] and Fort Polk [Vernon Parish, Louisiana] and some places. Then I came back [in 1970], and there had been a total transition. I drove my car back and then had to work a 7:00 o’clock session of early registration at graduate school for my assistantship. I hadn’t been on campus in two years. I got in at 2:00 in the morning, and I went to work at 7:00 o’clock. Walking down the hill, bra-less was in and everything else. It was obvious to me that many things had changed. I still had the buzz cut that I had had for two years. That’s it. No facial hair, buzz cut, and everything else. I decided I am getting with this program, because I had been missing out. So, I grew my hair, not long—this was in the fall—but the mutton chops came down. I had a nice set of mutton chops. But as a student coach—I guess, when they took Bill in there, they decided that we should clean up this whole mess at one time.

So, I went in there, and Coach [Bill] Battle was there. That was really very early on. I had just met Bill [Skinner], because I had just come back to campus. I knew who he was, obviously, but when it started off, I’m sitting there in a chair, and Bill’s sitting to my left, and we’re looking at Coach Battle. He comes in, and he looks at Bill and says, “Son...” And Bill says, “Coach, I’m not son. I’m a mature man, military background, and everything else.” I said, “Oh, this is going to be good. I’m going to just sit back in the aftermath.” And I did. I just cruised along. He asked me, “So, what’s your excuse?”—is what he said. I said, “Well, sir, I don’t have an excuse. I cut my hair and did everything I could for two years and gave them the best I had in the military. I’m back on campus, and I just want to be a student. I’m a student coach, and I just want to be a student and see what it is like.” He said, “Well, if you are going to be a student on this team, and you’re going to be in the dorm supervising these other guys, you’re going to go by the rules, just like they do.” I said, “It’s not that big a deal to me.” But I just sat and watched Coach Battle squirm when Bill explained to him, “Well, you know, when I won [the javelin in the 1970 USA-USSR dual meet], they didn’t say anything about my moustache.”

TS: So, where was Chuck Rohe while all this was taking place?

- RN:** Probably out football recruiting. That's what Chuck did mostly in the fall.
- TS:** I was thinking in terms of chain of command. What right does the football coach have to supervise the appearance of the track team? And why even the athletic director if the track coach isn't there?
- RN:** I think it was all power politics. I think Woodruff's role was to get the guy he thought was best to be the football coach. Then, after that, everything always in athletics rolled downhill from football anyway. We used to kid the football players, "You bring the money. We [the track team] will do the winning." That's really pretty much the way it was.
- TS:** Did you shave after that?
- RN:** I trimmed them up a little bit. I took about a half inch off the bottom. They flared a little bit, but they weren't full mutton. After he tangled with Bill, he [Woodruff] lost his enthusiasm after that. There wasn't a whole lot of enforcement from then on.
- TS:** Okay. Talk about your track career at Tennessee. You were a high hurdler, and we had some really good high hurdlers back then.
- RN:** I rolled [with] all the best. I told Richmond [Flowers] last night, "You have a lot of things you can claim. But I have one thing you will never be able to claim." He said, "What's that?" I said, "I was the world's fastest second man." I never won a race that one of my teammates—Richmond Flowers or Pat Pomphrey—didn't beat me. But I was ranked in the top 10 in the world. Nobody else had another teammate on the list. So I declared myself the world's fastest second man.
- TS:** The Penn Relays always had the shuttle hurdle relay. Nobody else had that did they?
- RN:** Drake [Relays] had it, and they started one at the Compton [California] Relays afterwards. But the long term history was really the Penn Relays.
- TS:** We always won that didn't we?
- RN:** Yes, every time we ran we won it. We had a good bunch. But we never put together that ultimate team you would want to see. Somebody was always hurt, or somebody was not available for one reason or another. We always won it in spite of that.
- TS:** What did you learn from Chuck Rohe?

RN: When you get pushed that hard, you start digging, and you learn what depth you really have compared to where you would normally stop and think, “This hurts. I’m not going to probe any further.” That, and to grind it out. I ended up in a career of public administration and management of engineering and planning firms. I had some pretty responsible jobs with five thousand employees and a billion and a half dollar budget. My real forte was getting people motivated to do things and then getting the deals done. In that, I always said, “I want to treat everybody fairly.” I would prefer to do that. I would rather treat everybody nicely. But, in the end, if all else fails, we’ll just go to grind down. In the end of the day, I’ll be standing, and they’ll be heads down on the table. I got that from Chuck. I knew, no matter what, I’ve got the ace in the back pocket. So, eventually, you’d challenge their manhood to go in here and, “Let’s just shut the door. We’ll stay in here until we get a solution.” I knew we’re going to get what we need out of this deal. It was Chuck’s persistence that he taught us.

TS: That’s a great story.

RN: I learned so many things. I remember when we got on a bus. Chuck would always ride up front on the bus. He would put his feet on that rail when you go up, and he would have his paper out. I remember somebody came up one morning and thumped the paper. “What are you doing, Coach? You’re always up here reading your paper.” He looked at everybody—everybody was on the bus—and he said, “Okay, you guys get in there and go back and dig out your *Mad* magazines and your comic books and sit back there and entertain yourself. Or, you could actually learn something about something like this. This is called the *Wall Street Journal*. If you want to read something like this, you will learn some skills that will allow you to have a quality life the whole rest of your life. Or you can get back to your *Mad* magazine.” Chuck was always investing in things. I learned that back in graduate school. He was concocting ideas. He was a financial investor and really studies stocks and learned. A lot of us observed, and I always learned quickly, “You’ve got to pay attention to your finances. You’ve got to watch what you’re doing.” I really got that very first inclination—I was in business school, but I was just taking courses and getting a degree and trying to run track. But I learned from Chuck [about business]. You go through his career, as much as people want to concentrate on his coaching, but he was a phenomenal businessman and the penultimate promoter.

TS: And still is at age 82.

RN: Oh, yes.

TS: I always enjoyed being in the same car with him if we were traveling to a meet somewhere by car. I think I got a better education just listening to the conversation in there than I did in my classrooms.

RN: Yes. One of the jobs I have to do here—I told Hardee McAlhaney I read the story about his interplay with Chuck and Jimmy [Carnes]. I told Hardee, “You got a lot of it right.” But what actually happened—in Montgomery, Alabama, they had the Coliseum—used to be called the Coliseum Relays and became the SEC championship. In 1967 we won the championship. I got to be up there because I was captain, and Chuck and I were getting the trophy. It went down a little different than Hardee remembered. I think Hardee may have been influenced by having that Gator graduate school [experience that] may have influenced his objectivity. What actually happened, which, as I recall it, was much more in keeping with Chuck’s character than the way it was portrayed: Jimmy looked up at Chuck and said, “Chuck, next year, I’m going to be up there.” And Chuck looks down at Jimmy and says, “Jimmy, as long as I’m here, you *will* be down there.” That’s closer in keeping with Chuck. Of all the things he has achieved, I defy anybody to come forward and say, “I ever saw an egotistical boast or a putdown of anybody else.” He never did that. But if somebody engaged him, and it became a challenge and a competition, all bets were off. He could put you in your place pretty quick when you needed to be. But he was always just a class act from the word go for all of us.

TS: Okay, Roger, tell the story of the train ride from New Orleans.

RN: Well, we went to Baton Rouge to run in the SEC Championships in the late spring of 1965. We ran the meet and had some great results out of there—people performing far above what their expectations were. We all got on a bus, went down to New Orleans, and went to the train station. Chuck told us, “This is the train. We’re going to be on the last car on the train. He got it set up where Gus Manning and Haywood Harris [in 1965 the former and current UT Sports Information director] were in the last seats of the next to last car. Somebody, maybe Bud Ford, in an official capacity—not one of us—was the guard of the backdoor to make sure nobody tumbled off the train. Chuck gave us twenty bucks apiece. We were in New Orleans. We were there, and it was like 8:30 or so. We didn’t have to be back until midnight. He told us all, “Wherever you want to go, nobody has got any excuse, because it’s not that far from where you are to this train. We will leave, and we will leave you, and then you are on your own.” So, we went out, and for me, that was the first time I had ever had anything to drink. As clear as a whistle as Pat Pomphrey’s reputation always is, he was the one who got me to, “This is the way you do this.”

TS: I’m shocked!

RN: He poured a glass of gin. It wasn't a shot. It was a water glass, one of those plastic water glasses, about two-thirds full. Then he put some juice, like orange juice, in the other one. He said, "This is the way you do it. You chug this, and then you wash it down with this juice." I had never had anything, so, I chugged it. My eyes were crossed. They were on fire. I had water coming out of my eyes. I was breathing some fumes. It was burning and burning and burning on the way down. It was burning enough that I hit my hand to the side and spilled that whole glass. The juice glass was half way down the train by then. I sat there and burned and burned.

TS: Was this a practical joke?

RN: No, that's the way I was supposed to do it. It might have worked if I had got the chaser down before I turned it over. I've never had another drop of gin ever in my life. So, needless to say, we had a bunch of shenanigans going on. We were partying. We were locked into the back train. Everybody goes to sleep. About 10:00 o'clock in the morning, we are rumbling down the tracks through northern Mississippi, and there's a truck following along on the road right beside us. The tracks are right by the road. A little kid, it looked like maybe his older sister, and the driver who looks like he was about our age. The little kid waves, and four or five of us waved. Then the girl waved, and we all waved.

Everybody is at the glass, watching, and the guy shoots us a bird over the top of the car. Just reaches up and shoots a bird. Carroll Thrift spins around and performs what he called, affectionately, a pressed ham, and mooned them. Two or three others followed. About that time, the brakes slam on, and the car just fades back and drops back, and the train keeps right on going. But let me give you an idea. We were not easily entertained. And, so, we got into all kinds of stuff like that—a lot of things. Chuck was off on a recruiting trip to Memphis. He had jumped on a plane to go up there. We had twenty bucks and three and a half hours in New Orleans. It was not a pretty scene, Tom, it was not.

TS: Okay, so, you learned something from that trip.

RN: Well, yes, I learned I didn't like gin, and didn't have that problem again. I remember one other event. Chuck might have been the instigator in starting the SEC-ACC meet. We don't know how they started, but in [1966] they decided they would have the first one. To the best of my recollection, [the 1967 meet] was Columbia, South Carolina. The night before that was the annual "T" Club lettermen's blowout, which we all attended, some in worse shape than others, particularly Richmond and Larry Kelly, as I recall, had, perhaps, more fun than even the rest of us, but we all had a lot of fun. We probably should have won a gold medal for just being able to identify a bus the next morning, as opposed to getting there on time. But somehow

we got there and ran the meet, and in most cases we beat them. And we did beat them. The SEC won, and Tennessee guys acquitted themselves pretty well. But you might want to check with Kelly and Flowers and get their recollections on those races, if they have any whatsoever. But Chuck started that.

TS: Well, how would you summarize your career at Tennessee?

RN: Great, for me! I made a transition from one event to another. I had great teammates—all the talent in the world. I did not have the athletic skills—the speed, the power—that they had, but I learned from Pomphrey how to be meticulous about the skill sets you needed to be a hurdler, and from Flowers just the speed and the fluid action. I was fortunate enough to go to the NCAA finals a couple of times. When I was a junior, with Pomphrey, I was sitting there at 6 foot, 4 and a half inches and 172 pounds. I look around, and there was Pat. Pat was a big guy, and Pat was by no means the biggest guy in the race. I looked around and said, “Wow, there’s an element of power to this event.” So, I came back the next year, and I weighed 195, not 172 or 173. But it was always about getting better and wanting to be part of a team, and Chuck really instilled that. Once you worked and suffered through all that stuff, you were bonded by the heat.

TS: Did you do a lot of weight training? Was that how you gained weight?

RN: Yes. I gained immeasurably more power. The next year [1968] I went to California and ran with the LA Striders and came back and did graduate coaching and Karl Kremser came in. Kremser was 145 pounds and a 6’8” high jumper. He and I decided we would start lifting weights. We would go over every other night, and we would lift until we couldn’t curl our arms up. They were just kind of suspended in an inanimate position. Our legs were so wobbly we would bounce against the wall trying to get back to the shower. That’s why I went from 172 to 195. Karl went from 145 to 175. Chuck, being away on football recruiting and everything, had no idea what was really going on. Karl had become a great long distance kicking specialist and went on to play pro football for the Dolphins. But Karl went from 145 to 175, and Chuck came in, and that’s the only time I remember Chuck really screaming at me. He chewed me up and said, “What in the heck have you done to my high jumper? He was a 145 pound high jumper, and now he’s 175. Have you seen that guy?” I said, “Yeah, Chuck, I work out with him.” “You’re responsible for this?” Fortunately, Karl jumped 7 feet one and a half inches, and I was redeemed. When I came back [from the military] everybody lifted—weight lifters, distance runners.

TS: Is this where Coach Rohe learns about the value of weight training?

RN: Yes. I met Hal Connolly, the world record holder in the hammer throw [and gold medalist in the 1956 Olympics], out in California, and Hal told me about these workout programs where you do five progressions of like 10, 8, 6, 5, 4, 3, but your last one was the heaviest weight you could lift, one rep. So decreasing reps and increasing weights. We tried that, and it worked. It really made dramatic changes. Not only did we put on a lot of muscle and a lot of weight, but we were dramatically faster. When I came in—I was injured in high school—but I was 11.1 in the 100. I was one of the slowest guys. I ended up in my junior year running a leg on the 4 x 110 yard SEC record setting team [in 41.0 seconds] with Jim Webster, Phil Smith, and Carroll Thrift. My high school coach couldn't believe it, but it was the rehab I had been through for four different knee blowouts. In that last year, we added real power and explosiveness to it with the new workout.

TS: There is an element that we haven't really addressed on this website. We think of coaches teaching the athletes, but you are describing examples of the athletes teaching the coach also. You all started these workouts, and he learned from what you were doing.

RN: Well, he does, and, of course, Chuck was always looking for the best way. He was always looking for improvement and open to those ideas. That was how he got all those distance training ideas.

TS: I think that's the way it ought to be in education with everybody learning from each other.

RN: One of the advantages of everybody getting better and better, and the way Chuck played the game was, "If you want Richmond [to run in your meet], you've got to take these four guys too." Then once those four guys started doing well, we would spread out. He sent me to Kansas City one time when I was with the Knoxville Track Club, and I had Steve Owens and four or five other young guys with me. So, as soon as he would get you groomed to a point, it was like multiplying. We were dividing and conquering and going different places. We got exposure—many of us got exposure—to top level people. Chuck only made one recruiting commitment to me. I asked, "What's different? What can I expect?" He said, "I will get you in any meet that your performance justifies you being in." That's what was different from Alabama and Auburn and West Point. He said, "I'll get you in the meets, and you'll be able to go places that nobody else in the Southeastern Conference even dreams of going now." He kept that commitment in spades. As you went, you saw how the big dogs did it.

I coach a lot now, and I do a little sales pitch for my guys and say, "Who's the man?" They say, "What do you mean, the man, Coach?" I say, "You've got to go to these meets. You know who's really good, exceptionally good, don't you?" They say, "Yes." I say, "Is that the man?" They say, "Oh,

yeah, that's the man." I say, "Is he like you guys? He's standing around here. He's chatting. He's telling jokes. He's talking about his girlfriend. Is the man leading all that?" They say, "Well, no." I say, "Well, what does the man do?" They say, "He shows up at the dead last second. He's totally warmed up. He's already run wide open and is prepared to run races. He steps in the blocks, he blows the doors off, and he leaves." He's a mystery. The next meet, everybody knows who's going to win. They're looking around seeing who they have to beat for second place. I said, "You need to learn to be the man. You need to focus and concentrate to be the man." They learn, they understand how that works. Chuck did that. Chuck never changed workouts when it rained or anything else. If it snowed, and the hurdlers were supposed to run, he would say, "Well, just put on longer spikes. One day it will make it."

When it made it for us: I remember that Florida was supposed to beat us at the SEC Championships down in Athens [Georgia, 1966]. We were warming up for the 4 x 110 yards, and a huge thunderstorm came. The temperature must have dropped twenty degrees. We knew Chuck had something planned for us. We didn't know what it was. We had a tent. We went in the tent. He looks down there, and he says, "Okay, I want you to look at something." We look down there. He says, "Look at those Florida guys. They're shivering; they're jumping; they have never been in weather this cold. They have never had to run in the rain." He told us all the things that we don't know whether they never did this. But by the time we got through, [we believed that] they never ran unless the sun was shining and it was 80 degrees. But they were jumping down there, shivering and holding everything else. He says, "This is what you live for. We trained in every condition, every event, and if you are frustrated by all those workouts, you just need to unleash that on them."

Then, he pulls off the tarp, and he gives us all these orange Puma running shoes. They were kangaroo skin. They were the first ones. Nobody else had ever had or ever seen them. We put on those shoes, and we opened up the 4 x 110 yards—out little group of [sprinters and] hurdlers—and blew the doors off that place. We ran the hurdles next, and Pomphrey [first in 13.4 wind aided] and I [second in 13.8] got in there and did well and [Phil] Smith [fourth in 14.3]. And the roll was on. It was an avalanche from then on. But Chuck orchestrated it, as you would imagine Chuck could do. He had us convinced, if anybody got in our way, we were just going to steamroll them. That attitude and seeing how that works—every time, through business and government experience and everything else—I use that motivational technique. You've got to challenge your people, and push hard, and let them know, they've paid the price, and they deserve to win.

TS: Talk about how you were county manager of Seminole County. When did that happen?

RN: Well, I was 27, and I was their director of development, which was urban planning, zoning, building, agriculture, parks and recreation. They decided to go to a more urban form of government. Even though they didn't change to a charter form, they had five constitutional commissioners. I was appointed the first county administrator for the county and ran that for eight and a half years. Then, I went into private business, engineering and planning, and ran the largest operation of the biggest engineering company out of Florida: Post, Buckley, Schuh & Jernigan. Then I owned my own company, and then went back and was the first county administrator for Orange County [Orlando], which is a big county. We had 5,500 employees and a billion and a half dollar budget. I did that under the new strong chairman. I was county administrator there under that new form of government. I went back and forth between public and private business. The last seven years of my career, five were full time—the mayor of Orlando asked me to set up a transportation department for the City of Orlando. I did that, and then worked part time for him for two years. Now, I've retired again. I hope to have it stick this time.

TS: All right! Great! Thank you.