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HUSKER FOOTBALL

Steven M. Sipple: Tip of the cap to Bill Busch, who pulled off one of rarest recruiting feats ever

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Apr 21, 2020



Bill Busch joined Ed Orgeron's staff as LSU's safeties coach in 2018. He's expected to be officially named as Nebraska's special teams coordinator in the coming days.

HILARY SCHEINUK, Baton Rouge (La.)
Advocate file photo

Steven M. Sipple

Don't even try to tell me you've heard of this happening in college football.

It simply doesn't happen. There's too much that works against it happening.

Here's the deal, though: Bill Busch tends to make things happen. He's a 4 a.m. riser and an all-day grinder. To say he's enthusiastic about what he does in this world is an understatement. He basically willed his way into being a college football coach in the early 1990s, going so far as to buy — on his own dime — the same coaching uniform worn by the Nebraska staff, even though he wasn't technically part of that staff.

He would drive on his own to away games and walk into the stadium with the full-time staff. Mind you, he wasn't being paid. He was doing what he had to do to get his foot in the door. After all these years, his story just keeps getting better.

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He's been a full-time assistant at nine different schools, including four years (2004-07) at Nebraska. The 54-year-old is now in his third season as safeties coach at LSU, the defending national champion. But that national championship ring, and the winding path Busch traveled to earn it, isn't the rare achievement we're talking about in this case. What we're talking about here is so unlikely, I would challenge anyone to find another case even similar to it.

Although he's been an assistant coach on defense throughout his career, Busch has recruited two high-profile quarterbacks. One was all-time Utah great Alex Smith, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2005 NFL Draft. The other is Joe Burrow, the 2019 Heisman Trophy winner from LSU who's almost certain to be the top overall pick Thursday night when the three-day draft commences.

For a defensive backs coach to have directly recruited two eventual No. 1 overall picks at quarterback ... it just doesn't happen. It almost *has* to be unprecedented.

Which raises a question: Is it possible that Busch — who, by the way, grew up in Pender (population 1,112) in Thurston County — should've been a quarterbacks coach?

"It's kind of funny," he says. "I played quarterback at Pender High."

He was an all-conference selection.

"But trust me, there's no carryover to it," he says with a chuckle.

Talk to Busch for an hour, and you come away knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that he genuinely loves Nebraska football. He'll always love it. It was his dream job to work as a Husker assistant. When Bill Callahan and his staff were fired following the 2007 season, it crushed him, Busch says. But he kept pushing forward in the business while never losing his passion for Big Red. He remains close to his "ultimate mentor," longtime NU secondary coach George Darlington, and still talks to Tom Osborne on occasion.

Ultimately, Busch's strong Nebraska background played a lead role in helping lure Burrow to LSU. Dan Burrow, one of Joe's older brothers, played for Busch at Nebraska. Plus, it helped matters that Dan went on to live and work

in Houston, just four hours from LSU. Yes, of course, Busch worked that angle hard. What's more, Busch has known former Nebraska graduate assistant Jimmy Burrow, the father, for 20-some years, although the two have never coached together.

"If you've been at Nebraska, you kind of know everybody, and I got to know Bill at some (coaching) conventions," Jimmy Burrow says. "So, when we went to decide who Joe was interested in, Bill was somebody I considered a friend — and knew we could trust."

You can't leave out the Ohio State angle. Busch spent the 2015 season as a Buckeyes quality control assistant as Joe Burrow worked through his redshirt season. Burrow ultimately played two years behind starter J.T. Barrett. After Barrett moved on, Burrow lost his bid to become starter to Dwayne Haskins and decided to transfer. The rest, as they say, is history — incredible history, considering Burrow completed 76.3% of his passes last season for 5,671 yards and 60 touchdowns with only six interceptions.

National broadcaster Dan Patrick recently asked Joe Burrow an interesting question: Did LSU find Burrow, or did Burrow find LSU?

"You know, I think they found me," said Burrow, immediately pointing to the way Busch sold him to LSU head coach Ed Orgeron. "Coach Busch stood on the table for me with Coach 'O.' He was like, 'If we get this guy, we're going to win the national championship.'"

That's *almost* the way Busch remembers it.

"I know this for sure: I told Coach Orgeron we'll get to the (four-team) playoff for sure if we get Joe," Busch recalls. "I believe I told Joe we'll win it all if we get him. I knew how good we were around him. I knew we had dudes. But the

biggest thing, and the reason I was on the table for Joe so hard, was because I knew how competitive and how tough he was."

Busch witnessed it first-hand at Ohio State. He just had to sell it to Orgeron. But Busch credits both Orgeron and LSU offensive coordinator Steve Ensminger for being open-minded about Burrow.

Oh, yes, there was something else Orgeron did that was critical.

"Coach 'O' told Joe, 'I ain't naming you the starter walking in here having never thrown a ball for us,'" Busch recalls. "But Coach 'O' put together a plan with how Joe's reps would be divided out, and it gave him reps with the first unit. It was brilliant."

Busch's recruitment of Smith in 2001 was actually more about the coach's keen eye for talent. Although every Pac-10 school passed on Smith, Busch, then a safeties coach at Utah, saw enough in him that he insisted the Utes recruit the slender Wing-T operator out of Helix High School in suburban San Diego. Although Busch wasn't a quarterbacks coach, San Diego was his recruiting area. Again, it worked out well for all involved.

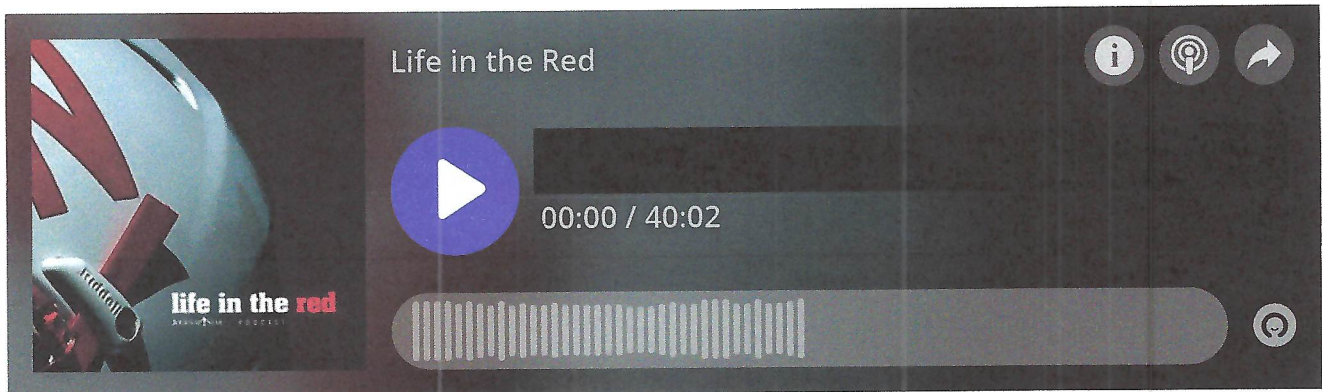
"Coach Busch was the first guy who believed in me and saw my potential — even before my senior year in high school," Alex Smith told me in December of 2004, a few days before he finished fourth in the Heisman Trophy balloting, and before becoming a 161-game NFL starter over 13 seasons.

Busch recalls it all with his typical enthusiasm. You get the feeling he would recall with incredible enthusiasm something mundane as changing a tire. It's no wonder he's an excellent recruiter. But he doesn't want to be known as

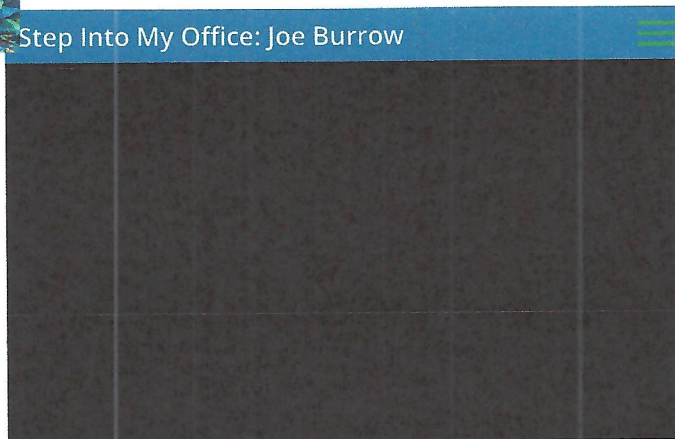
just a recruiter. That's not what he set out to do back in the early 1990s at Nebraska. He wanted to be a coach, a *respected* coach. Check out his career. He's accomplished that for sure.

In fact, he's on the verge of accomplishing a feat probably no other defensive coach has pulled off. Ever.

Don't even try to tell me otherwise.



Sights from Nebraska football's virtual Spring Game



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