

RICK FORZANO 1929-2019

Former coach faced uneven field





Navy coach Rick Forzano talks with Bruce Bachman in 1970. (Capital Gazette file photo)
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Navy football has lost another former head coach, just one week after the death of Hall of Famer George Welsh.

Rick Forzano, who preceded Welsh in Annapolis, died on Wednesday at the age of 90 at his home in Orlando, Florida. He was head coach at Navy from 1969 through 1972, a down period for the program.

Hampered by the growing popularity of professional football and the unpopularity of the Vietnam War, Forzano had difficulty recruiting and the result was a four-year record of 10-33 at Navy.

“Rick Forzano was an intense football coach who demanded a lot and wanted to win,” said Bill McKinney, captain of the 1970 Navy team that finished 2-9. “Unfortunately, we played some really good programs back in those years and we just weren’t talented enough to compete on even terms.”

Forzano had been an assistant at Navy from 1959 through 1963 under legendary head coach Wayne Hardin. He left the academy to become head coach at Connecticut and compiled a 7-10-1 record in two seasons at a time when the Huskies played at the Division I-AA level in the Yankee Conference.

Bill Elias replaced Hardin as head coach at Navy and amassed a 15-22-3 mark from 1965-68. James “Bo” Coppedge was hired as Navy athletic director in 1968 and one of his first moves was to fire Elias and hire Forzano, who coached in the National Football League with the St. Louis Cardinals and Cincinnati Bengals from 1966-68.

McKinney, who lives in Arnold and his senior pastor of Mariners Church, believes the success of Navy football during that era was not a reflection of the coaching ability of Forzano. A quick glance at the schedule highlights the challenges as it featured the likes of Penn State, Texas, Pittsburgh, Notre Dame, Syracuse, Michigan and Boston College on an annual basis.

“Rick Forzano came in and tried to get things turned around. He worked very hard to help us become the best we could be,” McKinney said. “I would describe Coach Forzano as a

disciplinarian. He held players to a high standard and did everything possible to help the team be successful, but there was only so much you could do with the talent on hand at the time.”

Forzano hired four assistants who wound up becoming head coaches in Leeman Bennett (Atlanta Falcons, Tampa Bay Buccaneers), Frank Gansz (Kansas City Chiefs), Jim Stanley (Oklahoma State) and Joe Bugel (Phoenix Cardinals, Oakland Raiders).

Steve Belichick’s career as the longest-tenured assistant in Navy football history (1956-1989) included a stint under Forzano, whose junior varsity coach was former Midshipman All-American Dick Duden.

Forzano left Navy in 1973 to become an assistant with the Detroit Lions and was elevated to head coach the following season. The Ohio native led the Lions to a 15-17 record from 1974-76.

Forzano’s staff in Detroit included the aforementioned Bugel along with future NFL head coaches Jerry Glanville (Houston Oilers, Atlanta Falcons) and Raymond Berry (New England Patriots). In 1976, Forzano hired a youngster named Bill Belichick to serve as an assistant.

Belichick, who had graduated from Wellesley College in 1975, served as assistant special teams coach for Detroit under Forzano.

Welsh replaced Forzano at Navy and directed a dramatic resurgence of the struggling program, compiling 31-15-1 record with three bowl berths from 1978-1981. In an odd twist of fate, Welsh and Forzano died exactly one week apart.

That period of 1965 through 1972 is a forgettable one for Navy football as it came between the tenures of Hardin and Welsh, both of whom were inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame.

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