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Osborne: Spiritual Dimension Key To Living A Full Life

By David Lias Vermillion Plain Talk, Sep 28, 2018 Updated Sep 30,

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Former University of Nebraska-Lincoln football head coach Tom Osborne addresses a banquet audience at the Muenster University Center on the USD campus Friday night. He was keynote speaker at the Rotary District 5610 annual conference being held this weekend in Vermillion.

David Lias/Vermillion Plain Talk

VERMILLION — It takes spirit — literally — to be a success at life.

That was one of the messages former University of Nebraska-Lincoln football head coach Tom Osborne brought Friday to a banquet audience at the Rotary District 5610 annual conference being held in Vermillion.

More than physical discipline is needed to be a winner on the football field or in life, Osborne said.

“The Greeks, about 4,000 years ago, said an educated person was one who had balance in

his or her life,” he said, speaking in the Muenster University Center on the University of South Dakota campus. “They said there really are three dimensions of human experience — there’s the physical dimension ... and secondly there’s the intellectual dimension and thirdly they said there’s a spiritual dimension. They said someone who has grown and developed in all three areas is truly educated.”

Osborne served as head football coach of the Nebraska Cornhuskers for 25 years, from 1973 to 1997. He was one of the most successful coaches in American college football history, with a career record of 255–49–3, 13 conference

championships, and three national championships. He was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame as a coach in 1999.

Osborne was later elected U.S. Representative from Nebraska's third congressional district as a Republican and served three terms from 2001 to 2007. He then returned to the University of Nebraska as athletic director. He retired as AD in January 2013.

"We tend to think of education as having to do with the intellect," Osborne said. "I thought about that because we had a lot of players who aspired to play in the National Football League, and we had probably six, seven, eight every year who were drafted."

Many of his Nebraska Cornhusker players who made it the professional ranks, he said, believed they were living the American dream as they achieved newfound wealth and notoriety thanks to their athletic talent and youth.

"I've been around long enough to see a lot of them come back out of the NFL," Osborne said. "What kind of surprised me was I wasn't seeing people who were always on the top of the world. Some of them came back after five and up to 12 years (in the NFL) and what I saw often were some broken people. Some people were disillusioned."

The legendary coach said he came to realize that many of his former players were one dimensional.

"They knew how to block. They knew how to tackle. They knew where the weight room was, but when the blocking and tackling was over, there wasn't anything in their life that gave them purpose or meaning or significance," Osborne said.

One would assume, he said, that players who left Nebraska football with a degree from NU would also do fine in later life.

"But you know, if your whole persona and what you're known for was being a great athlete from the time you were 10 years old," he said, "and all of a sudden a knee injury hit or a coach decided they didn't need you any longer – these guys were sometimes struggling just as badly as the guys who had one dimension."

Players with a strong spiritual dimension, Osborne said, "somehow would weave their way through adversity. It didn't mean it didn't hurt. It didn't mean they didn't suffer some pain from being separated from that team, but they began to realize it wasn't all about me, myself and I, and as a result, we factored in a spiritual dimension. We felt that was important."

Osborne defines spirituality as something that has to do with a cause or purpose "that's more important than you are. In many cases, it's a faith; it's a religion. It could be a cause that you're serving. We felt this was critical to factor in a spiritual dimension."

A chaplain would hold Mass for those players who would want to attend, he said. Short devotional periods were shared by coaches and players every morning.

"I would talk to them once a year about my faith and I'd tell them that I was going to make a lot of decisions that were going to affect all of them so you better know where I'm coming from," Osborne said.

The coach said he'd tell his players "if you ever feel that I'm phony or if I say one thing and do another, I want you to call me on it because I think it's really important that you know where I'm coming from and that I walk the walk."

Osborne also implemented a program that would require Husker football players to devote themselves to community service at local schools, hospitals and other institutions where they could serve someone else.

"We eventually began to develop a pretty strong spiritual nucleus," he said. "When people are willing to serve one master, then a lot of the turf battles and infighting begins to fall away. That was part of what held us together."

Osborne told his banquet audience of Rotarians from the Vermillion region that "in any organization, you can develop a spiritual background where that organization becomes very important to the people in it. If you can ever get it to the point where they're willing to sacrifice for that organization and they care so much about the welfare of that organization that it's not all about them, then you've really got the thing whipped."