

PREFACE

This book may or may not be as successful as a *New York Times* bestseller, but that type of success is not the primary goal. The goal is to find a way to pay forward *and* pay backward at the same time.

In 2019 our son John-Ryan and his wife, Heather, gave me a writing book for Christmas and asked me to use it to tell my stories. I intended to do it, but there never seemed to be time.

That same year George Chaump, my quarterbacks coach at Ohio State, and Earl Jones, my high school football coach, both passed away. My college coach, Woody Hayes; my high school basketball coach, George Hill; and several high school, college, and NFL teammates had preceded them. As I began writing the book, I lost others who had a profound effect on my life, such as my close high school friends Joe Edwards and Ed Klinker.

It was time for serious thought and action.

My first decision was to write something for my grandchildren and their children about the life lessons I learned growing up

in Lancaster, Ohio, just down Route 33 from Columbus. Woody called that “paying forward.” Our sons know my wife, Nancy, and I are faithful in our giving. It made sense to pass on ideas and experiences as well.

After considering how to do that, I decided the best way was for our relatives, present and future, to know about the people who had influenced me throughout my life. That gave me the chance to “pay backward”—to say thank you to the many people who had meant so much to me in so many ways. I immediately jotted down eight priority contacts. Eventually, that list became several dozen.

I had written a doctoral thesis, so I felt comfortable writing a book. As months went by, however, there did not seem to be any time to write it.

Lee Caryer and I had talked several times over the years. He wrote *The Golden Age of Ohio State Basketball: 1960–1971*. I thought he did a great job with that book, and I enjoyed several articles he had written about recent Buckeye basketball teams. I thought he had the interest in sports and the writing skills to share the responsibility of completing this book.

The first thing Lee said was, “Rex, I think what you have in mind is an interesting idea, and I would like to do it. But if it is good enough for your relatives, why wouldn’t many others find it valuable? Besides, there is a large group of Buckeye fans, like myself, who fondly remember the Super Sophs and would be interested in new stories about them.

“Let’s do this,” he continued. “Let’s begin with the idea to provide stories and lessons for future generations of Kerns by introducing your friends, coaches, and teachers, and we’ll stay true to that. As we proceed, if we want to include experiences and people at Ohio State, we have that latitude.”

So I gave him the eight names, and I called them to ask permission for him to call at a convenient time. To give each person an identity, we decided for each to have a write-up as well as excerpt

parts of their stories in other chapters.

It was fun to read their thoughts, and it was even more fun to hear how much they were enjoying the conversations. We initially titled the chapter “Living Legends.” This was going well.

Soon it was obvious we needed to include those who had passed on, so I told him about them and arranged calls with their relatives. He did research and added valuable information. Thus began a chapter we tentatively named “Fallen Heroes.”

A chapter on faith was necessary, and Lee suggested we discuss my injuries in detail. “I know you have had many,” he said, “but only you, your wife, and your doctors know how many.”

Like phone numbers of friends, I kept adding injuries for a while. The injuries were tied closely to my Ohio State and NFL careers. While working on this Preface, a friend reminded me of one operation I had forgotten. Hopefully the list is complete.

“The subject of race is something we must address for the future,” Lee said. “You went from an almost all-white community to captain of a high visibility, highly successful mixed-race team. The problem has not been solved in four or five centuries; you can’t do any harm.”

I was skeptical, but the approach we presented made more sense than some I have seen. Most important, a few of our African-American friends gave their approval.

The 1966 basketball season stood out for its impact on the Lancaster community. Lee believed he could discuss my role more objectively than I could, and he already had valuable input from two starters on that team, Captain Paul Callahan and Bill Grein, and other students who remembered it. I liked the result. Of course, we wanted to touch on the other sports seasons, which we combined into another chapter.

The chapter on leadership and mentoring seemed a good way to discuss how so many people have contributed so much to my life in so many ways.

We settled into a pattern of talking twice a week for two hours, usually on multiple chapters. He wrote drafts, I corrected misunderstandings, and we discussed alternatives. After a couple of those cycles, we had something to put away as a semifinished product and went on to another chapter.

The Woody chapter is quite long. We both wanted to shorten it, but there is just so much to say about the man in order to present the full picture.

Somewhere along the line, I realized the book could be used to raise money for some of my favorite organizations: Buckeye Cruise for Cancer, which helps fund cancer research; the Archie Griffin Scholarship Fund, which offers Olympic sports scholarships at Ohio State; the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in Columbus; and the Ohio State Athletic Department came to mind immediately. There may be others.

As I neared the end of the book, a conscious decision had to be made: Did I quote everyone directly, even if unacceptable words were involved, or use something like “*unprintable?*” It seemed clear that teaching young people that certain words are not necessary was preferable.

One more thing: As we were completing the book, I read this quote: “Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” It was written by one of Woody’s favorite writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

That’s me, I thought.

I thought about my first idol, my brother Keith. He was three years ahead of me in school, though only two and a half years older, and an outstanding athlete. During high school, he became a star guard in basketball and a great second baseman in baseball. He would have played football if he had been bigger. Since sports dominated my world as a child, I wanted to beat him at everything, and I worked hard to do it.

Too many people to count have helped me take a serious look

at my faith, and they have guided me as I've developed my relationship with God throughout my life.

Through sports, I met many men who believed in the importance of education and a true princess who convinced me to seek excellence in that world. "Being your best in everything" became our mutual goal, which we passed on to our children.

As I was failing to achieve my career goal of becoming Ohio State Athletic Director I met a man who saw a physical education graduate with the potential to become a businessman. Due to my admiration of him, my desire not to disappoint him, and his direct guidance, he was correct.

It is a pleasure to invite my relatives, my friends, and anyone else who would care to join me in thanking the many people who have taught me so much and guided me in so many ways. Also, it is the intention of my wife, Nancy, and myself to provide some thoughts, beliefs, stories, and ideas for our young relatives—present and future—to consider on their way to becoming outstanding men and women. We love you dearly.

While you learn from all these individuals as I did, consider the words of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards."

My prayer is that they help you look backward and forward as they have me.

—Rex Kern

Ole #10,
OSU football, 1968–1970