

Story of the Decade 1980s

Firing of Head Coach Mike Currence in 1985 still Reverberates in Massillon

Controversy has always surrounded Massillon football. During the days of the Pro Tigers at the turn of the 20th Century the headlines were screaming about the “Fix of ’06,” when Massillon was accusing Canton of “fixing” games.

But through all of the decades of controversy, the firing of Mike Currence stands alone as the most controversial. Controversial enough to be featured in *Sports Illustrated* and *USA Today* and an untold number of newspapers across the nation. The coverage by Massillon’s *Evening Independent* and the *Canton Repository* was voluminous.

Currence’s record stood at

79-16-2 when the Massillon School Board voted 4-0 to fire him on May 24, 1985. Currence was one win shy of the Massillon wins record, held by the great Paul Brown (80-8-2).

The firing was shocking to Massillonians. “You could drop a nuclear bomb on the city and people would care more about what’s happening to the football coach than the bomb,” a Massillon resident was quoted as saying in the *Independent*.

The firing certainly had massive repercussions. Tom Kimmins was the president of the board of education who presided over the firing. For 40 years he’s shared a

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law office with Jim Snively on the corner of Lincoln Way and Erie Street in the heart of downtown Massillon. Both are former Massillon football players.

Kimmins could feel the pulse of the populace throbbing when he showed up for work in the wake of the firing. “It was just boiling,” Kimmins said.

Perhaps one reason why the firing generated so much unrest in the community was because of the board of education’s refusal to tell the public why they were firing Currence.

Many thought Currence was fired because he was within a game of tying Brown’s win record. There was also talk that possible changes to Cur-

rence’s coaching staff led to the firing.

Whatever their motive, the school board chose to keep things private.

“I don’t recall,” Kimmins said, “Nobody wanted to hurt Mike Currence. Everybody liked Mike Currence.”

“It was just boiling.”

Tom Kimmins

Kimmins dismissed the threat of Currence breaking Brown’s record as a reason for the firing. “I know Mike has said many times that the reason he was let go was because he was about to pass Paul Brown’s win record. I couldn’t tell you what Paul Brown’s win record was or Mike Currence’s either one at that particular time. That was not of significance. What was of significance was that we had a superintendent who was

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not as close to the football program as some of the superintendents have been.”

School board member Bill Caples also dismissed the importance of Brown’s record in the board’s decision.

“One of the things Mike alluded to, one of the reasons we let him go, is the board was afraid that he was going to break Paul

Brown’s record for the most wins,” Caples said. “He was one win away when he was let go. However, what he didn’t say—and we tried to put that out and let people know it—the year before we fired Mike, we extended his contract for two more years. We extended that contract,

figuring he’d be here, of course. And we thought he would win a lot more games. So how were we afraid of him breaking Paul Brown’s record when he was let go? That made absolutely no sense at all (laughs). If we had been concerned at all

about it we would have never extended his contract. The reason we let him go had absolutely nothing to do with football,”

Caples said emphatically. “*Nothing.*”

The fireworks started with a Wednesday night meeting with the school board and Currence.

It was a meeting Kimmins said was precipitated by the

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Bill Caples

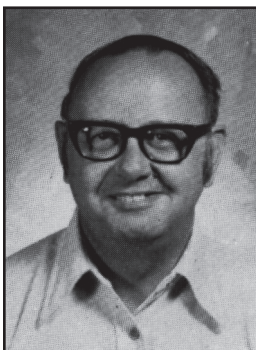
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school board's history of problems with Currence's hiring practices.

"We had admonished Currence on hiring coaches from the surrounding school systems," Kimmins said. "We told Currence that it was necessary for him to *not* be hiring our next door neighbors onto his coaching staff. He accepted that, except that he didn't follow it.

"I remember at the Monday night school board meeting, Dr. Darrell Cheyney (superintendent of schools) had a list of new hires for the coming school year. We were looking through them. I believe Bill Caples asked Dr. Cheyney, 'Who is this teacher who is going to be teaching up at Longfellow?' Dr. Cheyney said 'He's an

applicant, he has degrees, well qualified.' 'I remember, Caples said, 'That's not why we're hiring him. He's one of our neighboring district's top coaches. Mike is doing what we told him not to do again.'



Bill Caples, Board Member.

"He was slipping one in on us," Kimmins said. "We had a little private meeting afterwards and they said they were going to call Currence in on Wednesday night for a private meeting about this, because he had a

very dominant and aggressive personality. Currence thought that if he ran the football program he ran the majority of the rest of the school. That was something we had to sit on him about."

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Another theory in the firing had to do with two hometown coaches who many believed Currence was ready to get rid of.

“We had a couple of guys, one of them was Butch Hose, who I think took it to an extreme by complaining to some of the board members,” Currence said. “Now Butch to this day I still consider a good friend because he

was always a strong supporter of me. Gary Wells at that time was one of the defensive staff. Gary was going through some problems with his family, divorce and stuff like that. He just needed to step out and get his own personal life taken care of. I think they complained,

particularly to board members Joel Cunningham and Bill Caples. They never had any communications with Kimmins because he was never around. But Caples was always around and Cunningham was always around. Those two guys kind of

carried the ball. Now we had on that board Jan Krofut. She normally voted against everything. So they could count on her vote

(laughs). They only needed three votes, but they were going to get Kimmins’ vote because they’re telling him a bunch of bull about the coaches—that I was going to hire some outside coaches.

“I had permission to do that. I had run it by the board and

“We had a private little meeting afterwards and they said they were going to call Currence in on Wednesday night.”

Tom Kimmins