

Interview with Rob Boss

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AG: This is the interview with Rob Boss... Rob is currently finishing up his degree at Northern and he's the defensive line coach for the Northern Michigan football team.

AG: Rob, tell us a little about your early life. You grew up in Charlevoix. Give us a background on yourself quick.

RB: I was raised on a dairy farm in Charlevoix, had an older brother, a younger brother, and a younger sister. So, I got to do a lot of farm chores while we were in Charlevoix. I played a lot of sports and worked pretty hard.

AG: Was it just Charlevoix High School you ended up going to then?

RB: Yup, Charlevoix High School.

AG: When did you start playing football?

RB: We started playing football in Charlevoix in 7th grade. We obviously played throughout elementary school, just pick up at recess and stuff, but the first organized football we were able to play was in 7th grade.

AG: Okay, was it soon after that you realized that you were better than the average... or were you a slow developer?

RB: Well, I was always bigger than everybody. I wasn't one of kids that kind of grew slowly. I always had pretty good athletic ability. I was actually more prone for baseball and basketball at the time. Football was just something that I did because I was big and it was fun, but it wasn't something that I thought about doing anything afterwards with.

AG: So then in high school did you play all three? Basketball, baseball, and football?

RB: Yeah, I played all three. I did track one year along with baseball. I ended up with 12 varsity letters or something like that, and was able to play three years of varsity football.

AG: And then you ended up here at Northern Michigan University eventually. Did you get recruited by them? Did you find them or did they find you? When did you decide that college football was the route you were going to take?

RB: After my junior year of football I kind of started to look into possibly doing something with football afterwards. With how big I'd grown I figured that was probably going to be my best chance. I started going to football camps in the summer, which is where I met Coach Matt Collins, who was the Offensive Line Coach at Northern Michigan. He was my personal group coach when I was at Central Michigan football camp. So, that was where the recruiting process started with him. I had a couple opportunities

here and there, but for the most part there really wasn't a big recruiting battle coming out of a small school like Charlevoix.

AG: Right. So, you were an offensive linemen obviously, did you play defense in high school too?

RB: Yeah, in high school we had around 27 people on our team so I played offense and defense.

AG: So you guys had a big team then?

RB: Yeah, real big (laughs).

AG: So, you got in touch with Coach Collins, and he brought you up here on a recruiting visit. When was this... how was this... what was your first experience of Northern?

RB: My first experience of Northern was... I actually had a family friend who'd gone to Northern and he'd always told me about how great it was, so my family and his family came up and watched a game in the fall. That was my first experience of actually being on campus. After that, I had my recruiting visit in January. They had just fired the head coach at Northern and they didn't have a head coach when I came up on a recruiting visit, so we just came up and it was Coach Collins, Coach Jurison, and Coach DeWitt, and that was basically the guys that were here, none of them being the head coach, but the recruiting visit went very well.

AG: You mentioned Coach Collins, Coach DeWitt, and Coach Jurison, these were the three guys that were with you all the way through your career here until your last year playing, correct?

RB: Yeah, Coach DeWitt actually went on to a different school, he was GA'ing at the time of my recruiting visit, but my Junior and Senior year he returned to be the defensive coordinator, but Coach Jurison and Coach Collins were here for my four years.

AG: Okay, and Coach Collins was your offensive line coach obviously. Did he have a big influence on your career? Coming into Northern did you have any thought of taking your skill to the next level? Did you have any thought that that was a possibility?

RB: The thought that crossed my mind coming to Northern Michigan was "I just hope I don't get cut." I came up here and had never played against anyone who had been nearly my size or anything like that. I'd never been at a level like that, so I was probably more scared than anything coming in. Coach Collins did a great job of taking me under his wing and teaching me a lot of things about being a man and playing football.

AG: Okay.

AG: Like we mentioned earlier, Charlevoix is a small town, you only had 27 on your football team. Was you going to Northern a pretty big deal then around the high school or the town of Charlevoix?

RB: Yeah, it was pretty well known. We had a good basketball team with a lot of backing from the community, so when I signed in February that was right during basketball season and they made a little announcement for it. It was a pretty big deal, not a lot of people really go on to play collegiate sports.

AG: Yeah, at my high school there's not many that go so... me and a kid that came out of my high school with me... before attending Northern it was pretty exciting around the high school and the city, so I'd

imagine in Charlevoix it was a pretty big deal. Once you finally got to Northern, did you come in with a field of study you were already interested in, or did you come in kind of unsure?

RB: I came in as a business undeclared in the First Year Experience Program through Northern. I jumped into Business after the first semester, and then realized over the summer of freshman year that I had decided to turn to science.

AG: And your freshman year you came in, what year was that?

RB: Fall of '02.

AG: Okay, did you play that year, or were you registered as a freshman?

RB: After the first game of freshman year I started the last 10 games of freshman year.

AG: Okay, so you went from being a big fish at Charlevoix to coming here and taking on responsibility of being a starter and a freshman in college, which is hard for anybody. How did the transition go for you as far as handling your academic responsibilities, travelling, and being a starter on a college football team?

RB: To tell you the truth it was a lot easier than I expected it to be. Coming from a high school where you had to play both ways I was very surprised with how... as far as conditioning it was easier to be able to play one way. It was really nice to be able to concentrate on one thing and play against one guy for an entire game, as opposed to moving around and trying to do different sides of the ball and special teams and everything that came with high school. As far as the academics came, that always came pretty easily for me, as well as the First Year Experience Program was a good transition from high school into college. They kind of teach you the way that you need to study and those type of things.

AG: Okay.

AG: Coach Jurison, Coach DeWitt, and Coach Collins were here as you mentioned. Who ended up getting hired as the head coach that year?

RB: Doug Sams was the head coach for my freshman year. Actually, he was the head coach for my freshman through my senior year.

AG: Okay, and how did your first year experience as far as once you went through your first college season... how successful were you guys? What was the reaction to the team based on the record? Was it a lot different than being part of 27 when you're on a team of 100 guys now?

RB: There was a lot of optimism on the team that first year. We went 6-5 and at one time I believe we were 5-1. There was a lot of optimism in the community, there was a lot of optimism on the team, it was Coach Sam's first year and everything was clicking really well. We were all very excited to start the offseason and hopefully improve on where we were.

AG: Okay, this was your freshman year. Did you come in with many other freshman that played? Do you remember the size of your freshman class coming in?

RB: With the coach leaving there was a couple of guys that had left the program and so they ended up bringing in more freshman. I think we came in with 48 freshman my freshman year. I think that there

were quite a few... there were two of us that started fulltime, but I think there were probably six or seven guys that saw playing time that year.

AG: Alright, that's pretty impressive for a freshman class. Going into your sophomore year, being a starter as a freshman, it's obviously a pretty big burden on your shoulders to deliver as a sophomore. You got a year under your belt. How'd the transition between your years go? Was there any attention from the next level yet, or had that become more of a distinct possibility for you?

RB: No, there really never was a whole lot of attention from the next level as far anything with Northern goes. After my freshman year with Northern we kind of fell off, as far as a record goes from my sophomore through my senior year. The offseason in between my freshman and sophomore year was really where I made the biggest transition as an athlete and as a person. I was able to learn a lot about work ethic and about putting in the time that it takes to be a successful football player. Going into my sophomore year I was nothing more than confident. We'd put in the time, we'd gone through the workouts, we'd gotten bigger, faster, and stronger, and I was nothing but optimistic going into my sophomore year.

AG: After that sophomore year what was your record?

RB: I think we ended up at 2-8 that year.

AG: So that was obviously disappointing.

RB: Quite the disappointment, yup.

AG: But your work ethic, was that instilled on you by fellow teammates, coaches, a specific coach?

RB: That was something that was kind of driven into our heads repeatedly by coach Jurison. He was a guy who'd played in the CFL for 12 years. He was a disciplinarian and he always strived to get the most out of us. He taught us "that if you don't mind it don't matter," I believe is what he used to say, and that your mind can take your body as far as you will let it.

AG: So you he said he was in the Canadian Football League for 12 years, and he had previously played his ball at Northern Michigan, correct?

RB: Right.

AG: So you had him. Would you say you had a connection with any certain coach over the others? Did Jurison's work ethic get instilled? Was it kind of a love-hate relationship where you hated what he did, but you loved him for it?

RB: Yeah, there was always a little bit of that with Coach Jurison. The one thing about Coach Jurison was he was always really tough on everybody, but if he respected you he always made sure... and as long as you worked hard for him then he knew... as long as he knew that you were working hard it was never a bad situation with him. My relationship with Coach Jurison has always been very close. I would say between him and Coach Collins, those would be the two coaches that I would be the most close with.

AG: Fast forwarding to your senior year, I understand you played both ways in multiple games your senior year.

RB: Yes.

AG: You offensive and defensive line?

RB: Right, I played left tackle and defensive end my senior year.

AG: Okay, and how was the adjustment going both ways as the season got out there? How'd you feel taking that responsibility?

RB: Well, it was something that I enjoyed doing because I wanted to do anything that I could to help the team win. That was one of the reasons that I wanted to be able to do it. Obviously, it could take away from both sides, doing able to do each. You're very, very tired when you get done, that's for sure, but to me it didn't matter what it was. As long as we could win games then that was all that mattered.

AG: Okay, when you were a senior that was the fall of '05?

RB: Yes.

AG: Then how far after that season had ended did you realize that arena football was a possibility for you?

RB: I'd say about halfway through that season Coach Jurison had sat me down and said "With you playing both ways you're putting together a pretty good resume for the Arena Football League." So, I started to research it a little bit, I went and rented a video game and started to play that just to see what the rules were and everything like that. I just kind of let the chips fall where they may. I just kind of went about it and figured we'd deal with it as soon as the season was done.

AG: So going both ways really contributed to opening the eyes of some scouts. Obviously Coach Jurison's work ethic impacted you, did your personal work ethic have a big part in you having an ability to play, or was it just your talent and given ability that Jurison recognized?

RB: It was a combination of talent and things that he had taught us. If it wouldn't have been for Coach Jerison, I literally would never had been able to play at the next level. There weren't a ton of scouts that had noticed us. We were an underachieving football team in the Upper Peninsula. Basically, what ended up happening was he made a call to a guy in the Arena Football League that he had played with, or known throughout his time in the coaching and football world. Basically, the guy off of Jurison's recommendation told me that he'd bring me into camp.

AG: Okay, so you got brought into camp. Was this the Green Bay Blizzard, the camp you are referring to?

RB: Right, yes this is the...

AG: So shifting more now towards the arena football aspect, what was your initial experience coming... I mean you were the kid that came from Charlevoix, a small football team, to a Division II University, and now you're going from the Division II University to playing on a professional football level.

RB: Well, it was oddly similar to the transition from high school to college. Really my only hope and my only goal was not to get cut.

AG: Yeah, you were just trying to make it out there.

RB: Right, just wanted to go there and perform well. I knew that I had some talent, but now I was going there and the guys that they were signing were from West Virginia, and Air Force, and Illinois, and all these other Big 10 Schools. I had no idea what level we were about to be at.

AG: So this camp you were at, you weren't necessarily on the team for sure, it was just basically your tryout?

RB: Right, basically what they do is they bring in about 45-50 guys in the camp. You go through all of the training camp and then it's just like the NFL. They go through and they make a round of cuts after a week, they make a round of cuts after the second week, and then you'll have a scrimmage. After that scrimmage they'll make the final cuts and make the final roster of 25.

AG: Okay, so there's only 25 on an arena team then?

RB: Right.

AG: Now was this tryout... how did this correlate as far as academically, or were you trying to wait to see how the tryout went before you made any decision?

RB: Well basically it wasn't really a tryout, it was a training camp. To go to the training camp... the camp started in March. So, I had to make the decision that if this was what I was going to do, that I was going to take off that semester from school... basically give myself one shot to see if I could go play at that next level, and with that I had to take that one semester off.

AG: Okay, was that a difficult decision for you? Was there many people weighing in on it as far as your family, your coaches, and your friends? How did you deal with making the decision?

RB: That year we went down and flew... my brother was living in Atlanta, Georgia that year and my whole family went down for Thanksgiving and we sat down and us, altogether as a family, went through and weighed the pros and cons of it and made the decision on whether or not I'd play.

AG: Then the decision is ultimately yes then?

RB: Right.

AG: Then after the training camp, your first season with the Blizzard, how'd that go for you?

RB: First season with the Blizzard went absolutely fantastic. We went through training camp, came out the training camp as a starting tight end, defensive end. We went through the season and ended up... I think we ended up 9-7, made the playoffs, ended up going on a good run through the playoffs, made the championship game for the league, which was played in Puerto Rico. Went down there and was nominated for that league's all-pro, and was able to have some success as far as both winning as a team and individually.

AG: Okay, as you mentioned there were people coming from all over, were there many other players at that level from the Division II or were they mostly Division I?

RB: It was kind of odd actually. There was a few guys from the lower levels, there was a few guys from the upper levels, but it really seemed like there was a lot of guys from Division I and there was a lot of guys from Division III. There really weren't a ton of guys... there was a couple guys in the GLIAC that I knew, there was a kid from Wayne State on our team with us, and there was actually another one of my

friends who I had known previously who played for Ferris State that played for us. So we had quite a few Division II guys but you really didn't see a ton of them around.

AG: Okay, so it was kind of nice having some people that you already knew who they were to kind of feel somewhat closer to home?

RB: Definitely.

AG: And this was in Green Bay. Had you been to Wisconsin many times? Had you been in the Green Bay area?

RB: I had never been to Green Bay other than driving through. I hadn't been anywhere in Wisconsin prior to going down for that training camp.

AG: Next were going to talk about your progression from the Blizzard to the Rush, and you mentioned that you were all-pro for that league that year after the game in Puerto Rico for the Green Bay Blizzard, how far after that did you realize that you were maybe getting an upgrade into the Arena I scene?

RB: Obviously the whole point of going to Arena II was to try to show that you could play, and that you could make Arena I where you could make good money and everything like that, and play on TV, so... The first day actually after we got back from Puerto Rico I got a call from Chicago that asked me to come to an invite-only tryout, and I had expected that to kind of be the beginning of many, but that ended up being the only invitation that I got. So what I ended up doing was I came back up to Northern, took classes that fall, the tryout was in September, a game that we had in Puerto Rico was in August, so in September I went down and did the tryout down there and ended up making the team.

AG: Awesome. And this was the Chicago Rush now. How were they doing as a program? Where they pretty successful?

RB: Yeah, actually the year before I got there they actually won the Arena League Championship. They went 7-9 or something, they had the worst record ever of a champion, but they went on a real big run towards the end of the year and got hot and won the championship.

AG: So you're just a kid from Charlevoix chasing the dream, got on to this Blizzard team, and now all of a sudden you find yourself at the top arena league on the championship team from the year before. How did your first year go, and your experience with the Chicago Rush go?

RB: My first year went really, really well. I went into another situation where we were in a training camp where I started out as a second or third team guy, kind of as a guy that seemed like he was brought in there as a camp body... ended up making a pretty good impact and ended up starting the first game. I started all 16 games. We ended up going 12-4 that year, won the conference, went into the playoffs, and ended up losing in the conference championship game that year.

AG: Oh wow.

AG: I guess the problem I should probably ask... earlier... how was the transition from 11 on 11 football on the 100 yard field shift into the smaller arena field? What is it, eight on eight?

RB: Eight on eight, yes. It was definitely a transition. There was a while, especially playing tackle in the 11 man football, to where you're taking those deep sets to kind of kick out to blitzers, and kick out to

wide defensive ends. In the Arena Football League they have different rules and everything that keep the defensive ends tight, but one of the things that was nice was we ran a very pass-oriented offense at Northern Michigan so I was very keen on pass blocking, that was one of my strengths. So, in that aspect it was alright, but it was definitely different from going from having an entire line and having different protections, to basically a one on one man blocking all the time.

AG: Okay, but as I've been told before by people, football is football, regardless where you're playing at.

RB: Exactly, you've still got to beat the man in front of you.

AR: So now you can... basically you can say you made it into the Arena I league, you're a successful player at this point, what was the reaction like in Charlevoix? How were people back home feeling seeing one of their own on TV every other week playing arena football?

RB: It was always fun to be able to go back to Charlevoix, and have people say that they've been able to sit down and watch your game, and things like that. It's kind of what you would have expected. Some people were impressed and they thought that it was fun that they were able to see it and everything like that. So it was always fun to be able to go home and kind of experience that atmosphere.

AR: Okay, and then now we're getting to the point where the Arena has folded in the last year, and you're back at Northern now. How did the decision that the league was going to fold for a while affect you personally? What was the reaction across the league, on your team? Was it a big deal to a lot of people? Was there a lot of backup plans?

RB: Yeah, well there really weren't a lot of backup plans, it was something that sort of came out of nowhere. After my second season we started to hear winds of a couple of teams that might have been folding. That wasn't anything new that had happened. There were new teams that would come in and teams that would fold. So we kind of expected a bit of a change. During my second season I had just been resigned by the team, just started to feel like I had started to make it in the league, started to make some good money, when the league ended up folding it was definitely a big hit. It was a big hit for everybody. There were a lot of guys with families, there were guys on big contracts that were expecting that money and basically they just pulled the rug out from under us.

AG: Yeah, kind of blindsided everybody. Was there many people that had the situation you were you had the opportunity to go back and finish a degree?

RB: It was kind of 50/50. There were some people that didn't have degrees, there were some people that did. There were some people that had businesses that they'd ran in the offseason, or places that they went to in the offseason that they were able to fall back onto, and there were a lot of people that didn't have anything. That kind of had their plans to come back that season, and all of a sudden those plans were taken away and they were just kind of left empty.

AG: So it was kind of like your career was just taken from these guys before anybody was ready to let it go really.

RB: Exactly.

AG: So, you got brought back to Northern, your finishing up your degree, what's your major again?

RB: My major is ACS, certified chemistry.

AG: Okay, and this is your last semester?

RB: Yup, I'll be done in about a month.

AG: Okay so you'll be graduating in '09?

RB: Yup.

AG: How did the opportunity to coach the D-line here at Northern come about?

RB: Well, what ended up happening, when I knew that I was coming back to Northern Michigan University, I contacted Coach Anderson more to just see kind of where they were as a program, what was going on, if there were any openings. There ended up being a possibility for an opening at the defensive line. There were a few different candidates that they were looking at, so I kind of put my hat in the ring and told them that I'd like to come on and help out with the program anyway that I could.

AG: So that's definitely something Coach Anderson was pretty excited about. Getting somebody that's been there to come back and coach. Was there any major changes? What was the biggest difference you noticed in the few years you were gone from the football program... being back?

RB: Well, with Coach Anderson it was a bit of a different atmosphere. Obviously the lasting taste that I had in my mouth were the coaching staff that I was with [pause] being let off, and obviously that environment of that whole team had kind of gone down into more of a negative aspect towards the end of my career. Coming in they were going through some harder times as well, so there was a bit of that. There was a bit of the losing mentality still. But you could tell that there was something. They were more of a player-oriented staff as far as that had gone. They really cared for and took care of the players well.

AG: Okay, so now that this season has just finished up, it feels pretty good to come back and say that you had a hand in starting to turn the program around once again. We talked about your freshman year, you guys were kind of right there and came up a little short, and now you're on the coaching aspect of it and you're getting this program to turn the corner. How does that feel, and what is the attitude like coming out of that season for the team?

RB: Well, coming out of the season it's very similar to where we were at during my freshman year. It's a little bit better because my freshman year I think we lost our last four games and we were able to win the last game this year, which kind of gives you that momentum to carry into the offseason. One of the things that I want to be able to do if I'm still here coaching next year, is to kind of let those guys know that that's the kind of situation that you need to continue on, you can't take anything for granted.

AG: If you're still here coaching... you're done in December, what is your post-grad plans if you have any immediate? Do you wish to pursue a coaching career? Do you have any thought of pursuing an athletic career in a different league or the arena league that's starting back up?

RB: I've been contacted by the Arena Football League and multiple teams as far as coming back and playing, but I think that coaching is something that I've really started to enjoy. I think that that's going to be the first thing I'm going to try to pursue when I'm done, is trying to get a fulltime coaching position. If that doesn't happen then that's the reason we got the degree. I would be more than happy to get a job in chemistry and it would probably make a little bit better money, but coaching that I enjoy is something

that's not work for me. It's definitely something that I've got a passion for. I've been around the game for so long that I would like to be able to keep doing it.

AG: Right, and I was brought up... my father's a football coach and he always told me for every ten athletes that make it there's one coach that makes it, so there's kind of a passion and a pride in that there. So, ideally ten years from now, where do you see yourself being if you could lay out the future for yourself?

RB: Well, depending on the path that I start on, there's kind of two different ways that it could go. Ideally, in ten years if I was start down a coaching position, I'd want to be getting into that coordinator, head coach type deal. Being 36 at that time, you might be getting close depending on where. If you're at one of the bigger schools then you're still looking at possibly a position coach, or maybe a coordinator position around that time, but if you're a position coach or coordinator at a Big 10 school you're doing pretty well. That would be something as far as that goes. As far as a business would go you'd want to be starting to move up, having a couple of promotions from where you've started. Hopefully with the same company you started with.

AG: Okay, so let's put it this way. Football, without question over chemistry you could say.

RB: As of right now, given the opportunities, yes. I would much rather coach than go and sit in a lab.

AG: Alright, well you've got a good story right now. You're 26 years old, I look forward to seeing what happens in the future with you, and I'll be checking back in, but thanks for your time and have a good holiday.

RB: You too.