

Larry Zierlein – Super Bowl Coach

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The Super Bowl ring is large, hefty, and shiny – and it proudly displays the words “World Champions.” Today we’ll meet a man from rural Kansas who earned that ring as an assistant coach in the National Football League. Special thanks to Norton County Life Magazine whose article told this remarkable story. This is a Super Bowl edition of Kansas Profile.

Larry Zierlein is the proud owner of a Super Bowl ring, which he earned as an assistant coach for the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Larry grew up on a farm seven miles northwest of the rural community of Lenora, Kansas, population 250 people. That’s rural – but there’s more. Larry graduated from Lenora High School.

“I tell people that there were 18 in our graduating class, and I graduated in the top 10,” Larry said with a smile. Then he joined the Marine Corps and served in Vietnam. After the service, he went to Fort Hays State and joined the football team, playing defensive end while working part-time in construction.

During his last game at Fort Hays, Larry dislocated his shoulder so he couldn’t continue his construction job. He was invited to help coach the team during spring practice.

“The first day on the field, I knew that coaching was what I wanted to do,” Larry said. Larry had heard that the quality of high school football was high in Texas, so he decided he wanted to go into coaching down there.

“My wife and I sent out about 150 applications to schools in the Texas panhandle and west Texas,” Larry said. “Out of all those, we got one interview, and that was for the eighth grade job at Abernathy, a small school about 15 miles north of Lubbock.” So Larry and his wife made the move to Texas and launched a remarkable coaching career.

He moved up through the ranks to coach for the University of Houston, Tulane University, Louisiana State University, and Cincinnati. He went on to the NFL, where he coached for the Cleveland Browns, Buffalo Bills, and Pittsburgh Steelers. Altogether he coached 23 years at the NCAA Division I level and nine seasons in the NFL.

Then came February 9, 2009: Super Bowl XLIII (43). Larry was the offensive line coach for the Pittsburgh Steelers who were taking on the Arizona Cardinals. When the final gun sounded, it was the Steelers who brought home the Lombardi trophy as world champions.

“I was thrilled that we won and that my three kids and their spouses were able to be there with Marcia and I and share in it, because they were there the whole time through all the different jobs and the ups and downs we experienced along the way,” Larry said. “I was happiest for my wife, Marcia, because of all she went through as a coach’s wife.”

Larry left the Steelers in 2010 but he remains highly involved in the sport, coaching football camps and clinics in the U.S. and abroad. He and Marcia moved to Texas near where their son is a high school football coach, but he remembers Kansas fondly.

“I have great memories of life on the farm and of our community, which most people knew as the Good Hope community because we all attended Good Hope Church,” Larry said. He estimated there were eight or nine core families who made up the community, which might make a total population of about 40 people. Now, that’s rural.

Larry has brothers living in Norton and Smith Center. His wife’s family is from the Colby area.

“I still love coming home and going out to the farm and seeing things,” Larry said. “I’m proud to be from Norton County.” When asked his favorite book, he cited the Bible. When asked his greatest accomplishment in coaching, he said, “Knowing that maybe I was able to touch the lives of some people in a positive way.”

The Super Bowl ring is large, hefty, and shiny, and it belongs to a man from rural Kansas. We salute Larry Zierlein for making a difference by influencing his players in a way that is, well, super.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.