Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Jeffrey J. Bower

Interviewer: David Tisdale

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

JEFFREY J. BOWER

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Jeffrey J. Bower and is taking place on March 29, 2006. The interviewer is David Tisdale.

Tisdale: This is David Tisdale with the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at The University of Southern Mississippi and today we’re visiting with University of Southern Mississippi head football coach, Jeff Bower. Today’s date is March 29, 2006. Coach, thank you for joining us today and for doing this interview with us. First question, Coach, the last few seasons you had games rescheduled due to hurricanes, and I believe that was the 2004 game against [University of] California was rescheduled because of Hurricane Ivan. Then last year, obviously, you had Hurricane Katrina reschedule the Tulane [University] game and then Hurricane Rita forced the postponement of the University of Houston game. Of course, in 2001 the [University of] Alabama game was rescheduled because of the 9/11 terrorists’ attacks. Generally speaking, what do you have to do in your coaching staff to adapt to these situations in terms of getting your team ready, as well as handling just the general logistics of the situation?

Bower: Well, it’s never easy and it’s never the same, you know. Obviously, the welfare of your team is the most important thing and, you know, we were really affected by Katrina, probably thirty, thirty-five of our players’ families; and then their welfare is number one, so you, first of all, you wanted to make sure that they were fine. But basically what you do is just reschedule, and you do the best you can from a logistic standpoint to get your team ready to play the game the best they can. I think it really tests your mental toughness in dealing with adversities like that and changes in your routine and things like that, but we, the best we possibly can, try to get our football team back on a game preparation routine and leading up to that ball game that gives us the best chance to win. And I don’t have any great answers or any miracle things that we do. I wish there were some. But you’ve got to deal with the situation at hand and do the best you can to get your team ready to play and that’s, and to me that’s getting back on the best routine you possibly can from a preparation standpoint.

Tisdale: What are your memories of that particular weekend in terms of, you know, what you and the staff did to get ready, specifically, for that event? I mean, as we recall, we thought the hurricane was heading towards Destin, and all of a sudden its turn towards Hattiesburg was kind of quick. We didn’t really have a lot of time to get ready.
Bower: Yeah. We dealt with a lot of kids, and a lot of kids asked permission to go home, which if they were close enough I’d grant them that permission, knowing that they’d have enough time, making sure they had enough time to get home to shelter. But to make sure that, you know, we knew where every one of our kids were, to do the best we could to maintain contact with them after the hurricane hit. I know when I finally got out of my yard—I had trees over my road and somebody had to come cut me out—you know, we rounded up all the water we possibly could to assist our players. We made sure that they had enough food, which the university really did a good job with the Commons, of supplying food to all the students that were on campus. But I think, more than anything else, just making sure we knew where our kids were, trying to find if they were OK. And once we did that, adjust our plans; and logistically that was a nightmare. And John Miller did a tremendous job, our director of football operations. But we knew we weren’t going to play the Tulane game, but we knew we’d play the Alabama game. Now, how do we best get ready to go to play Alabama? And thank goodness [University of] Memphis, you know, really reached out and gave us tremendous help.

Tisdale: One of the next questions was the University of Memphis provided us with space to practice in advance of that game with Alabama. How did that arrangement come about?

Bower: Well, we called them. And then we had helped them a couple of years down the road earlier and whether or not we had helped them or not, I’m sure they would’ve done the same thing. But, you know, I’m friends with Tommy West—they’re in our same conference—and they knew what we were going through, and they opened up their facilities and their practice facilities until one o’clock every day. And we found a place to stay up in Memphis and we bussed up there. It’s really kind of memorable. I remember riding out of town—you could not hear a word on the bus. We had the local radio on and hearing all the damage reports and you could see all the damage driving up to Jackson, and this was four or five days since the hurricane had hit. A lot of our kids hadn’t had a shower, hadn’t had a good meal, a really good meal, and the mood totally changed. We kind of felt like we had enough of all that. So we put on some music and ate; and boy it was just totally a different demeanor. And I think our guys were relieved to know that we’re going to get back to business and work on football. And thank goodness, you know, Memphis gave us that opportunity to do that. And we stayed what, nine, ten days up in Memphis and bussed right over to Alabama to play that game.

Tisdale: So that kind of felt like a return to normalcy, having some kind of—

Bower: Somewhat. And there was still a lot—

Tisdale: —you know, even though they were away from—

Bower: —of concern. Sure, there was still a lot of concern because I remember at that time I was still talking to Chris Clark; he wasn’t sure where his family was. So
you were concerned about those kids, especially Chris that hadn’t found his family, and those things.

Tisdale: Chris Clark. Now, where is he from?

Bower: He’s from New Orleans.

Tisdale: What position does he play?

Bower: He’s an offensive tackle.

Tisdale: Offensive tackle. OK.

Bower: Yeah, he’d be a good one to talk to; really a sharp guy, too. But we had families displaced and that was one of the things that I wanted to be constant about is to always ask our kids, “How’s your family doing?” you know, just to let them know we were concerned, which we obviously were concerned. But there was a lot weighing on some minds, I think, of our players that were affected and the families affected by the storm.

Tisdale: Were there any other situations with some players, that you recall, where they were—you know, a situation where they were trying to find their family or they hadn’t heard from them?

Bower: Well, by that time it was—some of them it took two, three, four days. Damien Carter was another one.

Tisdale: And he’s from New Orleans, right?

Bower: Um-hm. You know, most of the New Orleans’ kids, George Batiste, they were more affected than anybody else. Most of our Mississippi kids had a lot of damage—Darren McCaleb. But you pretty much knew who was affected or what families were affected by the storms, because of when I was recruiting these kids and where they were from. So, you know, I made more contact with them than I did anybody.

Tisdale: Then again, the Hurricane Rita situation with the University of Houston game, what did you have to do in terms of getting ready for that, or how did that play out? I know that that was kind of hit and miss because we weren’t really sure where it was going to land but it was—

Bower: Well, it was, it was almost like when we came off the field and we heard it was canceled, it was too hard to believe. I mean, how can this happen again, you know, because you’re getting ready to play a game—

Tisdale: I think it would be aggravating.
Bower: And it was. And we were a little bit frustrated at that time. And where that really affected us is that it forced that along with Katrina with the scheduling changes. We’ve gone on the road four straight times and played three games in twelve days, and where it affects you is not so much physically, just mentally, dealing with that situation, being out of rhythm, playing that many games on the road. We played a game this past year: we played a Tuesday night, we played a Friday night, we played on Saturdays, we played a Sunday game; we just had no, absolutely no rhythm at all, no routine and—

Tisdale: And that Houston game was a Sunday, wasn’t it?

Bower: Yeah, that was a Sunday game.

Tisdale: And we had, I think we had just played—

Bower: We had played a previous Tuesday game.

Tisdale: That was against Marshall [University].


Tisdale: That’s right.

Bower: And that’s where it really started showing up because after the Marshall game we were mentally just, we were—

Tisdale: And that was an overtime victory.

Bower: Overtime game and we were just mentally whipped. And I don’t think we were very sharp. You know, we played Houston, then we played Memphis, and we played Tulane, but we were not a very emotional football team the rest of the year. We were just a mentally tired football team. And that was my biggest challenge and our staff’s biggest challenge was to, you know, how do you keep your guys mentally fresh? What do you do? And sometimes you do that. It’s, you want to bust a routine or do things different but, you know, with us being on the road and sometimes a short period of time to play a ball game, you couldn’t do things like that. But we really did some things that we felt like were the best that we could do to get our players ready to play.

Tisdale: Tulane’s football team was forced to play every game on the road and, of course, our game with them was postponed to the last game of the season. And I remember in that game our fans gave them a standing ovation when they came on the field for all that they had endured during the season. Did you have any conversations with Tulane coach, Chris Scelfo, during the season? And what was your impression of how their team performed during the duress? And I know that when you played
here as a quarterback, here at USM [The University of Southern Mississippi], that there was those two seasons where y’all played every game on the road because of the construction at Roberts Stadium.

**Bower:** And a little bit different then is because you knew upfront that you were going to play every game on the road.

**Tisdale:** Right. With them it was like—yeah.

**Bower:** Yeah. But yeah, I talked to Chris a number of times and I thought they did a heck of a job. I mean, we went through some tough times but I can’t imagine just totally being, you know, picking up residence and moving to Lafayette, I mean Ruston. And going to school there and just being out of your environment, totally, and going on the road every single weekend playing at different stadiums. And he shared a lot of things with me, but the difference in that game was that they were more mentally affected than what we were. They were really a flat football team.

**Tisdale:** Yeah. What do you remember about them coming into that game? I remember it was pouring down rain and it was almost kind of like a fitting end to the season, with the weather.

**Bower:** Yeah. And I told him after the game, I said, “I thought we were flat but y’all were worse than us.” He said, “Yeah, Coach,” he said, “we got guys that can run four sixes or run four sevens out there.” He said, “We’re just, we’re so tired, we’re beat. Mentally, just whipped.” The things that he said and the concerns that he had and the things they tried to overcome were the same things that we had talked about. There wasn’t any physical preparation or anything like that, it was just, mentally, just trying to get them to focus in and be sharp; and the excitement, the enthusiasm, you know, the winning edge. Those are the things that make the difference.

**Tisdale:** Just loving to play football.

**Bower:** Yeah. But I think under the circumstances they really did a wonderful job, I really do. I can’t imagine—you know, that was the hardest year I’ve ever been through coaching but I can’t imagine going through what they tried to go through.

**Tisdale:** What kind of support or communication did you receive from colleagues and the coaching community after the storm? Other coaches that you had heard from?

**Bower:** Not much. Sylvester Croom really was the only one.

**Tisdale:** Alabama coach?

**Bower:** Yes. No, Mississippi State [University]. He’s the head coach at Mississippi State.
Tisdale: Oh, that’s right. He played at Alabama, didn’t he?

Bower: Yeah, but he called me when we were up at Memphis and just wanted us to know that they were thinking about us, and this and that, and that was really classy. Everybody else was in the season and—

Tisdale: Trying to get their focus on—

Bower: Yes, I mean, you talk to coaches before games that you played and everything, and they’d always ask you about the hurricane and things like that. But pretty much he was the only one that called and said, “Hey, we’re thinking about you and wish you the best,” and things like that. And, of course, I did talk [to] Scelfo and, you know, because I had called him and just—I think there were some—I can’t probably name any products, but there were some of the athletic companies that sort of put care packages together for schools that were affected by the hurricane and we sent all ours to Tulane.

Tisdale: Oh, OK.

Bower: Yeah, because they had, those kids had lost everything. They lost all their clothes and things like that—

Tisdale: So we provided them with some assistance.

Bower: Yes, and I called him up and talked to him. In fact, I remember calling him when they were in a hotel in Dallas and saying, “What are you doing?” I tried to pick his brain a little bit about, you know, logistically, are you doing anything different or—of course, at that time he didn’t have any idea what they were going to do.

Tisdale: Yeah.

Bower: He says, “I don’t know if we’re going to be here, if we’re going somewhere else or whatever.” But he and I talked two or three times, but other than that, that was it.

Tisdale: Yeah. I know at one point there had been some rumor that we may have let them play one of their games here.

Bower: Um-hm.

Tisdale: At the stadium.

Bower: Yeah, and we were all for that. It just didn’t work out.

Tisdale: Finally, Coach, we finished the season six [wins] and five [losses] and earned a berth in the New Orleans Bowl, which itself had to be relocated to University
of Louisiana at Lafayette’s football stadium because of the damage to the Superdome. Did it sort of seem fitting that we wound—

**Bower:** Yeah.

**Tisdale:** —up playing in a bowl that was, itself, relocated.

**Bower:** It really did. I said, “Wow, what a way to end up the season. Now we’re going to play in the New Orleans Bowl and it’s going to be played in Lafayette. And, you know, we’ve been displaced, the bowl’s been displaced, so we’re one of the two teams in the bowl game and it was just, it was, it put the cap on just a crazy year, now. I mean, it was just an unbelievable year, and I’m sure I’ll never go through another year like that as long I’m in coaching. I certainly don’t—I hope not.

**Tisdale:** Don’t want to?

**Bower:** I don’t want to.

**Tisdale:** Well, you know, after that game and we beat Arkansas State [University] thirty-one to nineteen, what was, kind of looking back, was your assessment of the season, winning on a winning note?

**Bower:** I thought it was a good year. I thought the coaches did a good job and all our players hung in there, and I thought we showed a lot of mental toughness. You know, we were nine points away from being a nine and two football team in the regular season. And then, you know, as we talked about, then you go to the New Orleans Bowl. Well, we had pushed our exam schedule back and they wanted us down there on a certain day but we couldn’t because we had to get, you know, we were in exams and we had to get all of our exams moved up so our players, even though we had some to take exams when they came back from the bowl game, but we were a day or two late getting down there. I know we as coaches, we missed recruiting weekends. We had to have a recruiting weekend that weekend and we missed them because we couldn’t get hotels. So our players went down there Saturday. We went down as coaches on Sunday. We only had one bowl practice. It didn’t even feel like a bowl game. It really didn’t.

**Tisdale:** Were y’all able to spend the night down there? Were there hotel rooms for y’all?

**Bower:** Oh yeah, we spent the night down there. The players got down there Saturday. We had to be there for a function, a mandatory function, Saturday night. So we were Saturday night, Sunday night, Monday night, [and] we came back right after the bowl game.

**Tisdale:** So it was almost, basically, like a regular season road game.
Bower: Yeah, it was. We had one practice down there. When our coaches get down there Sunday, Monday is the day before game, you know, so I mean, it was no, there was really not much difference than a regular season game. But it’s like we all said, it’s fitting, it’s the way the whole year’s been so why not play a bowl game with all the, you know, the changes in schedules and trying to move your exams up and get that done, and the work recruiting in and all those things. It was, logistically, it was a nightmare all year.

Tisdale: Coach, thanks for joining us today. We appreciate your time.

Bower: Thanks, David.

(end of interview)