

Episode 47: Being true to himself: Bill Moos and his memoir

Bill Moos is a natural storyteller, from his childhood on a wheat and cattle ranch in eastern Washington to his time as a football player at Washington State University and as a college athletic director. He's got many tales to tell. Now, Bill has gathered those stories in a new memoir.

Welcome to the Washington State Magazine podcast, where we bring you stories of WSU alumni like Bill, WSU research, and more. I'm Larry Clark, editor of the magazine.

Here Bill talks with me about his new book, Crab Creek Chronicles: From the wheat Fields to the Ball Fields and Beyond. He shares some of the stories of his youth WSU football career, coming home to WSU as athletic director, coach Mike Leach and the current state of college sports.

Hi, Bill.

Larry. How are you?

I'm doing great.

How are you doing? I'm doing super. And it's fun. I know to be with you today, and I'm looking forward to a good visit.

Yeah. Me, too. I've been looking forward to this. Are you at home at the ranch?

I am, we just finished a new home, and we've just been in it a couple of weeks, so.

That's great. It's great to hear. We'll probably talk a little bit about it. It's part of something that you also have that's relatively new, which is a memoir. Yeah. Of your life. And it's a really extensive memoir with lots of really fun stories in it covers your childhood, goes through your WSU days, your career. So I always have to ask this, and I've talked to other authors. What inspired you to write this memoir?

Well, um, at my very core, I'm a storyteller. People that know me know that. And I, I've had a blessed life. Um, lots of adventure, um, ups and downs and triumphs and tragedies and all those kind of things. But I really, at the, at the end of the day, wrote this for my family, um, to pass down through the generations. And I always have loved to write. I did know I wanted to write a memoir at some point. And I did write this all myself. Every word, all six hundred and thirty nine pages. I had no ghostwriters. Being a storyteller, I just sat down and told my story. Now, I did organize it very well, and I'm also just short of being a hoarder. I'm an organized hoarder with lots of memorabilia tubs full of notes and and clippings and all these kind of things, which was very nostalgic to go through those. But I wanted this this book to read like a novel, even though it's a memoir. And I think I was able to pull that off.

So I actually got it started during Covid when we all had a little extra time and I was pinned down pretty much in, in my office in Lincoln, Nebraska. And that's when I started the project, which took five years to complete.

Tell me a little bit about your childhood, you know, fishing on Crab Creek, Edwall and Olympia. You have strong WSU family. So what was your childhood like and and how did those stories come together?

Well, I had a wonderful childhood. I was born and raised on a wheat and cattle ranch in Edwall, Washington, a small community in Lincoln County. Maybe about an hour from Spokane. And I got to tag along with my dad. Day by day by day. And very grew very close to him through the years. And the book talks about that extensively, but one of the highlights is a small boy was when he let me skip school in the spring and join him and the other cowboys down at Crab Creek at a pasture for a round up days. And, um I've always held that very dear. I went to a four room country schoolhouse one teacher for two grades at eight, eight kids in my class. And it was, it was just a beautiful time. And that's when I started my athletic career.

I was very blessed to have a guy that moved in as a teacher and coach that really got me excited when I was about in the fifth grade and just enthralled with the intricacies of sports. Uh, not just throwing and catching and kicking, but also all the, the, the behind the scenes stuff that I describe in my book.

Um, my dad, who was a World War II combat veteran, um, fought in the battle of the bulge and so forth. Uh, met my mother at Washington State College at the time when they were freshmen. And of course, the war interrupted their time as students. Um, but when he came back, they were married and after a while moved to that ranch. It was a leased property. And my dad farmed there for seventeen years. And during that time, he ran for the state legislature. Um, won his first election by seventeen votes. hence giving him the nickname Landslide Moos.

And but in part, that changed our lives of our family because we'd spend time in Olympia had moved over there and changed schools and all that. And then he when Dan Evans was elected, he appointed my father, the director of agriculture. So we moved to Olympia. I went from that class of eight kids, um, to one of the top five schools in the state high schools in the state as far as enrollment.

So little culture shock there, but very and, and after a while, I realized it was very beneficial because I had great coaches, top rate competition. And due to that and a lot of good luck, I was recruited by a lot of major universities and ended up coming home to Washington State, which I really fell in love with when I was eight years old and saw it for the first time for a Cougar homecoming game in Old Rogers Field. And my dad, who had co-sponsored the bill during that legislative session to change WSC to WSU, was being honored, among others. And I got to tag along my older sister and me and see my mother's sorority and my dad's fraternity. But most importantly the likes of Keith Lincoln and, and those kind of Cougar stars for the first time in Rogers Field.

And I I made the commitment right then and there. I didn't care what it was going to take. I was going to do that one day. And I, I fortunately had the chance to do that.

Oh that's great. And leads right to my next question, which is about WSU and your time at WSU. Uh, you answered one of my questions, which is, you know, was it always on the radar? The other question, I guess, for me and for a lot of our listeners too, you know, you played football for the Cougs at a really dynamic time. Tell me a little bit about that. And did you have like a favorite moment or victory that that really sticks out for you?

Yeah. Um, the chapter in my book is titled State U and um, it it tells the whole story. And I was on my way to becoming a Husky. Uh, you know, the dynamic part of Jim Owens in the

day. And they, they came their whole staff to a basketball practice. I described that to, and I was, I was teetering there, you know, parents were open minded, but I knew they were kind of keeping their fingers crossed.

And the following week the Irishman came to town, Jim Sweeney. And after he got done with me and my mother in a four hour dinner in a local restaurant in Olympia, I knew I was going to be a cougar. The whole experience was incredible, but not always enjoyable.

I went to school at at my alma mater during a time of unrest in our country. The Vietnam War was raging. There were civil rights issues. Um, the feminist movement was starting. It was, it was the early seventies. And what I had seen is that kid eight years old and hoping for didn't quite look the same. But at the very core, the college, the environment, the student body president Glenn Terrell who I thought the world of navigated through that football wise.

Those were the days when freshmen were not eligible and you played a four game freshman season. We went undefeated. We had some good players. The following year, however we we had to start from scratch and it took a long time. We may have been in nineteen seventy, the worst major college football team in the country. And guys were quitting left and right. Fans were not coming to the games. Uh, I really felt feel good now in looking back that I experienced that because two years later, in seventy two, we finished fifteenth in the nation and I was a part, a co-captain and an all conference player in seeing that through. And that gave me a confidence that really was a foundation for a lot of other things in my life.

And it all started right there at Washington State. I'll always be grateful.

Well, it's certainly a wonderful story, one of the many wonderful stories in your book. And then after you got done at WSU, you stuck around the Palouse a little bit.

I did. Uh, I had aspirations to, to play in the NFL. My size limited me. And as I describe in my book, my goal growing up was to play college football. And when I started to have success, I thought, well, maybe there'd be a chance, you know, to play at the next level. The, the, the paydays in those days in the NFL are nothing like they are now. And believe me, the college pay days weren't either. But, um, I had a chance to go to the Dallas Cowboys as a free agent. And I weighed that out and thought, no, I want to finish my degree and try coaching. I became a graduate assistant and I did that in the fall of nineteen seventy three. So I got the the pleasure of having another semester in Cougar country. And we enjoyed that. Had another good season.

You know, as you did that, did athletics leadership kind of come about or had you seen that in the past as a possibility for you?

I really, I was kind of lost. You know, a lot of people are lost when you get out of school and that still happens today. Um, and I really didn't know what I wanted to do. Uh, and that's when, um, through again, my, my father's political career, I had a chance to go to Washington, D.C. as an intern. And again, I started at the bottom and, and luckily again, I made some, some advances there, but I was only there six months because it was it was during a federal pay freeze and hiring freeze, and I was just on a six month deal. But again,

I got some experiences there that are fun to read about. And again, um, we're able to help me later in my career.

So I came home, I didn't know what I was going to do again. And I was in Olympia and went to a Cougar Club meeting. That's what the CAF was called back in the day. A great Cougar of all time, a former All American, Ray Sundquist, played in the nineteen forty one national championship game. And he heard me speak at this Cougar Club meeting and took me out in the hall and said, I want you to run my restaurant in Pullman. And I don't know anything about running a restaurant. And he said, you're going to go over and you're going to learn from one of the best. And I did. I helped build it. It was called The Misfit. It was an old Flatiron building downtown. The restaurant as we build it is not there anymore. It's changed hands a few times, but that was also a fabulous experience that laid a foundation for the industry that I eventually got into.

And that chapter is called Steak and Sizzle, and I lean on that throughout my entire career as a college athletic director as well.

Well, I love that. And I'm sure there will be some listeners and readers who of your book who recognize The Misfit.

Oh, yeah. I have some pictures in the book that show it. And it was a fun time. I got to go back to Pullman. Um, all told, in my seventy five years, I've spent twenty five in Pullman, Washington, so a third of my life and loved it then and love it now. And the core of Pullman, Washington, even though it's grown significantly, is still the same, a wonderful community. And I was, you know, just out of college. I went back when I was twenty three and spent four good years there and learned a lot, advanced in that industry and a couple other locations before I had a chance to come back home for the second time as Sam Yankovic's assistant athletic director and head of the Cougar Club in nineteen eighty two. I was thirty one years old.

Well, and then eventually kind of, you know, jumping ahead, you became an athletic director yourself, starting in Montana, in Oregon, later WSU, in Nebraska. You know, you talk about the roles you've had within that top level of athletics leadership. After all this reflection, what do you think really makes a strong and successful athletic director at a big program?

First of all, the philosophy of what the blueprint will consist of, and that really has to be, um, focused entirely on the student athlete. That's a theme in my book that I keep coming back to. Um, because I got to experience it myself. Uh, the two things that I embraced as a college athlete that were again emphasized during my athletic director jobs was the young people's ability to receive a quality education and the camaraderie of their teammates. Um, those are the things that need to be the anchors in my opinion. Hiring good coaches, hiring a good staff. Always let my people do their jobs, but they were all on the same page. As far as, again, the blueprint and the focus of where we wanted to move the program.

And there's a whole lot of financial pieces to this. I was always creative with that. I talk about Bushels for Butch that I started at Washington State that really was aimed at the local wheat farmers, because I knew that world too, having grown up in that and a lot of other things, you know, through all my various stops. I hire good people, let them do their jobs, make sure that the focus is on the student athlete. Compete. And I think the other thing I

was known for, I have always been a competitor and I've always had an imagination, and I was able to use both of those to really make some waves in the industry.

What we did at Oregon was quite significant. We were off the charts and colored outside the lines. But that program thrives to this day with what we were able to build as a foundation. We did the same at the previous stop at Montana. We moved them into national championship positions and what was then one double A football and eventually became FCS.

And when I was fortunate to come back and lead my alma mater, we did some creative things as well, and I'm very proud of that. And of course, that centers around facilities and coaching hires, which is a fun part of the book as well.

Yeah. And that kind of leads to a couple of my next questions. One is about the somewhat famous, I think, at least in Cougar circles, about how you were at the special K ranch and you got a request. So for those of people who have not heard it, could you share?

Okay. I'd be happy to. Uh, when we left Oregon in two thousand and seven, I was fifty six. My wife, Kendra was forty seven. Uh, we had five children, but only two were still at home. So we had bought this land up here where I am right now today way back then, sixty plus acres. And it was just raw alfalfa field with some pine trees. And we wanted to sit on it for the day that you know, we wanted, I wanted to come back home to the Palouse area. I was kind of fed up with college athletics. It was a very, embracing fun and exciting time at Oregon. But the industry was starting to change and the dynamics were starting to change. And I remember I was asked at the press conference when it was announced that I was leaving in Eugene. Somebody pulled me aside and said why? Why would you go leave to raise cattle when you're in the midst of all the glitz and glory and bright lights of college athletics. And my response was, well, I guess I'm at a time in my life where I'd rather step in it than put up with it. And that's how I felt.

Then you know what? After two years I still had the flame in me, and Kendra and I decided, well, let's get back into it. And the kids were all in favor because they'd been used to going to bowl games and Final Fours and all those kind of things, and being in the locker rooms and all the fun stuff. And so I took a run at the UNLV job and actually was offered that job. And I had a clause in my contract at Oregon that prohibited, prohibited me from doing that without a substantial penalty financially. So we didn't go there and we didn't know what we were going to do. And I came in off the tractor. Kendra was out of town, and the vacancy at Washington State had opened. And my friend Jack Thompson goes, the Throwin' Samoan, we want you to come home. Come home. And I go, wow, I don't know. I have that same penalty if I did that. And I think we're just going to stick it out here for a while. And I was, I was torn.

One day I came in for lunch. I just made my own sandwich. Kendra, who's a nurse I think may have been working or downtown or something, and I hadn't shaved in four or five days. I had cattle crap on my Wranglers and my boots and, um, I see this SUV coming down our lane. It's about a third of a mile lane, really a beautiful little lane there. And I go, well, who can this be? It pulls up, and this classy gentleman gets out, walks up. I go out the screen door and he walks up and he goes, Bill. And I go, yes. And he goes, Elson Floyd, president of Washington State University. And I've come here to take you home. Well, I actually got a

little choked up, quite a bit choked up. And I gathered myself and I said what an honor that would be for me to end my career where I started it when I was eighteen years old in nineteen sixty nine. And then in the same breath, I said, But I'm not going to go down there and be a maintenance man. We're going to have to build facilities, hire and retain top coaches, and recruit the very best talent in the country. And to do that, you're going to have to have my back. And he gave that classic Elson little grin. He goes, I'll have your back. And he did. He was a pleasure to work with. And I say work with because our relationship, I never felt like I worked for him.

Uh, it was a true, a true team effort. And you look at just the facility, the football facilities alone, we invested over one hundred and thirty five million dollars, and that couldn't have been done without Elson and his relationship with the Board of Regents and the legislature. And he's just a fabulous ambassador. And we went ahead and built. Of course, the premium seating and that whole addition. Um, and we built that in nine months, if you can believe it. And then the Cougar football complex after that.

And with those in place, we were able, of course, I was able to secure Mike Leach uh, with a promise that was happening and I fulfilled it and some wonderfully talented football players that contributed. Not right away. That was a couple of years of rough, rough sledding, but in time, um, maybe one of the greatest periods of Cougar football of all time, including the eleven win season, which is still the most wins in one football season in Cougar football history.

So that was a thrill. It was fun. And to work for him was one of the highlights of my life. And we lost him way too early and miss him to this day. We were friends as well as working together at Washington State.

I enjoyed working with him. He was president when I came back to work for WSU too. And an amazing man.

Yes, and a big thinker. Yes. Who would ever think, okay, people may not back then would have never thought we'd win eleven football games, but they also probably didn't think we'd have a medical school and many other things. He was a can do guy and that's why we connected so well. There's some real good pieces in the book that talk about that and just finding ways to get things done.

Well, you mentioned Mike Leach and getting things done. Uh, I've had the pleasure of had the pleasure of, of talking with Mike Leach a couple of times and very entertaining interviews, as you can imagine. Um, hiring him was quite an interesting move. And I think all of us in Cougar Nation were pretty excited. So do you have a favorite Mike Leach story?

Oh, gosh. Um, well, the, the one I talk about when I went down to interview him in Key West, of course, is my favorite. Um, because he was a national personality. Even with the three years he wasn't coaching, ESPN GameDay, Herbstreit and all the guys would have a section about Mike Leach, and he wasn't even coaching. One of my assistants, Mike Marlow, was intrigued with him, and I felt, you know, we needed to make a change. And I go, well, study it a little bit and come in and see me. And he did and he did.

And sure enough, I thought to myself, you know, he needs a home and I need a coach. And I got to go down and talk to this guy. Well, UCLA, Arizona, Arizona State, Kansas, Illinois,

Ole Miss, they were all firing up the jet to go down and talk to him as well. I just worked my back hallways of conduits and everything else too, with people calling agents and all that. And I never talked to Mike. And so I went down and figured it was time to have a face to face. And I described that in the book. And the first impression was not good. The last impression after four hours was outstanding. And the main thing, and there's a lot of laughs and a lot of fun and people that were observant of Mike Leach during his coaching days, they'll be able to get it.

But the important thing is we connected because he respected my body of work and I respected his. And I told him I was going to let him coach. I'm not going to be at your practices. I'm not going to be in your locker room. I'm not going to be in your office. But I'll get you what you need. And I know you prioritize academics and not breaking rules and discipline. That will be the core because we're on the same page there, and we're going to have to build this thing together. It's going to take a while because we got to get a roster put together. We had some good players, but we didn't have enough to compete in the Pac 12 within three or four years. We did. And it's a great story. I had his back.

Um, my feeling, I think, in short, was this the Air Raid offense could entertain the fans while we were building a program. Now Connor Halliday was on his back most of that first season, but we still lit up the scoreboard. And we didn't win a lot of games. But it was entertaining. And it also served as, um an attraction to top skilled players, even offensive linemen, that kind of thing, who were hoping and aspiring to be NFL players. And we produced a bunch of them. So, um, it's a great part of my story, one of my most proud moments. I miss him as well. He's another one we lost way too early.

Yeah, definitely. We're in a new era you know, for college athletics. You've been pretty outspoken about a lot of your thoughts on it. I think a lot of us have. So in terms of WSU specifically, what do you see as the state of WSU athletics? And you know, where are we going to go? What's the path to success for the Cougs?

Well, I think the Cougars have good leadership. I like what I'm seeing. President Cantwell and um and what has been developed throughout the university and also in the athletic department and what the conference has been able to do. I mean, you look back at the deception and the greed that took place, that crumbled one of the finest conferences, over one hundred years old, that ever existed. And it was done under the table without full knowledge of the two that ended up staying in the end. Oregon State and Washington State. And the fact that those two schools were able to hang on.

Uh, let's not forget Cougar alum and great Cougar Gary Libey. Um, and he did the right thing, not because he had one at one time been the president of the Cougar Club of Whitman County. He did the right thing right there in Colfax, doing the right thing there. Washington State and Oregon State hanging on, anchoring it. Theresa Gould, who I know very well keeping that those two together while she and the presidents, the two presidents built a conference.

Uh, it's not the old Pac-12, but it's not the old Big Ten. It's not the old SEC. It's it's not, it's not the old Big 12. Uh, and I think Cougars got to understand the pride in everything that has gone on through the generations can and should remain. The support needs to increase. I'm outspoken in an article in the Spokesman Review not long ago and the state

needs to pick up the pace. Washington State University is a highly regarded land grant university. And that's a big part of this state. You look at the agriculture in this state and you look at the engineering, veterinary medicine, and you can go on and on. Uh, it needs to be funded at a significant level from, from the state side.

Successful intercollegiate athletic program can and has in the past, and can again provide the sizzle that we talk about. to make sure the steak is with it. And I like the energy. I'm just getting to know the people in the athletic department because that's their show now. I had my time. I'm proud of what we did, how we did it. Um, but I stepped away. My cougar pride and my love for my alma mater is still there.

But, um, I like what they're doing, how they're doing it. The state and the Cougars everywhere really need to support it. And it's getting tougher now because of NIL, the revenue sharing. I say I've been outspoken when the NIL came, I go, hey, amateurism as we once knew it is over. And then the revenue sharing, the twenty point five million. And now you have general managers for the football programs and basketball programs.

And when I talked about the value of the education and the camaraderie of your teammates, that's way down the list of priorities in these young people's minds anymore. And unfortunately, it's more about me than it is about we. I talk about again, when I'm outspoken on this topic, that what a shame that the Cougars develop great players and then now and that young person would want to stay and be with his or her teammates and graduate, have something to take with them instead, if they had an NIL deal at a local restaurant or business in Pullman that paid them twenty thousand dollars a year, if they're good, UCLA can come up and say, hey, I can get you a gig with Anaheim Chevrolet for seven hundred and fifty zero zero zero. What are you going to do? Uh, and that's the real tragedy.

And I know arms are trying to get around this. Commissioners need to be more on task in that regard instead of greedy and thinking about, hey, let's just worry about our guys and let them worry about theirs. And now Congress is stepping in. I think they have some good ideas. The train has left the station, and it's my hope that it can get slowed down a little bit because the color and pageantry and the love and excitement of college athletics from the life I've been able to lead and, and successfully, but also successful because we accomplished not just the scoreboard, but the other things. And I hope that isn't lost in the future of college athletics. It's kind of sad for me.

And again, I feel fortunate that I was in it at a fun, I mean, you know, nineteen sixty nine to twenty twenty one, a lot happened in that period. And a lot of it was good, very, very good.

Absolutely. I hear that, and I know that a lot of other people who really love sports and college athletics generally feel that as well. So hopefully it can slow down or, or at least get reframed a little bit because, you know, the train has left the station, but we still love, you know, the joy and the pageantry. As you said, there's nothing like a Cougar football Saturday.

And the days of when I would talk about my eight years old and the days that I was a player, I won the first coin toss in Martin Stadium in nineteen seventy two, and it's in this trophy case right behind me. It's how much that meant to me. But a one thirty kick off and the smells of autumn and the rolling hills of the Palouse and people coming to town and

tailgating and the spirit squads. And I'm old enough to remember when Butch was alive. He was a real cougar. And the Butchmen wheeled him around and when an opposing player was hurt, the student section would chant, feed him to Butch. Feed him to Butch. I mean, I got to experience that, and unfortunately, that there's pieces of that that still are there.

But the best thing that happened to college football was television. The worst thing that happened to college football was television. because now you're playing on various days at various times. Seven o'clock at night. Um. Hey, honey, let's just watch this on TV tonight. It's kind of a nasty day, and it's a long drive and it would be getting home late. You know, all those things get factored in.

And one of the sad things about the Pac-12 dissolving, if I could touch on that again, is, um, the two true college towns were left in the dust, Pullman, Washington, and Corvallis, Oregon. And the charm of those two places. And I know them both very well. I hopefully are going to be a part of the nucleus that keeps them thriving in the new Pac-12, and I'm eager to see how it how it plays out.

Well, your book is full of wonderful stories. You just shared a few today. Uh, I would encourage everybody to go find the book. Read the book. It's a good time. How can they get it? How can they get the book?

The best way to get Crab Creek Chronicles: From the wheat fields to the ball fields and beyond is to go to my website, which is simply billmoos dot com, and it will guide you through how to get, to Amazon primarily and order the book. A lot of interest early on and it has continued. Uh, again it's very humbling. And I'm so glad that that people can enjoy that book. It's, again, it's a, it's a fun read for me. It was gratifying. It was therapeutic. Uh, it was nostalgic. And it was a lot of fun. And it, I believe that people want to, if they, if they want to buy it, they'll want to turn the pages because it's story after story. And they're all true.

Well, that's wonderful. We'll put the link in the show notes as well for this podcast. And so it's another way for folks to find the book and to learn more about you from your website. So thanks again, Bill. And as always, go Cougs.

Go, Cougs. Thanks again. Appreciate it.

You can find links to the book, a review in the magazine, and stories about Bill Moos from the archive at magazine dot wsu dot edu. Follow the Washington State Magazine podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, YouTube, or wherever you listen. And please leave us a good rating. Tell your friends about the show and send us your podcast ideas.

This episode was produced by me, Larry Clark. Our music is by WSU emeritus music professor, composer and musician Greg Yasnitsky.