

Southern Voices Oral History Project  
Florida Southern College

**Interviewee:** Harold "Hal" Smeltzly, Class of 1957

**Interviewer:** Zachary Wheeler

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**Wheeler:** *So I understand that you are Hal Smeltzly, the first baseball coach here at Florida Southern.*

**Smeltzly:** Well, first they had baseball for quite a few years, uhh, well it dates back quite a few ways but there were very few varsity sports if you will. There was only one women's team, they had baseball and basketball and tennis. I came aboard here, to be exact, in January of '52, and, um, as a student and I became the actual head baseball coach in 1957, January of '57.

**Wheeler:** *So how old was the baseball program before you came here?*

**Smeltzly:** Pitiful.

**Wheeler:** *My question was how old?*

**Smeltzly:** It was really puny. In those days, college baseball which wasn't really a big deal to play, I'd say 15 to 18 games. That was the season. There was no such thing as an offseason baseball program either. Baseball started in most college campuses, including Florida Southern. Umm, I would say in February after school got started and everyone found out what their classes were going to be and they got together and played baseball and that was pretty typical of the area schools and maybe just nationwide, but Rollins was in existence in those days, so was Stetson, and Tampa, and those kinds of schools and that's pretty much the plan, or that was the plan in those days.

**Wheeler:** *So was the baseball program what brought you here to Florida Southern?*

**Smeltzly:** I beg your pardon.

**Wheeler:** *So was the baseball program what brought you here to Florida Southern?*

**Smeltzly:** Now, well, yes I think it probably really was. I had a friend, I'm from the Midwest, and it snows a lot in the Midwest. I had a friend who came down here, kept sending me postcards. We were working after I got out of high school, and, umm, I'm, trying to remember. Money so I could go to school. And he kept sending these postcards from the beach, Sarasota. And when you get that kind of thing in the

middle of a Chicago snowstorm, uh, Sarasota and St. Petersburg, well I started thinking, "This might be a good place to play baseball" too among other things. But seriously I checked out Florida Southern and it seemed like a really nice place to try so I showed up.

**Wheeler:** *Did you see a lot of potential in this program when you came here?*

**Smeltzly:** You'll have to say that again.

**Wheeler:** *Did you see a lot of potential in this program when you came here?*

**Smeltzly:** Well I can't say I saw that far down the road, when I just saw it as an opp-, as a young guy who could play baseball pretty well. I just saw it as an opportunity to play and get an education and try to figure out, you know, how I can have a marketable skills when I got out of here and make a living. And it was pretty simple stuff. I was on my own. That was really the motivation, and I have to say that playing baseball in the sun beat shoveling snow in the north.

**Wheeler:** *Hm-hum.*

**Smeltzly:** And ...

**Wheeler:** *So let me ask you one thing. What do you think were the changes that made Florida Southern really competitive in baseball? Because you said it wasn't very good before you came here.*

**Smeltzly:** Well, certainly ... I'm not sure how much you know about me but you do know that I started the student [inaudible]. In '52, I played a few seasons of minor league baseball after playing a couple of years here as a student. And I signed a baseball contract to play professional baseball for about a year and a half or whatever it was, and then I got drafted during the Korean War and spent two years in the Army. And when I came back here, umm, my intent was to finish college and get out and either get into the insurance business, or if the right opportunity presented itself [sneeze], take advantage of the fact that I was a certified teacher, you know, and coach.

Well as I got ready and I graduated, that would have been in January of '57 I believe. January, February, or whenever. The baseball coach they had at the time quit, and he took the uniforms with him. He, he, and a few other things I think, but anyway the athletic director at the time was Tom Green and I got to know him. He knew that I had been a minor league baseball player, and he called me up one day and just said, "Do you mind coming over here, I need to talk to you about something?" And he's the one who told me that the baseball coach had disappeared and the season was getting ready to start, then so on. And he was in a desperate state.

Alright that's a long way around to tell [sneeze] that I took the job. I decided not to get into the insurance company. I had an offer from the Metropolitan Insurance Company and they wanted to hire me and all that good stuff, but I thought, "Well, I'll just try it for a year." So I did, and I would say when you say, when you mentioned or asked the question, "How did it all get started?" Well, first of all I needed to survive one year as the coach the first year, which I did and I found out I really enjoyed it, and I really enjoyed the environment. These are really nice people, and the guys that I worked with in college in those days were full-time coaches and coaches had to teach full-time and you had to coach. But the full-time faculty with that kind of security and contract was important to me, so it was really that security in addition to something that I really enjoyed, which was coaching and managing baseball

players and baseball teams. And so, I just kept pecking along for a while, and we had pretty good success, but then suddenly we got very successful.

And it became more and more apparent first of all, that as the father of three daughters and I learned a great deal about how competitive young women can be, and Florida Southern at the time had two or three women's teams, if you want to call it that. There was absolutely almost no interest in women's athletics. And so if we're going to, you know, go ahead and have women's sports programs, the athletic director left suddenly called, so, and so I found myself with President Thrift. He asked me if I would be fine temporarily being the athletic director. So ...

**Wheeler:** *How long were you the athletic director?*

**Smeltzly:** Well for 43 years. Twenty-three actually, I was the baseball coach officially for 20, and then coach Green left suddenly, and President Thrift asked me if I would pick up the slack was the way he put it. So that was also about the time that Title IX came and I just decided that we could get them opportunities. We certainly did not, but you know it wasn't just Florida Southern either I don't want to lay it all down. Just across the board there were very few significant women's athletic programs around athletic teams, and so I remember going to, a well, it was a transition to Dr. Davis. Dr. Thrift retired and the new president Dr. Davis who was just terrific to work with. I went to him in his first year and told him pretty much what I'm telling you that we need to, we need to do a better job of being out front, and we need to do something, and he agreed and off we went.

**Wheeler:** *So Hal, what did you do to get the women's program started?*

**Smeltzly:** Well first of all, he, he, we had to figure a way to pay for it. And from your standpoint I ... I might realize that you know, having not been in the business and just getting started myself, that you can't appreciate what a huge problem it can be. And when you're starting to talk to alums, and boosters, and all that good stuff, it's really not an easy sell because I have to convince them that women should be competitive or that they can get out there and produce entertainment or whatever. All the aspects of it, and what a meaningful thing it is and that equal [inaudible] is the way to go. And, so well that was the challenge, and I accepted that, and I was determined that Florida Southern was going to be out there and I told Dr. Davis that. And bless his heart he bought it. He said, "Okay, Hal." I told him my plan was to go a little bit at a time, and I choose to go with women's golf. We had women's basketball, kind of, but ...

**Wheeler:** *Intramurals*

**Smeltzly:** And, and, so I went after women's golf. You only need a couple of outstanding golfers because the team is made up of five players, and so I felt, if I can look out, hire the right coach, and weave together we can find a couple outstanding young females. We're going to get some publicity and some notoriety, etcetera, etcetera and we'll build on it. And that really, it was that simple. I left out I hired Lois Webb, and Lois was just a tremendous coach. She was a basketball coach actually when I hired her, but I remember calling her to the office and I told her, "I hired you to upgrade our basketball program, but now I'm going to ask you to help me develop a women's program." So I give her a lot of credit, I could push her into different situations. She started it, and really gave volleyball creditability, national recognition at one point. Then I pushed her over to golf, and we did that. So just when you talk about things and how it got started, that really is the very beginning of some interest in, and awareness that you can have weaving quality athletics. Female athletes meet and compete and you're going to get some notoriety. And you don't have paper all the time. And I don't know if you saw the *Ledger* the last

few days, but what is happening with women's lacrosse with all the pictures, all the commentary, with a sport really nobody knows a whole lot about here, with golf ...

**Wheeler:** *I actually know a few players on the women's lacrosse team.*

**Smeltzly:** I beg your pardon.

**Wheeler:** *I actually know a few players on the women's lacrosse team.*

**Smeltzly:** Well, it was very much like that in those days, and we built on it. And we upgraded our basketball. We did a heck of a job improving women's tennis. And so the rest is pretty much out there in the record books, you can see with women's athletics and Florida Southern. Our good example of what you can do if just stay focused and don't sell out your [inaudible] or integrity. For me the whole thing, many of them, it was a serious commitment that you could win and not have to cheat to do it. Because we were surrounded by a couple of schools, particularly [inaudible] who suddenly got an instant transfer from somewhere or someone with suddenly it was discovered he was playing in his fifth year. So that unfortunately they were pretty punk and their act has been cleaned up dramatically everywhere, but Florida Southern was right out there in front of him. Getting him the main point for my coaches was this, we're gonna win, and you're going to make it possible, and we're going to do it with not breaking rules.

**Wheeler:** *So let me comment, Lois Webb had a very successful career here at Florida Southern. She was the volleyball coach, I believe, for about 25 years.*

**Smeltzly:** Well at least 30. Yeah it was her [inaudible], she is durable.

**Wheeler:** *She did very good and I heard she succeeded you as the athletic director briefly after she retired from coaching.*

**Smeltzly:** Could you say that again?

**Wheeler:** *Didn't she succeed you as the athletic director afterwards?*

**Smeltzly:** Yes she did, but not immediately. She was not the first one. We had a young guy by the name of Mike Roberts who actually succeeded me, and he lasted six months. He had some problems, and he had some problems adjusting to this; he was from the University of North Carolina, and it's in a university system and had never dealt with a private college in all of it that kind of goes with that. And so it just got the best of him I think is the best thing to say. And he realized it. He decided, "It's not for me, I'm not a good fit here", [inaudible] gone. Okay, Lois became the interim athletic director from president of boosting and she agreed to take it another year and so on. She had a great career here; she did a lot of good things. And, umm, she still lives around here, I still see her periodically, and she's not the worst [inaudible].

**Wheeler:** *Um-hm. I sure you also remember when you hired Chris Bellotto as the softball head coach?*

**Smeltzly:** Yep! I ...

**Wheeler:** *She still does it today.*

**Smeltzly:** She was a young thing. Pretty good softball player to tell you the truth. But what was impressive about Chris Bellotto was she had the potential even as a youngster to be a good teacher, when you watched her in class and you discard an action if you will. She just looked like somebody who could you know probably handle it. But there again, softball in those days was slow-pitch. You ever played slow-pitch?

**Wheeler:** *I don't think so.*

**Smeltzly:** Well that's a pitch where everybody's supposed to hit, and they throw you the pitch, the pitch doesn't have any velocity.

**Wheeler:** *So it's easy to throw.*

**Smeltzly:** They throw it where they expect you to hit it somewhere. Well that's kind of how she started it and that's what softball was for women in those days. And then the transition to fast-pitch, and pretty much what you have now, which is a very competitive, very tough sport. And Chris, just bless her, she just made the transition, and I helped out unofficially as an infield coach for a while. And I helped her get going again, and she's the best and she's been honored by her contemporaries and, you know, the record speaks for itself.

**Wheeler:** *Last thing, do you remember when Dr. Plowman was the coach of the cross country team?*

**Smeltzly:** Huhh [inaudible].

**Wheeler:** *Like in the '80s.*

**Smeltzly:** Yeah, we've had, let's see you're talking about Dawson? Which coach?

**Wheeler:** *Dr. Plowman.*

**Smeltzly:** There were a lot of them. There was Sam Snow for district, and probably the most recent one would be Dr. Dawson, who did both men and women's cross country. He just retired three years ago and I think the current coach who I never met, but ...

**Wheeler:** *Well our current coach left his position last fall to help his wife with her job up in North Carolina. Right now we have an interim head coach who is only going to be here for a few more months before we find a full-time coach.*

**Smeltzly:** Okay.

**Wheeler:** *The funny thing is that my current head coach was actually my teammate just twelve months ago.*

**Smeltzly:** Ha-ha.

**Wheeler:** *Yeah.*

**Smeltzly:** That's different.

**Wheeler:** *Hm-hm.*

**Smeltzly:** Well, I'm not going to pretend to understand the cross-country business. I have a ton of respect, for it's an awful lot of work, but my daughter, one of my daughters was a runner for a while but her hips gave away and that kind of cut it short. But I admire them, it's about dedication and willing to work, or work ethic is what I'm looking for, certainly I have respect for that but I just can't tell you right off the top of my head what the sequence of coaches have been. Other than Buck Dawson, who I hired and he ran both men and women's cross country here for quite a few years. And he did a very good job.

**Wheeler:** *And, umm... You mentioned earlier that you were drafted by a major league team back in the '50s and you were signed to a contract. Which team were you contracted to?*

**Smeltzly:** In those days, there were minor league teams in almost every town. It's not all like it is today, it wasn't like that. And I was originally drafted, I believe, it was the Philadelphia Phillies, and they assigned me to a minor league ballclub. I never went at that first shot; I never went to spring training, they signed me and right out of school I played two seasons with Florida Southern and they signed me. I went ahead and I played a year and a half, and then the Army drafted me because I was a [was a former student deferment] which was common in those days, and so that's how I got involved in the Army. When I came back, I was still assigned there, and Detroit invited me to spring training out here in Tiger Town and I went I went out there in their minor league camp, which I don't know if you're familiar with which is the facility behind Marchant Stadium, but it's a big area of baseball fields. And in those days, minor league players that Detroit might have had longer, the players that they owed contracts on, and they signed them to these teams around the country. And so it was a big deal. That's over with in professional baseball, now they've got maybe four teams, you know, rookie league that I talked about and then you're in Detroit. But anyway that was it; I went to spring training camp at Tiger Town. I then had three daughters, I had to earn a living, and I decided to retire. And no sooner did I do that then when the baseball coach quit and took the uniforms, the athletic director called me and I started my career at Florida Southern. One thing you might be interested in too is of course the minor league contracts are annual events when you're in the minor leagues, sometimes they can be weekly events. It would probably be interesting to you that I signed 43 one-year contracts at Florida Southern. I never went for a multi-year contract.

**Wheeler:** *So you just renewed yourself every year.*

**Smeltzly:** Yeah, it was just my personal [inaudible] if you will that if they don't want you around, they're going to move you and so that was the purpose that we'll just agree that we'll go one more year agree what they're gonna pay me to do it and I'm gonna tell them what I'm gonna try to do, and that's pretty much what I did.

**Wheeler:** *I was wondering, what did you study when you were a student here at Florida Southern?*

**Smeltzly:** What did I what?

**Wheeler:** *What did you study?*

**Smeltzly:** Study. Well, I wanted to be a teacher. If I was going to get something out of this, I was going to come back and get a marketable skill, and so liberal arts I had to tell you, I wasn't really sure what that

meant. And this place had liberal arts and they had other programs too like science we did and etcetera. I wanted something that I could earn a living with, so I headed to the education department and then after walking on as an athlete, they shifted me to the physical education and I tried to become a certified teacher, so that I had something.

**Wheeler:** *Other things, how many championships did you win as a coach when you were here?*

**Smeltzly:** Well in baseball, three national championships.

**Wheeler:** *What were your best memories of the first one in '71?*

**Smeltzly:** Well it was a bit of a miracle. We were out in Springfield, Missouri. And an old church related-school down in Florida, and we ended up playing teams like the University of [inaudible], the University of California-Riverside, and we played, umm, Western Michigan and Central Michigan. We played the people that survived and got to the College World Series for Division II schools. Of most of the universities, we were the only private college [inaudible]. And you could only play nine people at the time, but on the other hand they had resources and a lot of money to begin with that Florida Southern didn't have. So I would have to say that the most exciting thing was that we were able to survive that process in those days, and we won the national championship on, really on the backs of donors who had really helped me put the money together, really to fly out to the College World Series. And in those days in the '70s, the NCAA didn't reimburse you for expenses when you went to a tournament, they ran the tournament, but it was up to you to get there. That's changed now, you get some money back and they take your transportation and so on, so really it was in the backs of a lot of really friendly alums and donors and we were able to get out there, and we won. And when the tournament moved to Springfield the next year, I basically had the same players and we won again. And so we went out to Springfield and won that championship, and we knew what it was going to take from our previous year, and we did it, and we were successful and we came home and won. So then we did it again in '75, by the way in '73 we came in third, and in '74 we got knocked out in the regional here in the southeastern United States, and then in '75 we won it again. So you know that was a big deal.

**Wheeler:** *So were there any strategies that you had that helped your team win that season because you mentioned that Florida Southern at the time did not have the resources that other universities had at the time?*

**Smeltzly:** Well, from a coaching standpoint I made them appreciate this. My strategy or philosophy was to re-emphasize fundamentals. I'm sure I was boring but I just stayed a lot to the defensive side of the game. I figured if I could prevent you from scoring, I didn't have to score so much. And so I was going to find and recruit guys who were overlooked because they weren't big or they didn't hit the ball out of the ballpark, but they could catch and throw the ball well. Very well. And they were quick. Foot speed, hand speed, were critical. And so our team led the country in the fewest errors, and in baseball, I know you're a track guy, but in baseball if you're going to find a defense that includes pitching we'll win at the end.

**Wheeler:** *That's true about most sports though, defense wins championships.*

**Smeltzly:** Defense, defense is a big deal. I don't know how that relates to running, but [laughs] I guess you save your energy for the finish.

**Wheeler:** *Well I used to play football in high school so I know quite a bit about defense.*

**Smeltzly:** Well yeah. So I say that. And the other thing that I have to comment on is my involvement with international sports, because it did impact when I went about managing baseball in the States, and here at Florida Southern. I learned with my experience that I was involved with the U.S. Olympic effort for about 14 years.

**Wheeler:** *Absolutely, and I heard that you used to coach there and what was your experience coaching at the Olympics from what I heard about you?*

**Smeltzly:** Well I got involved with this story that is long and I won't worry about it. Umm, people found out that I was a pretty good coach and I was able to teach some things and manage the players pretty well, and they gave me a chance. And so my very first experience was as an assistant coach in the Dominican Republic, and I went down there and I was an assistant coach, umm, for a world championship team. And the ball clubs in the United States at that time were literally the best college players in the country from Southern Cal [inaudible] anywhere where we could find somebody who was going to be as baseball play-, umm, professional baseball player but they were still in school. So we went about picking players in that circumstance and we put them to work and as a team we got better and better at it and we were able to compete. We started in the Caribbean, and that included Cuba, Venezuela, Dominican Republic, [inaudible] etcetera. And if you look at today's major league rosters you're going to notice there are a lot of Dominicans ...

**Wheeler:** *Ohh, yes!*

**Smeltzly:** ... in baseball, heh, heh.

**Wheeler:** *There are a lot of Hispanics in the majors today.*

**Smeltzly:** I had some success and I guess I impressed some people. Then so they made me the head coach of a Pan-American team which is [inaudible] of Mexico City in '72. I remember one summer out there in Mexico and the Pan-American games are already part of [inaudible]. Well the Olympic effort then they put me up with the '84 Olympics in Los Angeles and I was out there and I did that one, and then they hooked me up and with Seoul, Korea. So I was involved another four years and preparing for Seoul, Korea and we went from there and it kept me going. I ended up in Barcelona and I did that Olympics. [inaudible] Three Olympic events, we came up with two silver medals and a gold medal in Korea, so we did a pretty good job, and that was enough. But at the time I was trying to be an athletic director and a head coach here and [inaudible] I tell you the truth I give all the credit in the world and, and, I'm appreciative to the presidents that I worked for because they allowed me the time away from this job, and I had some good help. I had a really good coaching staff who knew what they were doing, but all that together was provided by the president, and so I remained a faculty member and a coach and an athletic director here for all of 43 years, and that included both international and domestic baseball.

**Wheeler:** *Alright, well I enjoyed having your company here today Coach Smeltzly. Hope you enjoyed yourself and I'm glad to hear what about what you did as athletic director here.*

**Smeltzly:** Well it's a ... Ha, you're going to interview a lot of people and I'm sure you're going to hear some good stories because we've had a lot of interesting people here. And so I applaud your effort and I hope it's going to go well for you and dig us all out of the shadows. And, umm, one last thing. Let me tell

you, I was here before these buildings were here. All that was here when I first showed up here in January of '52 with a suitcase was this pond out here and it was a reflective pond.

**Wheeler:** *Umm-hmm.*

**Smeltzly:** That's all it was, with some lily pads in it.

**Wheeler:** *And the Frank Lloyd Wright buildings.*

**Smeltzly:** And quite what's now the administration building. I guess on down there was the library. The building that is right over here was the admissions department. And when I showed up here in a cab, [inaudible] I flew into Tampa, took a bus, Greyhound bus to Lakeland, and Greyhound buses to where the *Ledger* is today, that was the station. I took a cab for like 50 cents out here and showed up right out here. And the director of admissions saw me standing out there, kinda figuring out where I was, because I had no clue. And I had a suitcase and a carry bag, and he came out there, greeted me, walked in, and you know they admitted me right on the spot. I didn't have a transcript and I didn't have anything. They gave me a food ticket and they took me across the walking [inaudible] to campus to the boys' dorm, men's dorm, and umm, I went and had lunch, and I went over to the gymnasium, met the baseball coach, and I practiced that afternoon. Now trust me it's not that way anymore. [laughs] So I couldn't leave here without having you know how I got started, and it was not a big dramatic event, but it was a guy who was looking for a place to play baseball, go to school, and try to get an education. And fortunately it worked out. Well I enjoyed talking with you.

**Wheeler:** *I enjoyed talking with you too Hal.*

**Smeltzly:** Yeah.

**Wheeler:** *It was good seeing you today.*

**Smeltzly:** Okay, take care.

**Wheeler:** *Yes sir.*

[END]