

Learning curve

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It takes 30 minutes to drive from the football field at Judson High School to the College of Business at UTSA.

It took Dennis Kennedy 17 years.

The 19 university students taking Kennedy's senior-level "Business and Society" class do not know why it took him so long, or more importantly, what the journey cost him.

They don't know that Kennedy, 35, is a former All-State linebacker who graduated from Judson without being able to write a sentence.

They don't know that the instructor who teaches them about "monopolies" and "fiduciary obligations" was reading on a fifth-to-sixth grade level when he was admitted to the University of Houston.

And they don't know that Kennedy flunked "Fundamentals of English" at UH three times.

What the students do know is that this young, energetic instructor spices his lectures with illustrations from such current events as the collapse of Enron Corporation and the fall of Mike Tyson.

"He's very intelligent," says Steve Miller, 20, a senior from Stuart, Fla. "He knows a lot because he reads a lot."

Kennedy's journey from semiliterate football star to college instructor took 10 years of classes at UH, more than two dozen tutors and a spiritual conversion.

The journey began with deception, almost ended in failure and became an academic miracle.



Dennis Kennedy is a changed man in many ways through education and religion. Kennedy (above) prays at his home church, Harvest Fellowship. Billy Calzada/Express-News



"School meant nothing to me. They didn't hold pep rallies for honor students."

In high school, Kennedy cheated. In college, he floated through his first year in such classes as "Personal Health," "Weight Training," "Sport in Society," "Emergency Care and First Aid" and "Football For Secondary Schools."

Later, as he began taking history, philosophy and logic, Kennedy posted a litany of D's and F's.

Today, he has undergraduate degrees from UH in economics, business, political science and physical education, and a master's in business administration.

"Extraordinary," says Dennis Duchon, chairman of UTSA's Department of Management and the man who hired Kennedy to teach.

Students expressed surprise when told that Kennedy couldn't write in high school. "That's a shock," says Tania Mendoza, 24, a junior from El Paso.

Mendoza would be more shocked if she knew the depth of Kennedy's ignorance at Judson. An English teacher once assigned Kennedy an essay. "I didn't know what an essay was," Kennedy says, "so I wrote down the letters 'SA.'"

Other athletes have attempted to hide their reading and writing deficiencies. In the 1980s, Dexter Manley presented himself well in the Washington Redskins' locker room. An All-Pro defensive end, Manley flipped through the pages of the Wall Street Journal — even though he couldn't read a word.

Manley graduated from high school in Houston and attended Oklahoma State. Almost 10 years later, as one of the great players of his time, Manley admitted he was illiterate.

His story made headlines. Kennedy is sharing his for the first time.

Kennedy is dyslexic. He teaches part time at UTSA and works full time at H.E. Butt Grocery Co. headquarters, designing employee payment plans. He also mentors football players at Judson and Sam Houston high schools.

"I don't want them to travel the road I did," says Kennedy, who is single. "I know what it is to get so consumed with your sport that you have no goals outside of it. It's either go pro or bust."

They'll never forget Dennis Kennedy at Judson. A weakside linebacker, he led the 1983 state championship team in tackles and remains the hardest-hitting player in school history.



Dennis Kennedy passes out test results to students in his business class at UTSA. Kennedy, who graduated from high school and played college football despite getting a very low score in the ACT and being able to read at only a fifth-to-sixth grade level, now teaches at UTSA and is a college graduate.

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Former players still talk about the Edinburg runner whose face mask Kennedy broke in a 1984 playoff game. They still talk about the Madison guard whose jaw Kennedy dislocated.

Though then only 5-foot-10 and 175 pounds, Kennedy brought ferocity to the field and could alter a game with a single hit.

Recalls former Judson defensive tackle Marcus Booker: "That hit on the Edinburg runner changed the whole complexion of the game (won by Judson 14-7). I remember the kid yelling, 'He broke my freaking face mask!' They got a look of fear in their eyes. I don't think they got more than 10 yards the rest of the game."

Madison guard Scott Petoskey remembers Kennedy from the 1984 city championship game. Kennedy blindsided him on a punt return. "I couldn't eat for a week," Petoskey says.

Kennedy was proud of his savagery. He was ashamed of his inability to write. After spending elementary school as a special education student, Kennedy recalls talking his way into mainstream classes in middle school. He struggled. By the time he reached Judson, Kennedy cared only about football. "School meant nothing to me," he says. "They didn't hold pep rallies for honor students."

The challenge for Kennedy at Judson was keeping his grades high enough to play ball. "I became proficient at cheating," he says.

During some exams, Kennedy sat behind students who let him copy answers. During others, he received answers to multiple choice tests through hand signals. He never wrote a paper. Someone always did that for him.

"I used to help him with his papers," says Frieda Kennedy, Dennis' mother. "I remember writing one on the bubonic plague."

Frieda, 62, is a retired reading teacher. She corrected her son's spoken English at home. She taught him how to avoid common grammatical mistakes. But she did not teach him how to write. She did not know that he needed help.

Former Judson coach D.W. Rutledge knew that his star linebacker struggled with grades. But Rutledge finds it hard to believe that Kennedy couldn't write. "Dennis is a great story," Rutledge says, "but he might be embellishing things a little."



Dennis Kennedy walks at the H.E. Butt Grocery Co. headquarters, where he designs employee payment plans. Kennedy, who could barely write in high school, began to catch up on what he missed in 1987 after two years at the University of Houston, and four years later received undergraduate degrees in economics, political science and physical education. He went on to earn an undergraduate degree in business administration and a master's in business administration.

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Booker disagrees.

"Dennis is not lying when he says he couldn't write a sentence," Booker says. "He'd give me something he'd written to a girl that looked like chicken scratch. I could understand the words with two letters. But anything with more than five I couldn't. So I'd write the love notes for him."

Booker helped his friend with more than love letters.

"He signed yearbooks for me," Kennedy says. "I could write my name. But I couldn't write a sentence. I didn't want anyone to know."

It is not surprising that no major college offered Dennis Kennedy a scholarship. Coaches considered him too small, too slow.

It is not surprising that Kennedy won a scholarship after walking on at Houston. He impressed coaches with bone-jarring hits and earned the nickname "Assassin."

What is surprising is that Kennedy got into Houston in the first place. He scored an 11 out of a possible 36 on his ACT exam, and graduated from Judson with a 2.0 grade-point average.

"If you had a student with the exact same academic criteria he had but didn't play football, that student wouldn't have been admitted," says Spencer Lightsey, a freshman counselor in the UH admissions office. "There's no way you can get in with an 11."

According to Lightsey, Kennedy would need a 2.5 GPA and a 24 on his ACT to get into Houston today.

Former Houston coach Bill Yeoman expressed surprise when told of Kennedy's high school grades and college test score. "I'm kind of impressed that he was able to get in," Yeoman said. "I have no idea how."

Invited by assistant coaches to walk on in 1985, Kennedy believes that someone in the athletic department squeezed him past admissions requirements. Lightsey agrees.

"You can override anything," Lightsey says of the way UH used to admit athletes. "Humans make the decision. So, if a coach said, 'Hey, we want this kid here, no matter what,' then they would call the department and say, 'Let this kid in.'"

The entering 1985 freshman class finished with a bizarre record. According to the NCAA, only 10 percent of all UH athletes and 4 percent of football players graduated within six years. "There were semesters that I didn't open a book," Kennedy says.

Adds Orsby Crenshaw, a former UH teammate: "You can't open 'em if you don't get 'em. Books were free. But I know lots of guys who never bothered to pick them up."

Once a starting cornerback, Crenshaw remembers advisors steering him toward professors who gave good grades to football players. He remembers classes in which athletes were given answers to tests. He remembers missing nearly half a semester of one class and still receiving an A.

You can find football-friendly professors at all schools, Yeoman insists. "There's nothing wrong with that," he said. "There are some who work harder with athletes. I'm not suggesting professors give answers to (test) questions."

Crenshaw and Kennedy enjoyed benefits not given to other students. "The only reason I was at Houston," Kennedy says, "was to play football."

Kennedy lettered two years. He started the last game of his sophomore year against Rice and made 11 tackles. "If he had been more gifted physically," Yeoman said, "he would have been something."

Two people and one crushing disappointment led to an awakening. The first person, a church-going female student, asked how Kennedy was progressing with his degree plan.

"What's a degree plan?" Kennedy replied.

The girl explained. As she reviewed Kennedy's transcripts, her eyes widened at all the weight training, personal health and emergency care classes listed. "You've got 30 hours that don't count for anything," she said.

The second person, a Christian businessman, challenged Kennedy to get right with God and to get an education.

At the time, Kennedy was skipping class and chasing girls. He won a nasty dance contest, \$500 and a trip to Las Vegas.

The businessman presented the gospel to Kennedy. The girl showed Kennedy a degree plan.

A spiritual conversion and a sobering realization followed: As a Christian, Kennedy could no longer cheat. And if he could no longer cheat, he was going to need help with school.

"I remember falling asleep with a biology book in my hand," he says. "I didn't understand it, and I had a test the next morning."

His grades plummeted. He despaired. "It was a very frustrating time for me," he says. "I almost failed out."

Two years later, a dream exploded. In the spring of 1989, coaches chose to start a redshirt freshman ahead of Kennedy at weakside linebacker. Kennedy, a junior, knew his career was over. "If I can't make it in college," he said, "how am I going to make it in the NFL?"

The energy he once poured into football he redirected toward school. Kennedy declined to attend volunteer summer workouts and studied. When classes conflicted with team meetings in the fall, he refused to change his schedule and slid down the depth chart. Kennedy didn't play a single down as a senior.

His conversion in '87 prepared him for new challenges in '89. After becoming a Christian, Kennedy learned to write with the aid of tutors, who helped with every class. He learned to read college textbooks. He spent hours studying "A Dictionary For Learners of English."

Today, the dictionary is a record of personal progress, a tattered book filled with marks beside words Kennedy did not know: "clever" and "differ," "holler" and "savor."

Six and a half years after enrolling at UH, Kennedy graduated with three degrees. He earned two more eight years later.

Transcripts show that the same person who flunked "Fundamentals of English" three times in 1987 made A's in "Research," "Investments" and "Commercial Banking" in 1999.

"All things are possible through Christ," Kennedy says.

Dexter Manley made millions as an illiterate pro football star. After learning to read, he wound up on drugs, checked in and out of rehabilitation centers and became homeless.

He has a home today. Prison. Manley is serving two years for possession of cocaine.

Dennis Kennedy never made it to the NFL. He is not disappointed. College football gave him an education and a chance to help others.

It gave him a miracle.

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