



Oral History Interview of James Nelson (SOH-006)

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Oral History Interview of James E. Nelson

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Interview Summary

In this interview, James E. Nelson, Director of Athletics at Suffolk University, discusses his educational background and his long career at Suffolk. Coach Nelson discusses his experiences growing up in Cambridge, Massachusetts; how his interest in athletics developed; and his experiences at Suffolk since joining the Athletics Department in 1966. He concludes by discussing the pride he takes in being a part of Suffolk's athletics program.

Subject Headings

College sports -- United States

Nelson, James E.

Suffolk University.

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This interview took place on March 7, 2007, at Suffolk University Law School's
John Joseph Moakley Law Library.

Interview transcript

JAMES NELSON: Should I click this on, does it have—

KATE BUDSILKO: It's on.

NELSON: —pick up speaking quality?

BUDSILKO: It's already on.

NELSON: Okay. I don't have to get that any closer to me?

BUDSILKO: No. Please state your full name.

NELSON: James E. Nelson.

BUDSILKO: Where do you live?

NELSON: 114 Newport Street in Arlington.

BUDSILKO: Where did you grow up?

NELSON: I grew up in the great republic of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

BUDSILKO: What was your childhood like?

NELSON: My childhood was a wonderful childhood. I was a fourth and last child of Dorothea Nelson and Edward Nelson. I think any of those individuals who grew up being a baby in a

family, I know that that's a pretty special thing. I was the last to leave the house. All of—my two sisters and my brother had moved out. So I was pampered up until my very wedding day.

BUDSILKO: When you were a little boy, what did you want to be when you grew up?

NELSON: I had envisioned myself being a basketball player, of all things. How interesting.

BUDSILKO: It is! What were the most important and memorable experiences that you had in high school?

NELSON: I went to a rather small parochial school, St. John's High School in North Cambridge. After my freshman year, the parish church had a great fire. It cost quite a bit to repair that. Because we were a parish school, funds were limited. Then Cardinal Richard J. Cushing came to the rescue of the parish by purchasing a public school in Cambridge, and it became North Cambridge Catholic High School. The North Cambridge Catholic High, we had in our graduating class, eighty-eight students. The opportunity to get to know every one of your classmates in more detail than they probably wished was a wonderful thing. To this day, having remained here in the Boston, Cambridge, Arlington area, I still get to see those individuals, and share some wonderful memories with them.

BUDSILKO: Wow. Were you involved with sports in high school?

NELSON: I was. Our high school just had two sports, baseball and basketball. And because we were a small school, there was plenty of opportunity, and I had the good chance to be on the varsity all four years. If I had gone to a much larger high school, maybe that would not have been the case. But it was quite a thrill to be, all four years, on both varsity teams.

BUDSILKO: What was your favorite class in high school?

NELSON: I would have to say history.

BUDSILKO: Oh yeah?

NELSON: I enjoyed history very much, and continue to do that to this day. At St. John's slash North Cambridge Catholic, it was an era back in the late 1950s where we had all nuns as our teachers. That was a unique experience because I did go to a public grammar school and had very little association with nuns during my grammar school years, other than in the CCD [Confraternity of Christian Doctrine] class. Having nuns and the strict discipline that they brought to the classroom was quite an adventure.

BUDSILKO: Where did you go to college?

NELSON: I went to Boston College, but prior to going to Boston College, I spent one year at the Huntington School for Boys over at—the building was located in the Huntington YMCA, adjacent to Northeastern University. After my year at Huntington, I matriculated to Boston College.

BUDSILKO: What was your major?

NELSON: Interesting enough, similar to you, I was a marketing major. (both laugh) Why I was a marketing major, I'm not quite sure. So we have that in common.

BUDSILKO: Well yes, we do.

NELSON: I also minored in English, which I probably enjoyed more so than my marketing classes.

BUDSILKO: When did you graduate?

NELSON: I graduated in 1965.

BUDSILKO: Did you live on campus?

NELSON: I did. And had, for my last three years, my sophomore, junior, and senior year, had a wonderful location. There's a mansion up on the top campus, the upper campus as they refer to it, at Boston College. And the mansion belonged to the individual who owned Liggett Rexall Drug Stores. I'm assuming that Boston College purchased it from him. I had a room—it was right at the top of the staircase, overlooking the portico that looked out on the front lawn at that point. And there's a movie called *39 Rue de Madeleine*. It's a very old movie. James Cagney is in the movie. And in this movie, Cagney comes in the front door of the building, walks up the steps to the second floor, and walks directly into the room that was my dormitory room. It was a great place to live, in a mansion.

BUDSILKO: What was your first job?

NELSON: Well my first job that I ever received any compensation for goes back to my elementary grade, in the eighth grade, where I was paid twenty-five dollars an hour—correction! (both laugh) Twenty-five cents an hour! I wish it was twenty-five dollars an hour.

BUDSILKO: I was thinking, where did you work? (laughs)

NELSON: Even today I wish it was twenty-five dollars. It was twenty-five cents an hour at my school to come in Saturday mornings and to shovel coal. I would do that for four hours, from eight in the morning to noontime, make one dollar for the day. That would be my spending money for the week. Then I would go off and—whatever activities that was going on.

But the first position that I held, and it was a part-time one, that was a little more extensive than that, was at the Star Market in Porter Square in Cambridge while I was in high school. I came as a bagger. Didn't last long because I, at least at bagging, because I put—at that time, they were selling gallons of milk in glass containers. And I put the two gallons of milk into one of those little buckets that went outside where people would pick up their cars, and on their way out, they clanged together, and the whole parking lot turned to a sea of milk. So they decided that I was better off stocking items. So I did that for my junior and senior year in high school.

Then while I was going to Boston College, I had a number of positions. I worked for the [Massachusetts] Turnpike Authority at the Sumner Tunnel. We would clean around the tunnel and clean the handrail inside the tunnel. And there's a little bit of a lawn space over there. So through my college years, I held a number of part-time positions that I found interesting, and found the individuals that I was working with quite interesting.

BUDSILKO: Are you married?

NELSON: I am married. My wife and I are celebrating our fortieth anniversary this year. And we have five children. And I'm pleased to say that three of our five children hold degrees here from the university. One with an undergraduate degree in English. I have a middle daughter, Erin [MS '97], holds a master's degree in education. And our youngest son, Dan [MSPM '03], holds a master's degree from a program that the university was sponsoring a few years back, the Visionaries Program. A master's in philanthropy and film editing.

BUDSILKO: How did you meet your wife?

NELSON: I was introduced to my wife down in Harvard Square. That was the location where most folks in high school, and sometimes in college, would go to hang out. A friend of mine, who was dating my wife at that time, introduced us. And he made the comment when he introduced me that I was going to be going into the seminary to become a priest. I did entertain that thought at some point. But once I saw his girlfriend at that time, I quickly changed my mind, and later on we started dating. Dated all through college and got married in January, a beautiful January day. No snow.

BUDSILKO: How long have you been working at Suffolk?

NELSON: This also is my fortieth year at Suffolk.

BUDSILKO: Oh my gosh.

NELSON: I came to Suffolk in September of 1966. But I was familiar with Suffolk prior to 1966, because, growing up in Cambridge, I was a member of the Cambridge YMCA. And from 19—I believe it was 1957, Suffolk began to practice their basketball over at the Cambridge YMCA. While I was in high school, during the winter break, I would go down to the Y, and the Suffolk University basketball team was practicing down at the Y. Many times, they would not have quite ten people there because of class conflicts. And the then-athletic director and basketball coach, my predecessor, Charlie Law,¹ would ask if I wouldn't mind scrimmaging with the team.

So I was quite familiar with Suffolk. And Charlie Law asked me, upon my graduation of high school, if I would come over and apply to Suffolk. I did put in an application and came over to what was the single building at that time. The university just had one building, the Archer Building.² And interviewed with the then-dean of admissions, D. Bradley Sullivan.³ But I elected to take one year of prep school, and then was offered a basketball scholarship at Boston College, and thought that I would spend those four years up at the Heights.

BUDSILKO: Why did you choose this profession?

NELSON: This profession?

BUDSILKO: Yup.

NELSON: Well, having established my priority early on of being a National Basketball Association player, and then having the chance to play four years of high school basketball, then go on to Huntington Prep, where our basketball team won the New England Basketball Championship in 1961, and then having been granted an athletic scholarship to Boston College

¹ Charles Law served as Suffolk University's athletic director from 1946 to 1978.

² Suffolk University's Gleason L. and Hiram J. Archer Building, named after the university's founder and his brother, is located at 20 Derne Street in Boston, across from the back entrance to the Massachusetts State House.

³ D. Bradley Sullivan served as Suffolk University's dean of admissions from 1960 to 1966, then as its first dean of students from 1966 to 1986.

and having my boyhood idol, who was known then as Mr. Basketball, Bob Cousy,⁴ to become my college coach, was a wonderful thrill. Certainly he inspired me, in terms of the love of the game, as did many others prior to that. My high school coach, Jim Power, and my elementary coach, Jim Fitzgerald as well, who had a great passion, all of those gentlemen, for the game.

As a consequence, I thought maybe I'd like to stay in the sport of basketball. At that time, when I graduated in 1965 from Boston College, I went on for one more year at what was then Boston State College to receive a master's degree in counseling. While I was at Boston State, I did a full-time year of substitute teaching at Watertown High School, and met a gentlemen by the name of Nick Pappas, who turned out to be a Suffolk University graduate. He was a wonderful mentor to me. He, along with another friend, who was a student here at Suffolk, Dan Harvey, indicated that Suffolk was now looking to hire a second full-time person to assist Charlie Law. And because I had known Mr. Law and Suffolk from my high school days, and having played against so many of those players during winter break at the Y, I decided that I would apply for that position. And I was interviewed by then-President John E. Fenton.⁵

In speaking with Judge Fenton, he asked a little bit about what I was doing. I told him that I'd just finished playing basketball at Boston College with Bob Cousy as my coach, and he said, "Bob Cousy!" And Cousy was a famous All-American at Holy Cross. He said, "I'm a Holy Cross guy. I love Bob Cousy!" And then I told him that my parish monsignor, Father Fallon, was providing a recommendation. And he said, "Father Fallon? Monsignor Fallon? A classmate of mine at Holy Cross!" And he looked at Vice President Flannery⁶ and he said, "Young Nelson seems to have all the credentials that we need." So back then, it was not quite the lengthy interview process that I'm sure that goes on today. And I became the second full-time person in the athletic office as an assistant to Charlie Law.

⁴ Robert J. Cousy (1928-) is a retired professional basketball player who most notably played for the Boston Celtics from 1951 to 1963. He played basketball at the College of the Holy Cross and coached at Boston College from 1963 to 1969.

⁵ John E. Fenton, Sr. (1898-1974), a Suffolk Law School graduate (JD '24), served on the Suffolk University Board of Trustees for sixteen years before serving as president of the university from 1965 to 1970. He had previously served for twenty-eight years on the bench of the Massachusetts Land Court.

⁶ Francis X. Flannery has served as vice president/treasurer of Suffolk University since 1970. He began his career at Suffolk in 1964 as assistant treasurer.

BUDSILKO: How do you think Suffolk has changed over the years?

NELSON: Well, certainly, it has changed dramatically in many regards. As I mentioned, Kate, when I came over to interview as a prospective student back in 1960, there was but one building, the Archer Building. And then when I came to work in 1966, it was just at the final stages of completion for the second building, the Donahue Building.⁷ So certainly our university, in terms of the number of buildings here on Beacon Hill and the surrounding area has grown dramatically. At that time, it was so heavily populated by male students. There were very few women students who were attending Suffolk at that time.

In addition to being an assistant to Charlie Law in the Athletic Department, some of the responsibilities I had to do—I was an assistant basketball coach to Mr. Law. I was the head cross-country coach. I held the position as assistant baseball coach to a wonderful person by the name of George Doucet [BA '59, MEd'62], who taught me so much about the game of baseball. I was also the intramural director. And at that time, there was a required physical education, one-credit course, that both males and females had to take. The course for the males was over at the Cambridge YMCA, and the course for the females was over at the Boston YWCA. There may have been fifteen or twenty maximum of—they were primarily freshman—women in that class over at the Boston YWCA. And we had several hundred men in the class over at the Cambridge Y.

So most of my day in those early years, those first seven or eight years, were spent over at Cambridge, because the required phys. ed. class was in the morning at nine o'clock. Then we had our basketball practices over at the Cambridge YMCA at two o'clock in the afternoon. And I would spend more of my time during the workday over at the Cambridge Y than I actually did here on campus, for that early period.

And we've certainly—in addition to the numbers of buildings that now comprise our campus, our student population has grown exponentially. Numbers of faculty, numbers of majors,

⁷ Suffolk University's Frank J. Donahue Building, named after Judge Donahue, a former faculty member, trustee, and treasurer of Suffolk University, is located at 41 Temple Street in Boston, down the street from the Archer Building. It was the university's second building.

residence halls, and now international campuses. For so many of those early years, we were just a commuter institution, with students who could come to our location by access—by commuter rail, as you currently take, or the MBTA [Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority]. And it certainly, in some regards, restricted the number of students and the types of students that we were attracting.

BUDSILKO: Do you think athletics have changed since you started working here?

NELSON: It's certainly changed in the sense that, when I first arrived on campus, there were three sports that constituted essentially our program at that time. Men's basketball, baseball, and golf. And from those three sports, we will be offering, in the next academic year of 2007-2008, we will be offering thirteen varsity sports, with six sports for women and seven sports for men. So it has changed dramatically, as has the quality, because we recruit now with a much larger base. We have athletes who, in some regards, might be considered to be more accomplished than the local contingent that we had previously. And that's not to say that there weren't very many stellar athletes in those early years that I had the good fortune to either coach or to hear about from Mr. Law.

BUDSILKO: What else are you involved with at Suffolk?

NELSON: I do teach a course on essentially the history of sport. And it's called Theory and Practice of Athletics. It was a class that Mr. Law taught for many years at the university, and upon my becoming athletic director, then-Dean Ronayne⁸ asked if I wanted to teach the course. At that time, I thought that I would have a little bit too much on my plate with being the new athletic director, and also being a head basketball coach. And I said I'd prefer not to at this time. Well, Dean Ronayne was a persuasive individual, and he convinced me that it would be a wonderful opportunity to expand my interest into the classroom. And I accepted the position.

I'm so pleased that he was persistent on it, because I've been able to build a wonderful library about the history of sport, and in particular, the history of the Olympic Games. It's become a

⁸ Michael R. Ronayne, Jr., was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences from 1972 to 2004.

particular favorite of mine, along with the other sports that we concentrate on. We talk about the centennial of Suffolk in 1906, and certainly there were other significant events that took place in 1906, one of them being the founding of the NCAA, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, of which this university holds membership since 1954. It's the governing body for collegiate sports. And so I use that as my introduction in each of the semesters that I'm teaching the course, about what occurred besides the founding of Suffolk University. We have the NCAA, the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906, which destroyed a great deal of what some consider the sister city on the west coast to Boston, as well.

I also have the good fortune to be the chairman of the university's Social Committee, in planning what I like to think is an event that reaches out across the three schools of our university, the Law School, the Sawyer School, and the College of Arts and Science. We have a Deans' Reception in the fall, in which all members of the faculty, staff, and administration are invited, and we recognize those individuals who have honored this university for either ten, twenty, thirty, forty years. And in several cases, fifty years. So those things I enjoy so very much.

BUDSILKO: Do you think that Suffolk is overshadowed by other colleges, like BC [Boston College] and BU [Boston University]?

NELSON: Well, I think that certainly they're—and they have been institutions similar to Harvard University, that have a much longer history than us. And I guess I would phrase it in terms of when folks ask me where I went to school, or undergraduate school, of course I say that I spent four years at Boston College, but I've spent a lifetime at Suffolk University. And certainly my allegiance is to this university and all aspects of it, because I've found it to be a wonderfully caring institution.

It has been stated in the past that it was the university with a heart, in the heart of the city. And I, along with so many others, have found that to be the case. We have our special niche here on Beacon Hill, and we've certainly broadened our grasp, with campuses in Madrid and Dakar as well. But our location is such a special one, as neighbors to the state house, and with all of the cultural and social and educational amenities spread before us. This is a very special place.

BUDSILKO: Did any pro athletes come from Suffolk University?

NELSON: None that have reached the major leagues. We have had several of our former baseball players who have been drafted into the professional ranks. George Doucet [BA '59, MEd'62], whom I mentioned as the baseball coach, when I first arrived here, was a Suffolk student, and was drafted into the Kansas City organization. Bill Fulginite [BSBA '70], out of Cambridge, Massachusetts, was drafted in. Ron Corbett [BSBA '71]. We have had two players who were drafted by NBA teams. Bill Vrettas [BSBA '65], back in the early sixties, was drafted by the Boston Celtics, as was Allan Dalton, who was drafted by the Celtics, and with a team from the American Basketball Association, the Memphis Tams.

None of those individuals made it to the professional ranks, although certainly on the college—correction, at the law school level, Nick Buoniconti [JD '68, LLD '93], who received his degree from our law school, was one of the star players from the only undefeated National Football League team, the Miami Dolphins. But he received his law degree while he was still playing with the Dolphins. He didn't come directly out of his college on that.

BUDSILKO: Boston is known for sports. Which one is your favorite?

NELSON: Well, I would have to say that, as the director of athletics, whatever sport is in season for me, and I really don't say that in jest, because, although my career has been so acutely intertwined with basketball—it provided to me the opportunity to receive an athletic scholarship, and to go on to receive a college education. It provided me the opportunity to come for my work, my professional employment. In 1972, I had the good fortune to go over to Athens, Greece, to play basketball over there for a professional team, Ethni Koperare. And at that time, we had, my wife and I, had three children. A four year old, a two year old, and a six month old baby. And I came home to her and said, "How would you like to go to Greece?" And she said, "When?" And I said, "Next week." (laughs) And we did. Some would say we were young and foolish, but I like to think that we were young and adventurous on that. So I had that chance to go over and play there.

So basketball certainly has been a gift to me. But as a director of athletics, and one who oversees all of our athletic programs, regardless of the season, I take great enjoyment in witnessing their performances. I try to go to every home contest for all of our teams, so that I get to know who our student athletes are, not only in terms of what they can contribute to us in terms of athletics, but what they can contribute to us as far as being a student as well.

BUDSILKO: What are some of the responsibilities that a student athlete has?

NELSON: Student athlete, as we indicate, myself and the coaches, they have a number of responsibilities. They certainly have a responsibility to the university, as we indicate to them that they are—if they're going to be a candidate and be selected as a team member, they are in uniform twenty-four hours a day. It's not just for the two hours that they're practicing on the court, or the baseball diamond, or in the hockey rink. They carry that mantle of being a team member for whatever period of time they're representing us, because if they have Suffolk, not only literally but physically a jacket that says Suffolk University, and they're not living up to the ideals that we would like them [to], others are going to witness that. And a broad brush may be painted that that's the way all Suffolk athletes act. So certainly we stress that point.

There's only one reason that they really come to this university. And it winds up on the most important day of their collegiate career. And that is a commencement day. We certainly indicate that sports is a vehicle for them to enjoy themselves, but as the NCAA preaches, the vast majority of athletes are going to go professional in something other than a sport activity. In this instance here, we want to make sure they do well academically, so that they can move on and have wonderful careers for themselves, and be role models, as we like to believe that our coaches are for them while they're here.

BUDSILKO: What is your favorite part about your job?

NELSON: I think the aspect that every day is a different day. The fact that we have this wonderfully unique location. That up until 1991, the university had no on-campus athletic

facilities. Nineteen ninety-one, the Ridgeway Building was completed, and a full size gymnasium is located thirty feet underground. Goes out underneath the Cambridge Street sidewalk and street to give it its regulation size. But even though our men's and women's basketball teams utilize that facility for their practice, as does—practice and games—as does women's volleyball, all of our other sports require another venue.

A large aspect of my responsibilities are to make sure that we do have these various venues for our teams to both practice and play their games. In the fall, we have men's and women's soccer, and we use a number of resources. So we've been fortunate that our sister institutions have been very generous to us. MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], Harvard, UMass Boston, Tufts, they've all let us use their facilities at some point for either a practice or a game, as does the City of Boston for some of their fields. The City of Cambridge, the Town of Watertown.

Our golf team goes up to Oakley Country Club up in Belmont. Women's tennis, in the fall, and men's tennis in the spring go over to the Buckingham Browne and Nichols School up in Cambridge to practice and play their home contests. Cross country utilizes the running track over at Moakley Field over in South Boston, as well as along the Charles River, for their sessions. Ice hockey uses Boston University's Walter Brown Arena. Softball uses the Puopolo Field in the North End. Baseball uses Adams Field in Quincy. So every day is a challenging day. Where most schools may have a single baseball diamond, I like to retort that we have nineteen of them. That means I can call nineteen individuals that I have numbers for to ask if we could use their facility.

But the fact that individuals have allowed us to use facilities, the challenge and the goal out there is that, at some point in hopefully the not-too-distant future, that Suffolk University and the City of Boston will partner up in a private partnership relationship to do a field over within walking distance of our campus, so that our student athletes, in artificial surface, can call, quote unquote, that their home venue for a number of our outdoor sports.

BUDSILKO: What accomplishments are you most proud of, and why?

NELSON: I think I'm proud—and the pride also is shared with our coaches and our student athletes. Given the challenges that being a student athlete here at the university, in so many instances, having to hop in a van to go to practice or to play a game—we know it's not for everyone. That there are so many student athletes that may come from a high school, and most of them do, that have a wonderful practice and game facility right outside their front door. But at this point, we have not been blessed with that circumstance. And as a consequence of that, I take great, great pride in, over the years, being able to, through a magnanimous gesture of so many others, be able to provide venues and sites for these student athletes who want to compete and have competed so very well. Winning conference championships and involving themselves in postseason play in both the NCAA and the ECAC, the Eastern College Athletic Conference.

BUDSILKO: If you could have dinner with anyone, alive or dead, who would it be, and why?

NELSON: I'd probably say my mother, who is deceased at this time, who had such an influence in terms of encouraging me over the years, and sacrificing to make it possible for her children to have a wonderful life. My dad was a taxi driver, and my mother was a domestic. We came from very modest means. But as children growing up, we did not ever lack for love and caring. And so I hold my mom in high esteem.

BUDSILKO: Is there anything else that you would like to add that we haven't covered?

NELSON: Well, it's been forty years here at Suffolk University, and certainly I have seen a remarkable transformation of this institution. And as our president [David J. Sargent],⁹ who has been here for well over a decade beyond my forty years, he has indicated that the best is yet to come. I'm hopeful and thankful for good health that has been blessed upon me, that I might be able to continue to share in his dreams as well.

BUDSILKO: Wow. Thank you so much.

⁹ David J. Sargent graduated from Suffolk Law School in 1954, then served as a law faculty member from 1956 to 1973, dean of the law school from 1973 to 1989, and has been president of Suffolk University since 1989. OH-016 in the Moakley Oral History Project is an interview with President Sargent.

NELSON: Okay. I appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW