

# An Ivy League football pioneer's absence looms large, but 'you can't hold Buddy Teevens back'

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Over the years, it became a running joke for Archie Manning. A staffer would ask the patriarch of the first family of quarterbacks, "What would happen if Buddy couldn't attend the camp one year?"

Without missing a beat, Manning would quip: "The camp is over!"

Last weekend down in the bayous of Thibodaux, La., the best college quarterbacks in the country convened at Nicholls State University to mentor more than 1,400 young quarterbacks and receivers at the Manning Passing Academy. The camp is an institution, a rite of passage for counselors and campers alike. But while Archie, Peyton, Eli and Cooper Manning are the faces of the camp, one of its driving forces has been a fearless, larger than life Dartmouth head coach from Pembroke, Mass., named Buddy Teevens. Each year, he selects the event's 90 or so coaches, coordinates schedules and assigns the drills that keep this 27-year machine running.

And the reality of having the MPA without him caused some panic.

"It's not funny now," Manning says.

Campers roamed the field this month in shirts reading "BT STRONG" after Teevens, 66, [was critically injured in a bicycle accident](#) the evening of March 16 on state road A1A in St. Augustine, Fla.

Teevens suffered spinal cord injuries and his right leg was amputated after he was struck by a Ford F150. Teevens' bike was not illuminated, according to the state highway patrol's preliminary report, and he was not at a crosswalk nor wearing a helmet. Dartmouth assistant Sammy McCorkle will serve as interim head coach for the 2023 season as Teevens' rehabilitation continues.

And suddenly so many are reeling from the horrific injury to one of the most important presences in football you may not know. Teevens is the coach who [stared down the conventional football world at Dartmouth](#), his alma mater, and eliminated tackling at practice to make football safer. He [was the first to hire women](#) to his full-time staff. He swims and cycles – he biked across the entire country a few years back. He played an NCAA hockey Frozen Four straight from quarterbacking in the Blue-Gray Football Classic. He made

weight on the freshman high school team by putting a 5-pound weight in his jockstrap. The former head coach at Maine, Tulane and Stanford helped launch the MPA and won 117 games along the way, too.

And now this Energizer Bunny of a human is fighting for his future.

Not many people have contributed more to the game than Buddy,” NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, also a friend of Teevens, tells *The Athletic*. “It’s unique in that he’s had so many touch points into the future of the game as well as the past.”

Goodell thinks of Buddy and Kirsten Teevens like family. His twin daughters attended Dartmouth, and anytime they needed anything, Kirsten was there for them, dating back to the girls’ first day on campus. It was an emotional one for both Goodell and his wife, Jane, as each drove a car with a daughter for the drop-off day.

“My wife was crying so hard that she had to pull over, and guess who pulls up next to her but Kirsten,” Goodell says. “We were literally 50 feet from their house by chance. And she just said, ‘Oh, please come in, please come in.’”

After Teevens’ accident, Goodell was able to reciprocate that generosity in a sense. In May, when Goodell attended his daughters’ graduation, he also scheduled time to visit with the Dartmouth football team. He suspected those young men, much like he was, were reeling without Teevens.

“He’s one of the best people I know,” Goodell says.

Goodell and Teevens first crossed paths more than a decade ago because of Teevens’ curiosity regarding some of the NFL’s health and safety policies. Over the course of his career, Teevens has tried to improve football. “I love football,” Teevens told Congress during a hearing on concussions in youth sports in 2016. “But I love my players more.”

“He saw that in order for the game to survive and be successful that they needed to to really address that safety issue,” says Delaware Gov. John Carney, Teevens’ teammate at Dartmouth in the 1970s.

Teevens was the first college football coach to eliminate live tackling from practices, believing it a key step to addressing concerns of head trauma and other injuries in a sport known for its violent collisions. Instead, Buddy opted to rely on the Mobile Virtual Player (MVP), a remote-controlled tackling dummy — a concept he baked up alongside former classmate John Currier in the spring of 2011. The robot could teach proper tackling technique without adding to the wear and tear that football players traditionally endure. The

practice — which his peer coaches initially told him would cost him his job — has become more widespread at both the collegiate and professional level.

“I just don’t think many people had the imagination and guts to do that,” Harvard football coach and lifelong friend Tim Murphy says.

Cornerback Vernon Harris, a two-time first-team All-Ivy League selection who became the first Dartmouth player to start 40 games, played for Teevens from 2012-2015. Harris, who eventually played for the Kansas City Chiefs and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, says he initially was skeptical of the strategy. But at practice, he and his teammates worked on their form, position and timing just as they always had — they just stopped before bringing their teammate all the way down to the ground.

“We harped on it and worked on so many drills that by the time we got into games, it was just like second nature,” Harris says. “And because we weren’t beating each other up on the football field, we were definitely a lot fresher than most teams toward the end of the season.”

In 2015, Harris helped Dartmouth win its first Ivy League title in 19 years. In the past seven seasons, the Big Green have finished first or second in the conference five times. As Harris puts it, “The proof is in the pudding.”

Teevens also has been a trailblazer in hiring, opening doors for female football coaches. In 2018, Teevens hired Callie Brownson to be an offensive quality control coach — the first known full-time female football coach at the Division I level. He met her at the Manning Passing Academy, and she made such an impression on his Dartmouth players during preseason camp they asked him to hire her. She’s now the Cleveland Browns’ assistant receivers coach.

Jennifer King, whom Teevens hired as an offensive assistant in 2019, is now the Washington Commanders’ assistant running backs coach, the first Black female full-time assistant coach in NFL history. Teevens has worked to identify and develop quality candidates and takes part in the NFL Women’s Careers in Football Forum at the scouting combine each year in Indianapolis.

“I love that he just says, ‘This is the right thing to do, and we’re gonna do it,’” Dartmouth athletic director Mike Harrity says. “He exemplifies what college athletics can be at its best ... and people will tell you that he’s one of the best educators that this campus has ever seen. His classroom just happens to be the football field.”

Those close to Teevens see his impact every day, but Goodell wanted to make sure the world saw it, too. In the leadup to the 2023 NFL Draft, he insisted that he’d deliver a message

to Teevens and Kirsten and everyone else who loved them. Moments before he put the Chicago Bears on the clock with the No. 1 pick, Goodell stood at the podium and delivered a nationally televised message to the man he considers family.

“His impact both on college football and the NFL has been enormous,” Goodell said. “He has been a leader in making our game safer through breakthrough innovations. He is a pioneer in hiring female coaches, two of whom are currently coaching in the NFL.

“I know Buddy and his wife, Kirsten, are watching the draft tonight, and we send our love and best wishes to both of them. Thank you, Coach. Thank you for all you do for the game of football. We look forward to seeing you back at Dartmouth.”

In the late ‘70s, Teevens was a dual-sport athlete at Dartmouth, jumping from football in the fall to ice hockey in the winter. He quarterbacked and then turned himself into an enforcer. It was grueling, physically, but a challenge that suited Teevens and, Carney notes with a dash of irony, did not necessarily suggest that Teevens would go on to become a coach who voluntarily limits physical contact. “What you have is a quarterback with a hockey player’s mentality,” says Jeff Hawkins, an associate athletic director at Oregon and friend of Teevens.

Fearless is the key word, Carney said. Fearless in the way Teevens faced down football norms, or fearless in the way he and Murphy got into constant trouble in school, going off ski jumps in a sled or sticking a chewed-up orange jelly bean inside of a frog and asking the teacher what it was. These were, of course, Teevens’ ideas.

Later in life, Teevens turned into what close friends describe as a workout fanatic and avid cyclist. “Buddy is the best conditioned 60-year-old man in America,” Manning says. Part of the great tragedy of Teevens’ accident, they say, is that it occurred on a bike.

Because Teevens had all these plans to keep on living. On their 60th birthdays, Teevens and Murphy reunited on the edge of the Jones River Bridge in Kingston, Mass. They made this jump, a rite of passage in the town, together as 13-year-old boys. Six years ago, they made the jump again.

“Buddy is a natural leader,” Murphy says. “It’s that simple. I would have followed him anywhere, and I did, even if it wasn’t the wisest thing to do.”

Carney says Teevens lives his life with a kind-hearted independence, the type of teammate who served as the glue keeping everyone together. Now the head coach of his alma mater for nearly two decades, Teevens does the same — though he uses his voice more forcefully. He’s an elder statesman of the Ivy League, a leader of a group that describes itself as uniquely close and collegial. His peers credit him for cultivating that type of community.

His rivals, like Murphy and Princeton coach Bob Surace, can't say a bad word about him. After the 2018 Dartmouth game against Princeton, a dramatic 14-9 loss that kept the Big Green out of the FCS playoffs, Teevens jumped off his team's bus to grab Surace and say, "I'm so proud I coached in that game against you."

"He always has the right words to say, the right thing to say, and makes the person across from him feel so special," Surace says.

When former Dartmouth receiver Tim McManus felt a pull toward a career in medicine, the first person he told was Teevens. And, of course, Teevens knew exactly what to do.

"He introduced me to a friend of a friend who ended up being one of the heads of cardiology at Stanford, and that person told me to meet a guy who was from Minnesota, like me," McManus says. "And he opened up a different world to me."

McManus, now an orthopedic surgery resident, wasn't the only one who benefitted from Teevens' extensive Rolodex. He's watched former teammates, years after their time at Dartmouth, call Teevens to pick his brain about a potential career change — and he'd always know the right introduction to make. Didn't matter if it was law, politics or medicine, in New York City, Los Angeles or Minneapolis.

"His contact list, I think, could rival the pope or anyone in the White House," McManus says.

Teevens knows the team's bus drivers and brings them team gear. People know he cares, so they care, too.

"In the heart of the winter, if there were recruits coming in for visits," Harris says, "he would wake up early in the morning — before we'd even have morning lifts — to dig out the logo of the field from the snow. There was nothing that was above him. And he wanted us to understand that as well."

Just last season, with a rash of injuries to his football team, Teevens was faced with needing to burn redshirts for a few freshmen. He pulled each first-year player into a one-on-one meeting to reinforce that they could lose a year of eligibility and could jeopardize plans for getting a master's degree paid for if they played in more than four games. He wanted each player to make an informed decision.

"I've never heard a head football coach speak like that," says Harrity, the AD. "He let them decide without any guilt."

Those conversations are not always easy or straightforward. McManus, for one, remembers the conversation they had after he suffered too many concussions during his final season. “He was pretty instrumental in terms of letting me let go of football,” McManus says.

Even though Teevens certainly has a knack for relationship-building, he’s intentional about it, too. He keeps up with pop culture so he can connect with his players – he went out of his way to meet Lizzo at the Super Bowl. Goodell found it funny, because Teevens is typically shy in settings like that. But Teevens grabbed Jane and asked for an introduction to the pop superstar.

By the time Goodell turned around, Teevens and Lizzo were smiling for a photo together. He chuckled.

As for Dartmouth, McCorkle, who has coached with Teevens for 18 of his 23 seasons there, will lead the program, allowing Buddy to focus on his rehabilitation. Harrity made the decision along with Kirsten.

Though McCorkle is someone whom Teevens has been grooming to become a head coach, there’s a gaping hole where Teevens should be. Harrity feels the loss every day. So much so that he’s twice slid into Teevens’ office just to feel the coach’s energy.

“I’ve gone over late at night, like 8 or 9, when no one’s in the football offices, and I cry,” Harrity says. “I cry and I think about him. I’ve actually written him some notes that I haven’t given him yet. But he just means the world to me, and ... just ... we’ve missed him so much.”

Murphy was with Teevens 24 hours before the accident, as their families celebrated St. Patrick’s Day together in Naples, Fla. Then Murphy got the call from Teevens’ daughter, Lindsey, and he hopped in the car to drive 320 miles to Jacksonville without stopping. It didn’t feel right to see somebody so full of life in that condition. “No matter how intangibly tough and gritty you are,” Murphy says, “it’s something that is really challenging.”

But then the people close to him remember who they’re talking about. This is one person who isn’t scared of the road ahead.

“I’ll tell you right now, Buddy Teevens is gonna come back from this,” Hawkins says. “And he’ll be able to compete again. You watch. You can’t hold Buddy Teevens back.”