John Stiegelmeier—Leader of the football family
John Stiegelmeier had a role in the 1979 SDSU football team, the school’s first football team to qualify for postseason competition.

But you won’t find him on the roster. You won’t find him on the roster in the prior years either. In fact, Stiegelmeier was never on the roster at SDSU, or any other college for that matter. The man who is on the verge of becoming the winningest football coach at SDSU never played a down of college football.

It’s a rare trait among Division I coaches, but he is not without good company: Mike Leach (Washington State), Charlie Weis (Kansas), David Cutcliffe (Duke) and Hugh Freeze (Old Miss).

Stiegelmeier knows his path to 111 wins as a head coach at SDSU is unique, but “I totally believe God made me to be a coach. That’s the way I’m wired.”

Don’t interpret that to mean type A, intense, focused, driven. Of course, he has a measure of those qualities. You can’t lead 100 young men in a punishing physical sport without being part drill sergeant. But embodying “the Jackrabbit way” also encompasses family, individuality, respect and dedication.

What makes Stiegelmeier unique among his peers is his servant heart.

Luke Meadows, who served under Stiegelmeier for 10 years and has since coached at Florida Atlantic and Southern Mississippi, said, “In a profession filled with egos as large as the facilities being built, he is the exception and not the rule. He treats all of his players like they were his own son, and he reminds his coaches daily to do the same.

“Stig is a servant leader. He doesn’t have to motivate the student-athlete through the volume of his voice or the use of colorful words. The kids are motivated to do what he asks because they know he truly cares for them. He was made to be a coach but more importantly he was made to be a coach at SDSU.”

Raised on wheat, football fields

Stiegelmeier will cite a number of fellow coaches who made him who he is now, but he points to his father Milton, a farmer, as the most influential one in his life.

“I didn’t grow up in a sports family. I grew up in a farm family. I lived a very sheltered and conservative life. I spent a lot time in the field farming with my dad.”
It was in those fields northwest of Selby in north-central South Dakota that Stiegelmeier developed his work ethic, dedication and stewardship. He respected his father and enjoyed farming, but he loved sports. “I spent every waking moment trying to play sports—football and basketball. My dad didn’t let me run track. He said I was too slow and put me on the tractor. That was verbatim, too,” said Stiegelmeier, who was the middle of three boys.

He played fullback and linebacker for the Selby Lions, which had an eight-man team his sophomore year and a nine-man team as a junior.

But being passionate about football doesn’t make one a college prospect. “I thought about walking on, but not at this level,” he said of SDSU. His brother, who is three years older, went to State for ag, so Stiegelmeier followed him. The youngest Stiegelmeier also attended SDSU.

Envisioned coaching high school
John Stiegelmeier enrolled with the aim of becoming a math teacher and a coach.

“My vision was to go back to a town near Selby, coach one sport and help Dad in the summer.”

That changed in Stiegelmeier’s junior year (1977) when he took a class on teaching football that was instructed by John Gregory, the head football coach at State. That was in the Division II days when the athletic and physical education departments were one and it was common for coaches to also teach.

Gregory “invited any of us to be student coaches.” Stiegelmeier and one other accepted.

While called a coach, the position was more like a manager. He was a go-fer and helped set up equipment for practice. However, he did get to help run the scout team, and “I fell in love with the strategy and depth at which a person could be a football coach. My personality is that I thrive on strategy, so I tried to observe as much as I could.”

A life-shaping question
Stiegelmeier was back the next year and asked Gregory a life-shaping question: What does it take to become a college football coach? Gregory’s answer: Get a master’s degree in physical education and don’t get married.

Not exactly the answer Stiegelmeier was looking for, given he had just become engaged to Laurie Huke, the daughter of a Lutheran pastor and his high school sweetheart. She was two years younger than her future husband and a student at Augustana College.

The couple married May 25, 1979, and Stiegelmeier stayed an extra semester at State so he could double major in math and physical education.

Even though Stiegelmeier rejected Gregory’s marital advice, he clung to the dream of being a college football coach. In fact, he had jokingly promised his college buddies tickets to the Rose Bowl. “My vision was to coach in the Rose Bowl.”

To fulfill that vision, he approached Gregory again, who got him a job as a graduate assistant at Northern Iowa, where Stiegelmeier earned his master’s degree in physical education and Laurie finished her bachelor’s degree.

An influential acquaintance
After two years in Cedar Falls, Stiegelmeier headed to Eau Claire, Wisconsin, where he was an assistant coach for three years at Eau Claire North, which had a “pretty average football program.” Despite that, he was able to land a job as defensive coordinator at Northern State in Aberdeen.

Stiegelmeier sees that as evidence of God’s hand on him. At Northern, he worked with Jim Kretchman, who was both linebacker coach and athletic director.

“He was the most influential coach in my life. He was twice my age, very wise, patient and a godly man,” Stiegelmeier said of Kretchman, who was a star player for NSU, its athletic director for 18 years and was elected to the South Dakota Sports Hall of Fame.

Stiegelmeier spent three seasons at Northern. Then he headed back to Wisconsin with visions of Pasadena still in his mind. At age 31, Stiegelmeier became a graduate assistant at the University of Wisconsin, which then was a cellar-dweller program but competed in a league that sent its champion to the Rose Bowl.

A life-changing season
The 1987 season was a life changer for Stiegelmeier and not just because the Badgers went 3-8.

He explained, “If you want family to be important, that’s a tough environment for that to happen. The intensity, travel and size of the program work against family. We reset our goals based on family, faith and football. We came back to SDSU” after one year in Wisconsin.

Stiegelmeier returned to his alma mater in July 1988 to become Wayne Haensel’s secondary coach and recruiting coordinator. After Haensel stepped down following the 1990 season, Stiegelmeier was elevated to defensive coordinator under new coach Mike Daly, who had been the defensive coordinator under Gregory as well as at Wisconsin when Stiegelmeier was there.

Finally, head coach
When Daly resigned after the 1996 season, Stiegelmeier became his successor; a head coach for the first time in nearly 20 years of coaching.

“Many coaches feel they’re prepared to be a head football coach. I don’t think anybody understands the changes that are involved in being a head coach. I’d been here nine years. I still had to interview for the job. My wife and I turned down another job waiting and praying that we would get this job,” he said.

Because of his experience at Wisconsin, Stiegelmeier didn’t see the position as a stepping stone.
“We didn’t want to move to move. We didn’t want to climb the ladder. When I say we, I am referring to my wife. She’s the head coach. The vision was not the next job but to win a national championship at South Dakota State,” Stiegelmeier said.

So with Laurie’s support and work ethic infused by his father, coach rolled up his sleeves and sought that title.

On the heels of a record
There has been no national title. In fact, there has only been one conference title in Stiegelmeier’s 17 years as head coach. But he takes a record of 111-81 into his 18th season. That leaves him just two wins behind Ralph Ginn, who had a 113-89-9 mark in 22 seasons (1947-68).

Ginn coached during what is considered the golden era of football at State. His 1950 squad is still the only undefeated team in school history. Ginn’s team won nine North Central Conference titles, all between 1949 and 1963.

Stiegelmeier never met Ginn. But “I’ve talked to a lot of people who played for him. Respect, utmost respect for him. You’re talking about some guys who are fairly old and they still talk with a ton of respect about him,” Stiegelmeier said.

Meadows sees that same kind of respect for Stiegelmeier. “Stig is a difference maker. He has impacted the lives of countless players, coaches and families.

“Everyone needs a standard to hold themselves up to and Stig has been my standard to emulate as a coach, a family man and in my faith. The only thing I don’t try to copy is his fashion sense of wearing socks and sandals. “

Family outranks mantelpiece trophy
An increasing emphasis on creating a football family is the greatest shift Stiegelmeier has made in his 26 years on staff.

“I work a lot harder getting to know the players. Once a week the assistant coaches have half-hour meetings with their position players and they can’t talk about football.”

Meadows recalled, “We used to have Sunday meetings with our position groups where we could talk about anything but football. He told us that we needed to know more about our players than their 40 time.”

As a result, coaches learn family histories, dreams and goals, and hidden talents.

“What is family?” asked Stiegelmeier, whose own family numbers two sons and two daughters. “It’s unconditional love, acceptance, discipline. It’s knowing the person inside and out.”

And it’s also knowing their birthdays. “Each player gets a 10-cent Snickers bar on his birthday. It’s symbolic of a celebration. We just invest in our players in a real way.”

Zach Zenner, an All-American senior running back from Eagan, Minnesota, said, “The sense of family on our team is instilled from day one as a Jackrabbit football player and it begins with Coach Stig’s attitude toward football and life in general. Even the word ‘family’ is used a lot with Coach Stig.

I can’t count the amount of times I’ve heard a phrase like ‘our football family’ or ‘this family.’

“His attitude and talk about family is also backed up with action. Many a player has missed practice due to a funeral or family emergency because, to coach, that’s more important.”

As a result, when Stiegelmeier’s career is evaluated, it is not the coaching honors, playoff appearances or career wins that define the coach.

Meadows said, “Of all his accomplishments at SDSU, the most important to him are the letters and notes he receives from former players thanking him for how he affected their lives. SDSU and the coaching profession are very fortunate to have an ambassador like Coach Stig.”

“My greatest highlight is when a past player comes back and he talks about how special his experience was here. That is beyond a national championship for me.”

Unlike the national title, this is not a vision waiting to be fulfilled. Between visits in the office hallways, phone calls and emails, it happens “humblingly often.”

Dave Graves