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**AJ Henderson - Georgia Southern**

## **Southern Staff Stories: John Murphy, Men's Soccer**

**Within his 30-year coaching journey to Statesboro, Coach Murphy has influenced - and been influenced by - soccer's top names**

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For Georgia Southern Head Men's Soccer Coach John Murphy, the road to Statesboro was a long and winding one. Beginning as a fresh-faced goalkeeper at Massasoit Community College in 1985, Coach Murphy embarked on a journey that has taken 30 years to bring the Quincy, Mass., native to the Eagles.

Along the way, Murphy has influenced - and been influenced by - some of college and professional soccer's biggest names in the coaching profession. And his unique mix of experience at both levels has brought success to the Georgia Southern men's soccer program as he delivered the first conference championship in the 40-year history of the Eagles in 2016, while already ranking as the second-winningest head coach by percentage.

How exactly did that journey start? And just how far does the reach of Coach Murphy's experiences extend throughout the professional and collegiate coaching world?

A lot of collegiate players think about entering the coaching profession while still in school. But for Coach Murphy, it came about even earlier than that.

"When I was still in high school, I assisted my little brother's team," Coach Murphy said. "He was playing on a U-12, and I was helping the head coach with that team while I was still a senior. But my mother was a teacher. My sister's a teacher now, and my wife is a teacher. I tend to think that I come from that kind of family, growing up in that home and around that kind of environment."

The two years that Coach Murphy played at Massasoit included a lot of success on the pitch - including contributing to the 1986 NJCAA National Championship squad. So it makes sense that his very first head collegiate coach became one of Coach Murphy's early influencers.

"My college coach had a big impact on me," Coach Murphy said. "Nick Palantzas was a top coach who won two National Championships at Massasoit. He was someone who had a lot of charisma, and a very powerful personality. He really was my first mentor, someone I looked up to. So as soon as I stopped playing, I started assisting him."

"In all, four guys I played with in college, went on to coach. Nick had the same impact on them as he had on me," Coach Murphy said. "Coaching is something I've seen up close that can make a big impact on a group of people, and it started right there at Massasoit."

It did not take long for Coach Murphy to get his first head coaching job, taking over his alma mater in 1994 - and also to take away his first coaching lesson.

"Like everything in life, you learn more from the tough lessons than you do from the good ones," Coach Murphy said. "If you have a clear mindset, you tend to remember the good things in a positive way, and tend to forget the negative things in a bad way. It sounds contradictory, but it's not. We lost a National Championship semifinal match my first year as a head coach - we were up 2-0, and lost 3-2. Even now, it stings a little bit, but it doesn't take away the accomplishments that we had that first year. I learned a lot from that game, like how to manage a lead, use of time and substitutions. But it kills me, because I was 27 years old. If I knew half as much then, as I knew now, I'd be wearing a National Championship ring."

Every step of the way from that first season at Massasoit to Georgia Southern brought different challenges, different experiences - and different contacts.



“It goes back to asking questions,” Coach Murphy said. “Greg Vanney, who played for me at Colorado and is now the head coach for Toronto FC - I distinctly remember Greg pulling me up in one of my drills, asking about the space. I remember thinking to myself, ‘He’s right about that.’ I adjusted the exercise and the exercise went much better. He didn’t do it in a disrespectful way, he was just making an observation. So it doesn’t surprise me that he’s now a head coach, and a successful one at that.”

In addition to Vanney, several other former players of Murphy’s during his time in the MLS are now head coaches at the MLS level.

“Robin was our captain at the Columbus Crew,” Coach Murphy said. “Now he’s the head coach at the Colorado Rapids, and I’m not surprised at all. When he walks in the room, he has a presence, that is similar to Greg. Also Luchi Gonzales, a very good player who won the Hermann Trophy at SMU. He played seven or eight years in MLS, and is now the head coach at FC Dallas.”

Others are waiting their turn as assistants at the MLS level, like goalkeepers coach Chris Sharpe at Colorado or Adin Brown at Chicago Fire.

And still others, like Coach Murphy, decided to dip their toes back into the collegiate game. For Coach Murphy, that came in the 2010 season, when he rejoined his former head coach at Brown, Mike Noonan, at Clemson as an assistant. That led to his third head coaching job at Anderson (SC), where he led the Trojans to the SAC title in 2012 and an NCAA Championships berth in 2013.

The jump to the NCAA Division I head coaching level came after he spent time at Boston College as an assistant coach for two seasons before joining the Eagles in Statesboro.



Some of the former professional and college players of Coach Murphy's who are now in the collegiate game include Johnny Torres (NE Revolution - Creighton), Brian Maisonneuve (Columbus Crew - Ohio State) and Eric Poque (NE Revolution - Oakland (Mich.)). Others have even moved over to the women's game, like Ross Paule (Columbus Crew - Creighton women) and some even jumped sports, like former Assumption College player Mike Roux, who is now an assistant women's basketball coach at Harvard.

Having such a robust network of former players and coaches now filling the professional and coaching ranks has helped Coach Murphy in his coaching journey, and in turn has allowed Coach Murphy to help others in their journey.

"For any young coach in sports, the willingness to sacrifice time and money for connections and experience is key," Coach Murphy said. "Another saying I like to use is, 'dig your well before you're thirsty.' You have to invest in people, and invest in relationships when you don't need anything. I'm very cognizant of my relationships with people. I'm telling them, 'I'm there, the phone is there.' And I can tell that I'm getting older, because my phone rings more, with people calling and asking for advice."

One such call came from Steve Ralston, who played for the New England Revolution. While an assistant coach at San Jose in 2016, he reached out to Coach Murphy prior to the MLS draft.

"He called to ask me about a goalkeeper, Andrew Tarbell, who I recruited and coached at Clemson," Coach Murphy said. "He called me the day before the draft and asked me what I thought. I said, 'The kid's a slam dunk, you have to draft him.' They drafted him



the next day in the next day [Round 1, Pick 8]. Now that call wasn't the reason, but I think I influenced him. He texted me afterwards to say thank you, and Andrew's gone on and done fantastic."

Having worked both collegiately and professionally for a good amount of time, Coach Murphy believes the two can work together despite some of the differences inherent to the college/pro soccer relationship.

"I do feel like there's a disconnect in this country, where we don't have the connection between the college game and the pro game," Coach Murphy said. "Our college system here, there are countries like Germany and England who wish they had our system. There's something about going to college that's going to give a player the foundation they need to go on and be a successful professional player. MLS has grown exponentially, and I'm very proud of how it has grown. And the USL has filled in the gaps in between. But I feel the college game still has an important part to play in this country. We're eventually going to find our place in the scheme of things. I've seen both sides, and I can understand where pro coaches are coming from, but when you can provide kids an education, and then they can go play professionally, you're giving them an advantage."

[I feel the college game still has an important part to play in this country."](#)



The advice that Coach Murphy has given - and received - throughout his distinguished career has helped shape him into the type of coach he is today. And while most of the focus is on the student-athletes that play for him, Coach Murphy still passes on that advice to his current assistant coaches and players who want to follow him into the profession.

"I try to mentor my assistants that it's getting more and more competitive out there," Coach Murphy said. "I did very well as an assistant by specializing within my specialty. I was a goalkeepers coach, but also a recruiter and a camps coordinator. I made myself more valuable, and that's what you have to do. Just sitting around, waiting for a head coach to tell you what to do - you're not making yourself valuable. The guys I worked with in the pros, they gave me a lot of autonomy. I try to do the same thing with the guys I'm working with."

And the best piece of advice he's given with regards to coaching?

"I say it all the time to my assistants, that in the back of your mind, you may be thinking, 'I would do this a different way.' I'm here to tell you, 'I know'. We're not twins," Coach Murphy said. "Of course you would do it in a slightly different way. But that's the challenge of being an assistant. Taking what the head coach is telling you, having your own opinion about it, then giving it. Sometimes the head coach will take it on and use it, and sometimes not. But you can't take that as a slap in the face. Ultimately, the head coach has to make that decision."

As Georgia Southern men's soccer embarks on a truly unique Fall 2020 season, Coach Murphy is appreciative of the number of former coaches and players he has worked with to help him get to where he is today. Because the success of coaching is not simply measured by the results on the pitch. It's measured by the success in life of the student-athletes, coaches and people that have been touched by the programs he has had a significant role in over the last 30 years.