Interview with Vernon McDonald

Interviewer: Howard Baker
Transcriber: Howard Baker
Date of Interview: April 25, 1986
Location: Coach McDonald’s Office, 113 Jowers Center, Texas State University, San Marcos, TX

Begin Tape 1, Side 1

Howard Baker: This is an interview with Vernon McDonald, Assistant Athletic Director at Southwest Texas State University. Coach McDonald received a Bachelor of Science degree from Southwest Texas State in 1952. In 1954, he completed his master’s work. During his undergraduate years, Coach McDonald played basketball for Southwest Texas State and later on became head coach. This interview is being conducted on April 25, 1986, in Coach McDonald’s office in 113 Jowers Center. The interviewer is Howard Baker representing the Southwest Texas State University history department.

Coach McDonald, you were real close to Milton Jowers down here. Can you tell me little bit about how he was as a coach and a person?

Vernon McDonald: What I would like to talk about him probably most of all. I came to Southwest Texas in 1949. I went to junior college at Texas Lutheran College, and when I got out of school, I had to weed out all my scholarships, which were one, (laughs) and when I came to Southwest Texas, Coach Jowers really saw something in the way I played basketball, and I don’t know today what it was, but he wanted me to play for the Bobcats. And I came over here, and I played three years for Coach Jowers. And then after I graduated, I went to Eagle Pass one year, which was in 1952–53, that school year, and then I came back to Southwest Texas in 1953, and I’ve been here ever since. I became very, very close to Coach Jowers. He was my coach when I played, and he was my boss when I coached, and he was my friend when I was in need. He was my everything, and I’ve been very close to Coach Jowers for many, many years. I could tell you a million stories about him: good ones and bad ones and funny ones, and I think without a doubt he’s one of the greatest coaches that ever lived. It’s a shame he didn’t coach at a big school of which he had many opportunities. I know that, I personally know [The] University of Texas talked to him about the job in Austin five different times, and he didn’t want to coach at a big school.

And I know that Texas A&M University talked to him several times, and this may be a little story that might be interesting: we were in the national tournament in Kansas City one year, and I don’t know what year it was, but Bear Bryant was the football coach at Texas A&M University.
He was also the athletic director, and we were having a team meeting in the hotel in Kansas City, which is where they used to hold the national tournament for the NAIA [National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics] schools, and the phone rang, and I answered it. They said, Long distance for Milton Jowers. And I informed them that we were in a team meeting, and it was urgent, and so I didn’t know who he was, so I called Coach Jowers, and he was not too happy that they had interfered with his talk, and so he came over and said “Hello,” and from hearing what Coach Jowers said, the conversation went something like this: the person on the other end said he was Bear, and Coach Jowers wasn’t thinking about anybody, he asked “Bear who?” and this man said, “This is Paul ‘Bear’ Bryant, Athletic Director at Texas A&M University.” Coach Jowers said, “Hello, Bear,” (laughs). We all thought that was very humorous he didn’t know who called him, and when he found out he said, “Hello, Bear.” So, Coach Bryant said he would like him to be the basketball coach at Texas A&M, and Coach Jowers said he had only one desire and that was to coach Southwest Texas this year, win the national tournament, and “I have no desire to talk to anyone about another job,” and Bear said, “I will come up there in my private jet and bring you to A&M, and you’ll be back within four hours in Kansas City.” And Coach Jowers said he was not interested in any job other than the one at Southwest Texas for now, for sure. So after a little discussion, he said, “Coach, I’m very busy, and I don’t have time to talk about this anymore,” and hung up on Paul Bryant. Needless to say, once he got back home there was another contact made, but he did not want to coach at A&M, and so I always thought that was very humorous he didn’t know who he was.

But he had the chance to go there a few times and the University of Arkansas offered him the job I know one time. Lamar University, which I guess right now, is a little better basketball school than we are, they offered him the job a time or two, so he could have gone to a lot of schools, but Coach Jowers wanted to coach at Southwest Texas, which was his home. He played here; he was an all-conference football and basketball player here. He was, again, a tremendous basketball coach that was a great impact on Southwest Texas, and particularly made a great impact on me, Vernon McDonald. I wouldn’t take anything for playing for him. See, I was a terrible athlete, I’ll tell you another story. I was white, and I was slow, and I could shoot the ball pretty good, and I think I had a good head on my shoulders, but you know when you are slow and in basketball, you need to be quick and everything, and no one wanted me. I talked to all kind of coaches, and no one, no one wanted me, except Coach Jowers, and I came to Southwest Texas, and I made all-conference all three years I was here, and I think it mostly was because of him because I did just what he said to do. That’s probably why he wanted me to come back here to coach. I believe if he said throw that ball out the window, I would have thrown that thing right out the window. By doing what he said, I know that I was a good basketball player and, again, I’m not bragging at all because I knew I wasn’t a very good talent, but by doing what the coach said to the best of my ability, he made me a good basketball player. See, I wanted to go to A&M when I got out. I thought that would be hot stuff to play for the Aggies, and they didn’t want me, and I got a score book up here that I could show you right now. We played them twice, on a Friday night and a
Saturday night, and we beat them both times we played them (laughs), and they won the Southwest Conference. That was a big thrill of my life to play the Aggies and kick their ole fannies. They didn’t think I could play, which they were right, I couldn’t, but by playing for Coach Jowers, he made everybody better than they were.

We had a bunch of boys on our team that no one wanted. That’s really right. We had Bookie Brymer. I was telling you the other day about some of these boys. We had Bookie Brymer from around Corpus. He, well, he lived in a town called Woodsboro. He just had long arms and couldn’t shoot very well but could guard real well. We gave him a half-scholarship. We had Slim Berry who was a good football player, so we gave him a half-basketball and half-football scholarship and got him. None of our players were very good, but together, by doing what Coach Jowers said, he made us, really and truly, made us a great basketball team. And I still say we may have been one of the best small college teams that ever was. We won thirty-one games and lost one, which is darn good. We got beat in a double-overtime in a game that we should have won. We didn’t play real well; I played terrible. Bookie Brymer wasn’t even there. He went to take his Navy physical. He wasn’t even at the game, so I was playing terrible, I was one guard, and Bookie was the other guard, he wasn’t even there. We got beat in a double-overtime by a team called Southwest Missouri with a bunch of guys nobody wanted. And can I tell you another story about Spider Maze? We had a boy that was our center named J.C. Maze. Am I talking too much?

Baker: No.

McDonald: We had another boy named J.C. Maze who was about six feet six tall in 1951, ’49, a guy 6’6 was tall, and now 6’6 play guards.

Baker: Guards, yeah.

McDonald: Or they can’t even play, they are too short. Well, this boy named J.C. Maze, we finally called Spider Maze. He graduated from high school at Livingston, Texas, and he graduated in January; a mid-term graduate. And he played basketball his senior year and was on the “B” team, and you realize that the “B” team is supposed to help the “A” team. Well, he was so sorry they just put him on the “B” team just to let him go out to play a little bit. He was terrible. Well, he was 6’6, and he went to Kilgore Junior College, and he went to University of Houston and Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin and tried out. And they all laughed and sent him on his way. “You can’t play, son.” So he came to Southwest Texas and Coach Jowers did not laugh, but he said, “Son, you can’t play.” And then Coach Jowers said, “You are the tallest man that we’d have, and if you were to come, you might help us one day, but you don’t have much ability, the only thing you have is size,” and then he said, “I cannot give a scholarship.” And Coach Jowers left and went to town, and he came back in about an hour, and J.C. Maze was still sitting in the same chair crying, and he told Coach that he came from a family of ten people,
and “I have to have a scholarship,” or he couldn’t go to college. Coach Jowers said, “Shut up blubbery boy, if you won’t cry, I’ll give you a scholarship from January to May, a half-year scholarship, but you must work out every day.” And he said, “Coach, I’ll do anything because I’ve got to have a scholarship.” And so he came that half-year and worked out every day. He worked so much that he stayed Easter and worked out Easter. Coach Jowers gave him a key to the gym, and he made him jump rope, and he ran, and he jumped rope, and he ran, and he shot crip shots, and he ran, and that’s all he did day after day. Couldn’t play, couldn’t play. And so then that was in 1948. Then the next year, full year, which was 1948–49, he came back and Coach gave him a scholarship, but he was awful. He played a little bit, but everybody made fun of him because he kept falling down. He was awkward and clumsy, and he fell down, and they laughed at him. Other teams laughed at him, and that was the year before all of us half-scholarship boys came. Bookie and Slim and Bob Beaty and me, we were all junior colleges’ guys or somewhere else. Then the next year, which was J.C. or Spider Maze’s second year, that was our first year here, and everybody quit laughing at J.C., this Maze boy, because we won the conference that year. We tied for the conference, and Spider made first team all-conference, this guy nobody wanted, he made first team all-conference. In the second year, which was my junior year at Southwest Texas, he was voted the most valuable player in the Lone Star Conference. In his senior year, we went to Kansas City, and we ended up with a 31–1 record. He lacked one vote of being the most valuable player in America, and Red Auerbach, who everybody knows of the Boston Celtics, came up to Spider, and Spider and I were roommates, and he came up to our room and told him he wanted him to sign to a contract with the Boston Celtics. He said, “You are the best rebounder in the United States.” And he said he would do whatever Coach Jowers said. So he talked to Coach and Coach said, “Nah, you can’t play pro-ball,” and he wouldn’t let him sign, and so he told Coach Auerbach, “No, I won’t play because Coach Jowers told me not to.” And that’s why Coach Jowers was so great. He made me a good basketball player, and I know I wasn’t good, and Spider and nobody wanted him, nobody wanted him (laughs), and yet when he gets through, Red Auerbach told him he was the best rebounder in America.

Baker: Man, I’ll tell you what.

McDonald: Super. Let me tell you a story about when I was coaching. The sad story I told you the other day.

Baker: Okay, all right.

McDonald: Coach Jowers died in 1972. He died of cancer. Coach Jowers was about 6 feet tall, weighed about 220 pounds. He was very much “man.” Big thick chest, wide, broad, thick, a tremendous leader, tremendous size, tremendous pride in his physical being. And when he got cancer, he shrunk up to nothing, and when he died, he weighed about 80–85 pounds. The last month of his life, he was in MD Anderson Hospital in Houston, and I used to go down there about once a week just to talk to him. Coach Jowers had cancer real bad, and he couldn’t even
see or talk very well or anything. But I wanted to still be with him. Just before he died, we lost a ballgame on Friday night, and we lost another game on Saturday night. We had played two basketball games before the season had started, but after the Saturday night game I got in my car and drove to Houston. I just wanted to see him because I knew he was in bad shape and I wanted to see him before he passed away. And so I got there about two or three o’clock in the morning. Since Coach Jowers was so bad, it made no difference when you visited him because he was, you know, day or night, he was just kind of there. And so I walked into his room, and his wife was sitting there, Mrs. Jowers, who, by the way, still lives in San Marcos. She said, “Milton, here’s Mack.” And he says, “Come here.” And I went over to the bed, and I said, “Hello, Coach, what can I do for you?” And Coach Jowers said, “You can’t do anything for me, but the main question is, what can I do for you, you are 0–2.” Even though he was just about to die, he was still trying to figure out how to help ole Southwest Texas win. He was a tremendous guy, totally dedicated.

He wasn’t just; he wasn’t just a basketball man. See, Coach Jowers was, I believe, a history major. He was a very brilliant guy. When he came in a room at Southwest Texas, when he, we used to go to a coffee bar almost every morning, when he came into the room, he totally dominated the room, and I don’t mean “smart aleck” or anything, but when he had his say, President Flowers and the janitor and Lola, who kept the coffee room, they all listened to what Coach Jowers had to say because he was, he read everything. I mean if he could pick it up, buddy, he read it. *U.S. News and World Report* was his bible. He read them every time they came out; he read them from cover to cover. He was a very brilliant person. He was a, I would say, was a straight-A student and now would say a four-point student. He was good at everything. When he was in the Navy in World War II, they picked fifty people out of the entire United States Navy to go to what they called “war college” at Notre Dame, and out of all the people in the Navy, and I don’t know how many people that is, thousands, they picked fifty, and he was one of those fifty that they picked to go to war college. He went to Notre Dame for several months, and they studied topography, or whatever you call it, of Japan. They were talking about; all they talked about was how they were going to attack and defeat Japan. They wanted, they were going to land on the island of Japan. Coach Jowers was one of those fifty men that they picked out of the entire Navy to get this extra work, so he wasn’t just a coach. He wasn’t just a father; he was a tremendous individual. I could talk about him for days and days and nobody like it.

**Baker:** Well, you had mentioned the other day about how many people on your team graduated and was successful and how that applied to your team that you coach. Would you like to comment on that?
McDonald: I would. I don’t know how much people keep up with athletics today, but you read where the coach at University of Las Vegas, the Running Rebels, I believe he’s had one or two guys graduate since he’s been there, and he’s been there seven, eight, ten years.

Baker: Tarkanian.

McDonald: Coach Tarkanian. I remember one of the reasons Abe Lemons got fired was only one of his players graduated in four or five, six years he was at Texas, and that’s not just every once in a while, [for] most schools that’s probably right, and I do think they use the athletes. I think they use the black athletes a lot. They use a lot of coaches. They don’t care about what happens later on. They want to win and bull on everything else. And a lot of times they’ll get the black athlete who’s, you know, faster, taller, jump better, runs, and they’ll get them in there, and then they go right back to the, back part of New York or something. What the heck. When I went to Southwest Texas, I’m looking at this picture right now, there’s two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen, fifteen players plus the manager is sixteen players up there, and all sixteen of them graduated from Southwest Texas, every stinking one of them. I don’t guess there’s time to tell, every one of them are successful. Every one of those guys. Probably I’m the only guy who wasn’t super successful. But there’s—

Baker: Nah.

McDonald: They do everything. They’re got good jobs. Right beside them I have a picture of a 1960 basketball team. There they have two, four, six, eight, there’s ten boys up there, and there were others on that team, but that’s the ten that went to Kansas City. Now, I was wrong earlier, there was one guy who didn’t graduate, and that’s the Charlie Sharp guy, the most valuable player in America, that one on the top right up there, he did not graduate. I told you he is out in San Francisco and does his hair styling stuff out there. Now, I told you all of them did, that’s one who didn’t graduate.

I have a picture of my own, one of my own teams on the wall over here, where we’re in Syracuse, New York, where we’ve all got the cowboy hats on, every one of those boys, every one of them, graduated. There are some super, super people on there, like little Larry Black, who’s vice president of the Frost National Bank in San Antonio. Then Ronnie Arrow, who is head coach at San Jacinto Junior College, who in the last four years has won the National Championship three times in the junior college. So, there are some, there’s real talent there, and they all graduated. I don’t know, I never went back to look, but I bet you 95% of the boys graduated that Coach Jowers coached and I coached. I’m real proud of that. I think that’s what it’s all about. I know that you are supposed to win, and I know that Coach Jowers won more than anybody. My lord help us, he beat everybody. But I know that we won a lot when I was coaching. But in the back of my mind, I think we came to Southwest Texas to coach, and I think
we came to help kids graduate and become successful citizens. I think a lot of them did. I think a big, big percentage of them did. I’m real proud of that fact.

Baker: We still emphasize that?

McDonald: I still think, I think we’ve been emphasizing it, but I think the new guy we hired is going to emphasize it more and more. I think that’s one reason that we hired him. I’m glad you asked that.

Baker: Coach Larrabee?

McDonald: Coach Larrabee. I sure do. We had eight people on the committee that screened our coaching applicants. We had a great committee, and I don’t really remember the names or not, I know we had Dr. Gowan out of the business department. I think he’s dean of the School of Business.

Baker: Yeah.

McDonald: And I think we had Dr. Salem out of the speech communications or something.

Baker: Cheatham?

McDonald: No, no, S-A-L-E-M.

Baker: Oh, really?

McDonald: I may be, he was Dr. Salem. I don’t know where he is. I think he was something to do with speech or something. And then we had some people from down here. We had Dana Craft, who is Women’s Athletic Director, and myself, and Coach Miller, Dr. Patton, but we had eight people and the two Deans, Chairman of the Speech or Salem and them, were so impressed with Harry when one of the first things he said was, “I’m going to recruit, we’re going to recruit students.” I thought that was good. He didn’t say we were going to recruit big guys, little guys, fast guys, we’ll recruit students who can play basketball. I think that impressed all of us. And since he’s been here a short time, I know that the people that he’s been talking to are students. I know they are basketball players, I’m not saying they are not, they are true basketball players, but I know they have talent in the classroom also. I think we are really going to emphasize it again. I’m real proud.

Baker: That first day I walked in here, you were talking on the phone to that girl, and you said, “We want you to come down here and play, but we want you to graduate and want you to play.”

McDonald: (Laughs)

Baker: You remember that?
McDonald: Yeah, I remember that.

Baker: And then you said, “I want you to play well.”

McDonald: Yeah, I remember that. You see now, I told you the other day; I got the best job in the world. I get to be with people like you. I get to be with young guys, and I don’t know whether you ever thought of this or not, but when you get fifty-seven years old like I am, all you can do is look back and remember and all that kind of stuff. Except I’m in a unique position, see, I’m with young guys, and when you are with young people, you think you are young. I do, I feel young, and I know I’m not, I’m an old peckerwood. I’m not young. But being with young people makes me feel young. Right now, to me, my main job, other than boosting Southwest Texas and helping the Bobcat Club, but I can help young guys. I can help you register. I can help you go to the right place to register. Go get your English classes. You know, when you register and you say, “What do I do, Coach?” I tell our football, basketball players, “Come here,” and I’ll go take them [to] the second floor or I’ll take them somewhere. Here’s the English department. That’s not hard on me, and I think they appreciate it. When you register the first time, that’s the worse experience of your college career. Is that right or not?

Baker: And all the other times, too.

McDonald: (Laughs) Registration is just depressing. You know, everybody’s lost, everybody’s mad, and whatever you get to a registration table, there’s always a thousand people there, and they’ll say wait until this afternoon. So, you sit on the floor, and everybody treats you like a dog, which is not right because the only reason I’m here is because you are here, and [if] you all leave, I’m out of a job. I believe that with all my heart. See, I’ve been here so long [that] I know that. New professors at Southwest Texas don’t realize that. So many of them think that y’all come to school here because I’m here. That’s not right. Y’all come to get an education, so I’m here because you’re here. (Laughs) So, I look at it the other way around, so I do my best to help them. So, I told that girl, and you heard me tell her the other day, when you come, “I promise I’ll help you register,” and I will. Not just for her but any of them, and I think it’s important. I think college, I think students like to think somebody is going to care about them, and I do. I care about our athletes, boys and girls both.

Baker: You said you knew all the presidents except for one.

McDonald: You should never be old, but the alternative is awful I guess, because I guess it’s better to be old. See, when I came to Southwest Texas, Dr. Flowers was president. Dr. C.E. Evans was the president prior to him, and I knew him and knew him well because he still had an office in what’s now Flowers Hall. It was our library building. Dr. Evans used to go to his office all the time. Now, the old Old Main, the one that looks like an old castle, that was the main building then. Dr. Flowers’s office was up there, but I knew Dr. Evans. And before Dr. Evans, who was Dr. Somebody, who was the president when this school started, well, I never knew him.
He may have been dead or something, but I knew Dr. Evans. (Phone rings) Apologies. What were we talking about?

**Baker:** Evans.

**McDonald:** Yeah. Dr. Evans. I know him because he went to his office all the time. He was always walking very slow up there. We only had 1,200 students here when I was going to school, when I started off anyhow. So we all knew Dr. Evans and he knew us, and we’d stop and talk to him. Of course, Dr. Flowers was the president then, and Dr. Flowers did not drink, he was a big Methodist man. There wasn’t much, you know, I dated and married my wife when I was going to school and he was president. We had a dormitory that we had to be in at nine o’clock every night. The girls did, boys could stay out all you wanted to, but he felt like if the girls came in, the boys would, too, which was right. Once the girls come in, once the girls were in the dorm, the boys all went to their dorm (laughs). I think that’s kind of normal, and I’m not too sure that’s bad. I know that sounds silly, it’s 1986, but I bet you, I bet you we probably did a little more studying than we do nowadays. Things like that. Anyway, I better not talk about that (laughs).

That doesn’t have anything to do with the president. Well, he, Dr. Flowers, retired, and that’s another story. He retired, he’s a great guy. Mrs. Flowers was a great lady, and the faculty all got together and gave them enough money to take a trip around the world. They were going to take it six months after they retired and, dadburnet, if both of them weren’t dead in six months. That was the dadburnest thing that there ever was. I don’t mean they died at the same time, but I think Dr. Flowers even died first, but he died and about a month or so after he died, his wife died. And I always regretted that because he talked all the time that he would love to travel. He said he would like to take a trip, and the faculty loved him enough so where we gave him enough money. I mean, you know, everybody put in $5 or $10 or something.

**Baker:** It adds up.

**McDonald:** It added up. He had a trip to go around the world and neither one of them got to go an inch. I always thought that was bad, and, you know, that’s bad about retiring. I thought about that, too. That doesn’t got anything to do with this tape. I travel all the time. I spend my money. I’m broke right now because I love to travel and that’s why when I retire, if I die, they can’t say that son of a gun didn’t travel. Look, here, I’m fixing to go there to stay with the Strutters—I’m going to Bangkok and Singapore. I’m going to, just, because if I bite the dust, they’re going to say, “That peckerwood died traveling.”

**Baker:** You [have] been to Singapore.

**McDonald:** I’ve been to Singapore. I guarantee you I have. I can’t think who the president was after Dr. Flowers got here. But, there has been a bunch of presidents. We had Dr. Lee Smith who was here not too, too long ago. Billy Mac Jones, who was an All-American football player at Vanderbilt, was our president for a while. Dr. Derrick was our president for a little while. Let me
tell you a little story about Dr. Derrick. My name is Vernon Shinn McDonald. My middle name is S-H-I-N-N. That was my mother’s name. I had a first cousin who was a pilot for Exxon Corporation, and he decided he wanted to get all the family tree for the Shinns and so, when he would fly these Exxon people around, when he would stop at some big city somewhere, he would go down to the library, to the courthouse, the city hall, or something—he started compiling a big book on the Shinn people. S-H-I-N-N, and you won’t believe this, but shortly before Dr. Derrick died, my cousin brought me this book, and I started going through it and way back in 1620 or 1508 or something, there was the family of Leland Derrick and the family of the Shinns were related, and I liked to drop my teeth. There’s a Leland Derrick who lives in San Marcos, Texas, and forty pages over there’s a Vernon McDonald who lives in San Marcos, Texas, and I got that book, and I went over to Dr. Derrick’s house. The book was folded, closed up, so I knocked on the door and Dr. Derrick came to the door. I said, “Dr. Derrick, I have something I want to show you.” He said, “Come in.” And I went in the house and I said, “Have you ever, I want to show you this book.” And he said, “Stay right there.” And he turned and walked out of the room and came back with the identical book. He said, “Don’t tell me you are in this book.” I said, “Dr. Derrick, we’re related.” (Laughs) He said, “I’m going to throw my book away.” So, way back ninety-ninth cousins or something, we were related. I thought that was hilarious because we both had the same book. But, we had a guy; we had a Dr. McCrocklin, McCrocklin Real Estate and everything here. We probably, we started growing really most of all under Dr. McCrocklin. He came at the right time. See, we had a guy named Lyndon Johnson was the president.

Baker: Yeah, I’ve heard of him. (Laughs)

McDonald: It’s amazing how things happened in our favor while he was president. Dr. McCrocklin and Lyndon Johnson were great friends, and that might have been one of the reasons he got into a little trouble as being president because he stayed in Washington a whole lot because Lyndon Johnson asked him to come up there. He was forever going to Washington, D.C. Southwest Texas really started booming while he was president. I liked Dr. McCrocklin. I like him today. He was a good president; a good man. I know that our, my basketball team got to take the greatest trip that ever was taken by Southwest Texas while he was president because of him and the people he knew and Lyndon Johnson. One day, an organization called People to People Sports, I don’t know whether you ever heard of that or not, I haven’t either, since that one time, People to People Sports called me and said, “Would you like to take a trip with your basketball team around the eastern United States?” And I told them, “I don’t know what you are talking about.” And they said,” Well, we’ve been informed—”

End of Side 1, begin Side 2

I was talking about this great trip we got. We got this great trip because of Dr. McCrocklin and Southwest Texas and the relationship to Lyndon Johnson as President of the United States. So,
this trip took place. I took that team that’s got those cowboy hats on up there; we were a good basketball team. We flew from San Marcos and we flew to Atlanta, Georgia, and we played Oglethorpe University. We got up the next morning and by bus we went across the state of Georgia to the far east side to a place called Statesboro, and we played Georgia Southern, and then we returned to Atlanta and caught a plane and went to Washington, D.C. We stayed there two days, and I let the kids just go for the first day, and they just took over Washington, D.C. They [went] from the monument to the White House to the Capitol, just everywhere—Smithsonian Institute. Most of them stayed in the Smithsonian Institute more than you can imagine. But anyway, we went to the White House and visited with the President, and there’s a picture right there, I told you, right there at the bottom, that’s the President Lyndon Johnson in the middle with my team around him. That’s my wife and my two boys there on each side of him. Anyway, we played that school there called Southeastern, there in Washington, D.C., and then the next day we caught a plane out of Washington, out of National Airport there in Washington, D.C., and we flew to Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, and we played a university there in Hamilton. Then we flew to Windsor, Ontario, Canada, and we played the University of Windsor, and we beat them and set the all-time scoring record at Southwest Texas, we beat them 116–104. I’ll never forget that because we needed every point to win. Come to find out, they won the National Championship for Canada that year. Windsor had a great basketball team, and we had a good team. I had a kid make twenty-two points and was the fourth leading scorer in that ball game. We had a guy made thirty-two, a guy made twenty-eight; it was a great offensive game. Anyway, we won that ball game, and then we got on a plane and flew to Syracuse, New York, and we played in a tournament there. We played Le Moyne, and we played a team called Kenyon College out of Ohio, and then we got on a plane and flew back to San Antonio and back to San Marcos. We were gone fourteen days, we played eight games, [and] we won five and lost three. Out of all that trip, we had ten guys, we had eleven guys and me, there was twelve of us, and that entire trip—food, hotel, airline ticket, everything—cost us $450. All the rest was paid by People to People Sports. You can’t imagine taking a trip and doing that much stuff, going to that many places; we stayed in the best hotels. I mean, we stayed in the best, and the different schools picked up the tab. It was a fabulous trip, and I have boys on, well, they are grown men, forty years old, I have guys now that say that’s the best trip they ever took in all their life because of Dr. McCrocklin and President Johnson and Southwest Texas.

Baker: You recall a scandal that was happening around here when McCrocklin was—

McDonald: See, I do. I do kind of. See, Dr. McCrocklin, I don’t know what. Now I’m really hedging. When he wrote his dissertation to get his doctorate degree, this is what I’m trying to remember now, he wrote it on the military part between Puerto Rico or Cuba or somebody and the United States—his dissertation. He went into secret files and got permission from the Puerto Rican government or the Cuban government or the something government, I’m not sure, to write down some transactions between our nations. You know, when you are talking about something
between two nations you write down, you better write down just what they got down and don’t make up stories. So, he wrote down exactly what the paper said, and then he got in trouble for copying. To me, I think it’s stupid. You know, the man, hell, he couldn’t say, “I think the United States meant to do such, meant bull,” he better say what happened or you know he might be telling something total falsehood. The best I remember is that he wrote down exactly what transpired, and then they said, “Well, you copied,” which he did, which he meant to do. That was, to the best of my knowledge, it happened like that, and I think he was right. I think he’s right today, and he was a good president. And, by the way, he’s a good friend of mine right now. (Laughs)

Baker: He did a lot of great things.

McDonald: Did a lot of great things. He sure did, and I tell you what, he told me not too long ago, he said, “I pay more in income taxes right now than I made as President of Southwest Texas,” (laughs) which I bet is right.

Baker: I bet you. Oh, let’s see, just for the record: is it Oscar Strahan or Strahan [different pronunciation]?

McDonald: I’m glad, thank you for asking that. Coach Strahan hired me. He was the athletic director. It’s spelled S-T-R-A-H-A-N, and it looks like Stra-han, but it’s a silent “h,” pronounced just like it’s just S-T-R-A-N, and most of the people I know call it the wrong thing. This building is called Strahan Coliseum, and his wife’s name is Marian Strahan, and his name was Oscar Strahan. It is Strahan. It really is. I’ll tell you another story.

There’s a guy here named Clovis Barker who is vice president of State Bank and Trust here in San Marcos. He and three other guys have just purchased the State Bank. He went to school here, and I had him in one of my classes. As you already know, I probably joke too much, and one day during deer season I said, “Boy, where you from.” And he said, “Junction.” And I said, “Where you going Thanksgiving?” And he said, “I’m going home, and I’m going hunting.” And I said, “If you want to make a good grade, you better bring me some deer meat.” Well, sure enough, he brought me some deer meat. (Laughs) And sure enough, he made a good grade, and I mean it when I say that deer meat did not have a dadburn thing to do with his grade, and I never thought another thing about it, except four or five, six years later, he came back as one of the officers of our state bank, and we’re at a function where President Flowers was, and I was, I mean he was introducing the President Flowers, and I was there, too, and he said, “President Flowers, I want to tell you about Coach McDonald.” And he had to add to the story, he says, “I want you to know I was failing his class one time, and he told me that if I wanted to pass to bring him some deer meat. And I brought him some deer meat, and I made a good grade.” Dr. Flower looked at me, and he said, “Did he make a good grade?” and I said, “Yes, sir.” So—

Baker: You don’t say that anymore.
McDonald: Yeah, I haven’t said that anymore. (Laughs)

Baker: Oh, man. We were talking about Coach Wacker the other day and how he said he’d never cheat. Now, I thought that was very interesting. Would you—

McDonald: I’d like to say two or three things about Coach Wacker. Coach Wacker was great, great, great for Southwest Texas. He’s great, great, great for TCU. Coach Wacker is a motivator, and he’s all this kind of stuff. He does lots of things; lots of good things. There’s two things that I would like to say about Coach Wacker. One of them is that I don’t believe he cheats. I do not believe Coach Wacker cheats. They may be cheating at TCU right now, but I don’t believe Coach Wacker knows about it. The alumni, some of his coaches, I don’t know, somebody may be cheating. I’m not saying TCU doesn’t cheat, but I don’t believe, I do not believe Coach Wacker is going to cheat. I believe that from what he did, from how he acted, from knowing Mike, his son, I just don’t believe he cheats. And he says you do not have to cheat to win, and I don’t know if that’s true or not, but I sure hope it’s true. I coached here a long time. I’ve been here a long time. I don’t believe Southwest Texas ever cheated in anything, and we haven’t been real good the last two or three years in our major sports, but we’ve been darn good in the past, and I think we’re going to be darn good in the future, and I don’t believe we’re going to cheat, and I believe Coach Wacker helped impress that on the people around here and you don’t have to cheat.

Just as important, he believes in the positive aspect of coaching, of life. He, well, he does away with the negative. He use[d] to have coaching meetings here every day, and he consistently, repeatedly told his coaches, “Don’t say no.” Do not say no. I don’t care what they do; you’ve got to have some kind of a positive reaction to them. For example, the day they ran a play in football, and Coach Wacker was messing with the offense. He was back there, and the two half backs in the rear offense, they pulled at the same time and ran head-to-head into each other. One of them went exactly opposite, and rather doing what I would have said, which is chew one of the kids out for running wrong, he said, “That’s the way to move on the snap. That’s exactly the way you are supposed to do it. Now, next time, let’s both go the same way.” And I thought I dropped my teeth. But, I thought, “That’s Coach Wacker,” because he really believes in the positive, and I’m not too sure that 99% of the people in the world will react favorably to someone patting them on the back. I think those are the two big points about Jim Wacker.

Baker: He was good for Southwest Texas in that he was such a good man and a good coach?

McDonald: No question. He’s a good family man. He and his wife live good as gold. They are a true good family. He has, I believe, three boys. Mike was by far the best athlete, but he had two other guys; they had Stevie, [who] was a good high school football and basketball player, wasn’t anything like Mike. He had a younger son, and my wife, who teaches fifth grade out here, Dolores, she had him in class, and she just loved him. She says, “I’m telling you, he’s the best
kid in my room.” But he’s just a Wacker. He’s just like Mike and everybody else. Yeah, he was a good person, plus he was a good coach.

**Baker:** I hope he’s very successful.

**McDonald:** I do, too.

**Baker:** You said he sent those other coaches letters.

**McDonald:** He did. He told them, he told them, “We’re not going to cheat TCU, and you are not going to cheat because every time we talk to a boy and you promise something special to him, we’re going to turn you in. If you catch us doing that, turn us in,” because he says, “I’m telling you this, if we talk to a boy, and we’re going to talk to the same boys you do, we’re going to try to out-recruit you. If we talk to a boy that says you offered him something special, we’re going to turn you in.” And I thought that was good. It made some of the coaches mad, but I think it’s going to straighten them up some. It would me. If I were cheating and a guy said he would catch me and turn me in, I believe I’d either hide it better or I’d quit, one of the two.

**Baker:** One thing about us remains, relatively smaller in our athletic program, is we don’t compete with those.

**McDonald:** That’s right. That’s really right. You see, and I don’t even know, I don’t have any idea about people cheating, but some of our, like Coach O’Hara was at Baylor for a long time. Some of our coaches have been at a lot of different places. You can’t imagine the inducements that kids are offered. Like giving them a home. I don’t mean $100, I mean building your mother and daddy a home if you’ll come to Jerkwater Tech or something. How can you turn that down? I mean, that’s terrible. Here I am, I’m from Dale, Texas, my name is Vernon McDonald, and my mother and daddy been working all their life, and here’s a guy saying, “If you’ll go to Dookydooky College, we’ll build you a house, we’ll give you a brand new automobile.”

**Baker:** How can you pass that up?

**McDonald:** How can you, you can’t. You can’t blame the kids. As everybody says, you got to go back to the coaches. They’ve got to stop it somewhere else. You can’t stop it by saying the kids were sorry. They couldn’t turn it down. I couldn’t, you couldn’t either. You couldn’t turn that down.

**Baker:** No way I couldn’t.

**McDonald:** No way. I believe it’s getting better. I really do.
**Baker:** When we had our preliminary, you kind of talked about the progression of our athletic facilities and how we played in the band hall for a little while, and how you played in the Aqua Sports Center.

**McDonald:** You can’t imagine. Right now, see, Division I is Division I, and the only way we could ever be national champions in football is to beat Southern California and Notre Dame, and I realize that. The only way we could ever be national champions in basketball is to beat North Carolina Tarheels and beat Louisville. I know that. But, still Division I has different size schools. You’ve got big schools, you have mid-size Division I’s and you have dinky Division I. Even though they are Division I, they’ll never, they’re not up there with the big boys. I’d say Southwest Texas is mid-size. I say we are mid. Coach Larabee said the other day that Southwest Texas was trying to recruit a basketball player who was a mid-Division I. I said, “Like what?” He told me, “He’s like us.” I believe that. I believe that. I hope one day that we can compete with them, but not today. I mean, I’m honest with myself. We can’t compete with Notre Dame right now in football.

**Baker:** Our time will come.

**McDonald:** I really believe it will. I surely believe it will. I think we are going straight up.

**Baker:** Witness the baseball team.

**McDonald:** That’s right.

**Baker:** Three years they had—

**McDonald:** We split with Austin, yeah, but right now we’re splitting with the big schools right now.

**Baker:** Aren’t we 28–20 this year?

**McDonald:** Yeah, I think we split with TCU, split with Baylor, split with—

**Baker:** Rice.

**McDonald:** With Rice, that’s right. We’re splitting, beat Pan American.

**Baker:** Beat Lamar. We beat that All-American pitcher of Lamar.

**McDonald:** Sure did. Darn sure did. That’s right. It’ll take time, but I think we’re on the right track. But anyway, I was going to say, when I played here, we played in a building that’s not even here anymore. The Aqua Sports Center is where the gym was that I played in. It had a real good name; it was called “Men’s Gym.” (Laughs) And right above it was another gym, and that was the women’s gym. So, we had no problem, because all-men classes had men only in it and
all-women’s classes had women only in it. The women met in their gym, and the men met in our gym. It was a two-story gym; it had floor at the bottom and a floor at the top, and the JV, the San Marcos High School, came and practiced in the bottom of the gym. We practiced in the top. After I graduated and came back here and coached a year or two, I forget what year, about 1954 or ’55, it burnt to the ground—just burnt down. Then we built a new gym called Strahan Coliseum, which is where the Music Building is right now, on the corner of Pleasant Street [Sessom, actually] and LBJ, I believe it is. Right on the corner there and we played our first game in 1955 in that gym. We had a real good basketball team in 1955. We stayed there up until about 6–8 years ago when we opened this gym right here, new Strahan Coliseum. The reason we got the new coliseum was that we really needed it, but we didn’t need it near as bad as we needed more facilities for our students in the music field. They didn’t have any area for them. So, we said, “We’d give you this building if we can build us a new gym,” and everybody’s happy. Academics were happy, athletics was happy just to build one, and see, that’s right on campus. We don’t have a whole lot of space, and at that time we hadn’t even built, we hadn’t bought San Marcos Academy [West Campus]. We didn’t even have that area, so we said, “Yeah, we’d love to give it up to get a new facility,” so they built Strahan Coliseum and Jowers Center, and then they totally knocked down everything except the columns and the walls, the main walls of old Strahan Coliseum, and they’ve totally redone it, and it looks absolutely nothing like a coliseum, the Music Building. I don’t know whether you’ve been in it or not, but to me, it’s a beautiful building. You’d never know that Vernon McDonald, I coached a jillion games in that crazy gym. But—

Baker: Did y’all pack them in there?

McDonald: We had good crowds. It only held about three thousand. You can see the pictures over there, up at the top up there. You can see way on the left, that’s on the far side; you can see people standing up in the balcony. Then on the right side, that’s the other side, the people are all the way to the roof. See that ole boy shooting that crip shot?

Baker: Yes, sir.

McDonald: That one way over there second to the right. We filled it up most times. You know, that’s something I don’t understand, kids don’t come to see us play now. We won’t have two hundred people in the gym. 5–20 may have something to do with it.

Baker: Yeah.

McDonald: That bothers me.

Baker: I love basketball.
McDonald: I don’t know why I’m telling that. That bothers me. To me, there’s nothing better than watching a good basketball game. We hadn’t been real good the last few years, but if our kids came out, I wished there was some way we could get through to them. I think it would help us play better.

Baker: I’m sure it would.

McDonald: Did you play high school basketball?

Baker: No, sir.

McDonald: See, I played—

Baker: Played ninth grade.

McDonald: See, but I think I played better if somebody were hollering for me. I believe I’d run faster, I believe I could make a speech better when people are listening to me rather than just sitting here and talking to you. (Laughs) I believe I could do anything better with people there saying, “Yeah, Coach,” I believe I’d do better. And yet we go out there and have two hundred people and play bad, and everybody goes home mad, and we’re mad. Now, which comes first, the egg or the chicken? Do the kids start hollering for us to play better or do we play better and the kids come? I think maybe we ought to start playing better probably.

Baker: Our student body, to me, seems a little more apathetic about everything.

McDonald: Everything!

Baker: The Student Government—

McDonald: I believe that. Why?

Baker: We had two hundred people vote in our student election.

McDonald: Why? I’m going to tell you what, a guy told me this the other day, this may be right, and I may not ever say this, he said, “You know, I believe the eighteen, nineteen drinking law has ruined athletics for the students.” I said, “What do you mean?” He says, “They’d rather go out and have a party than go out and see the Bobcats play, or anybody else, or do anything.” Because right now, because of peer pressure and everything else, let’s party, party, party, party. With the eighteen, nineteen drinking law, it’s easy to do. When it’s back up to twenty-one, it will help the crowd. You think about it. That may be right; I won’t tell you who told me that. But, you now, it makes sense. It may be right. I mean, I still think that kids still drink. They always did. But, it wouldn’t be as easy because it’s against the law. You know, you walk out there at the Sewell Park, and everybody down there’s got a bottle of beer, which that’s prerogative, I don’t give a flip, but if it’s against the law and all of them have a bottle of beer, they may go to jail and
watch them play. But, I don’t know, that may help us, and I think they’re going to move it up to twenty-one maybe.

Baker: I think September.

McDonald: Or something, yeah. I’m glad.

Baker: Yeah.

McDonald: I don’t know what that’s got to do with this, but—

Baker: Back to that gym, though, that is very fine, isn’t it, our facility at Strahan?

McDonald: At Strahan, the best.

Baker: It’s better than A&M’s.

McDonald: It’s better than A&M’s right now.

Baker: No question.

McDonald: I think, Harry Larabee said this when we interviewed. See, Harry came down and played Texas. He’s played different schools. The reason they play him is because he has that great Alaskan shoot out. They all go to his tournament. Well, heck, Harry, says, “I want to play North Carolina.” They said, “Come on.” They said, “Can we come to Alaska?” He says, “Come on.” So he gets to play a lot of schools. So he played at A&M and he played at Texas. He knows their facilities, and he said as far as facilities goes, Texas has a better facility, but it’s not owned by Texas, it’s owned by somebody else. It’s not really their gym. You know, I mean, that’s where they play. But he says Texas has a better gym, and he says he doesn’t know who else does. He says probably University of Houston has a better one, although it’s older. But he said TCU’s is not worth a flip. Baylor’s is pathetic. In the “Heart of Texas,” I’d rather play in that Aqua Sports Center. A&M’s is an old antiquated thing, it’s shaped kind of like ours, but their floor is a portable floor and it sounds like a bunch of horses are running down the court.

Baker: I’ve played on that floor.

McDonald: It’s terrible.

Baker: The ball sticks on the floor.

McDonald: That’s right, it’s terrible. I’m not too sure that we don’t, there’s not but two or three gyms in the state of Texas better than ours.

Baker: Yeah, I think right now, as far as basketball goes, the atmosphere is right.
McDonald: Perfect!

Baker: Large student body, young, tall players.

McDonald: Perfect. We’ve got a new coach; they are going to bring in new kids. I think, Coach Larabee said the same thing, he said, “If I can get the kids motivated,” and he says if I. He didn’t say if you or me, but he said, “If I can get them motivated by winning and talking to the—” He want to get the sororities and fraternities all involved, that’s basically what it is. We’re talking about our students now, basically, I mean our college kids; dorm students and everything. If we can get them to start to come, we could get this thing going right away, we’ll get plenty of speculators, and so we’re going to play good basketball. He says, “I think I’m at the right place at the right time.” And I sure hope he is.

Baker: How much do you think the game has changed since you played it?

McDonald: Well, a whole lot. Everybody does everything better. See, when I played everybody made fun of us because no one on our team ever shot a jump shot. We didn’t know what a jump shot was. Everybody, all of our guards, have to have both feet on the floor, and we shot one-hand set shots, and I’ll tell you who shoots just like we did, ole Larry Bird. You see his three-point shots. He don’t shoot jump shots.

Baker: Because he can’t jump.

McDonald: That’s right. That’s exactly right. That’s the way we always shot. All of us shot with both feet on the floor, and we kind of jump and shoot the ball up, just like, I don’t mean do it good. We’re not talking about comparing them, but, see, he looks like an old country hick from Frenchlick, and he is. That’s the way we shot. We played; we had fast breakers like they do now. Everything is better now. I know that we played good basketball in those days, but I’m just so glad I came then instead of trying to come now. I don’t think—

Baker: The athletes or the coaching—

McDonald: Everything. Training, facilities, we never lifted a weight in our life. Our basketball players right now are probably lifting weights this minute. They lift weights all the time, and they run sprints, and they got ropes to jump, and they go through all kinds of drills and all this techniques and everything. We didn’t know, we didn’t work, we didn’t know what it was and everything else. There’s just better way to do things because we got better everything. Balls are a little bit different. They have glass backboards, and just everything is better than it was then. And I’m glad. I’m still glad I came back in the forties or early fifties. But, I’m glad things are better now. They ought to be that way.

Baker: And you’ve got a say in all of it.
McDonald: That’s right.

Baker: Make us winners.

McDonald: I hope so, I really do.

Baker: Well, Coach, thanks for having me over here and agreeing to do this interview. I really enjoyed it. Seriously.

McDonald: Well, I hope so. If, listen to this, if there’s something you’d like me to go back and repeat or say something more or opposite or anything, just holler.

Baker: All right.

McDonald: Be glad to help.

Baker: Thanks, Coach.

McDonald: Sure.

End of interview