

State, The (Columbia, SC)

February 7, 2016

'Life is about love.'

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This was not where Jack **Easterby** was supposed to be. Not today, when the sports world is focused on San Francisco and Super Bowl 50.

Easterby, see, was supposed to be on the sideline at Levi's Stadium, tossing footballs with the New England Patriots' receivers during warm-ups, chatting with everyone from coach Bill Belichick to place kicker Steve Gostkowski, waiting for the opening kickoff – just like a year ago, when the Patriots, with **Easterby** on the sideline, won Super Bowl XLIX.

But life doesn't always go as planned. **Easterby**, for the past three years the Patriots' team chaplain, "character coach" and much more, knows that as well as anyone.

So, two days after the Patriots' 20-18 upset loss to Denver in the AFC title game, the lanky, balding and always enthusiastic 32-year-old was on his cell phone outside a Vista coffee shop, learning what happens next.

"Logistics," he said afterward, politely declining to go into detail about the call. Chances are, friends said later, **Easterby** would soon be

meeting with potential Patriots' draft picks, sizing them up in ways most coaches can't. But before that •

"I want some time with my wife, my family," he said wearily, having arrived in Columbia around 8 p.m. the night before, after season-ending exit interviews with the Patriots. The **Easterby** family – Jack, wife Holly, daughters Houston, 5, and Harriet, 2 – now moved to the front of the line. "Whatever the family wants to do."

As for the Super Bowl, "I don't know if I'll even watch it," he said, laughing. "It's more entertainment for most, but to us, it's a way of life," one he's lived 24/7 since the NFL season began.

And right now, there is so much else on **Easterby**'s plate. On Monday night, when second-ranked South Carolina and No. 1 Connecticut meet in the biggest game so far this season in women's college basketball, he'll probably be somewhere around Dawn Staley's bench: talking to and listening to players and coaches, offering encouragement and compassion and, yes, hugs. Big hugs. Bear-like hugs.

From conducting weekly Bible studies with USC athletes, to private conversations and midnight phone calls about grades and girlfriends, parents and stress; whether with Staley's team, baseball, men's golf, softball, football – if anyone is part of the Gamecocks' family, **Easterby** is there for them, clock be darned.

It's been that way for more than a decade, starting with tutoring sessions for the USC men's basketball team in 2005, shifting to become then-coach Dave Odom's character coach, offering spiritual guidance and life lessons to athletes then not much younger than he was. Six years ago, his friendship with former Gamecocks place kicker Ryan Succop led him to the NFL and the Kansas City Chiefs, then the Patriots. **Easterby**'s calendar became more crowded, his impact more far-reaching.

But his passion remains the same. As a onetime Fellowship of Christian Athletes chaplain and now head of

his own foundation (The Greatest Champion), **Easterby** hopes to bring people to Christ. But first, it's about helping them find meaning, joy and comfort in their lives.

And this:

"I lived with my grandfather (also named Jack) the first year and a half of my ministry," he said, "and every night before I went up to bed, he'd tell me, 'Life is about love.' Here was a man from the greatest generation, a banker, loyal to his career

– but the biggest thing was that he let people know he loved them."

His namesake is still doing that.

DAVE ODOM GAVE HIM A CHANCE

This being Super Bowl Sunday, the original idea for this story was **Easterby**'s unusual – some say groundbreaking – role with the defending NFL champions and expected SB50 participants. Then Gostkowski missed his first extra point since 2006 (his only miss in 563 tries), quarterback Tom Brady later failed on a two-point conversion pass, and the story line became Peyton Manning's likely swan song and Cam Newton's dancing.

But back to the first item: how does a kid from Columbia, basketball player and golfer at A.C. Flora High and Newberry College, and one-time ticket-office employee with the Jacksonville Jaguars wind up as part of the famously secretive Belichick's inner circle?

Easterby gives much credit to Odom, the Gamecocks' men's basketball coach from 2001-08. "There's no way possible to describe his influence on me, as a man, as a friend," **Easterby** said. "He sat in the front row at my wedding; when I saw my wife coming down the aisle, he was right there."

Odom, in turn, found **Easterby** to be a valuable and trusted part of his team. "I'm so incredibly proud of him," Odom said. "I'm especially proud of the way he's taken each step of his life and made the most of it."

Odom first spotted **Easterby** working at a USC summer basketball camp, "this new, fresh-faced personality who was enthusiastic, caring and excited to be working with kids for very little money. That's very unusual," Odom said. "I asked: Who is this guy? And someone said, he's a Newberry grad (sports marketing) who wants to be involved in basketball – and he wants a conversation with you."

Easterby, working for USC as a study-hall director, told Odom he believed his true calling was in ministering to athletes. "It just so happened that the demographics of that (2005-06) team, (guys such as) Tre Kelley and (Renaldo) Balkman, needed encouragement in life," **Easterby** said. "Several of them had no fathers, and during study hall, academics would develop into, 'Hey, I need to talk to you about my family.' " Odom agreed to let **Easterby** work his way into a position as team chaplain and counselor.

If Odom provided the avenue to what **Easterby** felt led to do with his life, he was also there, in July 2013, when **Easterby** called him about the Patriots' offer. According to a 2015 ESPN The Magazine profile, the team told **Easterby**, "We heard you're the best in the league at what you do, so and we want to bring you up here."

By then in his third year working with the Chiefs – though not on their payroll

– **Easterby** was interested, but unsure how to proceed.

"I told him, 'Be very careful, because Kansas City has been good to you,' Odom said. "So he goes to Foxboro and calls me, says Belichick wants to meet him in a restaurant. And I said, 'My only advice is, you listen to him, don't tell him who you are. He'll tell you what he wants from the position, and you decide if you want it.'"

"Two hours later, Jack calls back, says, 'Coach, he told me what he wanted, but then he listened to me. I can't believe he was so willing to listen.' And I said, 'I don't know Belichick, but he wants you to help with his legacy of success, having a major influence on his team, so I'm not surprised he wanted to listen.' "

While he declines to offer details of his work with the Patriots, **Easterby** is open – and effusive – about his relationship with Belichick. "Bill's one of the most phenomenal people and leaders that my generation in the sports world has ever known," he said. "The public image doesn't begin to do him justice. He's never one time said anything to me that he didn't follow through on; that's a characteristic we'd all like to subscribe to."

Odom laughed as he added a postscript to the Belichick story: "After their meeting, Belichick wanted Jack to meet with Tom Brady the next night. I said, 'That's an entirely different conversation. Tom Brady has won Super Bowls, and he got there without you, so I don't know how interested he'll be in you.' Sure enough, Jack calls back, says, 'He didn't want to hear anything I had to say.'"

"I said, 'Don't take it personally. He's just cautious, wants to get to know you. He'll listen when you take the job.' "

The Patriots in 2013 were coming off two Super Bowl losses and the arrest of Aaron Hernandez on murder charges. Special-teams player Matt Slater told ESPN the team needed someone – **Easterby** – who "would offer love with no strings attached."

Flash forward two seasons. Last February, the Patriots pulled off a miracle finish to top Seattle and win their fourth Super Bowl and first since 2004. That week, Brady had described **Easterby** as "just a great person and friend. You feel a special connection with him and with his genuine caring for all the people in his life." ESPN reported Brady told friends that **Easterby** was one of the main reasons for the Pats' success; team owner Robert Kraft called him "a wonderful individual."

After the Super Bowl, **Easterby** again called Odom. "Jack told me that Brady asked to sit by him on the bus to the game," Odom said. "Jack said, 'That's something I'll never forget.' "

Odom laughed softly. "Jack takes that with appreciation," he said. "That's how he works."

FRIENDS WITH USC PLAYERS AND COACHES

This is also how **Easterby** works: A lot.

His time with Odom's team until the coach departed in 2008 started with **Easterby** leading a pregame devotional during a 2005 tournament in Alaska. "(Odom) knew my faith background, my relationship with the players, and said, 'Do the devotion,' **Easterby** said. "Then I did the next game, and the next one •"

Said Odom, "Tre (Kelley), because of his home situation, was more open to Jack as a mentor; you spend time with (players), let them talk to you instead of you to them. When they need you, make sure you're available, and (**Easterby**) was there 24/7."

Easterby also connected with the USC men's golf team, many of whom he knew from his own junior golf career and while at Newberry. One player, Patrick Rada, was struggling with the death of his mother from cancer, and **Easterby** soon met and befriended golf coach Bill McDonald.

"He definitely helped me through the process, shifting focus from a bad situation to 'how can I use my platform in golf to help others?' " Rada said. "We prayed together, read the Bible, and I managed to find the good in a very tough situation."

"It started through Patrick, who asked if Jack could do a devotional before a road trip," McDonald said, and laughed. "Then Jack got a speeding ticket on Blossom Street en route. We met him in the parking lot at Maxcy Gregg Park while he was getting the ticket and got the devotional that we took with us."

McDonald said **Easterby** helped fill a gap in communications with his team. "My job is to get them ready to compete, and in school, but 18-20-year-olds need someone else to talk with about their lives," he said. "They could trust him not to tell the coach."

Later, when McDonald was diagnosed with leukemia, "other than my family, Jack was the first person I called when I was diagnosed," the coach said. "He's influenced me as a coach as much as anyone I've been around."

Soon, **Easterby** connected with other USC athletes via a Monday night Bible study. Succop was one of the football players who regularly attended. Later on, another was quarterback Dylan Thompson, who met **Easterby** as a freshman.

"I think it's just the fact he was always there, good or bad," Thompson, now with the San Francisco 49ers, said. "The biggest thing with Jack is, he breaks down the wall of being cordial; he does hugs, chest-bumps. And he never asked for anything. What he and I have, I look at it like family."

Thompson also introduced **Easterby** to his roommate, baseball player DC Arendas – which led to **Easterby** meeting baseball coach Chad Holbrook. "DC, at times, was not performing on the field, having emotional issues, lacked confidence," Holbrook said. "But he always had Jack, who developed a relationship with DC's parents because he wanted to understand their stance (the Arendas' had wanted their son to play at North Carolina).

"Now the mom and dad love Jack, and they lean on him." So, too, does Holbrook. "When he touches down in Columbia (from New England), he's knocking on my door. Even though he's employed by the NFL, he wants to talk to the baseball coach at South Carolina because he cares."

Perhaps no coach at USC has benefitted as much from **Easterby**'s presence as has Dawn Staley. A year after Odom left, new men's coach Darrin Horn decided not to utilize **Easterby** and FCA. **Easterby** calls that "a great blessing, because it opened up two things: my relationship with Ryan (Succop) led to the opportunity with the Chiefs, and Dawn sought me out."

Staley said she saw **Easterby** as someone who could counsel – and listen to – players in a way that coaches could not. "He doesn't discuss what he says to players with me," she said. "I want them to have a place where it's theirs, where they don't think he's reporting back to us."

"We try to create an atmosphere where players can get the best, most experienced people to help them work through things, and sometimes that's personal stuff."

Staley says **Easterby** helped Aleighsa Welch, who experienced several deaths of family and friends early in her career. "**(Easterby)** knows the right words to say to them, to get them to a place where they're thinking about the great memories rather than the void in their lives," she said. **Easterby** also became, and remains, a confidante for A'ja Wilson, whom he calls "an incredible heart (in) a person who just happens to play basketball at the highest level in the world."

Even since joining the Patriots, **Easterby** remains on call and in touch with Staley's players and coaches. "We text him all the time, he texts with our players," she said. "He has staff Bible studies with us, comes to pregame meals, does a chaplain service for us. Every day when he's in Columbia, he's at our practices."

"Once he wasn't working with the men's team, I thought it was a great opportunity to bring him into what we're doing because he really has a way with people. We became a Sweet 16 team when Jack came on board, and (despite his Patriots' job) we're still able to have success at a high level, a Final Four level, as a direct result of what Jack has instilled in our staff and program."

Staley marvels at **Easterby**'s capacity to tend to her team's needs while also juggling all his other self-inflicted responsibilities. "It's like he's on that 5-Hour Energy drink all the time," she said, laughing. "He's a friend of ours, and he's someone who I've grown to love."

That brings us to another **Easterby** staple: hugs. He "blames" his affinity for powerful, bear-like embraces on his father, Jimmy, who co-heads "The Greatest Champion" foundation and website. "That's how my family is," **Easterby** said. "(Jimmy) did it with me and other guys for unconditional love and support. I just love giving hugs because that's a sign that "you're OK, it's OK.'"

Not everyone so embraced by **Easterby** is OK, though. Scott Pioli, general manager of the Chiefs during **Easterby**'s time there, once warned him not to hug his boss, who was suffering through a 2-14 season; **Easterby** did so anyway. Succop says, "I had to learn to get over that; the first couple of times, it was awkward." Other Chiefs players never did get comfortable with it.

Staley is fine with it. "I'm a hugger, too," she said, laughing. "Our program is made up of people who like to hug."

"He's just energetic, loving, and it comes from a place of • he just wants nothing but for you to be the best you can be. Not just on game day, but every single day."