



Abby Drey/Collegian

Penn State football equipment manager Spider Caldwell screws a helmet on Wednesday morning in the Lasch Building. Caldwell spends his days doing everything for the football team from fixing cleats and sewing jerseys to washing the uniforms after games and organizing the equipment room. Caldwell has been working for PSU football for 20 years.

PSU equipment manager driven by camaraderie

By Brendan Monahan
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Severe scoliosis of the spine hindered Brad "Spider" Caldwell from being an astronaut, but he figured he could settle on working for Mission Control instead.

When freshman year of college at Penn State DuBois came around, Caldwell found the aerospace engineering courses getting difficult. So when the opportunity came to become a Penn State football student equipment manager at the main campus, Caldwell switched his major to recreation sports management, allowing him to transfer to University Park.

From his high school years, Caldwell — who has been the Penn State football head equipment manager since the 2000 season — loved the team camaraderie and the sense of belonging the team gave him, something that has never faded.

Caldwell was the manager for the baseball, football and wrestling teams while he was a student at Curwensville Area High School in Curwensville, Pa., and Gary Orwig — the school's baseball head coach — had played baseball with Tim Shope, the head Penn State football equipment manager at the time. This connection, and others, helped land Caldwell a job as student manager.

On Caldwell's first day on the job — the first day of 1983 pre-

season workouts — Shope threw a helmet to the new student manager and told him to fix its face mask. As he found a spot on the floor to fix the helmet, phones rang. Players walked into the old equipment room. Others walked out.

"How am I ever going to fit into this rat race?" Caldwell said to himself. "Twenty years later, I'm still here."

He fit in fine. He always loved the hands-on work, like using the several huge washers in the small room connected to his office in the Lasch Building. That's where he washes the paint and dirt-stained jerseys before they become almost spotless again. Washing the Capital One Bowl jerseys took six hours — four hour-and-a-half cycles — to get the dirt out.

His job also entails fixing cleats and scrubbing helmets, organizing mail and bringing pants and jerseys to his home so he and his wife can stitch them on their sewing machine. Even with the most meticulous hands-on aspects, Caldwell seeks perfection.

"No loophole there for a finger, so the players can't be brought down," said Karen Caldwell, Spider's wife.

But if there's one negative of the job, it's the time commitment. That's why Caldwell lives in a log cabin on secluded four-acre property in Port Matilda — it's an escape from his hectic day.

Maybe not every day is as hectic as his first in 1983. When he arrived that year, he was already a pro. He had done it all before.

Caldwell's eighth grade science

teacher, and Curwensville's junior high football coach Mike Keely asked Caldwell to be his equipment manager several years before. He was nervous at first until his best friend on the football team, Jack Fye, urged him to take the role.

Caldwell was shy in junior high school, but he came to love the team. The job allowed him to come out of his shell and be around sports, though he could never play them because of the scoliosis, which forced him to wear a brace from the time he was 20 months old until he was 16. Caldwell took the job, but it only lasted three days. The head coach of the varsity team, Lyle Domico,

knew Caldwell's father and saw Spider working with the junior high team. The varsity coach had an idea — train a young kid and allow him to be an equipment manager for three to four years so he didn't have to constantly train new managers.

Caldwell didn't want to leave Keely, the man who had given him the opportunity for junior varsity, but Keely insisted.

"He said, 'Hey, it's varsity. You got to go,'" Caldwell said. "Because varsity in high school is it."

Keely claims three days is an exaggeration. To Keely, it was more like 48 hours. He said he brought Caldwell on as student manager because of his ability to do a good job.

"He did more for the people around him than they did for him," Keely said.

As far as Caldwell's former science teacher was concerned, Caldwell's scoliosis wasn't very noticeable, and he was capable of handling things. Keely said Caldwell's parents allowed their son to take his knocks, which molded him into the selfless man he is today. Keely inadvertently referred to Caldwell as a coach when recalling the manager's high school years.

"I keep wanting to say coach," Keely said, "because he was so much involved with the high school."

Because Caldwell was always considered a part of the team he received a standing ovation at the senior awards sports banquet during his senior year. He was given a wristwatch as a gift from the players as all in attendance applauded.

Afterward, Caldwell talked with Keely and his pregnant wife. At that point, Keely gave Caldwell the greatest compliment he ever received.

"He pointed to his wife's belly and said, 'I hope this kid turns out to be half as good as you are and half of what you are as a person,'" Caldwell recalled. "That kid today works for Mission Control in Houston."

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Blue-White week

Wednesday

After the last spring practice before the Blue-White game, the players dump their equipment into the empty travel bags, located in the players' lockers.

Thursday

Caldwell and his assistant managers bring the travel bags and trunks of equipment from the Lasch Building to Beaver Stadium. The extra equipment is left over from the bowl game and is brought to the stadium in case a piece of equipment goes missing.

Friday

Caldwell and the assistant managers unpack the bags. They clean the helmets, polish the shoes and hang the equipment in the lockers.

Saturday

Caldwell sizes the incoming 2010 freshmen for their equipment at Beaver Stadium before the game. Caldwell takes their helmet, shoulder pads, shirt and shoe sizes.

Current players file into the locker room, and Caldwell attends to their "millions of needs." As the players go to their autograph session, Caldwell finally gets a break.