

Phil Steele puts out top college football preview

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In the Westlake office where he spends 100-hour workweeks, opposite a floor-to-ceiling bank of 12 televisions, amid decades of handwritten college football play-by-play sheets, Phil Steele is surrounded by 15 photos of his daughter, Savannah. Her birth 15 months ago was the highlight of Steele's life. Yet, as the 46-year-old cooed at his newborn upon her arrival, he filmed his shoes, absent-mindedly pointing the family video camera at the ground.

"Ask my wife, I'm not great at a lot of things," Steele said, "but I can tell you the jersey number of the third-string tackle from Tulane. I can talk football."

He talks it and writes it in his language of abbreviations and self-designed statistics, the obsessive with a head for numbers making his life in the game his father taught him to love.

The 1979 John Marshall High grad produces one of a handful of major college football pre-season magazines. The mid-June arrival on newsstands of Phil Steele's 2007 College Football Preview for \$8.95, his 328-page labor of love and lunacy, helps signal the start of a college football season that, for Steele and his staff, never ends.

Steele has 30 full-time employees in an industrial park office; sales he reports between \$4 million and \$5 million per year; a circulation of nearly 500,000 for the six versions of his college magazine; a Web site at philsteele.com; an NFL magazine; a newsletter; a print shop churning out menus and wedding invitations; and an underdog streak he can't, and won't, shake. He revels in his competition with older college preview publications like Athlon, Lindy's, Street & Smith, and The Sporting News.

"That does make me feel good, to see those names, and I'm just a guy in Cleveland," Steele said. "But I like to take on the big boys. I never really liked rich kids."

He's the nut in this niche market who wakes up each morning at 5:55, arrives at the office by 7:02, maybe 7:03, downs nine 12-ounce cans of Mountain Dew before noon and makes it his business to know all 119 Division I-A teams - from Ohio State to Louisiana-Lafayette, from the Heisman Trophy candidates to the walk-ons. After a year of analysis, Steele writes the two-page previews for each team himself, plus the predicted order of finish for each conference and a national top 40, freely sprinkling in code phrases like VHT (very highly touted, meaning a player was a top high school recruit).

"No one ever said that it's fine literature," Steele said. "I write with a purpose."

Every part of his fall pastime has a purpose. Steele said he will watch every televised college game in the country, and before finishing his 2008 preview by next May, will have reviewed, and recited into a tape recorder for retyping, the play-by-play and boxscore from every game,

more than 700 of them. He'll also read between 50 and 200 stories from local and college newspapers on each team, the stacks compiled by his staff, 20 of whom are devoted to the football side of the operation. The "fun part" begins with the first Saturday of the college football season on Sept. 1, when about 10 Steele staffers will chart three to seven games each from TV, radio and the Internet, while Steele takes in 12 games at once in his office.

Raised in Cleveland, one of three sons of Henry and Mary, Steele bought a print shop in Lakewood to put out a football newsletter in 1984, the money coming from the second mortgage his parents took out, a grudge against the bank officer who rejected Steele's loan request still in place.

"When he sets his mind to something," said assistant Nancy Avila, who remembers that four-desk first office, "somehow he gets it done."

Sleeping on a couch in the print shop, Steele lost money for seven years, turning a profit for the first time in 1989, the same year his father died of cancer. (His mother, his first newsletter typist, still works with him, as does his younger brother Jim.) He moved to his current location in 1992, put out his first magazine in 1995, and now in his 13th season is recognized for his meticulous devotion, with no statistic too small.

Evaluating preseason guides, Eric Crawford in the Louisville Courier-Journal wrote last month, "[Steele's guide] is the only one that has attained full reference status for me." With his analysis always yielding some unusual picks, he's a radio favorite, criticized and praised around the country as a guest on about 40 shows a week during July. The operation is based on analyzing information, not first-hand reporting.

An admittedly demanding boss, Steele competes like a coach, his scoreboard maintained by Chris Stassen, a software engineer from Newark, Ohio. Stassen's Web site, football.stassen.com/, tracks the accuracy of preseason predictions of 13 publications. Steele won last year, finished second in 2005, won in 2004 and cumulatively over the past five years is the most accurate, a point of pride that Steele tracks weekly during the season.

"I always liked the quantity of information and the completeness of information in Phil Steele's magazine," Stassen wrote in an e-mail, "but prediction accuracy is very highly weighted in my system and this caused him to be ranked in the middle of the pack early on. Since improving his prediction accuracy, he has been the runaway winner in my ratings every single year."

An Ohio State fan growing up, Steele roots now for his picks in his magazine and those dispersed as top tips to Saturday call-in customers. He's cutting his hours to get home earlier to wife Rebecca, stepdaughter Sierra and Savannah, keenly aware of their understanding of his obsessions. But he puts his life in those predictions. And if Utah State doesn't finish eighth, one spot behind Idaho, in the Western Athletic Conference this year, Steele will be ticked.

"There's no meaningless game," Steele said. "I want to win them all."

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