

Navy's Ken Niumatalolo is the most underrated coach in college football

By John Feinstein

Two days after Navy's stunning 45-20 victory over then-13th ranked Memphis, Coach Ken Niumatalolo stood in front of his office window and gestured in the direction of Annapolis Harbor, a smile playing at his lips.

"On a day like today, this is a spectacular view," he said. "Everything looks great: the boats, the water. I can see all the way to Chesapeake Bay. It's perfect.

"Of course there are days when I stand here and think, 'Why do I have to look at all these boats? Why do they make so much noise. Why can't they all just go away?'"

He laughed at his own self-confessed skewed view of the world. These days, the view from Niumatalolo's office is bright and cheery. The Midshipmen are 8-1, they're ranked 16th in this week's College Football Playoff poll and they have a very real chance to be the Group of Five representative in either the Peach Bowl or the Fiesta Bowl.

Not bad for a left-handed backup quarterback who graduated from the University of Hawaii in 1989 and then spent the next 18 years working his way up the coaching ladder before the chance to lead his own team came along in late 2007 when Paul Johnson left Navy to take the Georgia Tech job.

Johnson had turned Navy around, taking over after an 0-10 season in 2001 and guiding Navy to five straight bowl games beginning in 2003. In 2007, after Johnson and Navy had ended the Midshipmen's 43-game losing streak to Notre Dame, Johnson felt it was time to move to a big-time job. The day after Johnson left, Navy Athletic Director Chet Gladchuk named Niumatalolo to succeed him, starting with that year's Poinsettia Bowl. To say that Niumatalolo had big shoes to fill is a vast understatement.

"Work hard, have great coaches, believe in your kids," was Niumatalolo's mantra coming in the door, and it hasn't changed in the past eight years.

Although he played under Johnson at Hawaii and coached under him twice at Navy -- first when Johnson was offensive coordinator and then when he became head coach -- Niumatalolo's personality couldn't be more different than Johnson's.

Johnson was, to put it mildly, supremely self-confident. When he was negotiating with Adm. John Ryan, then the Naval Academy's superintendent, to become the head coach, Johnson told Ryan he would need at least \$500,000 a year to leave Georgia Southern, where he had won two national titles in the lower-tier Football Championship Subdivision.

Ryan was stunned. "I'm a three-star admiral in the United States Navy," he told Johnson. "And I don't make anywhere close to that kind of money."

"Well, Admiral," Johnson replied. "I guess you got in the wrong business."

Niumatalolo would no more say something like that than he would blame one of his players for a loss. He is quiet by nature -- though he has a fierce temper at times on the practice field -- and he would be perfectly happy to receive no credit for his team's success. "Just happy for the kids, they deserve this," he repeats after every Navy win.

After Navy beat Army last December for the 13th straight time to make Niumatalolo the school's leader in all-time coaching wins, he turned blubbery about 30 seconds into his postgame news conference.

"All of you who know me know I'm just a big crybaby," he finally said. "I can't begin to tell you how blessed I feel to coach this team and these kids."

When Johnson left, there was concern about whether Niumatalolo could keep Navy in the same stratosphere. Quietly -- because he knows no other way -- Niumatalolo has taken the Mids to places even Johnson never reached.

Which is why the days when Niumatalolo, who turned 50 earlier this year, can continue to duck credit should be in the past. He has a record of 65-36 going into Saturday's game at Tulsa. The Midshipmen have played in a bowl and won at least eight games in six of his seven full seasons. This year, they have a real chance to do something extraordinary.

Most of the attention this fall has focused on quarterback Keenan Reynolds, who is not only gifted, but a younger version of Niumatalolo: give credit to others; put the team first. While that is a reflection of who Reynolds is, it is also reflective of the program Niumatalolo has built. When Reynolds broke the all-time NCAA record for rushing touchdowns this past Saturday against SMU, Niumatalolo made sure the quarterback's father was able to come out of the stands so Reynolds could present the record-setting football to him.

"I wanted to make sure that ball ended up in the right place," Niumatalolo said. "I didn't want it ending up in the stands or somewhere else."

He also wanted to be certain that Reynolds and his teammates would put the moment behind them and go on to win the game -- which they did, 55-14.

Florida's Jim McElwain, Michigan's Jim Harbaugh and Clemson's Dabo Swinney are probably going to get most of the attention in the national coach-of-the-year award voting, but Niumatalolo should be given serious consideration. Navy's only loss this season is at Notre Dame, a game in which Reynolds was hurt and missed about half the offensive snaps. If the Mids win Saturday and then beat Houston next Friday, they will play for the American Athletic Conference championship on Dec. 5th with a chance to go to a major bowl game.

Pretty impressive for a group of future sailors and marines and a coach some people weren't certain could handle the big headset. There will, of course, be those who think that Reynolds's graduation will mean a drop-off for Navy next season. Not likely.

Niumatalolo's quarterback his first season was Kaipō-Noa Kaheaku-Enhada. He was followed by Ricky Dobbs who was followed by Kriss Proctor who was followed by Trey Miller and then Reynolds. Next season, Tago Smith will be the quarterback and the Mids will keep winning. That's the kind of program Niumatalolo has built: good players graduate and are replaced by good -- occasionally great -- players.

Through it all, Niumatalolo flies under the radar. The national media is interested only in Reynolds and Niumatalolo's name hasn't been connected with any of the big-time job openings in spite of his remarkable record. All of that is fine with him.

Next year, he and his wife Barbara will be empty-nesters. Alexcia, their oldest, is a BYU-Hawaii graduate who is living in Hawaii. Va'a is playing football at Brigham Young and Ali'i will go on a Mormon mission before going to Boise State to play football.

"All the kids will be out west in different places," Niumatalolo said. "Chances are, Barbara will move out there and leave me behind. I mean, the kids or me? I've got no chance." He laughed. "I'll probably just move into an apartment on top of Chick 'N Ruth's so I can just go downstairs every morning and get breakfast."

If that were to happen, the famous downtown Annapolis deli would have one more celebrity to feed each morning. Of course, he would probably go unnoticed. Which is just the way the most underrated coach in college football likes it.

For more by John Feinstein, visit [washingtonpost.com/feinstein](https://www.washingtonpost.com/feinstein)