

Leadership ACHIEVEMENT Award

COACH TROY CALHOUN '89

By Sam Hastings



Reflecting on 17+ years as head football coach at the U.S. Air Force Academy, Troy Calhoun '89 exudes humility and gratitude for his journey as a leader. Asked about his professional successes, Calhoun repeatedly credits one thing more than anything else: people.

"There are some really key elements that you lean on leadership-wise — what you learned while at the Academy, on active duty and in your professional experiences — and people make it go," he says.

Calhoun has built a legacy of leadership. His record at USAFA — 130-82 — is marked by historic accomplishments. During his tenure, the Falcons have achieved 12 winning seasons, including two Mountain West Division titles and a staggering 13 bowl appearances. But the wins tell only part of the story of his leadership.

EARLY INSPIRATION

Calhoun says his parents are two of the most influential people in his life.

His mother modeled a strong work ethic, returning to school to become a nurse while raising two children. Her devotion and sacrifices didn't go unnoticed.

"The poise, the commitment, how often she worked on holidays — there was a work ethic and a consistency there where I had great admiration [for

her]," says Calhoun.

His father, who still coaches high school basketball at the age of 82, demonstrated how leadership can impact young lives and the importance of lifelong learning.

"To see how much he studies the game and is always looking for a new inbounds play or a new half-court press, that's inspiring," says Calhoun.

Calhoun's parents' dedication inspired him and his younger sister, Cal-lie (Calhoun) Malloy '91, to attend the Air Force Academy.

LEARNING TO LEAD

As a cadet, Calhoun played quarterback for the Falcons under Coach Fisher DeBerry, whose commitment to the Academy's mission connected all the dots for Calhoun and his teammates.

"They took the mission to heart. They believed in the system, the process of how the Air Force Academy develops young men and women to become leaders of character," says Calhoun. "They were remarkable that way."

Calhoun was one of only two fourth-classmen to letter for the 1985 team and started at quarterback the next season. The leadership lessons he learned on the field complemented his military training and education, teaching him the importance of balance.

He graduated from the Academy in

1989 as a member of the Superintendent's List and served as an active-duty officer until 1995. During his time in uniform, Calhoun served his alma mater as a graduate assistant (1989-1990) and then again as a recruiting coordinator and JV offensive coordinator (1993-1994).

From there, Calhoun went on to successful roles at Ohio University (1995-2000) and Wake Forest University (2001-2002) before returning to Colorado for a three-season stretch with the Denver Broncos. When Gary Kubiak took over as the head coach of the Houston Texans, Kubiak recruited Calhoun from Denver to be his offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach.

'THE GUY BLEEDS BLUE!'

In 2006, DeBerry retired as head coach of the Falcons. Then director of athletics Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Hans Mueh '66 was charged with finding a new coach to replace DeBerry — tough shoes to fill.

"No. 1 on my list was Troy Calhoun, but he had become a superstar among NFL coaches, so I wasn't sure we could convince him," says Gen. Mueh, a 2022 USAFA Distinguished Graduate. "I will always remember Gary Kubiak, head coach of the Houston Texans, telling me that he hated to lose Coach Calhoun, but in his words, 'The guy bleeds blue!'"

Calhoun kicked off his time as US-AFA's head football coach in 2007. In his first season, he transformed the Falcons from the 4-8 team of 2006 into a 9-4 squad with a bowl bid. The five-game turnaround from 2006 was the largest in the nation that season by a first-year head coach. On top of that, the 2007 Falcons are the only team in Air Force history to win road games at Notre Dame, Utah and Colorado State in the same season.

In a vote of continued confidence, Gen. Mueh nominated Calhoun for the Association of Graduates' inaugural Leadership Achievement Award. "He's here because he needs to be here to do what he does best — producing America's finest leaders," says Gen. Mueh.

RELATIONAL RECRUITING

Calhoun's time as head coach has not been without its challenges. Recruiting talented athletes is difficult for any collegiate program, but it is even more complex at the Academy. Calhoun and his team must find top-tier players who also meet the Academy's high standards for academics, conduct and physical fitness. Additionally, they must convey the values of the U.S. Air Force and the importance of military service after graduation. "It's the hardest thing we do," he says.

Calhoun jokingly describes the recruits available to other collegiate programs as a "gigantic pool" and the small number of candidates qualified for the Academy as a "tiny little puddle."

Over the years, Calhoun's recruiting methods have evolved. Early on, he focused on selling recruits on the quality of an Academy education and the opportunity to serve. Now, he takes a more upfront and relational approach, ensuring recruits understand the Academy's high expectations. Calhoun believes this approach has built trust, improved retention and attracted higher-caliber athletes.

A MAN OF THE PEOPLE

From recruiting to graduation, Calhoun's leadership reaches far beyond the Academy. Air Force Football teach-



As of press time, Coach Troy Calhoun '89 carries a winning record of 131-82 with the Falcons. That includes 12 winning seasons, two Mountain West Division titles and 13 bowl appearances. (Photo by Ryan Hall)

es cadets to be leaders of character who are tough, selfless and team-oriented. Calhoun also emphasizes developing an enduring drive and grit that help players persevere throughout their military and civilian careers.

"Nothing's perfect in this world, so much of it is sheer determination," Calhoun says. "It's a remarkable part of what I get to do."

Calhoun believes a good leader needs to be right in the middle of the action.

"I don't think your office can be 10 floors above everybody else. You have to be very involved in every aspect of the organization, especially when it comes to the well-being of your people," he says. "That means being very intentional about getting to know each person as well as possible."

His care, consistency and integrity are hallmarks of his leadership at US-AFA. "How you treat people is invaluable," he says. "The more I work in leadership roles — I realize that when people have balanced lives, it brings more discipline to the organization."

2029 AND BEYOND

Calhoun and his spouse, Amanda, live in Colorado Springs and have two

adult children, Tyler and Amelia. He recently renewed his contract with Falcon Football through 2029. Speaking about his family's ongoing connection to the Academy, Calhoun radiates gratitude and excitement.

"We're honored. We're incredibly humbled to be a part of the Academy, and it starts with the incredible people," he says. "That's the administration, the [Air Force Academy] Foundation, AFAAC [Air Force Academy Athletic Corporation], the cadets, the staff, the coaches, the players and all the families too. We're fired up!"

The people he works with and the relationships he has built with cadets continue to be among the most meaningful aspects of his role at USAFA. He treasures hearing from former players who reach out to say, "Thanks, coach."

Looking to the future, Calhoun has no intention of resting on his laurels.

"You're forever learning," he says. "You have to evolve, adapt and adjust. It's a must. I learned back on Day 1 when I first came to the Air Force Academy that flexibility is the key to air power. I still live by that in a lot of ways today." 