I love the way Matt Bragga exudes enthusiasm and passion for coaching. I also love to hear a coach laugh, and Matt laughs a lot. And I think it’s pretty cool the way he refers to his wife of 21 years, Eliza, as “his girl.” This interview will be a little different because the questions are coming from his former college coach; Matt played outfield, first base, catcher and designated hitter for me at Kentucky, and earned second-team all-Southeast Region and SEC all-tournament team accolades during his career, finishing his senior season with a .408 batting average in SEC play before signing with the Cincinnati Reds. I only hope that Matt’s love for his players, baseball, his family and his faith are as evident to the reader as it was to the Interviewer:

**Inside Pitch:** What’s the transition been like going from Tennessee Tech to Rice and from Cookeville, TN to Houston, TX?

**Matt Bragga:** It was a fast one, but it’s been very good, going from a city of 33,000 to 2.3 million. The good thing is that it only took me about 10 minutes to get to the office from my home in Cookeville, and because of the neighborhood we chose in Houston, it only takes about 15 minutes to travel from home to Rice. The traffic and size has been a challenge, it’s not small town America. But if that’s the biggest challenge I face, I’m in really good shape!

**IP:** Most people see the move from Tennessee Tech to Rice as a perfect scenario. How do you see it?

**MB:** No question, Rice is a ‘high profile’ job. Someone asked me after I got the job if I felt like I was drinking from a fire hose all of a sudden, and the answer is ‘yes,’ but at the same time when I made the move from being an assistant at Birmingham Southern to being a head coach at Tennessee Tech, that was a hectic transition as well, learning my way around and meeting a lot of new people. So the transition upon arriving at Tennessee Tech and the one arriving here at Rice really isn’t any different. Regardless of where you are, moving into a new situation is going to come at you fast because you want to get it right. But at the end of the day, it’s coaching baseball.

**IP:** When did you realize that you had something special going on at Tennessee Tech?

**MB:** It’s funny, after last season I had so many people saying “great year,” and it was a great year because we were able to accomplish something that had never been done there before. But at the same time, we had a great program before last year; it’s just that a lot of people didn’t know about Tennessee Tech until last year’s Regional and Super Regional run.

I think back to the 2008 season at Tech when we had a break-out year, winning 35 games. Up until that time, we had a lot of great kids in our program, but I had not been able to push the right buttons and turn the corner; I’m thankful that my administration was patient with me. In 2008 I remember thinking, “hold on, I think we can accomplish something really special here.” During the initial interview process, I told the search committee that “if you give me an opportunity to coach here at Tennessee Tech, it may take a few years, but I really believe I can take this team to Omaha.” It took us 15 years and we didn’t make it all the way, but we were sure knocking on the door.
When I was a young coach, I wanted to be the tough guy. I was tossed from a lot of games, thinking that was the way to earn respect. To be honest, I was probably doing it wrong.

So, 2008 is when the tide turned and we started really believing that it was possible to get to Omaha from Tennessee Tech. We had a few bumps in the road, but for the most part it was a pretty consistent, winning program. The difference with last year was that we had a lot of internal player leadership within that was really special and the players saw that team as ‘their team.’ They really took the ball and ran with it.

IP: You have made some coaching stops between your college and pro playing career and Rice. What specific thing have you learned in each program?

MB: My first stop was at Bevill State Community College in Alabama as a 25-year-old head coach. I found out quickly that guys love energy, passion and excitement. I can remember umpiring during an intra-squad game—what a great place to observe the entire team by the way, behind the mound as an umpire. You can call pitches, instruct your players and evaluate all from the middle of the diamond. We were playing really well on that particular day, so I whooped and hollered and did a somersault in between the mound and home plate and the guys loved it! That stuck with me that players want coaches to be excited at times and have fun with the game and just be human. We don’t need to be serious and rigid all the time. There is obviously a time and a place to be serious, but not all of the time. It may sound kind of stupid, but I think it’s OK for your players to see that you can be sort of silly sometimes. Let your players know how much fun this game can be. As a coach, you need to have the same energy you want your players to have.

My next stop was as an assistant coach for Brian Shoop at Birmingham-Southern College. I learned from Brian that even though the season can have ups and downs and be a grind at times, you can still be the same person every day, very consistent and steady. That’s all a player can ask, is for a coach to be consistent, I don’t think the players respond well to a coach who is a Jekyll and Hyde, up one day, down the next. When coaches are all fired up one day and the next day they are down, yelling and angry, it’s hard for a player to know how to respond to that. I was like that at Bevill State, but because of Coach Shoop’s influence, I learned to be a little more consistent.

Something we adopted as a team during that 2008 season at Tennessee Tech was a Latin phrase, Age Quod Agis, which means, “do what you do, be consistent” or “do what you are doing.” It always reminds me of a Christian song I listen to often which says, “incomparable, unchangeable” within the lyrics. That’s the steadfastness and consistency I learned from Coach Shoop. One of my former players, Adam Liberatore, was pitching for the Dodgers and had just seen the movie, Tombstone and “Age Quod Agis” was used. He sent me a text and said, “Coach, I’ve never heard anyone but you, until now, use that phrase!” Another thing happened while I worked for Coach Shoop was my growth as a Christian. He is such a godly example of a Christian coach and he is such a strong man of faith.

My next stop was Tennessee Tech. The main thing I learned there was communicating with your guys at a deeper level. Perhaps it was maturity, too, because I knew this was important all along, but at Tech I really embraced how important it is to take communication to a deep and meaningful level; not only in individual meetings, but also in more casual settings, just letting the guys know that you care about them as people too.

It goes back to that question we’ve all been asked several times; “do you want your players to like you or respect you?” I think you can have both. Players have parents, they don’t need for you to be their dad, but at the same time coaches can be a type of father figure to their players. We want our children to believe that we are great fathers. I really believe that our players can love us and also respect us, similar to the way our children feel about us. There is a line, of course, that players can’t cross. That doesn’t mean they can’t like us and enjoy being with us as coaches.

When I was a young coach, I wanted to be the tough guy. I was tossed from a lot of games, thinking that was the way to earn respect. To be honest, I was probably doing it wrong. Communicating at a deeper level is where you earn respect.

IP: As your coach, I remember Matt Bragga as a young man with a great smile, solid character, a fierce competitor and a really solid hitter from the left side...and someone who really hated losing...at anything...baseball, ping pong, wrestling. I loved that about you. How have you been able to maintain that fierce, competitive...
I'm not anywhere close to being perfect, but I want to believe that I'm growing. When I was a young coach, I'm sure that I took that competitiveness to an extreme and was way too tough on my players. What I've found over the years is that you want to create an atmosphere where guys want to play hard for the team and themselves, not because they might get yelled at or have to run. Because of maturity and experience, I now can be a very competitive, high energy coach without using profanity and screaming at players.

We keep score in almost everything we do in practice. Evaluating and scoring everything we do in practice, Intra-squads and games helps our players grow as competitors. We try to create an environment and culture of competition. Since I've taken this approach I've been just as demanding, but there's been much less frustration for me and for our players.

Your father, Larry, has been on your staff for several years. What's it like having your dad work for you?

The first 11 of my 15 years at Tennessee Tech I did not have a full-time assistant coach. I had some really good young assistants come through but they would leave quickly because we couldn't pay them. I was running through assistants like a sieve. I needed more continuity in my coaching staff. My dad had never coached college baseball, but he coached high school baseball and when I played at Kentucky, he was at most of our games and watched practice and was in to what we were doing. He had great wisdom and skills in helping me with things that would give me more time on the road recruiting and working with our players individually. I knew he could help with a lot of paper work, travel and organizing in the office and with practices. I called my dad to see if he would be interested in moving to Cookeville to help with our program and he quickly said, "I'm in."

It's been phenomenal having him on my staff. He is a tremendous sounding board for me on my staff and in my life. His wisdom has been invaluable, and is actually the director of player development here at Rice.

How do you stay organized and balanced with such a demanding family schedule, practice, recruiting and all the other responsibilities of a head coach?

I decided many years ago that it was of the upmost importance to keep God in the center of everything I do. I couldn't do what I do without an understanding wife. Great wives of coaches deal with lost weekends, night games, late practices and all of the time commitments. Because of this, I promised myself that no matter what, I will be as good a husband to "my girl" as I can possibly be. I promised to give her time, energy, commitment and love, and I vowed to do the same thing for my kids.

At the end of the day, I may not be there all of the time, but when I'm there I will be as absolute present in the moment. I know I fall short on that at times, but I want to do my best for them so they will never feel cheated because of my profession. From a priority perspective, they know that they are far more important than the job that I have. Since we love the game we coach so much, there must be organizational skills in place in order to utilize our time appropriately.

Are there any "go to" practice drills that you utilize?

Like most coaches, I borrow many drills from other coaches I respect. We put up cones in the LF gap, RF gap and on the foul lines. We then establish "difficulty levels." So, your outfield is divided into four areas. In the first round of BP, we give each hitter five cuts. If they hit the ball hard between the LF line cone and RF line cone they get a point. The first round would be all fastballs. In each round the level of difficulty increases. In round two, we award a point if you hit the ball from the pull-side gap to the opposite field foul line. If you pull the ball, you receive no point. If you hit the ball hard in-between the gaps, you receive two points. The last round is "money ball," if you hit the ball hard gap to gap you get four points. Also, in the last round, we start using negative points. If you hit a pop up it's a minus one, a foul ball is a minus one and a pulled ball is a minus one. We mix change ups and breaking balls after the second round as well. Our guys have always loved that type of batting practice.

Even very successful coaches have "ups and downs." How have you handled the low points in your career?

Low points are hard, Coach. Low points aren't always losing. Sometimes it's something else...perhaps a team wins, but still underachieves. When that happens, most of the time it's my fault. Maybe I didn't communicate well enough or dig in to my players with more substance. Maybe I didn't make the impact I should have or didn't make the game as fun as my guys deserved. But we should always learn, not necessarily from the losses, but from the underachieving teams. Sometimes we get away from in-depth individual meetings and quality communication, so as coaches we should self-evaluate after each season and learn how to lead better. When I've done that in the past, it's led to some of our most successful years. It's not always easy to self-evaluate, but when coaches do it honestly, it makes them better.