

How Chris Petersen knew it was time to step down as UW Huskies head coach

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Chris Petersen nearly slipped out of the Don James Center completely unnoticed.

He lingered after the press conference just a few minutes — shaking hands, giving some hugs. But as news cameras and microphones and reporters circled Washington’s new head football coach, the old one saw an opportunity. And if you turned away from Jimmy Lake just for a moment, you might have seen it: Petersen and his wife, Barbara, walking up a ramp and out the door, hand-in-hand. He never looked back.

It was quiet and non-ceremonial, which is how Petersen likes most everything. But this time — for the first time in a long time — he had a choice in the matter. It was Lake who had the lights in his eyes, who had to stick around to answer more questions. Nobody was demanding anything from Petersen. He could just go.

And maybe that was the point.

At Tuesday’s press conference, Petersen turned the Huskies’ program over to Lake, who had served on his staff in some capacity since his time at Boise State in 2012. The news broke on Monday. Petersen — a coach who took UW to a bowl game in each of his six seasons, won two Pac-12 championships, reached the College Football Playoff in 2016 and had made three straight New Year’s Six bowl games heading into this season — was stepping down after the bowl game. Not because he had to, but just because he wanted to.

Petersen’s journey to that press conference was a winding one, and it all started with a quote he first encountered a long time ago. It’s from Confucius, and it goes like this: *We have two lives, and the second begins when we realize we only have one.*

“That thing,” Petersen said, “was ringing in my ears loud and clear.”

He thought of that quote again months after last season’s Rose Bowl loss to Ohio State. When the demands of coaching and recruiting let up for just a moment, he was able to reflect on the season. What he quickly realized was this: He didn’t appreciate that opportunity, at least not as much as he should have.

“You work your whole life to get to (the Rose Bowl),” he said, “and I didn’t really appreciate the week. I didn’t appreciate the game like I need to, you know, as a kid growing up looking at that

game. I think that was one of the things that really hit me loud and clear. So, you know, you start to pay attention to that. Then you go and you put your heart and soul into what you're doing."

And that's exactly what Petersen did, even though this year wasn't the season anyone expected. The Huskies quickly dropped out of the Pac-12 championship race. They finished the regular season 7-5. But leading up to last week's Apple Cup, Petersen wasn't thinking about his record. He was thinking about Confucius. He was thinking about the Rose Bowl. In those final days before the game against Washington State, Petersen made his decision to step away.

"I knew in my heart that that was probably the right thing to do," Petersen said.

Petersen dodged an inquiry about whether he'll coach again — "I'm not falling for that trick question," he said — but for now, it's not on his mind. He's taken on a leadership advisory role in UW's athletic department.

"My whole plan is to get rested and get recharged and get redirected," Petersen said. "The one thing I know is I'm not ready to do nothing. I just got to figure out where all this energy and this passion and this inspiration goes. I don't want it to be on the football field."

Athletic director Jen Cohen described Petersen as more than a football coach. He's a husband, she said. A father. A son. He's a mentor, a friend and, she added, "the best book recommender ever."

"We see him as a caring and thoughtful man with a great smile who all he wants is for everybody else around him to be exceptional," Cohen said. "When Coach Pete came into this deal, he changed the tone for the football program and it really had a ripple effect for all of athletics. He set this crazy high expectation. He saw that we could be better than I think any of the rest of us saw. And when he did that, he did it with the utmost integrity and character."

Petersen has often stressed the importance of balance and perspective and life beyond football. It's what he preached to his players through his Built for Life program, and it's why he puts such an emphasis on levity. Petersen is keenly aware of the pressure his players are under. Maybe because he felt it, too. He wanted to control the "quality and balance" of his life. But in coaching, he said, that's nearly impossible.

"There is no balance, you know?" Petersen said. "It's out of whack. It's crazy. And we're one of those ... staffs that don't sleep in the office and a lot of them do. We would never do that, and it's still just non-stop."

Heading into the Apple Cup, Petersen had only told his wife that he planned to step down. He wasn't nostalgic. He didn't take an extra moment to soak in the Husky Stadium atmosphere. It was just game day, and he had a job to do. Even on Tuesday, his emotions betrayed him just once, in the final moments, as he thanked his family.

In the end, Petersen's decision was about more than just his future. It was about UW's future, too. It was time. He was ready. And the program he helped build? It would be OK without him.

“If I thought that this was going to set us back and not move us forward, I would have never done this at this time,” Petersen said. “I wouldn't do that to this program. I know that I could stay here and fight and we would get this thing back to where everybody's excited and comfortable with. But I have no doubt this is the better thing for the kids and this program and this fan base for Jimmy to go and inject his vision and his energy into this. I think it's going to reignite those players. They don't know it right now. They don't know what they don't know, but I do.”