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Relying on faith

FSU's legendary coach believes, with all of his tested heart, that spirituality is more important to life than any sport.

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TALLAHASSEE

Florida State coach Bobby Bowden didn't jovially greet fans in the lobby at the team hotel or pose for pictures or graciously sign collectibles as he ordinarily would.

Not that afternoon on Sept. 9, 2004.

Instead, he looked lost.

"He was as drained and as dispirited as I'd ever seen him," longtime sports information director Rob Wilson recalled.

But then Bowden had just flown in from Fort Walton Beach after attending the funeral of his teenage grandson, Bowden Madden, and his former son-in-law John Madden, both of whom died days earlier in an automobile accident.

How in the world could Bowden come to grips with such a devastating loss? Would he be able turn his focus on a game, any game, even one as crucial as the season opener against Miami the next day?

He could and would.

Bowden hadn't lost his faith.

"My belief is when we die, we live again," he said. "When I lost my grandson and my son-in-law, my first question was, 'Were they saved?' Both of them were, so my faith let me know they just got there (heaven) before I did. . . . You miss them, but my faith, my belief, helped me get over it."

That night, he wrote a short, poignant letter to his six children that read in part:

Keep in mind, at this time, our family will be together forever if we all TRUST in Jesus and surrender our lives to him. I don't mean change jobs or schools, etc. But just make your life available to Christ as your grandparents did and (as) Ann and I have tried to do.

"That was a defining moment in my father's life with his family and faith in relation to football," said son Tommy, the Clemson coach who furnished a copy of the letter to the Times.

For Bowden, 76, who has more wins than any other Division I-A coach, a pair of national championships, a spot in the College Football Hall of Fame, a field that bears his name, a bronze statue and a glorious stained glass window bearing his likeness at Doak Campbell Stadium, nothing is more important than his faith. Nothing. And certainly not a game.

"Football is a priority; it's big," he said, "but it ain't the priority. No. 1 is God."

That's what makes Bowden the man and the coach he is. He can maintain a healthy perspective when it comes to the head-spinning highs and can find the strength to cope with heartbreaking lows. He believes in trying to save people, which is why he has consistently tried to give ill-behaved players multiple chances, popular opinion be darned.

And he unabashedly and passionately shares his faith with his players, despite criticism that, as an employee at a publicly funded university, he threatens the separation of church and state.

"If you come to Florida State," said son Terry, a college football commentator and a former coach at Auburn, "you're going to get a dose, a good dose, of my dad's faith."

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Bowden likes to tell you that God has no interest whatsoever in his ability.

"He wants my availability," he says.

It's why he's up at 4 a.m., sets up the coffeemaker and then sits for about an hour with his wife, Ann, and reads the Bible or other religious books. That's every day.

It's why, hoping others will follow his lead, he begins staff meetings with daily devotions (one's particular faith isn't relevant as long as the story is inspirational), quotes from the Scripture for the foundations of his pregame speeches and has a omnipresent team chaplain on the sideline.

It's also why each preseason he twice takes his team to church.

During the recruiting process, he tells players' parents that unless they object, the team will visit a church with a predominately white congregation (never his own, First Baptist) and one with a predominately black congregation (Bethel African Methodist Episcopal). In his 30 years at FSU, he can't think of more than a couple of times a parent asked him to exclude his or her son.

"The fact that he brings them here says to them, it takes more than education and the tenets taught through competition to make the whole man," said Darryl Jones, a Clearwater High alumnus and the program manager at Bethel AME. "No other coach or athletic program brings his team to church. That, to us, says a lot about Coach Bowden as a man."

Although some kids may privately fret that going to church is like the so-called voluntary summer workouts, something you better not miss or it will be held against you on game days, Bowden assures them it won't.

It's not about football.

It's about being exposed to spiritual options.

"I've had Jewish boys on my team," Bowden said. "I've had Muslim boys on my team. I've had Protestant boys on my team. I've had boys who don't believe anything on my team. What I'm trying to do is show them that, no matter what their race is, they're welcome. After that, it's up to them.

"I'm just trying to get the word to them and then they've got to decide what they want to do with it. I tell them, 'I'd like you to leave here a better person.' "

"I respect him for his faith," said Jesse Stein, a punter from Shorecrest Prep whose father is Jewish and has a brother who's a rabbi. "His determination, his hard work, all comes from his faith. He was a great mentor. Everything he taught me has translated into my job. I was lucky to play for the man."

Bowden and players will tell you those two Sundays help foster team unity. For some, the effect is longer lasting than a football season or even a college career.

"I was raised in a Baptist church, but I hadn't been really going to church (regularly)," said Larry Key, who was a rising junior running back from Citrus High when Bowden took over at FSU in 1976. "When you get away from home, you more or less do your own thing. . . . What it did for me was it rekindled some of the things I had come up with. It got me going back to church. It sure played a major part in me turning."

These days, Key is a deacon at Christ Gospel Church of Pinellas Park.

"It's an eye-opener," Warrick Dunn said of Bowden's religious overttness.

A Baptist and a product of the Catholic school system, Dunn wasn't attending church often before coming to FSU. His mother had just been killed and he was wrestling with a full range of emotions and questions.

"Coach Bowden being a Christian and sharing things he's been through really helped me," said Dunn, the former Bucs star running back now with the Falcons. "He understands what teenagers go through and he tries to help build and mold us into young men; men of God."

These days, Dunn runs a program to help single mothers buy homes in Tampa, Atlanta and Baton Rouge, La.; in 2004 he was honored as the Walter Payton NFL man of the year for his work on and off the field.

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Not long ago, Air Force coach Fisher DeBerry drew sharp criticism for hanging a banner in the locker room that read, "I am a Christian first and last" and "I am a member of Team Jesus Christ."

Bowden saw nothing wrong with the message, arguing that recognizing faith, even if it wasn't his own, would help heal a society that has "gone crazy." He said so.

He had to.

"To me, being spiritually correct is more important than being politically correct," he said.

Terry Bowden was one of many who said what DeBerry did was inappropriate and that his father was wrong to support blurring the line between church and state.

"He thinks I'm wrong, too," Terry said.

Bobby Bowden's accomplishments as a coach have given him a bully pulpit of sorts, one he knows he won't have once he retires, a day that will come sooner rather than later.

"Believe me," Terry said, "he doesn't want to waste a day."

Still, the elder Bowden doesn't try to force feed anyone. During an hourlong interview about faith, Bowden didn't ask a reporter once about his beliefs.

He simply talks about what he believes and why.

"I don't think people should separate faith from the rest of their life," said Georgia coach Mark Richt, a longtime former FSU assistant, adding Bowden's priorities are inspiring. "It doesn't make any sense. It's a part of who we are, body, mind and spirit. Why should we leave one at the door when we walk out to work?"

Richt doesn't, not since 1986.

That year, FSU lineman Pablo Lopez was shot and killed, and when Bowden broke the news to the team, he spoke of his faith and that eternal life was guaranteed to those who were saved. He invited anyone who wanted to talk more to come by his office. The next day, Richt, then a graduate assistant, walked through the open door and accepted Christ.

As a head coach, he now incorporates many of the same practices he learned from Bowden. On and off the field. This spring, his wife, Katharyn, was diagnosed with cervical cancer. Throughout the ordeal and surgery, the couple said prayers and their faith kept them strong.

"When you start talking about having cancer and you're not sure what that's going to mean, knowing where you're going to spend eternity makes all the difference in the world," Richt said. "We had peace in that."

* * *

Forget the nickname, Saint Bobby. Bowden is the first to insist he's not perfect. That doesn't mean he's not striving for it. The road to the goal begins, he tells you, with faith.

"Coach Bowden is one who makes his life and his faith accessible; that has just been an awesome testimony of his life," said Pastor Hayward Miller of the Living Word Fellowship in Panama City, one of many churches at which Bowden has spoke in recent months. "He has a very clear message and our congregation really received him and the message. Awesome, awesome day."

Seeing Bowden's passion for the subject, hearing him share his own life events and lessons learned all spun with his unique wit and folksy charm, it's not hard to picture him as a preacher.

Actually, he sees little difference between an evangelist, a coach and a teacher. All can be differencemakers in someone's life. That, he sees, is his true calling.

"If you knew the cure for cancer, would you tell somebody? You wouldn't keep it a secret, would you?" he asked a congregation at the First Family Church in Overland Park, Kan., in May. "No. None of you

would. . . . Cancer can kill you, salvation can save you so you can live eternally. Isn't that a greater story? God didn't just pick ministers to preach. He picked you. And he picked me."

* * *

He has been a coach for more than five decades.

He has been a Christian his entire life.

On his desk, flanked by a new biography about his idol, Alabama coach Paul "Bear" Bryant, or the latest tome about Gen. George S. Patton or Stonewall Jackson, is the Bible.

Always at arm's reach.

Always worn on his sleeve.

"It's awful important to him that he be successful; he's very competitive," Tommy Bowden said. "But one of the reasons he's been successful is because he's been able to have a higher priority than football goals. . . . It's kept him level-headed, and I think it's kept him youthful."

Unlike so many of his peers, Bowden hasn't burned out or showed signs of walking away from his job for a life walking the beach and golf courses. It's not about winning more games or awards to him.

He's after a more important win.

"I think I've finally gotten to the point where I can really help these boys, if they'll listen to me," he said. "I just want to try to help these kids grow to be good people. . . . They have to get their academics, and they have to learn how to live with people. They have to look at life beyond football."

Or as he wrote to his kids that night two years ago:

When I die and go to Heaven (I know I will), if all of you and your family are not there with me when your time comes, I will consider myself to have failed in life. All the statues, trophies, championships, etc. will be in vain. Somewhere along the line, I failed you if you are not there. . . . Now is the time to recommit our lives to Christ. . . . Each night, this is my fervent Prayer.

Love, Dad.

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