

Former Air Force football coach enjoying retirement in South Carolina

By BOB GILLESPIE
Senior Writer
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ISLE OF PALMS — Looking back, it seems a perfect metaphor for a life and career. For Fisher DeBerry though, it's merely a funny, slightly self-deprecating story involving family — the type of story he loves best.

In January, DeBerry, a month retired as head football coach at the U.S. Air Force Academy, was helping his daughter, Michelle, and her family move from Colorado to Tulsa, Okla., where DeBerry's son, Joe, lives. "Helping," in this case, meant driving a moving van across three states in the middle of a Midwestern winter.

"Two U-hauls, two cars and five grandkids," DeBerry says of the family caravan, "and a snow storm in Wichita."

As DeBerry was nearing the new house, one of his five grandchildren pointed out a church on the side of the icy road. When he looked back, the truck — which carried, among other things, a piano — was on the road's shoulder, heading rapidly for a snow-filled ditch.

Somehow, the small but wiry DeBerry, 68, wrestled the truck back on line. He laughs now about the moment, as does his son, a former Clemson and professional baseball player.

"The thing is, he was just 200 yards from the house, after making it all the way across country," Joe DeBerry said. "I was scared to death, but not him."

No. The Cheraw native and Wofford College graduate knows about difficult journeys and reaching destinations safely.

On Dec. 15, an emotional DeBerry announced he was stepping down at Air Force after 23 years as coach. "There comes a time in every man's life," he said, "when you have to look at the big picture and decide what's the best thing for your family. ... This is the hardest decision I have ever made in my life."

The decision, while unexpected in its timing, was not a surprise. DeBerry compiled a 169-109-1 record, more wins than any service academy coach. But the Falcons suffered their third straight losing season in 2006, after just two in DeBerry's first 20 years, and the strain showed.

"It wore on him," said Kathy Shipley, DeBerry's secretary for 23 years. "He's always been an optimist ... it would wear down anyone. (The retirement) was almost like a death in the family."

It wasn't only the defeats and near-misses: Air Force was 4-8 in 2006, but five losses were by a total of 21 points, including a 31-30 loss at then-No. 11 Tennessee. Also, off-field controversies — in 2004, when the devoutly religious DeBerry displayed a Fellowship of Christian Athletes banner in the team locker room, and a 2005 firestorm when he said the Falcons needed "more Afro-American players" after a loss — also had dampened the perennially upbeat coach's spirit.

The deciding moment came after last season when, according to published reports, administrators pressured DeBerry to fire long-time coordinators Chuck Peterson (offense) and Richard Bell (defense). "I built my program on family," says DeBerry, who had never fired an assistant. "That was the thing we always talked to players about: loyalty, being brothers. It was always a foundation of everything we did."

And so DeBerry informed athletics director Hans Mueh he would quit instead. After his press conference, he hugged Mueh on his way out of the room.

Others were not as conciliatory. "I was disappointed for him," said Bell, USC's head coach in 1982. "It didn't have to happen this way. Here's a guy, he's a legend in college football. It could've been done better than it was."

Basketball coach Jeff Bzdelik, who invited DeBerry to stand and be recognized before a home game — cadets responded with a lengthy standing ovation — also was critical of the departure.

"(DeBerry) wasn't honored the way that he should have been," Bzdelik said. "It's a shame. The man deserves a parade."

Yet to see DeBerry now, relaxing with his wife of 41 years, Lu Ann, at their Isle of Palms house (they also own a home at The Cliffs, near Greenville), one would never imagine such events occurred. DeBerry laughs, talks animatedly as he tackles a huge pile of cards and letters from well-wishers, takes long beach walks with Lu Ann and Buddy, the couple's energetic Shi Tzu.

He says he is at peace.

"I have a great friend in (former West Virginia coach) Don Nehlen, and he said, 'You'll know,'" DeBerry says. "We got the feeling it was time. The last three years were a little tough, and 44 years (in coaching) is a long time. We wanted to spend more time together, time with our grandchildren."

Let no one think DeBerry will be idle in retirement. His recent schedule included attending a Wofford-The Citadel basketball game, then an FCA breakfast in Myrtle Beach at the state high school coaches' convention. The title of DeBerry's autobiography sums up his view on religion and the military: "For God and Country: Foundations of Faith."

Nor did he run away to South Carolina. The DeBerrys will return to Colorado in May to work with his Fisher DeBerry Foundation, raising money for local charities, especially for single parents (DeBerry was reared by a single mother). He has a golf tournament and a 5K run, grants to be awarded, summer camps for kids to be arranged.

"Now that I've got a little time, I want to get more involved, contact corporate America, see if we can build this foundation," he says.

There will be time, too, to reflect on a career that, despite missteps, has safely reached its journey's end.

On Oct. 19, 2002, a 6-0 Air Force team played host to 6-0 Notre Dame in one of the biggest games in AFA history. With ESPN's GameDay on site and a national TV audience, the Falcons lost 21-14; in retrospect, that was a high-water mark for DeBerry's program.

Air Force lost four of its final six games that season, and went 20-26 the next four seasons. Against rivals Army and Navy, the Falcons were 5-5 from 2002-06, after going 30-6 under DeBerry from 1984-2001.

As losses mounted, there was grumbling that DeBerry's option offense, always among the nation's best in rushing, was outmoded. As with Penn State's Joe Paterno and Florida State's Bobby Bowden, the only two active coaches at the same school longer than DeBerry at Air Force, there were murmurs the game had passed him by.

During the past season, the Colorado Springs Gazette ran an online poll: Should DeBerry resign?

DeBerry says his Falcons were always competitive, but close victories had become close losses. Talent-thin Air Force also suffered injuries; in 2006 alone, 13 linemen missed all or most of the season.

"We lost those linemen, lost our best running back, lost continuity," DeBerry says. "It wasn't quite as much fun."

In addition, Bell points out that in 2000, when the Western Athletic Conference split, Air Force joined the league's other top football powers in the new Mountain West Conference. "They took every good team and the competition stepped up," Bell says. "Now, every week is a Super Bowl for us."

And, Bell said, there were "a lot of issues off the field (DeBerry) never had to deal with before."

The two that caused the most controversy were, in part, of DeBerry's own making.

In 2004, DeBerry, after consulting with his team captains, hung a motivational banner in the Falcons' locker room bearing the FCA "Competitors Creed," which says in part, "I am a Christian first and last. ... I am a member of Team Jesus Christ." Officials told him to remove it a day later.

The timing was poor. Incidents of on-campus evangelism and religious intolerance toward non-Christians had created a "great sensitivity," DeBerry says. In 2005, Air Force officer and graduate Mikey Weinstein and four others filed a lawsuit (later dismissed) that accused academy leaders of overtly pressuring cadets to undertake evangelical religious instruction.

DeBerry's 2004 statement reflected that situation. "While I have a strong Christian faith, I have never intentionally set out to pressure, offend or upset anyone who might not agree with me," he said. "I never purposely set out to impose my beliefs on others, nor have I discriminated against any player ... for not believing the way I do."

In June 2005, then-academy superintendent Lt. Gen. John Rosa Jr.,

now president at The Citadel, told an Anti-Defamation League meeting in Denver that the coach's banner had been "clearly, clearly over the line."

These days, DeBerry acknowledges that "no one in a leadership position (should impose) his beliefs upon others, and understandably so." But he also says that afterward, he felt more constrained in his relationship with players than in the past.

"Some things we were restricted from being able to do," he says, "which conflicted with why I got in coaching."

As an example, he recalls a visit during the Falcons' game at Tennessee last fall by two former Air Force players, Tony Cates and Shane Bonham, who later transferred (Cates to Vanderbilt, Bonham to Tennessee). Both, DeBerry says, had become Southern Baptist ministers.

"Shane told me he most remembered our ritual in the locker room, saying the Lord's Prayer prior to the game with our arms around each other," DeBerry says. "Shane said he had never heard the Lord's Prayer before he came to Air Force (but knew) if he was going to be a part of the team, he'd better learn the words."

DeBerry sighs. "Those kinds of things ... some of the changes, made it very difficult to be who you were, who you wanted to be."

DeBerry's other inflammatory incident came in 2005 when he said publicly what perhaps every football coach in America has said or thought privately: black athletes equate speed.

After top-20 Texas Christian hammered Air Force 48-10, DeBerry bemoaned the lack of "minority" athletes on his team (AFA had nine black players at the time). A day later, he followed that by saying: "It's very obvious to me that the other team had a lot more Afro-American (sic) players than we did, and they ran a lot faster than we did. It just seems to be that way that Afro-American (sic) kids can run very, very well."

Milo Bryant, a black columnist for the Colorado Springs Gazette, wrote that "DeBerry's comments, however well-meaning he might have been, are wrong," and said the comments promoted stereotypes of black athletes. A day later, DeBerry apologized, saying Bryant was correct.

"I realize the things I said were hurtful to many people, and I want everyone to understand I never intended to hurt anyone," he said in a prepared statement.

Mueh and school superintendent Lt. Gen. John Regni both issued reprimands to the coach.

"I think that (incident) hurt him," Mueh says. "Boy, if there was one thing he could take back, it would be that. That was an isolated instance, his frustration over a tough loss. Fisher doesn't have a racist bone in his body."

Bryant, in fact, says DeBerry's comments seemed less racist than dated. "I never accused Fisher of racism," he says. "But I mean, 'Afro-American? When's the last time you heard that? Back in the '70s?'"

Bryant, in the same column, wrote that DeBerry, rather than bemoan his lack of black players, needed to make better use of the talent Air Force did have.

"I think he's someone whose time was passing him by," Bryant says. "(DeBerry's statements) let me know where he is, where his offense is, too. It's still back there."

National writers suggested DeBerry was less racist than out of touch. Frank DeFord, on Sports Illustrated's Web site SI.com, called the coach "not a very savvy guy," and wrote that DeBerry's mistake was "not being canny enough to speak in the euphemistic code that coaches ... employ in talking about race."

Floyd Keith, executive director of the Black Coaches Association, actually seemed sympathetic to DeBerry. "I know what they deal with in the academies, so that's a tough gig," he said. "Probably the best way he should have said it was, 'We just need to recruit some speed,' and left it alone."

DeBerry says he issued the apology "when really I didn't think it necessary (because) the academy had been hammered on previous things." He says when he asked his black players how they felt, "they laughed about it."

He also says he was comfortable with his record. "I know in my heart who I am, and my players know my heart," he says. "I wasn't really worried about it."

Ultimately, those around him believe what sent DeBerry into retirement was what he now says: It was the right time.

Bell and Mueh each saw the coach's disappointment after the 2006 season. Mueh says he did not specifically ask DeBerry to fire coaches — "We agreed changes needed to be made, there needed to be a shakeup," he says — but Bell recalls a conversation with DeBerry after his annual evaluation meeting with Mueh.

"(DeBerry) called me that Saturday and said, 'Well, it just didn't go well,' " Bell says. "He said, 'I don't know what I'm going to do, but I didn't like the context of what we discussed.'"

"And (he said), 'If I don't like it, I won't stay and fight this battle. I've got to have support in what we want to accomplish.'"

DeBerry now says that "we maybe spoiled the academy a little bit, but our expectations were always very high. I thought what we were doing was more important than just coaching football.

"I would get e-mails (from former players saying), 'Football taught me more than anything I learned in an academy classroom.' That makes me feel what we did was on target."

Maybe, in a sense, he is right. Since his retirement, DeBerry has been, if anything, more honored at Air Force, both by his peers and the academy.

On May 5, Mueh said, the academy will have a huge celebration of DeBerry's career: an invitation-only, 1,000-guest banquet at five-star resort The Broadmoor; a possible Exceptional Service Award from the Secretary of the Air Force; and the likely establishment of a Character

and Leadership award in DeBerry's name.

Oh, and this. "We'll probably have a parade by the cadet wing (student body) on that Saturday, and Fisher will be the reviewing official," Mueh says, then laughs. "Most of us never get a parade."

Jeff Bzdelik will be pleased to hear that.

Air Force also hired as its new football coach Troy Calhoun, a former DeBerry player and assistant coach. While Air Force's former offensive coordinator doesn't think that was because of his boss' legacy — "they're not that intelligent," Peterson says — Calhoun, late of the NFL's Houston Texans, says he wants DeBerry to be part of his program.

"Fisher needs to be around here, all the time. I told him that," says Calhoun, who will continue running the option with perhaps a few NFL touches. "He needs to be up and down these hallways, be around when we play games. He's still got a ton to contribute."

Meaning Calhoun doesn't buy the "passed him by" theory?

"All I've got to do is flip on the tape of the Tennessee game (which Air Force lost by going for a two-point conversion on its final touchdown)," he said. "That team was pretty well coached, and I know the role he played in that."

DeBerry laughs when asked that question. "We're the same staff that (in 2002) was 6-0 and playing Notre Dame on GameDay," he says. "I don't think we got dumb and outdated in that time."

DeBerry, four months shy of his 69th birthday, has lost none of his zeal for Air Force or the game he coached so long. Once, his influence on the academy was such that, he admits, players referred to him as "General DeBerry."

That likely won't change, even if he's no longer on the sideline.

"It wasn't all about me," DeBerry says. We had great players, coaches, administration. The people in Colorado Springs embraced us. A lot of people contributed; it wasn't all about my ride."

Then he grins again. "(But) I was the one driving the bus," he says. Working to keep it out of the ditches.