His family 'bullied,' 'tough memories' drove Texas' Charlie 'Tub' Strong to succeed

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Long before Charlie Strong was named the University of Texas football coach last week, he was known as Charles Strong. That was until he went to work at the University of Florida in 1983 and the head coach, who happened to be Charley Pell, said Charles Strong looked more like a Charlie.

And so Charles, a 23-year-old graduate assistant whose football life had been confined to relatively small schools in Arkansas and who was serving as low man on the Florida coaching staff, became Charlie.

But not without putting his personal signature on the change. He insisted his name be spelled with an “ie,” not an “ey.”

Charley Pell laughed, shrugged and granted Strong’s wish.

It really wasn’t a big deal for the young assistant. He had arrived not knowing another soul in Florida, and he hadn’t been Charles very long, anyway. That was what they took to calling him when he left home for the University of Central Arkansas in the late 1970s.

He was known as Rena (pronounced Ren-AY) growing up in Batesville, Ark., a speck in the southeastern Ozarks that proudly refers to itself as the “oldest city” in the state.

Charles Strong, as everybody in town knew, was his father.

Rena was the boy’s middle name. That was what his mother, Delois Ramey, decided he should be called. The 13 other family members who lived in her house on 14th Street as well as the rest of the town dutifully followed. To his football teammates and coaches, he was known as Tub in honor of a fall while taking a bath.

To this day, on the rare occasions he travels back to Batesville or when the family gets together as it did a year ago at the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans, Strong answers to Rena.

It was as Rena that Charlie Strong’s mettle was forged. He was still a child when he began showing a single-minded determination, work ethic and attention to detail that he was determined would take him far beyond Batesville’s city limits.

“And Rena never missed going to church on Sunday,” said his aunt, Cardia Ramey, who also lived in the house on 14th Street and still calls Batesville home. “He was a very great young man. He always tried as hard as he could. You know, he is still a great young man.”

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Coaching roots

Charlie Strong's father was a basketball coach whose break came when he landed a high school job 120 miles east of Batesville in Luxora, on the Arkansas side of the Mississippi River. Delois, like her sister, Cardia, cleaned other people's houses.

At his introductory news conference in Austin on Monday, Strong, 53, referenced his father's success in Luxora and mentioned that the town's recreation center bears his name.

"The values he instilled within his players were the values I was able to instill within my players," Strong told his audience. "I had a chance to follow him and look at how well he conducted himself."

In a more private setting later in the week, however, Strong insisted it was his mother who was most responsible for his "core values."

"She was the most influential person in my life," he said. "I watched her work so hard to make a life for her family. She never faltered. She made sure we had what we needed."

She had no choice. Charles Strong, who could not get a coaching job closer to home, did not get back to Batesville as often as he might have liked.

He worked with other people's sons. Rena, when he made the two-hour journey to watch his father at work, mostly observed.

"My father was a tough, no-nonsense coach who made his practices hard and demanded strict discipline," the son recalled. "There was a lot of running. And there was a lot of fighting for the ball. He instilled toughness. He was an old-school coach. It was a different time."

Charles Strong died in June 1995. He had a bad heart. Delois Ramey, who had come to wintering in Florida where her son coached, died five months later after her second stroke.

Developing drive

Cardia Ramey said that although cleaning houses was the sisters' primary source of income, they would when they could also work at a nursing home and at the Head Start program at school. They had a lot of mouths to feed.

Delois had eight children, Cardia five. Their house had four bedrooms.

Rena slept in a room with his older brother, Eddie Brown, and younger sisters, Debra and Carla.

"All of the children had a drive," Eddie Brown said. "When you grew up poor, you didn't want to stay that way. Our mother taught us you could work your way out."

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“You know, bullying is not something that was just invented,” he said. “Our family was bullied. Some people made fun of us and pointed fingers. Maybe we didn’t eat pork chops at every meal and didn’t get the things we wanted for Christmas and didn’t wear new clothes, but we were fed and clothed and grew up strong.”

Being accountable

Charlie Strong said he preferred not to talk about some of the early adversity his family faced.

“They are tough memories,” he said.

But he was happy to volunteer how a youth football coach, Arvie Burks, approached him after watching the eighth-grader shagging footballs.

“Why don’t you play?” Burks asked.

“Don’t have the money,” Strong replied.

Burks fronted Strong the money to play and invited Strong to repay it by selling candy out of the coach’s van.

One day the receipts didn’t add up to the amount of inventory remaining. Strong told his mother the story, confessing to having eaten much of the candy with his brother, Billy.

Delois Ramey insisted the boys immediately head to Burks’ home to explain the reason for the shortage. She wanted the boys to work out an arrangement to pay for what they had eaten.

“Responsibility for your actions,” Charlie Strong said.

Burks would not hear of it.

“Arvie Burks was a man who if I didn’t have something, he made sure I had it,” Strong said. “He was one of many good people I met along the way.”

Burks’ son, Richie, who lives in Southlake, said Strong stayed in contact with his father until Arvie died in 2010.

“Charlie never forgot my dad,” Burks said.

As he grew older, the young Strong worked at his uncle N.H. Strong’s Phillips 66 service station along Main Street.

“He was a hard-working kid,” recalled Willie Strong, widow of N.H., who also still lives in Batesville. “My

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College plans

When the time came to go away to college, Charlie Strong selected Central Arkansas, about 95 miles down the road in Conway.

Strong had traveled with his high school football team to the likes of Pocahontas, Paragould and Newport, but Conway, a community of about 30,000 back then, was the big city.

He was determined to become a teacher, go on to get an advanced degree and maybe even become a college professor. He was a small, skinny defensive back at Batesville High, and there was no football scholarship to be had. He walked on at Central Arkansas.

As a gift, Uncle Billy loaned Strong his decade-old Chevrolet Caprice, better known as “The Green Hornet,” to shuttle back and forth to Batesville so he could visit family and pick up some spending money working at N.H.’s service station.

“It was a big tank, really,” Strong said. “To me, it might as well have been a new Cadillac.”

NAIA standout

Strong grew into a three-time NAIA all-conference safety at Central Arkansas. In 1980 and 1981, he led the team in interceptions. He was inducted into the school’s sports hall of fame in 2009.

“Everybody else would be out running around; he’d be in his room studying,” Brooks Hollingsworth, his former teammate and later an assistant coach at Central Arkansas, told the Courier-Journal newspaper in 2010 when Strong was named head coach at Louisville.

“He was almost military-like,” Hollingsworth concluded.

After graduation, Strong moved to Henderson State in Arkadelphia, Ark., in 1982 and began pursuit of a master’s degree in education. To help pay his bills, he signed on as a graduate assistant with the football team.

He was sitting in football coach Sporty Carpenter’s office one day when the telephone rang. It was the break of a lifetime.

When Carpenter hung up, the coach told his young graduate assistant he was sending him on. Strong was going to the University of Florida, where he could learn so much more football.

Carpenter without telling Strong, had contacted his old Henderson State teammate, Dwight Adams, a defensive assistant and special teams coach at Florida, about his sharp-minded grad assistant whom he foresaw would have a big-time football future.

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Strong's first job was breaking down film. There were late nights and early mornings when the only people in the Florida coaching offices were Strong and a young offensive coordinator named Mike Shanahan.

"Charlie was one of those guys who didn't own a wrist watch," Adams said. "He worked until the job was done.

"And then he asked questions. He always asked questions. He wanted to learn as much as he could. It was as if he was in some sort of a hurry."

Strong's only other passion in Gainesville was studying for a second master's degree in education.

He slept in a dorm. He ate at the training table. He saved $8,000. He bought his first car — a Nissan Pulsar.

"I paid all cash," Strong said. "I was 24 years old, and I finally owned something."

Big break

Charlie Strong cashed in on his big break at Florida. He went on to learn from a Who's Who list of coaches at some of America's finest football schools.

After two years at Florida, he followed up with a season as a graduate assistant under Jackie Sherrill at Texas A&M in 1985. Then came two years at Southern Illinois before Galen Hall, who succeed Pell at Florida, beckoned him back to Gainesville.

Then came a year at Mississippi before another new Florida coach, Steve Spurrier, brought the former graduate assistant back as his assistant head coach.

Then "Coach" called.

Lou Holtz, whom Strong simply refers to "Coach," invited him to Notre Dame. And when Holtz, whom Strong calls his mentor, moved to South Carolina, he made sure Strong would join him.

Then it was back to Florida, where he worked for Ron Zook and Urban Meyer.

Strong chafed to be a head coach. There were disappointments when he believed he was being passed over for elite jobs. There were some offers. He waited, however, to get exactly the right one.

In 2010, at age 50, he finally debuted on a sideline as the head coach at Louisville. His teams won 37 of 52 games.

And then Texas came calling with a reported five-year, $25 million contract and the keys to a kingdom.

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IN THE KNOW

Charlie Strong

Born: Aug. 2, 1960

Hometown: Batesville, Ark.

College: Central Arkansas

Wife: Vicki

Children: son, Tory; daughters Hailee, Hope

The Road from Batesville to Austin

Year(s)	School	Job	Head coach
1982	Henderson St.	Graduate assistant	Sporty Carpenter
1983-84	Florida	Graduate assistant	Charley Pell
1985	Texas A&M	Graduate assistant	Jackie Sherrill
1986-87	So. Illinois	Wide receivers	Ray Dorr
1988-89	Florida	Outside linebackers	Galen Hall, Gary Darnell
1990	Mississippi	Wide receivers	Billy Brewer
1991-94	Florida	Assistant head coach, defensive tackles	Steve Spurrier
1995-98	Notre Dame	Defensive line	Lou Holtz,

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1999-2001	South Carolina	Defensive coordinator	Lou Holtz
2002-09	Florida	Assistant head coach, co-def. coordinator, linebackers	Ron Zook, Urban Meyer
2010-13	Louisville	Head coach	
2014-	Texas	Head coach	

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