Colleges

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Strong's life story is extraordinary

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By Roy Bragg
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BATESVILLE, Ark. — Charlie Strong, then a lowly graduate assistant at Texas A&M, asked his boss, defensive coordinator R.C. Slocum, for a favor.

“He said 'Coach, Southern Illinois has a job opening for a receivers coach. They want to hire a minority coach. Ray Dorr is the head coach, and I know you know him. I wondered if you'd call him,'” Slocum said, relating the incident.

It was 1986, long before Strong would be hired to replace Mack Brown as the head coach at the University of Texas.

Strong, an all-conference defensive back at Central Arkansas, just wanted to break into coaching. Becoming a graduate assistant at a big-time program such as A&M was an early step on that road.

Slocum, who later would become A&M's head coach, made the phone call, but the news on the other end of the line wasn't good.

The hiring process was nearly finished, Dorr said. There were three finalists and the school was poised to make a hire.

“'Ray, I think this guy is good,'” Slocum recalls telling Dorr. “'I feel strongly that if you interview this guy, you'll hire him.”

“R.C.,” Dorr said, “to be honest, we don't have the money to fly him in.”

“I said, 'I tell you what,'” Slocum said. “'I'll buy him a plane ticket if you can give him 20 minutes. That's how strongly I feel about him.' Ray said, 'You can't beat that deal.'”

“I got Charles a ticket and flew him up there,” Slocum said. “And Ray hired him.”

That became the first full-time coaching job for Strong, now 53 and hired Jan. 5 to return the Longhorns to national prominence.

Not a flashy guy

The former Louisville Cardinals coach was a surprise hire for Texas faithful, who had expected a name that would make a big splash.

Instead of flashpowder and spotlights, UT gets a coach described by friends and colleagues as detail-oriented and consistent, whose personal and professional style eschews any “big splash.”

Take Slocum's story, for example. The point isn't Slocum's largesse, but rather his faith in the young Strong. It shows the impact Strong has on nearly everyone who meets him. Slocum, like others before him, could tell that Strong was meant for great things.

“He was a hard-worker,” Slocum said. “He showed up early, stayed late, and was always asking for stuff to do and ways to help.”

Strong was not flashy and didn't jockey for attention.

“The thing that's very characteristic of him,” Slocum said, “is that he's a very steady guy.”

Others echo Slocum's assessment of the young Strong.

“He was always where he was supposed to be, doing what he was supposed to do,” said Ken Stephens, head coach of the Central Arkansas Bears when Strong played. “You tend to lose track of guys like that. Whether it was school or football, he just did his job and did it well.”

“He was quiet,” said Richard Martin, Central Arkansas' track coach and an assistant football and track coach when Strong was in school. “He didn't act like the other athletes. A no-nonsense guy. He did well in everything he did.”

Pride of Batesville

None of that surprises folks here in Batesville, a town of more than 10,000 that's a 90-minute drive north from Little Rock.

As a kid, Strong's family referred to him by his middle name “Rene.”

“Even when he was 5 years old, you could always tell that there was something special about Rene,” said “Mama” Pearl Flemming, who lived next door to Strong's family.

“Rene was very independent. He was very polite. He was good to his mama. He did the right things for the right reasons.”

“Everyone in this town knew that he was going to be something special,” said Willie C. Strong, the coach's aunt. “And he knew it, too. He always told us that he was going to do something great.”

Strong was one of six children born to Delois Ramey, uncle Arthur Montgomery said. His father, also named Charles Strong, was a well-respected coach and educator in Luxora, a town on the Mississippi border. The town's gym, in fact, is named after the elder Strong.

Strong's parents were never married.

Strong's family shared a cramped house with his aunt, also a single mom, and her six kids. There was a mix of Strongs, Browns, and Rameys

among the kids living there.

It was an impoverished and disadvantaged home.

Thankfully, there was Batesville.

This town's reality belies the popular belief that small Arkansas towns are hotbeds of racial unrest.

Black and white kids played together even before school desegregation in 1961, Montgomery says, and continue to do so to this day.

“We didn't look upon them as black kids or white kids,” said dentist Bill Beller, who's white. “They were just 'our kids.'”

Strong was a good example of that. As a young boy, his best friend, who was white, was Steve Elumbaugh.

“Those two were always running around, playing in the lawn (between the Elumbaugh house and Arthur Montgomery's home),” said Mayor Rick Elumbaugh, Steve Elumbaugh's cousin.

It continued when Strong played organized sports.

“I met Charlie in (youth) baseball,” says Mark Rush, now head baseball coach at Batesville High. “It seemed like every year, we were on the same team. He'd ride with my dad and I to out-of-town games.”

The boys became best friends, hanging out during idle time. They ran track together, too. Upon graduation, they both attended Central Arkansas. Strong, who didn't have a car at the time, routinely hitched rides home with Rush.

“You have to understand that everybody loved to hang around with Charlie,” Rush said. “He was the only African-American in our group, but he was just one of the guys.”

Strong was a good student. When he wasn't in school or playing sports, he was working.

The most visible job was at uncle N.H. Strong's Phillips 66 gas station on Main Street. N.H. Strong was Willie C. Strong's husband.

“He would work there every summer,” Rush said, “until he got old enough to work other jobs.”

“He used to say, 'I'm not going to do this for the rest of my life,'” his aunt said, chuckling.

Lots of father figures

Although his father lived across the state, he was a major influence in young Strong's life. He visited often, and the boy visited his dad, too. Both of Strong's parents are deceased.

His uncles — Montgomery, N.H. Strong and Billy Ramey — spent a lot of time with young Charlie, keeping him in line.

Another influence was Arvie “Bubba” Burks, a high school civics teacher, who ran a candy truck that rolled through Batesville neighborhoods.

“I think (Strong) ate more candy than he sold,” Willie C. Strong quipped.

And there was Medford Rutherford, a retiree who was rumored to be one of the town's wealthiest residents.

Again, playing against popular misconception, Strong's skin color didn't matter to Rutherford, who was white.

“He really liked Charlie,” Montgomery said. “He thought the world of him.

Years after Strong left town, Rutherford fell ill. Strong was unaware of it. He returned to Batesville in 1999 for a family reunion.

“I said 'I appreciate you coming by, but you need to go see Mr. Rutherford right now,'” Montgomery said, recalling the day.

Strong got up and went to the old man's house.

Months later, after Rutherford died, Montgomery ran into his widow at a local store. She spoke of Strong's visit.

“She said that Charlie and Mr. Rutherford just sat there, crying and hugging each other,” Montgomery said, his own eyes welling with tears.

“She said that Charlie coming to see him that day was better than any drug or medicine any doctor had given him.”

At Batesville High, Strong played football despite being only 5-foot-3 and weighing around 130 pounds. To be blunt, he was scrawny. He relied on speed and being a fundamentally sound player.

Things were going well until Strong broke his foot and missed his senior year. He wanted to play in college, but no recruiters were interested.

Off to college

In fall 1978, he enrolled at Central Arkansas, then an NAIA school. Strong showed up at football practice, still small and armed only with a Pell grant and a desire to prove himself.

“He didn't play enough his first year to letter,” said Jim Schneider, the school's former sports information director. “A walk-on who can't play doesn't get a lot of attention. It's a wonder he didn't give it up. That's what walk-ons tend to do.”

The next year, a taller and stronger Strong was able to break into the defensive rotation.

“He was tough and a sure tackler,” Schneider recalled. “I don't think he was regarded as having unusual speed. We continued to think of him as not that fast ... until the second game of 1980 (Strong's junior year) when he intercepted a pass and returned it 100 yards for a touchdown.”

Strong, the one-time walk-on, became an all-conference defensive back his junior and senior years.

After graduation, he decided to pursue coaching and got on as a graduate assistant at Henderson State, a small college in Arkadelphia, Ark.

He was only there a month when his boss, legendary Henderson head coach Ralph “Sporty” Carpenter would experience something similar to what A&M's Slocum experienced later.

In this instance, the Florida Gators called Carpenter, looking for a quality graduate student. Carpenter, sitting in the team offices, accepted the job on Strong's behalf. He turned to Strong, who was sitting at a desk in the same room.

“Pack your bags,” he reportedly told Strong. “You're going to Florida.”

The Florida graduate work led to Texas A&M. Then came Southern Illinois, which in turn led Strong back to Florida, this time as outside linebacker coach.

Strong became a full-fledged member of the itinerant society of college coaching. He coached receivers at Ole Miss before coming back to Florida. Lou Holtz hired him as Notre Dame's defensive line coach from 1995-1998.

Racial issues arise

He got married during that time to his wife, Victoria, who's white. And that's where Strong's otherwise successful coaching career ran into surprising obstacles, Montgomery said.

He joined Holtz in South Carolina and served as defensive coordinator from 1999 to 2002.

Strong showed up in Holtz's office one day, prepared to quit his job in Columbia, because locals were speaking ill of the couple's inter-racial marriage.

Holtz promised to take care of it, says Montgomery, who heard the story from his nephew.

An angered Holtz held meetings and made phone calls. The problems stopped, but race once again became an issue — in a much more subtle way — when the Strongs moved back to Florida in 2003.

Strong held various defensive coaching jobs under Ron Zook and Urban Meyer. For seven years, he was considered a masterful recruiter, a players' coach and a brilliant defensive tactician.

But he couldn't get hired as a head coach.

In conversations with friends back home and, most notably, with an Orlando columnist, Strong believed his marriage was being used against him by small-minded alumni or bigoted administrators.

“Everybody always said I didn't get that job because my wife is white,” Strong told the Orlando Sentinel's Mike Bianchi in January 2009. “If you think about it, a coach is standing up there representing the university. If you're not strong enough to look through that (interracial marriage) then you have an issue.”

He didn't name names, but it was clear that Florida was the offender.

“I asked him about it,” said boyhood friend Rush, “but he didn't want to go that way with it and be negative. He just wanted to work harder.”

Strong was more specific with others.

“He told me he felt that, because he was married to someone of another race, he hadn't been given the opportunity to become a head coach at a major university,” Central Arkansas' Martin said. “It bothered him, but he didn't let it get him down.”

He finally got his chance at Louisville, which hired him as head coach in 2010. The Cardinals went 7-6 for two years, then 11-2 in 2012 and 12-1 in 2013.

Close with family

Townspeople and family are proud of everything Strong has accomplished. And Strong, in turn, remembers his roots.

Strong stays in regular contact with Montgomery, his sister Debra Corley, who lives here, and other siblings. He makes daily phone calls, relatives say, to his stepmom, who resides in a Little Rock nursing home.

While still at Florida, he was nominated for the Broyles Award, which is the most prestigious award given to college football assistant coaches.

Mayor Elumbaugh read about it. He and another council member each bought $100 tickets out of their own pocket and made the trip to the Little Rock Doubletree Hotel for the ceremony.

“Charlie was in the middle of this crowded room, with other coaches and dignitaries and media everywhere,” Elumbaugh said. “But he saw us as soon as we came in and walked over to us.”

As always is the case when Elumbaugh and Strong speak, the coach asked about Steve Elumbaugh, the mayor's cousin and Strong's boyhood friend.

Elumbaugh is a few years older than Strong, but like a lot of townspeople, feels special pride in his success.

“Over in Louisville, when the freshmen come in, Charlie sits them down in room,” Elumbaugh said. “He asks them where they came from. They say stuff like 'I'm all-state, all-American ...' and he'll interrupt them and say 'No, tell me where you came from. Here's where I came from....'”

And then Strong talks about his difficult family life.

The Montgomerys attended a Louisville game and were milling around with other fans after the game. Strong approached his aunt and uncle.

“He said 'I need you to explain to these people who I am and where I came from,'” Montgomery says, quoting Strong. “'You know me. You know where I'm from. I've tried to tell them, but they don't understand it.'”

Rush, the baseball coach who was Strong's best friend, understands it.

Like all of Strong's family and friends, he's as diplomatic as possible when describing Strong's beginnings.

He shook his head when asked about Strong's home life.

“He never outwardly let on that anything was different,” Rush said. The coach paused and pursed his lips. “It was not good.”

“I watched him grow up,” Elumbaugh says. “I knew where he came from. And I couldn't be happier for him.”

It's here that the mayor's voice cracks.

“I don't care if Charlie Strong was a football coach or a small businessman or whatever,” the mayor said.

“If you knew where he came from, a guy who had absolutely nothing, and now saw him making a life for himself and living a good life, you would call it extraordinary.”