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Strong will demand toughness at Texas

By Max Olson

AUSTIN, Texas -- On the eve of his first full day as coach at Texas, Charlie Strong picked up the phone and did a smart thing. He called Mack Brown.

Strong made sure Brown knew the former Texas coach would always be part of the Longhorns program and is always welcome. Brown offered his praise and support. And he respectfully and firmly drew the line.

“You ran your program and now I have to run mine,” Strong said Monday. “This has to be my program. [Brown] said it himself, he said, 'Don't try to be like me. You are who you are because of what you've done. Just continue to be who you are.'"

And with that, the baton was passed. The coach carrying it now showed us Monday he’s ready to run with a relentless fervor. Texas players would be wise to follow -- and good luck keeping up.

At his introductory news conference Monday, Strong made it easy to understand why he was tabbed to take over a Longhorns program fresh off its fourth straight season of not-good-enough. He’s here to bring back the edge.

Strong respects the tradition of Texas football. It’s the culture that needs changing.

“The mentality is always going to be a physical and mental toughness,” he said. “You have to build your program on toughness. That’s what all the successful programs do. It’s all about toughness.”

Strong’s move to Texas has been labeled a strange “fit” by national pundits, essentially because a man who values privacy and cares more about coaching football than being The Football Coach is signing up to live in one of the sport’s most oversized fishbowls. How is he going to feel comfortable?

Comfortable is a word he used just once Monday in his 45-minute news conference, in reference to ensuring Texas players get accommodated to a life led by new coaches. Comfortable is a word those players won’t hear much after their initial meeting with Strong.

The players are in for an offseason of uncomfortable, in the best way possible.

Tough and toughness are words Strong used 11 times. He admits he still knows very little about the players he’s inheriting, and they won’t return to campus for another week. But they better know what they’re in for.

This is a man with a plan and a rigorous standard. This is the guy who’s going to give Texas football the kick in the pants it needs if it wants to be great again.

“It's about the attitude,” Strong said. “The attitude they develop will be the attitude that's going to change this program. They have to develop the right attitude.”

That attitude won’t be optional. The Longhorns who care about winning championships will separate themselves. The ones who aren’t serious will be exposed.

It’s that “fit” that matters if Texas will succeed in its first year under Strong: Getting players to buy in to Strong’s brand of football and finding more who share his hunger.

As he proudly put it Monday: “We will work like it’s fourth-and-inches.”

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Finding a passionate coach who's excited to rebuild a juggernaut wasn't a difficult job for athletic director Steve Patterson and president Bill Powers, and members of the search committee admitted Monday there were several coaches who checked most of the boxes of the criteria they sought.

Strong was the one, they say, who has it all.

"We wanted somebody who was bright and an ethical leader, somebody who was physically and mentally tough, somebody who could really recruit and evaluate talent," Patterson said. "Then once that talent is here, somebody who is a great coach and teacher who can really help our young football players grow both on the field and off."

Strong says he believes the right foundation is in place at Texas, though you know he'll take time to inspect it. What he'll find is potentially great talent that has, on the whole, underperformed and lacked consistency in Brown's final seasons.

In Dec. 2009, Strong held his first team meeting at Louisville after landing the head job. That meeting became infamous.

Strong reportedly tore into his new team. Their standard both on the field and in the classroom wasn't high enough. He demanded trust. He laid down the law.

The result? He got their attention and earned their respect. He built up a program in his likeness, full of toughness and grit. He's ready to build another at Texas.

"The bricks are there," Strong said. "I just need to put another brick on top of it."

And if he's really as good as they say, in time, these Longhorns will run through a brick wall for him.
