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MackKay benefit offers candid, colorful glimpse of ACC coaches

By Ogi Overman



Nearing the close of the event billed 'Sports Night! 2005' Wake Forest men's basketball coach Skip Prosser invoked a quote from the late tennis star Arthur Ashe: "We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give."

Moments before, his friend and colleague NC State coach Herb Sendek had remarked, "We often confer hero status on these young men because of their talents with a basketball, but the real heroes are here in this room tonight."

Both were fitting summations for the evening on several levels. Ashe died long before his time, and so did the namesake of the fundraising dinner, Bob MacKay. Both were accomplished athletes, although Bob would have been the first to admit that his feats on the golf course paled in comparison to Ashe's artistry on the tennis court. And both were exemplary gentlemen, worthy of the respect they were given in life and the legacy that carries on long after their death. In their own ways, both were heroes.

And, as Sendek noted, there were a number of additional heroes present Monday, Oct. 3, at the Empire Room in downtown Greensboro. At the top of the list was Bob's widow, Barbara MacKay Vinson, who organized this second annual sports dinner, as well as 12 memorial golf tournaments and several other events. As president of the MacKay Foundation for Cancer Research, she has raised over \$600,000 since her husband's death of leukemia in 1993 that has gone to the Wake Forest University School of Medicine's section on hematology and oncology. Then there were the corporate donors and supporters, plus the 200 or so folks in attendance who ponied up \$100 apiece for the fine meal provided by Painted Plate Catering.

But the marquee attractions were the aforementioned two coaches; their colleague-turned-commentator, former Georgia Tech coach Bobby Cremins; and Fox 8 WGHP sports anchor Rich Brenner, who served as emcee and served up questions to the three ACC roundball authorities.

After the meal, welcome, invocation, a performance of the national anthem by world-class trumpeter Timothy Hudson and an introduction by Barb MacKay Vinson of three WFU surgeons, the assembled sports aficionados got down to the not-so serious business of talking ACC hoops. With Brenner supplying the informed questions and Sendek, Prosser and Cremins responding with equally informed answers, several things became abundantly clear as the evening wore on:

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- First off, in his four years at Wake Forest, Prosser has assumed the throne of King of the One-Liner. After Sendek had waxed eloquent about the league's capacity to regenerate itself in response to a question about this season's prognosis, Prosser cracked, "I think NC State is going to be unbelievable this year."

Later, after Cremins had revealed his formula for ranking the teams in preseason — with Duke first and UNC last — Prosser brought down the house with, "It's really hard for me to talk right now, I feel so bad about Carolina. I get so emotional."

Then, after Cremins and Sendek had listed the numerous challenges today's college basketball coaches face, Prosser deadpanned, "It still beats working for a living."

- Second, the image of Sendek as a rather staid, unsmiling, scholarly stiff is 100 percent false. Yes, he answers questions thoughtfully, fully and candidly — and does, by the way, have a command of the English language that could be considered professorial — but he has an ease of manner and demeanor that belies his stern sideline persona. With a quick smile and an even quicker wit, combined with his incisive views on the state of college athletics, he comes across as a guy you wouldn't mind running the NCAA someday.
- Third, it is clear that Bobby Cremins has successfully made the transition from coach to broadcaster. His passion for the game is unbridled and his insights profound, yet he gets his points across with humor and without resorting to histrionics and self-promotion like some broadcasters. (Hint: "Oh baby, these Dookies are crazy! They love me!")
- Fourth, none of these coaches speaks in cliché talk. They fielded each of Brenner's questions with nary a "We play them one game at a time" or a "There's no 'I' in team" or a "Hopefully we'll come out on top." They pulled no punches to some rather tough queries on topics such as expansion to 12 teams (it was inevitable after the ACC saw how successful it was in the SEC), the 65-team NCAA field (Cremins wants to see it expanded to at least 72), the 19-and-under rule (all three of them dislike it), late start times and Sunday night games (getting back to the dorm at 3 a.m. makes it tough on a kid who has an 8 a.m. class), the loss of the double round-robin conference schedule (no way around the inequities it will produce), and the future of the game itself (the college game is secure but some individual athletes suffer by foregoing eligibility and turning pro before they're ready).
- Finally, Barb MacKay Vinson could not have chosen a more apt theme for 'Sports Night! 2005' than 'Friends Behind the Rivalries.' Throughout the evening the banter among the coaches revealed a mutual respect and genuine friendship. Away from the hardcourt they are a brotherhood, much less like the screaming, gyrating coaches one sees on TV and more like compassionate, concerned teachers.

Because, really, that's what they are.

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