Clemson Fires Coaches Without Knowing Why

By firing its third head coach in the last seven years—especially one who seemed so certain to stay after a season-ending victory over arch-rival South Carolina—it has become increasingly uncertain what Clemson really expects from the man who heads its football program.

Is the coach counted on to produce winning football teams? Of course, that is one of the objectives. Beyond that, however, it seems imperative that the man must learn to cope with outside interference. When athletic director Bill McElhaney dismissed Jim "Red" Parker Wednesday, his implication was, "My way or the highway."

After Clemson, a team that relied heavily on youth, had finished 3-6-2, McElhaney (a long-time assistant under Frank Howard) instructed Parker that he wanted changes, indicating specifically that the former Citadel mentor release much of his staff. According to the recommendations of assistant head coach and defensive coordinator Bill Pell, Parker did not make the changes he was told to make, and McElhaney dismissed him.

As a result of his Parker's refusal, Pell now stands responsible for Tiger football fortunes and one wonders whether he, too, will have to fight outside interference. According to the recommendations of assistant head coach and defensive coordinator Bill Pell, Parker did not make the changes he was told to make, and McElhaney dismissed him. "They did not tell me I had to carry through with the offensive changes," said Pell shortly after taking the job. "There were no strings attached."

Although Pell had come to Clemson under a personal service contract to the school's president, Dr. Robert C. Edwards, the 35-year-old Alabama grad realized his career was at a crossroads when he left Virginia Tech.

"I knew that if we had a bad year, it was the end of my coaching career," conceded Pell, whose two-year contract was unique in that most assistants receive a one-year verbal pact. "I also thought that if I revamped my credentials, it would enhance my credentials with another university."

While it has been reported that Parker told Pell late in the season that he would recommend him if "something were to happen," Pell confirmed Wednesday night that the decision was made at an earlier date, that it was one of the reasons he took the job at Clemson.

Tech Stint Helped

Although Pell had been a head coach previously, directing Division II power Jacksonville (Ala.) State to a 30-7-2 record from 1969 through 1973, he feels he will be a far better coach after two years as an assistant at Tech and one year at Clemson.

"It was a great learning experience for me," said the man generally credited with building the defense that carried Tech to an 8-3 record in 1975. "Taking an assistant's job after having been a head coach made me more humble. I was able to relate a lot better."

While rumors had been circulating for weeks regarding Parker's fate, it has become clear that Pell won the job in a walk, McElhaney's comments that he screened several candidates to the contrary. "Don't make it sound like they picked me over a lot of other good coaches," cautioned Pell. "From what I understand, they contacted Coach (Jerry) Claiborne and (Texas Tech Coach Steve) Sloan but I'm sure they're pretty set where they are."

Ultimately, it was all the speculation that forced McElhaney's hand. "Rumors were flying day and night," reported Pell. "It was affecting our players and affecting our recruiting. It was all anybody was talking about at the basketball game (the fans certainly couldn't have been discussing the closeness of Clemson's 110-72 victory over Furman)."

Ironically, although he had met with influential Tiger backers earlier in the day, Pell only learned that he was Clemson's choice following the basketball game, while he and Parker were busy courting prospects. Indeed, Pell's wife Ann heard that her husband had been named head coach over the radio but dismissed it as just another rumor until the new coach called 20 minutes later.

Bennett a Possibility

While the subject of his staff presents a ticklish situation, Pell insists that he will have the freedom to pick whomever he pleases. It was suggested that he might continue to handle the defense personally, but Pell scoffed at the idea, confirming that he became an offensive and defensive coordinator.

For that latter post, Pell wouldn't deny that he is considering Buddy Bennett, a collaborator for two years at Virginia Tech. "I've got some coaches' names in mind," said Pell, laughing at the suggestion of Bennett. "From what I heard, Buddy had to scratch something together every game down there, but they got the job done."

Strangely enough, the resumption of the Tech-Clemson rivalry will begin next fall in more ways than one. The two schools haven't played in 20 years, although they have been meeting on the recruiting battlefield for the last couple of seasons.

Former Martinsville High quarterback Rex Varn was the "find" of Clemson's recruiting season last year, and the Tigers also signed Varn's Bulldog teammate, Jamie Mason, Honaker's Rick Wyatt and Ken Youmans, a Top 30 prospect from Richmond.

"Because of my roots, I helped some," said Pell, "but basically, Clemson had made been making inroads in Western Virginia for several years. People have got to realize that Clemson, for the school, and its atmosphere are unique. We'll continue to search for the ones who think we think are kind of special."

To think, three years away from the head coaching profession, and it sounds like he never left.