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Destiny and Charles Fairbanks

By Bill Connors

Destiny has been kind to Chuck Fairbanks. Through trial, temptation, and tragedy it turned his disappointment into happiness, rewarded his loyalty and, finally, got him what he wanted most, under the most unwanted circumstances.

As a high school coach at Ishpeming, Mich. Fairbanks was offered his first job on a college staff by Lloyd Eaton at Northern Michigan. Fairbanks happily accepted, but before he could report, Eaton accepted an offer to become an assistant to Bob Devaney, the head coach at Wyoming (where he succeeded Devaney as head coach when the latter moved to Nebraska). Fairbanks shook off his disappointment and reconciled himself to a longer apprenticeship in the schoolboy ranks.

But two months later, Fairbanks' former Michigan State teammate, Frank Kush, was elevated to head coach at Arizona State, upon Dan Devine's exit to Missouri. Kush had a job for Fairbanks, and it was a better one than Northern Michigan.

Several years later while an assistant at Houston, Fairbanks was offered a position on Doug Dickey's staff at Tennessee. Fairbanks wanted to accept, but it was mid-summer, unusually late to make a move. In a show of loyalty to his boss and good friend, Bill Yeoman, Fairbanks declined the tempting offer and stayed at Houston. Had he accepted, Fairbanks wonders, would he have been in that car which a few months ago was crumpled by a train, killing three Tennessee aides who were en route to an early morning staff conference.

After the season was over, Fairbanks was offered a place on the new staff Jim Mackenzie was assembling at Oklahoma. It was a much better job than the one he had turned down at Tennessee six months previously.

Shortly before last Christmas Fairbanks was made a tempting offer by Devine at Missouri, with this bonus: Devine would retire within four years and name Fairbanks as his successor. But Fairbanks surprisingly chose to stay at OU; partly because of being elevated to offensive coach (replacing Homer Rice who landed the head job at Cincinnati) and the subsequent raise in salary which went with the promotion, and partly because he "wanted to stay with Jim and be a part of something big and exciting."

Four months later, the "big and exciting" dream ended for Mackenzie. He was dead, at 37, a heart attack victim, and Fairbanks again was the beneficiary, as destiny swept him into the biggest challenge of his life, and into one of the most pressurized jobs in a pressurized profession.

The man who steps into the hot seat as Oklahoma's 15th head coach (third in as many years) is 34, reared and trained in the Big Ten, but deep in Southwest conviction and philosophy. Trim, intent, and well groomed, he has the executive style and organized look which are now as essential to head coaches as booster clubs and quick line-backers. He is 6-1, weighs 190, has brown hair, blue eyes. He usually looks as though he just finished doing a TV shaving commercial.

Fairbanks is ambitious but patient, quiet but aggressive, candid but personable, confident but humble. When OU authorities, for some reason never adequately explained, gave him only a one-year contract and thus greatly magnified the pressure, Fairbanks seemed unshaken. "I plan to get the job done anyway," he said.

Is he Destiny's Darling? Has fate saved him to rebuild the Oklahoma citadel? While a curious public awaits the performance of the team, there are some interesting facts about Fairbanks' background; facts which some may prefer to think of as omens, because they show he has common bonds with OU's most distinguished football alumnus, and Fairbanks' two heroic predecessors.

His background and the circumstances of his debut smack of Bud Wilkinson. His post-college thinking changed like Darrell Royal's. His philosophy and formation preferences are the same as Mackenzie's.

Like Darrell Royal, Fairbanks came out of college with views that were geared solely to offense. But coaching quickly gave him an appreciation of defense. Now he is conventional, though less conservative than some of his colleagues. He believes, "You begin to build with a sound defense and kicking. They give you a chance to win." But he adds, "Great backs will win for you. They will do things on their own, sometimes without much help, that win. When I was at Arizona State, we tried to put together a film clip of how we executed a sweep that had been successful for us. We wanted to include all the basic things that made the play effective. We looked at our game films for days trying to find the ideal blocking to use for the clip. We couldn't find it. What we did find was that our great backs were making the sweep go without much help.

"Great backs make the difference. In selecting personnel for positions, I want the best backs to play offense because they win for you there making touchdowns more than they can on defense by stopping touchdowns. But I want the best linemen on defense, because they can win more for you by stopping TD's than making them."

Offensively, Fairbanks desires the same running-passing balance OU displayed last year. "To be consistent over the long haul," says Fairbanks, "I think you must establish something basic and fundamental, something that will challenge your opponent. There are going to be times when you must simply take the ball and drive it down your opponent's throat. You can't do it by being fancy.

"But I also believe you must throw the football to win. I think you must throw some kind of pass real well. I believe if your quarterback is skillful, you can afford to throw the ball from inside your own 30, but I do not believe in being reckless. I think your defense must dictate what you do on offense. If our defense is good enough to stop our opponent and get the ball back for us, we might get a little exotic on offense. But if our defense is weak, then we will be careful what we do on offense."

Fairbanks' coaching philosophy was shaped by four men—Duffy Daugherty, under whom he played at Michigan

State, Kush, Yeoman, and Mackenzie. The one thing they had in common, Fairbanks says, was recruiting. "Each of them worked harder on recruiting than any other area." Expanding on his experiences under these four, Fairbanks recalls: "Duffy was the first man to impress upon me the value of quickness and team speed. When I played at Michigan State (1952-54), we had great quickness and team speed, and we weren't big. I think Michigan State has gotten away from this the last few years and put more emphasis on size. I would not classify myself as an advocate of the present Michigan State system. The first thing I want in a player is speed, over size. But I got that from Duffy. The other thing that most impressed me about Duffy was his sincerity in dealing with all sorts of people. I hope some of that rubbed off on me. He is a man of great integrity. After I turned down the Tennessee job, which he knew I wanted, Duffy wrote me a letter saying he was proud of me for being loyal to Bill. I really value that letter.

"Kush was very blunt, a let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may kind of fellow who was a tough disciplinarian. I am not a hard-nosed disciplinarian, but I can be very demanding. Rather than tell a youngster this is the way it must be done, I would rather instill the desire for a boy to discipline himself, rather than have to discipline him myself. Yeoman was a great organizer and did not believe in doing something that would only help you today. He had vision and worked to build something that would be solid and sustaining."

Fairbanks' association with Mackenzie was briefer than with the others. But he is more like the late Sooner coach than any of his other ex-bosses. There is no similarity in physical appearance to the burly Mackenzie, and Fairbanks is not as outgoing. But he is strikingly similar in other ways. His philosophy is the same. He has the same passion for simplicity, and his conversation is laced with the same slogans: "Don't beat yourself"; "Don't over-coach a great athlete," and "Do the little things right. You can't expect to do the big things if you don't do the little things right."

Fairbanks, like Mackenzie, is refreshingly candid, both on and off the record, and has thus far handled his press relations impeccably. He says, "I can't be Jim, but I may sound like him, because I believe so strongly in the things he believed in." Fairbanks did not acquire this likeness in the 15 months he worked under Mackenzie. It came over nine years, during which time Mackenzie had a profound influence on Fairbanks' career, dating back to 1958 when Fairbanks recalls, "Kush discovered he had no one who could coach pass defense. He looked at me and said, 'You're elected.' I knew nothing about pass defense, absolutely nothing. I never cared for defense when I was in college, I guess because I was such a poor defensive player. I had never played in the backfield (he was an end), and here I was coaching pass defense.

"I started studying everything to learn it. Believe me, the best teacher is having to do it yourself. I contacted a lot of people. Among them were Jim and Frank Broyles at Arkansas. I went to their spring practice in 1958, and that's where I was first exposed to the monster defense. Broyles and Mackenzie were more responsible for influencing my defensive thinking than anyone. I went back to Arizona State, we put in their defense, and I coached it all the time

I was there. We had them come out to Arizona and conduct a clinic. Jim and I became good friends, and we visited quite a lot in the following years. I went to their spring practices whenever I had a chance."

Everywhere Fairbanks has coached, he has developed ball-hawking pass defenses. Arizona State's Joe Zuger led the nation in pass interceptions in 1961, and in Fairbanks' first game at Houston in 1962 Byron Beaver set an NCAA record by intercepting five of Don (Baylor) Trull's passes. OU ranked second in the nation in pass defense last year, allowing only one touchdown pass. Pass defense was the most improved phase of OU's play. Fairbanks also coached the offensive backs at Houston, where he was assistant head coach in 1965. He was in charge of OU's kicking game last year. At both Houston and OU Fairbanks gained the reputation of being a crack recruiter. The 1967 freshman squad has five recruits from Houston, each a result of Fairbanks' work.

"I think," Fairbanks says, "the kind of background I've had has made me a better coach. To coach pass defense you must understand more phases of the game than any other area. And by being where the staff was not always large, I learned how to work. Had I gone to some bigger school and worked with the offense at the start, I might not have become well rounded enough to become a head coach."

Fairbanks was part of the Michigan State group that has had a sharp impact on the Big Eight conference. His freshman coach in 1951 was Devine (Missouri). His end coach as a junior and senior was Devaney (Nebraska). From the same staff, Colorado got Sonny Grandelius, and Kansas State got Doug Weaver. Besides Yeoman, who was defensive coach, and Kush, who was a senior when Fairbanks was a sophomore, also on the coaching staff then was Alex Agase, now head coach at Northwestern. Carl (Buck) Nystrom, one year behind Fairbanks, now is OU's offensive line coach. "That was a great staff, but we never sent one out of here that was any better than Fairbanks," said Daugherty the day Fairbanks' appointment was announced.

Fairbanks played two years under Biggie Munn. He was an offensive end on Michigan State's 1952 national champions. In 1953 when limited substitution returned and forced two-way platooning, defensive inadequacies forced Fairbanks to the sidelines. But by 1954, when Daugherty became head coach, Fairbanks had learned to play adequately on defense and won a starting berth.

Fairbanks was married one day before his 18th birthday to Virgeleen (Puddy) Thompson, who was a babysitter for the Devines when Devine was a high-school coach at East Jordan, Mich. The Fairbankses have five children: Charles Jr., 14; Gwenn, 13; Melissa, 6; Tyler John, 4, and Tobin J., 3. Fairbanks was born in Detroit the first year FDR was president. A Presbyterian, son of a retail baker, he graduated from high school in Charlevoix, Mich. where he competed in many sports, but was above average, he says, only in football. He remains an avid golfer. He regrets that he has not had time to sell himself to an unknowing Oklahoma public. But among the alumni and booster club meetings he could schedule, Fairbanks has appeared to impress. The general opinion: Oklahoma came out of a bad situation remarkably well.

He has a shy grin, is a good storyteller at banquets,

and a relaxed speaker. He goes through cigarettes at a fast pace, but is a light eater. He does not hesitate to express his opinion, when asked, on such controversial topics as redshirting and out-of-state state recruiting. "I think redshirting can be good in some cases, depending on the boy," Fairbanks says. "A young boy who has not matured as fast or developed as fast as his teammates, and who might be in a five-year course, might benefit from redshirting. I believe in it in these cases. But I don't believe in a blanket, wholesale redshirt program.

"I think we should concentrate our recruiting on boys in the Southwest. But with the great reputation that Oklahoma has, I don't see why we can't go anywhere in the country and get a blue-chip prospect."

In his newly constructed, spacious, red-carpeted office, Fairbanks has quietly prepared for the most important three months of his life, keenly aware of the tradition he inherited and forever mindful of that shocking week last April 28-May 6. During that eight-day span, Mackenzie died; the assistant coaches were pallbearers at two funeral services (Norman and Gary, Ind.); Fairbanks was selected as head coach, conducted numerous press interviews, and directed the Varsity to a convincing victory over the Alumni in the spring game.

"I felt," Fairbanks said a few hours after the Alumni game, "that I aged 30 years the last week. For a while it seemed unreal that Jim could be dead. The first few times I went to the office after his death, I would catch myself about to ask him to make a decision. Then I would realize I must make those decisions." Looking back, four months later, Fairbanks says, "Jim's death cost the coaching profession a man who I believe would have made a great record. But he was more than that. Jim was a great person. I felt I lost a great friend. I have always wanted to be a head coach and have dedicated myself to that goal, but I would give anything for it to have happened under different circumstances. Someone had to become head coach, however, and I am grateful it was me."

The late date precluded naming an outsider. Elevating an aide and retaining the staff was the only practical decision. The only other aide who was considered was defensive coach Pat James, five years older than Fairbanks and more experienced. This could have created a sticky situation, but they understand and respect each other. Each agreed to stay if the other got the job; Fairbanks' first action as head coach was to promote James to assistant head coach. Their relationship seems sincerely harmonious. When Fairbanks recently returned from a lengthy luncheon-interview to find James asleep on his office couch, Fairbanks summoned the other assistants and laughingly said, "This is what our assistant head coach does." Awakened by the laughter, the witty James cracked, "If the head coach can stay out until two o'clock for lunch, I guess the assistant coach can take a nap." In a more serious vein, Fairbanks says, "I've worked with some great coaches, but Pat James is the best, the best I've ever seen on the field."

Fairbanks admits that there has been an inevitable change in his relations with the staff. "We were a real close group when I was assistant," Fairbanks says. "We used to go with our wives to each other's houses. There were no two closer than Pat and I. It was 'Chuck.' Now Pat and the others call me 'Coach,' and they seem to feel they should



The 1967 Football Staff: front row, l-r) Barry Switzer, Bill Gray, Fairbanks, Pat James, Galen Hall; (back, l-r) Buck Nystrom, Bill Michael, Leon Cross, Jerry Pettibone, Don Jimerson, Don Boyce.

call or inquire before coming by the house. I guess, though, that's just part of the traditional respect a head coach gets. It goes with the responsibilities, I suppose."

There is a definite tenseness among the staff members about 1967. The squad has a sprinkling of quality, mostly on offense. But overall the squad is not strong, or deep, and the lines are vulnerable. It is generally thought that the Sooners might fall under last season's 6-4 record more easily than they will improve upon it. Fairbanks, however, is not pessimistic. Improved recruiting this year brightens the future.

Fairbanks' situation has a fascinating parallel to Wilkinson's hiring twenty years ago. Wilkinson was 30, with a Big Ten (Minnesota) background, had been on the OU staff only a season, and succeeded a fast-building predecessor, Jim Tatum, who left (for Maryland) after only one exciting season. Then, as now, there was concern about the new coach's ability to sustain the momentum. The momentum of 1947 was so sensationally sustained and upgraded that it cascaded into the tradition and legacy which now cast a giant shadow over Fairbanks and make his job more challenging, more demanding.

Fairbanks has also inherited a problem that has not been a paramount concern to any OU coach since Tatum. It is Oklahoma State. After reeling off 19 straight victories in that series, the Sooners have lost two one-point games to the Cowboys in the last two years. This, to be sure, rankles OU alumni. A decade ago it was Notre Dame and national supremacy that occupied OU. Then as the decline unfolded it became Texas and regional supremacy. Now it is OSU and state supremacy, the most important of all.

So the torch has been passed. It is unmistakably hot. But Fairbanks (who says, "I've always been lucky and a winner") calmly accepts his challenge. "I know we have to win," he says. "That's a fact of life. But I'm happy to be a part of a program where the goals are high. Coach Wilkinson built a lasting tradition. I am grateful for the opportunity to work at a university with such a tradition. For however long I am at OU, I want to do things that will be remembered not for just a year or so, but for thirty or forty or fifty years. I want and intend to contribute to that tradition, too."

Bill Connors is the sports editor of the Tulsa World. This article originally appeared in that newspaper and is used with permission.