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With Fowler's appointment, football follows the family tradition

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With Fowler's appointment, football follows the family tradition

BRUCE FOWLER had just been introduced as Furman's new head football coach, and he was looking out over the standing-room-only crowd in Younts Conference Center.

He had been away from Furman for nine years while serving as defensive coordinator and assistant head coach at Vanderbilt University, but it was apparent that his time on campus was greater than his time away. He saw familiar faces everywhere, people he had known since he arrived at Furman as a freshman in 1977, and he gave shout-outs to everyone from former First Lady Martha Johns to old acquaintances in Facilities Services.

He was so struck by the moment, in fact, that he abandoned his prepared notes and began his remarks by ruminating on his Furman experiences — walking on to the football team as a confused freshman, meeting his future wife,

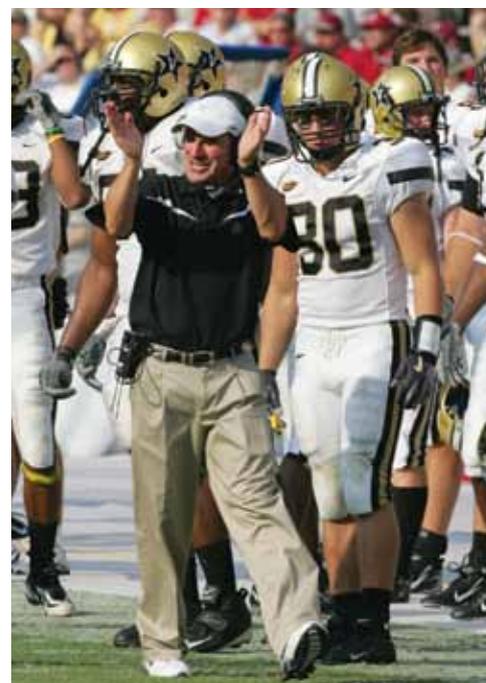
Lindy, and learning the coaching trade under such mentors as Art Baker, Dick Sheridan, Jimmy Satterfield and Bobby Johnson. He was glad to be back, he said, and it was a humbling experience to be handed the reins of the Furman football program.

Fowler didn't have to say it on that cold December day, but it was clear he was doing more than returning home to become a head coach for the first time. In replacing Bobby Lamb, who resigned at the close of the 2010 season after compiling a 67-40 record over nine years, Fowler guaranteed that a unique and highly successful coaching legacy that began with Baker in 1973 and continued through the next four decades would not end.

"When we began our search, we didn't limit ourselves to the Southeast or to looking at Furman folks," said director of athletics Gary Clark. "We thought it was appropriate to look nationally for the best coach. But what we learned in taking that approach was just how good the Furman coaching lineage is, and Bruce stood out as the best person for the job."

There is no questioning Fowler's pedigree. He was a defensive back for the Paladins from 1977 through 1980, starting his final two seasons and playing on two Southern Conference championship teams. After graduating in 1981 and spending three years as an assistant at Wren High School in Greenville County, he joined the Paladin coaching staff in 1984.

During his 18 seasons at Furman, the Paladins went 146-70-3, won eight league titles, made nine I-AA (now FCS) playoff appearances, and played in the national championship game in 1985, 1988 and 2001, winning the title in 1988. When Johnson was named head coach at Vanderbilt after the 2001 season, Fowler went with him as defensive coordinator.



When all was said and done, who could blame Furman for keeping the head coaching position in the family? While the football program has experienced a few hiccups over the past four decades, it has hummed along at a remarkably steady pace, winning games, championships and the respect of those who can't help but marvel at how a small, private school with high academic standards can excel at the one sport in which it most likely shouldn't.

Since 1973, Furman football has produced a record of 289-152-9, with 12 conference championships and a national title. There have been only six losing seasons, and the Paladins have finished among the top three teams in the league standings 25 times.

It began in 1973 when Art Baker was hired as head coach. When Baker (1973-77) left to coach The Citadel, one of his assistants, Dick Sheridan (1978-85), took over. And when Sheridan left for North Carolina State, another assistant, Jimmy Satterfield (1986-93), assumed

The Fowler File

Hometown:	Cincinnati, Ohio
Age:	52
Furman class:	1981 (M.A. '90)
Major:	Physical Education
Wife:	Lindy Gilman '83
Children:	Jake, 16 Maddie, 14
Career:	Furman 1984-85 Graduate assistant 1986-92 Receivers coach 1993-98 Secondary coach 1999-2001 Linebackers coach/ defensive coordinator
	Vanderbilt 2002-10 Defensive coordinator/ assistant head coach



PHOTOS COURTESY VANDERBILT ATHLETICS

responsibility. The Furman coaching tree stayed intact as Satterfield gave way to Bobby Johnson (1994–2001), who gave way to Bobby Lamb (2002–10).

It's no secret that Furman's coaching system has worked elsewhere, too. Both Sheridan and Johnson took most of their Furman assistants with them when they went to N.C. State and Vanderbilt, respectively. Sheridan's Wolfpack teams challenged for Atlantic Coast Conference titles, and Johnson's Commodores managed victories over Southeastern Conference foes South Carolina, Auburn, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi and Georgia, while winning their first bowl game since 1955 (against Boston College).

What's the thread of success that runs from Baker through Lamb and now Fowler? All five coaches had their own styles, and each did things a little differently, but an unwavering commitment to excellence and a disciplined approach to the game have been the foundations of the program.

Ken Pettus, director of athletics development at Furman, served as linebackers coach under Sheridan at both Furman and N.C. State. No Furman coach has enjoyed a better winning percentage than Sheridan, and Pettus has no doubt about what made Sheridan's teams successful.

"Dick's teams were always so disciplined," Pettus says. "They always led the league in fewest penalties, and there were very few blown assignments during a game. That discipline started with the head coach, then filtered down to the assistants and, finally, to the players."

Fowler may have the best vantage point of all to comment on the positive attributes of the Furman coaching tree. Having played for Baker and Sheridan, he coached under Sheridan, Satterfield and Johnson, and alongside Lamb.

"Each coach had his own approach to the job, but there is one thing that has been constant," Fowler said. "The football program has established a competitive standard of

excellence, both on and off the field, that demands everybody's best effort. It's never been about being .500 and winning a few more games than you lose, but about winning championships and excelling at the highest level."

Fowler, too, will prove to have his own style and approach. He says that while he isn't exactly like any of his predecessors, he learned something from all of them.

"I believe that winning comes from doing the everyday, common, ordinary stuff extraordinarily well," he said. "I believe in repetition, doing the same things over and over, and doing them well. There is a great tradition to build on and to continue here, and that will be our intent from day one."

— VINCE MOORE

The author is director of news and media relations at Furman.