The Measure of a Man

RED DOBSON was a little bit of what every boy wanted to be when he grew up, and a lot of what grown men wished they had become.
introduction to Hubert Ray “Red” Dobson came in the fall of 1951, when as a freshman at Furman I enrolled in one of his physical education activity classes. On the first day he entered the room, introduced himself and began going over the class rules:

“We’re going to be OT-OT: on target, on time and ready for the kickoff.”

“We will never laugh at you, but we will laugh with you.”

“In this course, everybody is somebody.”

He went on to say, “We’re going to learn sports skills and how to make friends. We’re going to take a clean shower and smell like a flower, because even your friends will tell you when you don’t smell good.”

He then informed us that the hot water was out in the gymnasium. We would soon discover that this was not an unusual occurrence. But we followed him into the shower room, turned on the water and, as he said, “Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, run through the water, it’s quite a trick.”

Furman faced many challenges after World War II. Its student body had been depleted by the war, its facilities were aging, and both its academic and athletic programs were in need of an overhaul.

One of the people the university asked to help it regain its footing was Red Dobson. A 1925 Furman graduate, all-Southern Conference football player and four-sport letterman, Dobson had been a highly successful teacher and coach at Spartanburg High School. His football teams lost only five home games in 19 years and finished unbeaten four times, and his basketball teams won six state championships.

Spartanburg was not happy to lose Dobson, who was a beloved figure in the community. Indeed, word came that the city had agreed merely to “loan” Dobson to Furman. Before he departed he was named Spartanburg’s most valuable citizen.

And no wonder. He was extroverted and caring, a man of strong faith and character who developed strong character in his students. He never used profanity and modeled ethical behavior.

Bobby Morrow ’51, a longtime Southern Baptist minister, recalled that Dobson once stopped a Furman gym class when a boy uttered an oath while playing basketball. Morrow says, “Mr. Dobson blew the whistle, turned to me and said, ‘Bobby, I don’t believe that boy said that, do you? He is too good a young man to say that. I don’t believe he said it.’ And then he gave us a 15-minute address on clean speech.”

Another story, from Dobson’s Spartanburg High days: During a faculty meeting, the subject of improper grammar came up. An English instructor suggested that “in every school activity, good English should be emphasized.”

Dobson stood, cleared his throat and said, “I have too much trouble in the gym keeping them from saying ‘damn’ and ‘hell’ to worry about them saying ‘ain’t’ and ‘nary.’ ”

Students looked up to Dobson, and he did not let them down. He was a little bit of what every boy wanted to be when he grew up, and a lot of what grown men wished they had become.

At 5-11 and 190 pounds, he was strong and sturdy, as befit an expert gymnast and superior swimmer. With his red hair, rugged face, football nose, bright eyes and excellent teeth, he cut quite a figure.

I had the honor of being an intramural student manager at Furman under Red Dobson. My job was to set the schedules, organize tournaments, see that the games started “OT” (on time) and ensure that students had fun — and that they played “in a clean, wholesome setting according to the rules.”

On game days the managers would load the equipment bags into Dobson’s red Buick, preparing to head out to the playing fields. Dobson would hop in with his bulldog, Rex, who always sat in the front passenger seat, wearing a cap. The managers sat in the back.

Once I suggested that I had been a pretty good fellow all week, all year in fact, and that I deserved to ride in the front. “Oh no,” Dobson said. “Rex means king, and a king should be given the seat of honor.”

So we’d ride around campus, with Dobson and Rex stopping to chat with passers-by while the managers hid so the girls wouldn’t see us. One day a member of the staff laughed at me and, calling me by my nickname, said, “Hunkie, unless that dog dies you’re never going to get to ride in the front seat!”

He was right. I never did sit in the front seat, at least while Rex was around.

Hubert Ray Dobson was born in 1900 in Duplin County, N.C.
During his youth his family, which included four children, moved first to Teachey and then to Smithfield, where his father died in a fall. They eventually settled in Wilmington, where his mother opened a boarding house.

Wilmington was a railroad, logging, shipyard and seaport town that hugged the Cape Fear River. Dobson struggled academically in high school
but enjoyed scouting and worked at a garage, repairing motorboats and motorcycles. During World War I he worked in the shipyards.

In 1919, at the urging of a family member, he entered Carolina Military Academy near Hendersonville. He began playing football — and caught the attention of Billy Laval, the Furman coach, who offered him a scholarship.

Dobson arrived at Furman in September of 1921 and became one of the university’s greatest athletes, lettering in four sports. A.P. “Dizzy” McLeod, then an assistant football coach and later head coach, recalled that Red “was a clean as well as a hard-hitting player. A fine Christian young man who never cursed on or off the field, he was a fine influence for clean play and always had a good word for the other players.” A popular student, Dobson was described in the 1925 Bonhomie as “a generator of pep and fun on campus.”

After graduation Dobson worked briefly at an elementary school before moving to Spartanburg High. There he quickly became a legend, winning state championships and the hearts and minds of his students. He was a master sport psychologist long before the term had been invented. One day he gathered his team around him and announced that people in the community had told him they had seen some of the players smoking in public.

Smoking was an absolute no-no for Dobson, who was also concerned about his team’s public image. But instead of lecturing, he looked at the assembled group and said, “I know these people are wrong and none of you would smoke, but let’s go out as a team and take 25 laps just to show them what good physical condition we’re in!”

Among those who came under Dobson’s influence at Spartanburg High was Gen. William Westmoreland, who would go on to command U.S. military operations in Vietnam. And little could Dobson have known that another of his Spartanburg students, a lightweight, spindly-legged, three-sport standout named Lyles Alley, would eventually become his colleague at Furman, where Alley enjoyed a distinguished career as basketball coach and athletic director.

In 1927 Dobson decided to start a summer camp in the mountains of western North Carolina. Known as Camp Pinnacle, it continues to thrive to this day. Many Furman alumni spent their youthful summers at the camp, first under Dobson’s direction and later under Walter Cottingham, another former physical education professor and director of intramurals at Furman.

A number of Furman students were lucky enough to be invited by Dobson to serve as counselors at the camp. During my junior year he asked me to be a counselor. My response was, “Mr. Dobson, those campers aren’t my people. They come from a wealthy background and I come from a different one.” He looked me dead in the eye and said, “I don’t want you to meet them. I want them to meet you.” I wound up having one of the greatest summers of my life.

Dobson set high standards for the camp and the campers. As he pointed out, “Camp Pinnacle is so named because it is the highest mountain, and we should always aim high.”

One night we gathered around the fire for the “special event” that always
Dobson was one of the university’s greatest athletes, lettering in four sports. A popular student, he was described in the 1925 *Bonhomie* as “a generator of pep and fun on campus.”

opened a new session of camp. As darkness fell over Wolfe Lake, Chief Dobson emerged. Dressed in a beautiful headband with his towel hanging over his belt, he turned toward the lake and shouted, “Fire God! Strike!”

In the meantime, two counselors had slipped into the boathouse and begun paddling a canoe, sight unseen, toward the center of the lake. They had also picked up a can of gasoline — instead of the kerosene they were supposed to use.

Chief Dobson spoke again: “Fire God! Strike!” The counselors poured the gasoline over the side of the canoe and lit a match. The resulting explosion rocked everyone on shore. Across the lake we saw the canoe silhouetted against the fire and slowly sinking into the water — and we heard the frantic, distant splashing of two swimmers escaping the blaze.

After a moment, Dobson turned to us in all his regal splendor, raised his arms and announced, “Campers and counselors . . . the Fire God is angry this year.” And so Camp Pinnacle began a new session.

**The loves of Red Dobson’s life were his wife, Laura Mae, and his daughter, Carolyn.**

Laura Mae’s father was a Baptist minister who had served churches throughout North Carolina. When she enrolled at Furman she followed in his footsteps, as well as those of her grandfather, aunts and two brothers.

She met her future husband in 1923 when she was a freshman, living in “The Zoo,” and he a junior. After a lengthy and loving courtship they became engaged. On July 6, 1927, in Bladenboro, N.C., the all-Southern football player and his college sweetheart were married. Her father performed the ceremony.

Over the next 32 years, Laura Mae Dobson was a valuable source of inspiration for her husband and a true partner in his work. Together, they raised a delightful daughter, Carolyn. Laura Mae also sewed uniforms for his players, fixed food for sports banquets, practiced first aid and motherly love on campers, went to strange towns to root for Spartanburg High and Furman, and hit the right note hundreds of times on the piano for a banjo to be tuned.

Banjo tuning? Yes. Among his many talents, Dobson was a superb banjo player who often joined with students and faculty members to

**Dobson was known as a “clean and hard-hitting player [who] always had a good word for the other players.”** Opposite: Furman president John Plyler took time one summer to visit Dobson at Camp Pinnacle.
“From New York to Miami to Oklahoma City, wherever a Furman identity was made, the question of ‘How is Red Dobson?’ was inevitable, and it was warm and asked with admiration.”

entertain the university community at campus events. He loved to sing. And at the end of every performance, if Laura Mae was in the audience, he would close by dedicating the song “Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?” to her.

Years ago I had planned to write a book about Dobson, and in preparation I contacted many of his former students and colleagues for their recollections. They offered a stream of stories and superlatives.

Donny Wilder ’54, a former South Carolina state representative and a retired journalist, recalled “the bounce in [Dobson’s] step” and how “the energy that radiated from him was catching. Even college students who were trying on a cloak of cynicism for the first time usually succumbed to his enthusiasm.” Frank Selvy ’54, the legendary basketball star, described Dobson as “one of the greatest men I ever knew.”

Bill Cox ’54 remembered occasionally “snickering a little behind his back at some of his statements or demonstrations, but not one of us would have wanted him any other way. No one ever doubted that he was sincere in all he did and that he would do anything to help us.” And Boyd Ayers ’50 described the sensitivity that Dobson showed when Boyd’s first child was born — and Dobson overpaid him for his week’s work at camp. Boyd said, “He was a giant among men.”

Dobson’s colleagues on the Furman faculty were equally effusive. Winston Babb, the noted history professor, said, “I remember Red as the one man whom I have known who never had anything bad to say of anyone. I remember the enthusiasm and drive with which he approached everything he did.” English professor Edward P. Vandiver said, “Coach Dobson’s smile and friendliness are what I especially remember, and those qualities would be valued highly in a world where too much sarcasm and too little sincere friendship exist.”

Dean Olivia Futch recalled his “friendliness and genuine interest in people.” She told of how once, on a trip to Florida, Dobson had stopped in to see her mother in Alachua, “just to give her a personal greeting because he knew me. This was his own idea, not a request from me. I always appreciated his thoughtfulness.”

And this from history professor Albert Sanders: “Red Dobson was a gentle man with a great concern to keep people from being defiled by the ugliness in the world. He deplored intolerance, unfairness and bad language. He was the most sincere lover of his fellow man — and lived by that philosophy — that I have ever known.”

Dobson served Furman as athletic director, intramural director and instructor in physical education. When he arrived in 1946, the university was ready to initiate a program in physical education and coaching, and he had just earned a master’s degree from Columbia University with a focus on professional preparation for physical education.

During his years at Furman, Dobson enjoyed the love of students and the respect of his colleagues — and, each summer, the adoration of a new group of campers. All seemed right in his world until early 1959, when Dobson began missing classes. This was cause for concern, because no one could recall Dobson ever being sick.

He had begun having severe headaches. Laura Mae said, “He didn’t complain, but his sight wasn’t as good as it had been, nor was his driving.”

Finally, as the headaches worsened, Dobson visited a doctor. The news was bad: a brain tumor. He underwent surgery, but his illness had progressed too far. On March 25, 1959, Red Dobson died at the age of 58.

Area newspapers were filled with tributes to Dobson’s integrity, character and influence. Dan Foster ’49, sports editor of the Greenville Piedmont at the time, wrote, “Among the big men in the athletic world, he was a big man. . . . In athletic travels from New York to Miami to Oklahoma City, wherever a Furman identity was made, the question of ‘How is Red Dobson?’ was inevitable, and it was warm and asked with admiration.

“It is just as true that he was a character and that he was unique — and that he is irreplaceable.”

In the April 1959 issue of The Furman University Magazine, editor Fletcher Allen wrote, “Truly great men need not be great according to national or international standards. They need only to be consecrated to God and dedicated to their fellow man. The rest falls into place. Such a man was Red Dobson.”
Services were conducted at a mortuary in Greenville, after which his body was taken to Spartanburg for burial. The hearse moved slowly through the rain toward a large group of people standing at the city limits. Neville Holcombe, mayor of Spartanburg, walked to Laura Mae's car and said, “We just wanted to welcome Red Dobson back home.”

The 200-car funeral caravan headed down Main Street, which was lined with people who were there to pay homage to their beloved friend. During the graveside service, the rain stopped — and a rainbow broke through the clouds.

After finishing Furman, I went on to teach on the secondary and college level. I wound up at the University of North Carolina, where I have worked since 1966. I directed the intramural program at UNC for many years, applying the principles and philosophies I learned under Red Dobson. I also wrote a book on intramural sports, which I dedicated to him.

But I never did write that biography of Dobson. I suppose this article will have to do.

As a point of personal privilege, I have reserved the epilogue for myself. I did not grow up a man of means, and during my years at Furman I held a number of jobs to help pay for my education. Aside from my position with the intramural program, I worked in the dining hall, drove buses between classes, and took the night shift at Campbell’s Pharmacy in downtown Greenville. I sent what money I could home to support my mother and grandmother in Latta, S.C.

One year, Furman notified me that I owed the university $80 and that unless I paid it, I would not be allowed to take my final exams. For me, this was the last straw. I was tired of worrying about finances.

I decided to leave. I took my two loads of clothes, put them in the car, said goodbye to my roommates, and went to tell Mr. Dobson goodbye. He said, “I’m glad you came by. Come with me, I have to visit some places on campus.”

And for what may have been the only time, I rode in the front seat of the red Buick.

We made several stops, and after about 30 minutes returned to his office in the gym. There he handed me a receipt marked “Paid in Full — Furman Business Office.” Without my knowledge, he had taken care of my bill.

For the first time in my life, I got angry with Mr. Dobson. “I didn’t come by here for money from you or anybody,” I said. “I’m going home to Latta, and I’ll be OK.”

He looked me straight in the eye and said, “No, Ronald, you’re going to stay in school, and you’re going to finish Furman, and you’re going to make something out of yourself.”

So I returned to my dorm room. And for the past 50 years, I have been trying to make something out of myself.

When I was green and needed to be educated, I met a man who made all the difference in the world to me and to countless others, a man of character and faith and humility who demonstrated unwavering love for his students and his institution.

His name was Hubert Ray “Red” Dobson, and he was a man of Furman.

A profile of the author, who graduated from Furman in 1956, appeared in the summer issue of Furman magazine.