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## Tragedy strikes soccer program

Furman University

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Furman has no idea how close it came to not enjoying the current success of its men's soccer program.

If head coach Doug Allison had followed his initial inclination 18 years ago, he would have boarded a plane back to London and never set foot in the United States again. And it is impossible to separate the success of the Furman program from its British head coach.

In 1984, Allison, a soccer-mad schoolboy from Bath, England, was recruited to play at the University of South Carolina. At first, it seemed natural enough for him to continue his soccer career at an American college, even though he and his parents had to find South Carolina on a map and he knew only one other person who had ever been to the United States.

Things began to seem very strange when his parents took him to the airport for his flight to the States. But the full impact of what he was doing didn't hit him until he was 30,000 feet above the Atlantic.

"We hadn't been in the air long and I was saying, 'What in the world am I doing?'," Allison says. "My mother was crying when I left. I wasn't going to know anybody in America. I decided right then that as soon as we landed I was getting a flight back to London."

By the time he landed in the United States, though, he decided he should at least visit the USC campus before returning home. But a second wave of doubts hit him when he arrived in Columbia and was greeted by the oppressive heat of a mid-August night in the South Carolina midlands.

"It was so hot that I could hardly move," says Allison. "It was so bad that I asked the assistant coach who picked me up if we could stop and get something to drink."

Allison was in for one final shock when he reported to the athletic dorm and met the other "football" players, many of whom were 6-6 and 280 pounds. "I took one look at these guys and thought, 'I'm never going to survive over here'," he says.

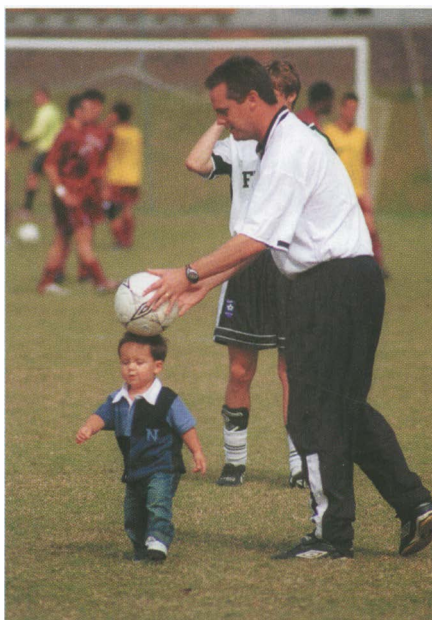
Of course, Allison did survive. He went on to become the leading scorer in South Carolina soccer history — a record he still holds — and one of the most successful coaches in America. Since his head coaching career began at Furman in 1995, his teams have won nearly eight of every 10 games they have played, making his winning percentage (.772 entering this season) the third best in Division I during that time.

But Allison traveled a few other roads before arriving at Furman. After graduating from South Carolina, he spent a year with a professional team in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The team program listed him as being from South Carolina, since Belfast was not the safest place for an Englishman to reside.

He returned to the States the next year to earn a master's degree at the University of North Carolina and serve as a graduate assistant for the Tar Heels. He moved on to USC in 1991 as a full-time assistant and, four years later, became head coach at Furman.

Since that time, one could argue that no Furman athletic program has achieved more than men's soccer. From 1995-2001, the Paladins posted the fifth best record in the nation and claimed victories over Clemson, South Carolina, North Carolina, Wake Forest, Notre Dame and Michigan, among others. With a 17-2-1 record this year through November 16, they qualified for their fourth straight NCAA tournament (they reached the quarterfinals in 1999). And they have been nationally ranked in at least one poll every week for the past four years.

What's more, this season Furman set a national record for consecutive wins in league play (43 and counting) and was featured



**Doug Allison helps son Callum perfect his header technique.**

in *USA Today* as a program that has escaped the broad shadow of the Atlantic Coast Conference and come fully into its own. Experts also rated this year's freshman class as the third best in the country, marking the third consecutive year Allison's recruiting classes had been ranked among the nation's top four.

If you're looking for the secret of Furman's success, look no further than that final statistic.

"I decided I wasn't going to wait and see who was left after all the top players were gone," he said. "But that's also what makes it tough, because every kid we recruit has a choice of going to Indiana or UCLA or Virginia or Clemson. But I figure if I can get two or three kids every year who could be playing at those places, then we're going to have a very good team."

Allison's success is all the more amazing when you consider that his program has two fewer scholarships than the NCAA allows and that he does not have a full-time assistant. Still, he isn't deterred from pursuing the ultimate dream.

"Can we win a national championship?" Allison says. "I hope so. That's always our goal."

Allison is glad he didn't head back to England those many years ago. In addition to becoming a top coach, he has settled comfortably into life in the States, marrying a girl from Pittsburgh (Michelle) and starting a family (his son, Callum, will soon turn two). He is so acclimated that his British accent is but a wisp of its former self, having been blunted by nearly two decades in the American South.

"I don't really notice it," Allison says, "but my mother sure gives me a hard time about it. She now calls me her American boy."

— Vince Moore

## Tragedy strikes soccer program

For the longest time, the men's soccer program at Furman had experienced nothing but the best of times. But that good fortune ended tragically October 11, when one player was killed and three others were injured in an early-morning traffic accident on Interstate 85 near Spartanburg, S.C.

Freshman standout Gray Griffin of Huntersville, N.C., who was driving, died in the October 11 accident. Three of his freshman teammates — Chefik Simo of Dallas, Texas, Josh Villalobos of Fayetteville, N.C., and Sean Murray of Wauwatosa, Wis. — were injured. The students were returning to campus from a concert in Charlotte, N.C., when Griffin's sport utility vehicle overturned.

Villalobos and Murray were released from Spartanburg Regional Medical Center a few days after the accident. Simo required multiple surgeries and was hospitalized for an extended period.

The tragedy shocked more than just the Furman community. Because of both Furman's and Griffin's standing in the soccer community, the accident made national news. Condolences came in from all over the United States and Europe.

Griffin, a graduate of North Mecklenburg High School, was a *Parade* All-America selection and former captain of the U.S. Under-17 National Team. He had started as a defender in 12 matches for the Paladins.

About 500 people attended a memorial service for Griffin on campus October 16.