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The beat goes on

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Furman athletics



The beat goes on

The Furman football team may have lost the I-AA championship game and its head coach in 2001, but history suggests that the program will keep rolling along.

Bobby Lamb steps into the media limelight at the press conference announcing his appointment as Furman's 21st head football coach.

Who could blame Furman football fans for being emotionally conflicted during the last few weeks of the 2001 season? They celebrated wildly as the Paladins advanced all the way to the Division I-AA championship game and then were silenced in mid-cheer when their team lost in the final and their head coach bolted to a Division I-A program.

But if you think that Furman fans had never experienced such turmoil at the conclusion of a season, think again. Because while the Paladins did lose to Montana, 13-6, in the championship game, and head coach Bobby Johnson did leave for Vanderbilt a few days afterward, it wasn't the first time the Paladin faithful had been down this road.

The same thing happened in 1985 when Furman lost to Georgia Southern, 44-42, in the Division I-AA title game and then lost head coach Dick Sheridan to North Carolina State. All of which goes to prove that while the players and the coaches may change at Furman, the philosophical system that

has driven the football program to the highest levels of achievement for the past 29 years remains the star of the show.

So after Montana celebrated its championship in Chattanooga, Tenn., and Johnson donned a Vanderbilt football jersey at a Nashville press conference, Furman did the only sane thing it could. It elevated one of the assistants to head coach and kept as many of the others as possible.

You can't argue with three decades of success, and nobody even thought about trying.

"After Bobby Johnson left, there were still five senior members of the coaching staff who had a tremendous amount of experience, talent and ability," says Gary Clark, Furman's director of athletics. "So it would have been crazy for us to look outside the program for a new head coach. Without question, we knew we could find the right guy internally."

That guy turned out to be 39-year-old Bobby Lamb, a former All-Southern

Conference quarterback for the Paladins who had served as an assistant coach since graduating in 1986. The other coaches interviewed for the job included offensive coordinator Tim Sorrells '81 and offensive line coach Clay Hendrix '86, both of whom chose to remain on the Furman staff.

Two other assistants — defensive coordinator Bruce Fowler '81 and receivers coach Ted Cain '74 — were invited to interview, but both elected to follow Johnson to Vanderbilt. Clark says that he would have felt comfortable with any of them as the Paladins' head coach.

"I've always dreamed of being a head football coach," says Lamb, who served as the quarterbacks coach and passing game coordinator under Johnson, "and I couldn't ask for anything better than for it to be here at my alma mater. This is a special place."

Furman's success on the football field has certainly been special. Since the current era began with the hiring of Art Baker as head coach in 1973, the Paladin football

program has produced 22 winning seasons, 11 Southern Conference titles and one national championship (while playing in two other title games). The Paladins have won at least eight games in a season 13 times and have posted victories against Division I-A opponents like South Carolina, North Carolina State, Georgia Tech and North Carolina.

In fact, when you consider Furman's size (2,600 students), its rigorous academic standards and its level of competition, it might be fair to say it has no peer on the football field. Since the Division I-AA classification came into existence in 1982, Furman remains the only private school to have played in the national championship game.

If there is one thread that runs throughout this record of success, it is the remarkable continuity of the Furman coaching staff. The narrative of Paladin head coaches since 1973 is almost biblical in its line of succession. Baker gave way to Sheridan, who gave way to Jimmy Satterfield, who gave way to Johnson. All had been assistants in the program and were familiar with the way things were done.

"We've always hired from within, and I think that is the basis for the success of the program," Lamb says. "You can't bring in an outsider and expect him to know how this program works. I can spend 30 seconds looking at a recruit's transcript and tell you whether he can do the work at Furman. We all know the type of student-athlete who will do well here."

Sorrells says that character, integrity and discipline serve as the foundation of the football program, and the entire staff is devoted to those principles. "When I walked on campus (as a player) here in 1978, I learned right away what was expected of me," he says. "I was told this is how you will conduct yourself, this is how you will represent Furman. That hasn't changed."

Although this is the fourth major transitional phase for the Paladin program since 1978, it should be one of the more stable ones. The core of the assistant coaching staff — Sorrells, Hendrix, Julius Dixon '90, Allen Edwards '92, and George Harrelson — remain with the program, and Steve Wilson, a 1977 Furman graduate who served as defensive coordinator from 1993-98, will return in that role for the 2002 season. When Sheridan left in 1985, only Satterfield and Johnson remained at Furman.

"It's great that those guys agreed to stay," Lamb says. "We're all friends, so we know each other inside and out, and there's no question about what a guy's thinking

when he comes into the meeting room. We've been 9-3, 9-3 and 12-3 the last three seasons, so there's not a lot we want to change."

With the frenzy of activity that occurred at the conclusion of the season, it is easy to forget that 2001 was one of the greatest years in Furman football history. The 12 wins (second all-time to the 13 victories in the championship season of 1988) included a tie for the conference title and a grand upset of two-time defending I-AA champ Georgia Southern at Statesboro in the national semifinals.

The Paladins' 24-17 win gave the Eagles their first playoff defeat in the history of Paulson Stadium and ended their 39-game home winning streak. The Paladins hadn't gotten home from Statesboro before the victory entered Furman football lore as one of the greatest ever.

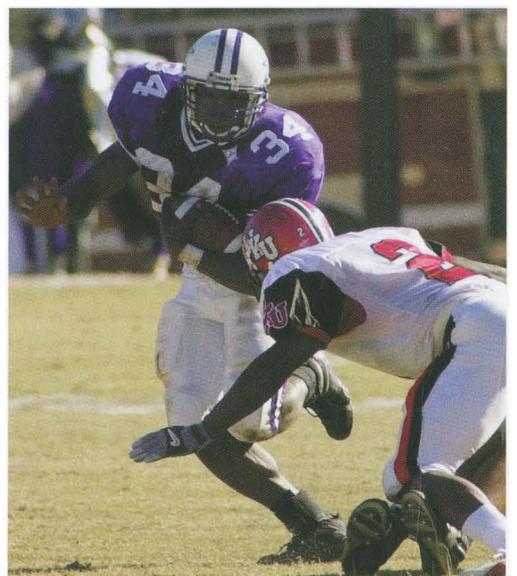
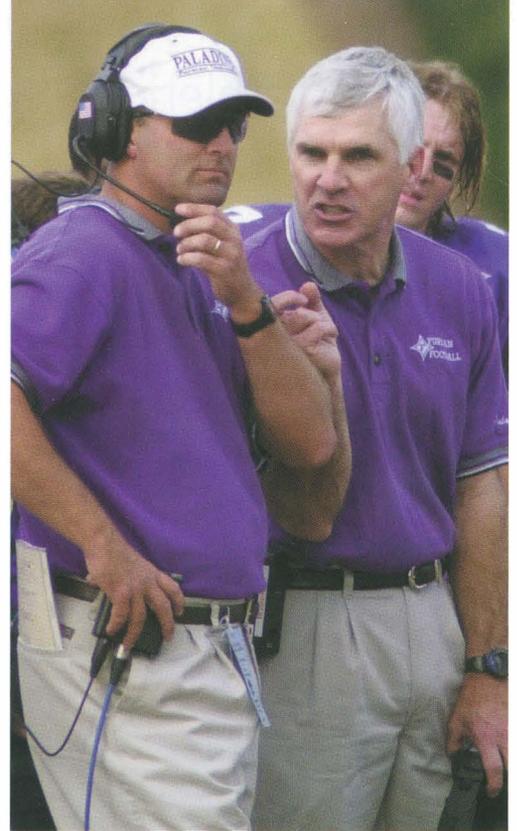
"Losing in the final to Montana will hurt for a while," Hendrix says. "For that matter, I'm not even over the 1985 loss (in the I-AA final) yet. But that win over Georgia Southern will definitely be something to remember."

The individual accolades were equally impressive. Johnson was named NCAA Division I-AA National Coach of the Year. Linebacker Will Bouton and tailback Louis Ivory were voted the best defensive and offensive players in the Southern Conference, and Bouton finished third in voting for the Buck Buchanan Award, which goes to the top defender in I-AA. Offensive lineman Donnie Littlejohn won the conference's Jacobs Blocking Trophy, and Brian Bratton, who returned three kickoffs for touchdowns and led Division I-AA in kickoff return average (37.2 yards), was named the league's Freshman of the Year.

Sixteen Furman players were selected to the all-conference team, which was more than the next two highest finishers — Appalachian State (8) and Georgia Southern (6) — had combined. The Paladins also landed six players — Bouton, Ivory, Bratton, and offensive linemen Littlejohn, Chris Stewart and Marty Priore — on the Sports Network All-America Team. Tight end Trent Sansbury was selected to play in the Blue-Gray All-Star Football Classic, but was unable to do so when it conflicted with the national championship game.

By mid-January, however, the 2001 season was just a memory. Johnson was at Vanderbilt, Lamb was in his new office in Timmons Arena, and there was little left to do except wait for the opening game next season, when Furman travels to Tennessee to play — who else? — Vanderbilt.

— Vince Moore



Under Bobby Johnson (top right), Lamb was never far from the decision-making process — or the advice of the intense head coach. One of Lamb's first tasks in 2002 will be finding replacements for two of the greatest players in school history, linebacker Will Bouton (20) and running back Louis Ivory.