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A Series of Miracles

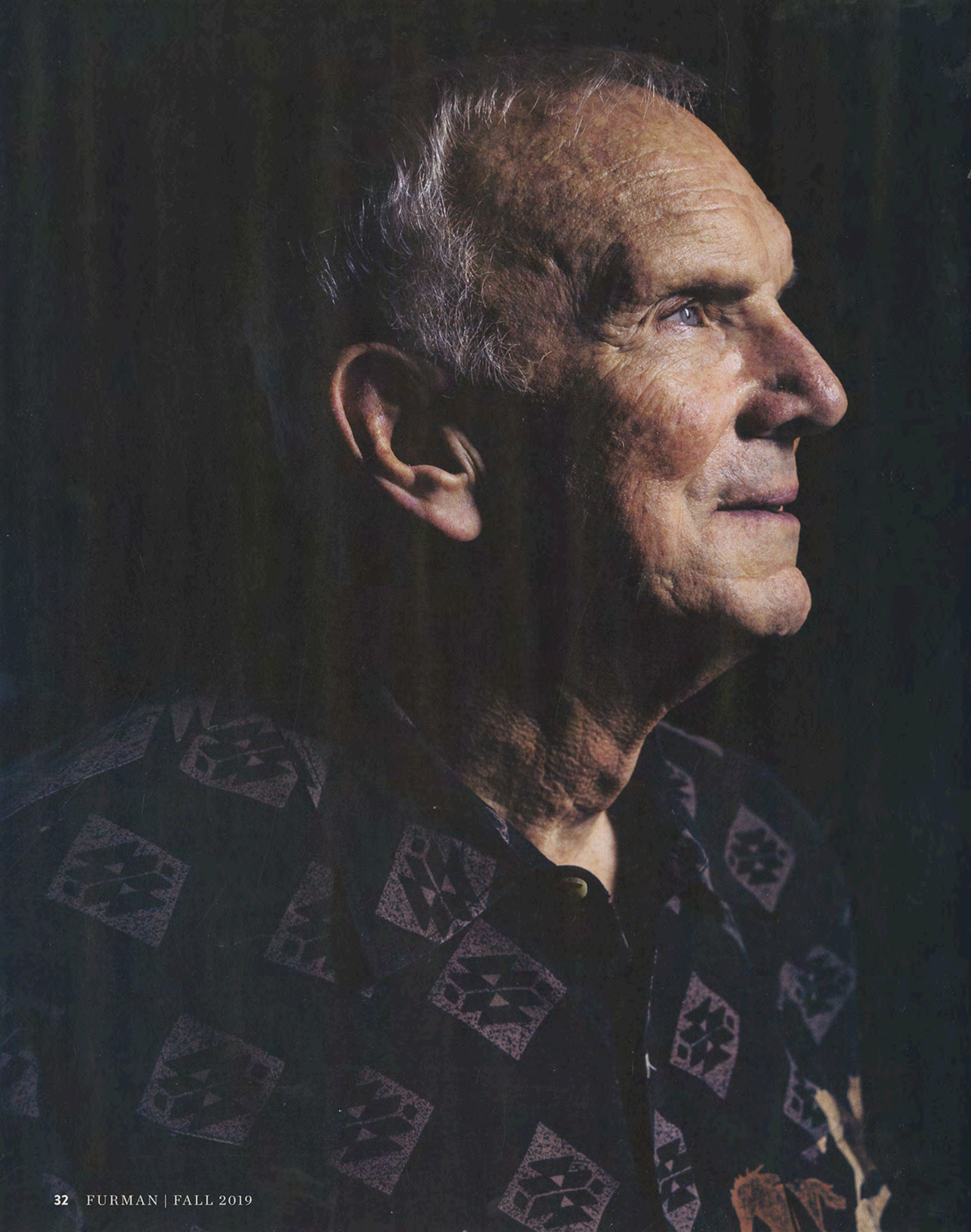
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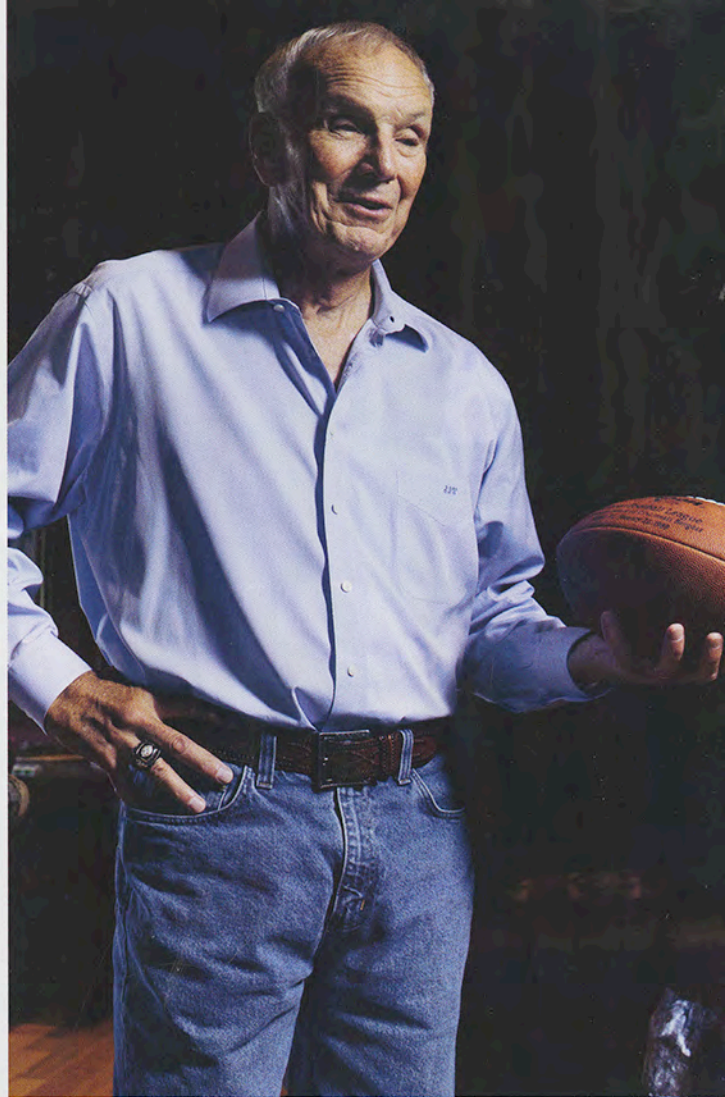
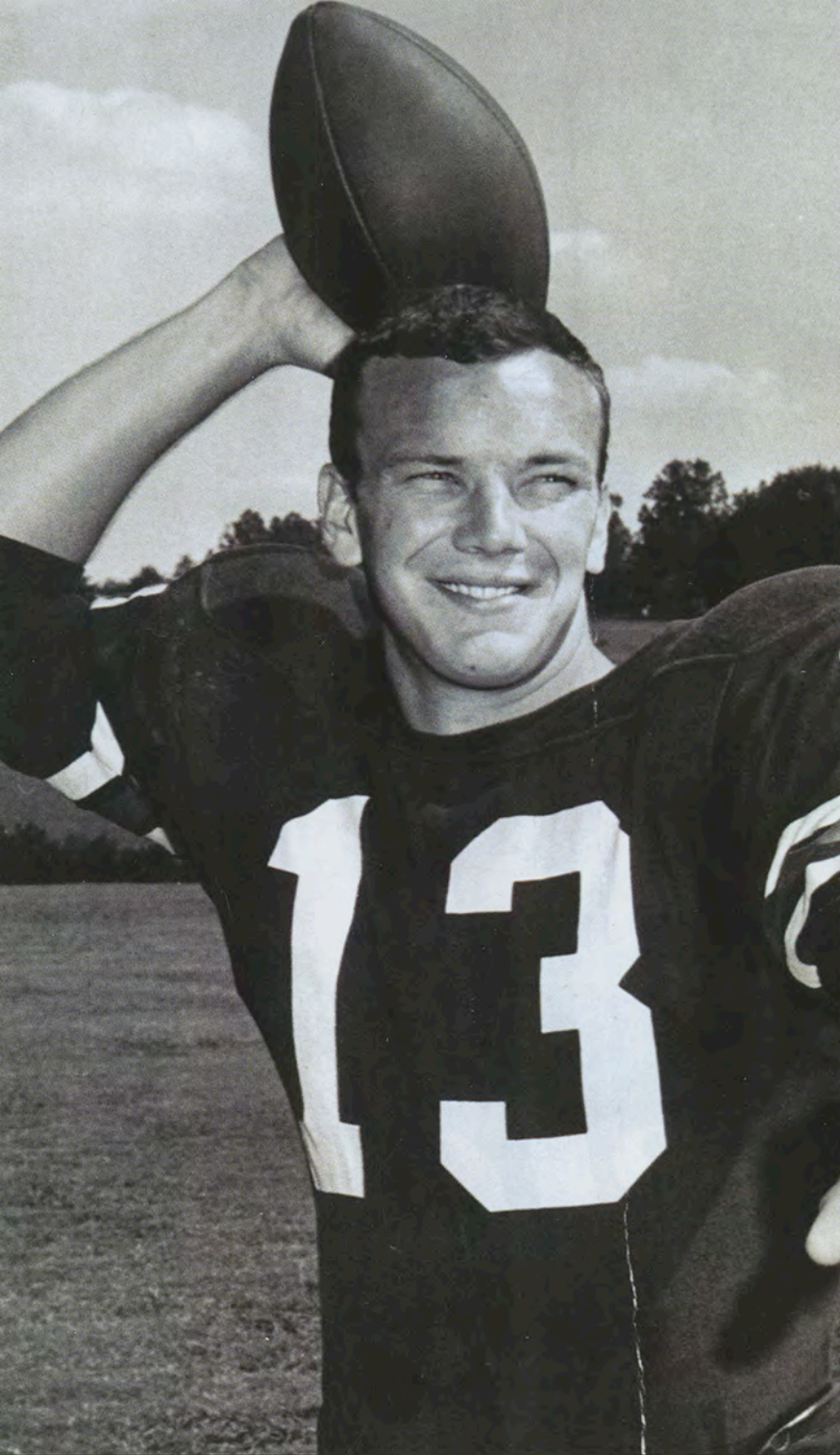
A Series of Miracles

It was September 12, 2016, and Sam Wyche had made his peace with dying. He had been living for 16 years with viral cardiomyopathy, a disease that slowly deteriorates the efficiency of the heart, but he had reached the point where the only thing that could save him was a heart transplant.

Wyche had spent the previous seven days at the Carolinas Medical Center's Sanger Heart & Vascular Institute in Charlotte, North Carolina, waiting for a new heart. But each day brought the same solemn news. Wyche's condition had grown so dire that the doctors called hospice and said they were sending him home to live out his final hours.

How Sam Wyche '66 went from Furman to the NFL to advocating for organ donation.

By Vince Moore



ABOVE

Sam Wyche '66 holds the football from Super Bowl XXIII, where his Cincinnati Bengals lost in the final seconds to the San Francisco 49ers.

LEFT

Wyche pictured as a Furman student-athlete. Only one school was willing to give him a chance to play college football, and Furman would reap the benefits for years to come.

“This was lunchtime and they told me to call my loved ones and say goodbye,” Wyche remembers. “They said it was my last day, that my heart was at the point where I wouldn’t live through the night.”

Wyche is not one to give up, as befits a man who walked onto the football team at Furman and ended up playing and coaching in the National Football League. He had already declined the doctors’ invitation a few days earlier in the week to return home to hospice, but now he sensed it was time to give in and accept his situation.

“It was about 5 p.m. and I was waiting for them to take me home,” Wyche says. “Then one of the doctors came in and said

they might have a heart that would be a match. They said it was a one in a million shot, and that I shouldn’t get my hopes up too much.”

The odds were long for a number of reasons. The new heart had to be both the right size and the right blood type. And then it would have to be delivered to the hospital in a matter of hours since Wyche wasn’t going to live much longer than that.

It turned out the heart was a perfect match and it could reach the hospital relatively quickly. So, after a four-hour surgery late that night, Wyche had a brand new heart and a new appreciation for miracles. His new heart was so strong,

in fact, it began beating with the first shock of the cardio paddles. The doctors told him later it was one of the strongest hearts they had placed in any transplant patient.

Within a couple of days of the surgery, Wyche was walking around his hospital room. A few more days and he was taking walks in the hallway. Less than a month later, he was back home in Pickens, South Carolina, riding his bike 15 miles a day on one of the local trails.

"In just a matter of days, I felt better than I had at any time in the last few years," Wyche says.

No ordinary football player

If Furman were to create a blueprint for producing the ultimate graduate, one who goes on to make an outsized impact in their chosen field and remembers where the path to that success began, it couldn't do much better than Sam Wyche. He came to the university in 1962 from Atlanta because he wanted to play football and Furman was the only school that would give him a chance.

When Furman stopped providing football scholarships before his second year, leading the players to jokingly refer to themselves as the "Football for Fun Bunch," Wyche didn't quit and go elsewhere, even though he was a 6-foot-4, 218-pound quarterback, and it was clear by this time he was more than good enough to play elsewhere.

"I wasn't leaving," says Wyche, who met his wife, **Jane Underwood Wyche '64**, at the university. "I loved Furman, and there was nowhere else I wanted to go."

After graduating from Furman in 1966, Wyche proved he was indeed no ordinary football player. He played quarterback and started games for several NFL teams, including the Cincinnati Bengals, Washington Redskins, Detroit Lions, St. Louis Cardinals and Buffalo Bills.

After retiring as a player, Wyche would ultimately return to the NFL as a coach, first as an assistant with the San Francisco 49ers (1979-82) and later as a head coach with the Bengals (1984-91) and Tampa Bay Buccaneers (1992-95). He also spent one year as head football coach at Indiana (1983) and returned one final time to the NFL as an assistant coach with the Buffalo Bills (2004-05).

How successful was Wyche in the NFL? He invented the no-huddle offense when he was at Cincinnati, which drove defensive coordinators to madness and is now a popular strategy throughout every level of football. Wyche says he is one of just four people in NFL history to have participated in a Super Bowl as a player (VII with the Redskins), an assistant coach (XVI with the 49ers) and a head coach (XXIII with the Bengals).

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TOP LEFT

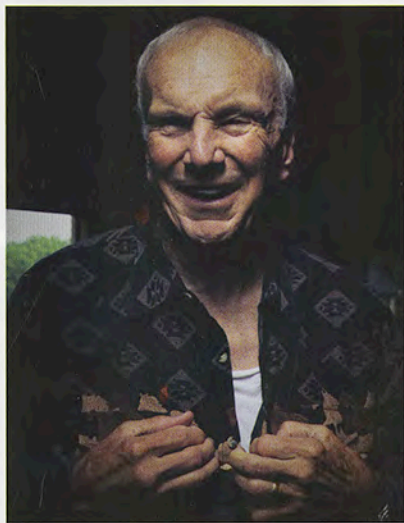
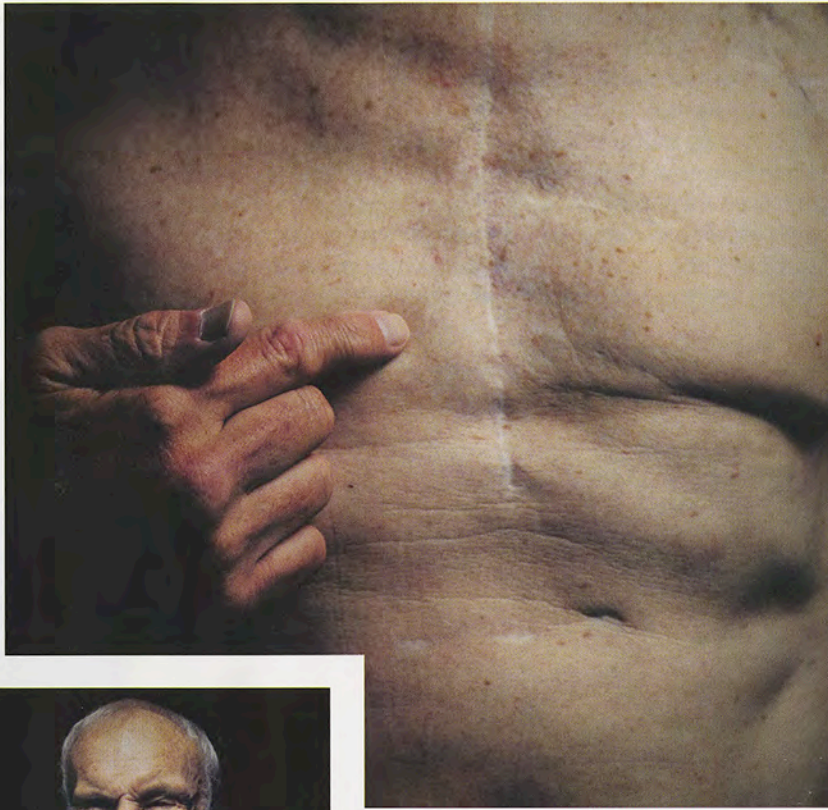
Not many NFL players or coaches can match the number of Wyche's championship rings.

ABOVE

An innovator and fiery competitor as head coach of the Bengals, Wyche invented the no-huddle offense that is now used at every level of football.

LEFT

Wyche shares a moment with his horse. The Wyche farm is home to a large number of rescue animals, including horses.



Wyche displays the scar left from his heart transplant surgery. He jokes the faint scar doesn't generate much sympathy when he takes off his shirt at the beach.

Once his NFL career was over, Wyche and Jane moved to a 28-acre farm in Pickens County, South Carolina, where Jane grew up and where they are joined by a large number of rescue dogs, cats and horses. Wyche also embraced his new community, joining the Pickens County Council and volunteering his time to assist with the local high school football team.

That may say as much about Wyche as anything. Even though he coached in a Super Bowl and helped develop NFL quarterbacks like Joe Montana and Boomer Esiason, he enjoys tutoring quarterbacks at Pickens High School. He also worked as a color commentator on NFL games for both NBC and CBS, but now offers the same observations for Furman football games broadcast on the local cable channel.

Championing organ donation

It's been just over three years since his heart transplant surgery. Wyche is still feeling good and making sure his second chance at life is put to good use. There are still challenges, especially since the anti-rejection drugs have compromised his immune system, making him susceptible to colds, infections, liver problems and even bouts with melanoma.

But nothing slows Wyche down for long, and it is his nature to keep moving forward. His surgeons told him that even when his failing heart was providing little physical assistance on the operating table, his brain activity was still amazingly strong. It was his will to live, they said, that kept him alive until his new heart could begin doing its work.

Wyche regularly travels around the country sharing the news about his good fortune, and there is nowhere he won't go to speak about the importance of being an organ donor. He counseled Major League Baseball Hall of Famer Rod Carew a few years ago as Carew awaited a heart transplant, and he was among the transplant recipients who rode aboard the Donate Life float in the 2018 Tournament of Roses Parade on New Year's Day in Pasadena, California.

Wyche says he realizes now that his whole life has been a series of miracles, and the heart transplant was just the most recent one. If he had not come to Furman to pursue his one chance to play football, he would have missed those professors who convinced him he was more than a second-tier player and the coaches who provided the connections that would ultimately lead to a career in the NFL.

After Wyche's playing days were over, his first efforts to get into coaching came when he

applied for two head coaching positions at high schools in North Carolina. He received rejections from both schools on the same day, but a few hours later he got a call from San Francisco Head Coach Bill Walsh offering him a job as the coordinator of the 49ers passing game.

“What are the odds of that happening?” Wyche asks, noting that his coaching experience at the time consisted of working with a Little League football team in Taylors, South Carolina.

Heart to heart

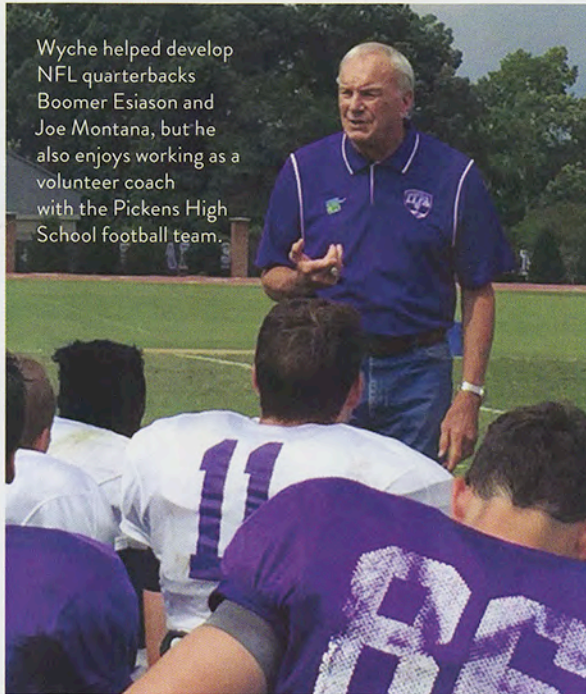
There is another miracle Wyche wants to experience, and that is meeting the loved ones of his donor. The donor family has to make that decision, and any contact between the two is generated through a clearinghouse, which guarantees that all communication remains anonymous.

Wyche heard nothing for a long time, but then received a letter early this year from the donor’s wife. She described her husband’s life in detail and said she was almost to the point of being able to meet with the person who received his heart. Another letter followed shortly after that with the news he was waiting to hear — that she was sure it wouldn’t be much longer before they could arrange a time to meet.

Wyche never gets more emotional than when he talks about finally being able to meet the family of the person who saved his life.

“She said she was in a place now where she was ready to put her ear to my chest and listen to her husband’s heart beat one more time.” ♦

Wyche helped develop NFL quarterbacks Boomer Esiason and Joe Montana, but he also enjoys working as a volunteer coach with the Pickens High School football team.



“She was ready to put her ear to my chest and listen to her husband’s heartbeat one more time.”

Wyche and his wife, Jane Wyche '64, live on a 28-acre farm in Pickens County where Jane grew up.

