



Smile

WHEN YOU CALL HIM BUM

Former Houston Oilers head coach Bum Phillips is a true Texas treasure

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In the beginning, it was mostly about that unlikeliest of nicknames, “Bum,” which Oail Andrew Phillips’ older sister stuck him with when she couldn’t pronounce “brother.” From then on as he grew up, no matter who Bum Phillips met, they’d always shoot him a quizzical glance and chuckle just to think about that improbable moniker.

today, mention Bum Phillips to anyone inside or out of the Lone Star State’s borders and they’re almost guaranteed to bring up the unofficial Texas state sport—football—and how, for many generations of Texans and lovers of the game everywhere, Bum has come to embody the heart and soul of it. They’re also inclined to tell you about Bum’s well-deserved place in the pantheon of legendary football coaches—giants like Vince Lombardi, Tom Landry and Bear Bryant—who have left an indelible mark on what has arguably become the most popular sport in America.

EAST TEXAS ROOTS

Bum Phillips was born in 1923 in Orange, Texas’s easternmost city—although Bum says he’d be hard-pressed to describe that community as a city, given that it barely had a paved road back then. As a boy, he wandered the grassy range and the shoreline along the Sabine River, and learned about discipline and hard work from his grandparents on the ranch they owned in that town, just across the border from Louisiana.

Bum’s family—his mother, father and grandparents—raised him in the Texas tradition, “as a Christian and a good



citizen,” he says. Those early years instilled in Bum the character he would carry with him through a lifetime of playing in and coaching football teams, gaining momentum and fame as he moved from high school squads, through college teams and finally into the spotlight as head coach of two of the NFL’s most legendary franchises, the Houston Oilers and, later, the New Orleans Saints.

ALL-CONSUMING PASTIME

The Phillipses moved to Beaumont, Texas when Bum was 14. “Up ‘til then, I didn’t know anything about football, but that’s when I started to play,” he recalls.

His sports career was temporarily interrupted when he enlisted in the Marine Corps during World War II. But, back from the war, Bum attended Stephen F. Austin State University where he resumed playing and soon lettered in football.

After college, Bum was preparing to go to work in the Texas oilfields when his former coach offered him an assistant coaching job in Nederland, Texas. Bum thought he’d try it for a year.

“Once I got into it, though, it just consumed me,” he says of the sport.

High school and college coaching stints followed, most notably at Texas A&M, the University of Houston, Southern Methodist University and Oklahoma State.

COLORFUL COACH

Bum’s career took off in 1975, when he was named head coach of the Houston Oilers. Applying the same grit, determination and will to “do things the right way” that he had in his high school and college coaching jobs, Bum whipped the faltering Oilers into shape. Over the course of the next five years, he became the “winningest” coach in the franchise’s history, twice taking the team to the AFC championship and racking up a 59-38 record.

It was more than just his winning ways though, that made Bum the beloved Texas icon that he is today. Every week during football season, America watched as the Oilers’ big, square-jawed coach planted himself firmly at the sidelines of every game, a tall white Stetson crowning his head. It became Bum’s trademark—that Stetson and his western attire—and something about his folksy manner and the sight of him out there week after week touched a positive nerve in America. It wasn’t long before Bum’s Oilers had transcended the Texas borders and become a beloved national team.

“LUV YA BLUE”

Through the 1970s, when Bum was coaching the team, something was happening in Houston, and Bum was at the center of it. The team’s fans sparked a movement that famously was called “Luv Ya Blue,” and the spirit and enthusiasm for the team embodied in that catchphrase traveled like an electric current out of the stadium and throughout all of Texas.

“I can’t for the life of me tell you how or why that movement became as big as it did or why it did,” Bum says. “I think it coincided with a lot of interest in western clothes and life and other things, and the timing was just right.”

Of course, it didn’t hurt that Bum was building a powerhouse of a football team, shaping and molding his roster of talented young players to become a force to be reckoned with on the gridiron. Bum will try and tell you his success is owing to the pure luck of having found the right players, of bringing in athletes like Heisman Trophy winner Earl “The Tyler Rose” Campbell, the legendary quarterback Dan Pastorini and a handful of other brilliant players of the game.

Pastorini begs to differ. “Bum likes to deflect any credit from himself—it’s just the kind of

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- WADE PHILLIPS

guy he is—but he knew football inside and out, and he was a brilliant strategist of the game. He was really a philosopher. Personally, though, he had a unique ability to bring people together and communicate with all players; that’s the reason our team was so successful.”

Bum chalks it up to knowing who you are. “As a coach, I think that being honest and being yourself is the most important key to your success—you can’t be somebody else. I couldn’t be a Tom Landry. If I’d tried, I would have failed. In the clutch, it’s always going to come out what kind of guy you are.”

FOOTBALL IN THEIR BLOOD

Bum’s son Wade Phillips is currently head coach of the legendary Dallas Cowboys. While Bum admits he’s pleased Wade has followed in his footsteps, he makes the strong point that he never foisted his chosen profession on his son.

“You don’t want to force your children into anything that they don’t like,” he emphasizes. “But he’s the same kind of guy I was, I guess. He’s not going to do anything unless he does it right.”

For his part, Wade says it would have been impossible not to be influenced by his famous father.

“I was always around the field and the office when my dad was coaching,” he says. “I was a water boy for a while, and I’d do anything then, really, just to be around him and the game.”

Much of what Wade brings to his current coaching job with the Cowboys comes from his father’s influence.

“He has great common sense,” Wade says of his dad. “A lot of people might be book smart, but daddy has a great knack for influencing people. He’s just that kind of person.”

GOLIAD “RETIREMENT”

In a way, Bum Phillips has come full circle—at least that’s how he sees it. These days, Bum and his wife, Debbie, are content to sit back and enjoy their 250-acre horse and cattle ranch in the historic town of Goliad, Texas.

The ranch isn’t unlike the spread his grandparents had when he was a boy, and it’s become a sanctuary for Bum and Debbie, and the happy setting for innumerable Texas-style get-togethers where the Phillipses’ steadily growing family of six children, 23 grandchildren and four great-grandkids mix and mingle with a stream of Bum’s former players, assistant coaches and just plain lovers of the sport, who show up to reminisce with the beloved old coach.

It’s not that Bum has slowed down much, it’s just that he and Debbie are devoting themselves to different kinds of projects, particularly a handful of missions and charities that they feel are important to their Christian “walk” through life, and consistent with Bum’s passion for “leaving things a little better than I found them.”

One of their primary activities is aiding their daughter and son-in-law, Kimann and Mark England, in their Heart Sign Ministries, which supports hard of hearing and deaf children in their communities, offering camps, retreats, workshops and much more.

Another involves Mike Barber, one of “Bum’s Boys” and a former star receiver for the Oilers in the late ‘70s. Barber now devotes himself exclusively to operating a prison ministry that is helping to lower recidivism rates among prison inmates throughout the country. Bum and Debbie have lent their names, time and energies to help Mike further this important cause.

“It’s amazing to see what a difference Mike’s ministry makes in each individual prisoner and life in general in these prisons,” Debbie says.

Yet another focus of the Phillipses is Coaches Outreach, a program designed to build coaches’ and their spouses’ characters by helping them live better Christian lives.

It sounds like Bum and Debbie are keeping plenty busy, but, true to form, when people ask Bum what he’s up to these days, he likes to tell them, “I’m not doin’ nothin’ and I don’t start that ‘til noon.”

If you believe that, though, you don’t really know Bum. ♣

