

SPORTS

BOB FAIRCHILD STEPS DOWN — A C-T EXCLUSIVE

Fairchild farewell

Unexpected decision to retire after 38 years ends exceptional era at CHS

By PAUL STURM
C-T Sports

The other shoe dropped today — with a thud which will reverberate not only around Chillicothe, but in football circles across the state.

And it has left a footprint to fill Godzilla would envy.

Bob Fairchild, Missouri's career-winningest active high school football coach the past few years, announced today (Thursday) his retirement, effectively immediately, as coach of the Chillicothe High Hornets after an historic 35-year run of success.

"I'm not leaving for spite or anything like that," he said in an exclusive Wednesday interview with the *Constitution-Tribune*. "I'm just tired with all the things that have happened (including the death of two brothers in the past 14 months).

"I'm going to miss it," he admitted. "Those 'Friday night lights' are an exciting thing. But I'm just looking at a time when I might want to be doing something else."

The impact of his departure from the CHS sidelines in football-frenzied Chillicothe is probably best summed up by Jeff Marriott, a former player who used the determination and work ethic partially instilled in him by Fairchild to become a contributor in the resurgence of the Missouri Tigers college program.

"He is Chillicothe football," Marriott declared from his apartment in Columbia Wednesday night. "The program he orchestrated and the tradition he built, everyone got wrapped up in it."

Fairchild's brother, Rich — like himself a longtime and highly-successful coach at CHS, died after an eight-month battle with brain cancer last month. Their older brother Kenneth just over a year ago.

Both coaches are members of the hall of fame of their respective sports state coaching associations. Rich Fairchild, hired by his brother in 1974, died the winningest coach in both boys' and girls' basketball history at CHS. Bob Fairchild bows out not only the most successful CHS football has ever had, but among the most successful in the state and nation.

His final record will be 307-79-5. His final Hornets team posted an 11-2 mark in 1997 and reached the state semifinals, one of four Fairchild teams to be eliminated one game short of the state title tilt.

Fairchild's career record tells only part of his story, a story which essentially is Chillicothe High football.

He coached five state championship teams at CHS (1970, '72, '78, '85, and '91), two state runner-ups (1988, 1993), 15 state playoff qualifiers, and 20 conference championship squads in both versions of the North Central Missouri Conference and the Midland Empire Conference. Four of his teams (1965, '69, '70, '78) had perfect seasons (no losses, no ties). There were no state football playoffs established in 1965 and the 1969 team failed to qualify for the limited playoff system, under the then-used points system, despite its unblemished record.

The five state championships matches the sixth-highest total for any school in Missouri. Lexington and Rockhurst of Kansas City have as many.

The top five are Jefferson City (10); Ste. Genevieve: Valle (9); St. Louis: John Burroughs (7); and



The scoreboard at the south end of Jerry Litton Memorial Stadium tells some of the story of the Bob Fairchild football coaching saga at Chillicothe High School. Architect of five state championship teams, Fairchild, right, announced today his retirement after 35 years at the Hornets helm — *Constitution-Tribune* photo by Laura Riedel

Cass-Midway and St. Louis: Mary Institute-Country Day (6).

Prior to coming to Chillicothe, he won a couple of conference titles and had a combined record of 20-4-2 in one year at Mound City and two at Hamilton.

However, the win-loss numbers and state and conference title numbers also tell only a part of the story.

In 28 years as a teacher and administrator at the school and 35 years as a coach here, he not only molded many talented athletes into great football players, he also made good players out of students most coaches would have written off as having no talent. He also interceded in the academic lives of struggling students as actively and passionately as he shaped team members.

"When I think back on my association with Bob," retired longtime Chillicothe Superintendent Dr. James Eden reminisced Wednesday night, "I think of him as a school administrator primarily.

"He was very firm, but fair (as assistant principal). He did an excellent job with students."

Eden, superintendent from 1969-88, calls the retiring coach "one of the few unique persons" in the community, in terms of his contribution to both the town's confident self-image and its image to outsiders as one of excellence and achievement.

And as far as a coach? "He was outstanding, perhaps unmatched, at getting the most from the athletes and material he had to work with, no matter whether it was good, poor or in-between," Eden remarked. "He was a winner, and, as you know, everybody loves a winner."

Probably the most-heralded player of Fairchild's storied Chillicothe career, Justin Bland, was a member of what proved to be the coach's final team.

Now preparing for his freshman year as a scholarship player with the

revived Missouri Tigers, Bland said from his Columbia apartment last night he was shocked to hear the news of his ex-coach's decision.

"He was a great coach, a fundamentalist and perfectionist. People should be extremely sad to lose a great coaching legend like Coach Fairchild," the player Fairchild projected earlier this spring could one day be an "all-pro" player in the National Football League, said.

Culture shock will set in in the CHS football program, even though the next coach will likely espouse many of Fairchild's beliefs and ideas.

It has to be because the new coach will be entering an 180-degree opposite atmosphere from the one into which Fairchild stepped in 1963. Where he took over a struggling program from a coach who demonstrated little dedication to the program, his replacement will be measured against a living legend and a program history now saturated with success.

"I replaced Harry Hayes at a time when it had been 20 years since Chillicothe had won a conference championship (in the original North Central Missouri Conference) against schools smaller than it," Fairchild recollected Wednesday.

"When I came, Chillicothe was struggling for wins and the school board and the town wanted to change that and I liked that challenge," he said. "They told me to do whatever it took, within the rules, to turn it into a winning program."

He began meeting the challenge right away, taking the 1963 team to a 6-2-1 mark a year after the Hornets were 3-3-3 under Hayes.

"The community responded the very first year and has stayed with us ever since," the coach said appreciatively.

With John "Butch" Davis the headliner, Fairchild's next three teams put together a composite 26-2 mark. From the 1964 season through the first state championship season in 1970, the Hornets were an incredible 61-3-2. Hornets football was on the state football map in a big, big way and would stay there to the present day, routinely producing great teams and outstanding individual talent.

Given Fairchild's success from the outset, why did he stay in a town of around 7,000 persons?

"The reason I stayed is because I just couldn't find a better job than this one," he related. "I had several opportunities to go on to be head coach at small colleges (including his alma mater, Northwest Missouri State and Central Missouri State at Warrensburg). I just felt this was where I wanted to be."

That, in a couple of different ways, wasn't how he had planned it originally, he recalled.

"When I started as a coach, I thought I'd move up to bigger jobs whenever I had the chance, and that's the way I did at first," he said. "But my family started and when I got back here, after they got in school, I just didn't want to move

"I've seen coaches who did what I thought I'd do and a lot of them ended up just kind of bumming around from job to job and not really getting anywhere."

He also didn't envision himself as a football coach at the outset.

"My high school coach, Elgin Posey, was a tremendous fundamentalist, not just in football, but especially in basketball," Fairchild declares. "I got a lot of my style from him."

"I probably leaned more to wanting to coach basketball than football at the start. At Skidmore (his first year out of college), we won 30 games (in basketball). After that year, I put in for the basketball job here, but it went to Fred Stephens, who had more experience than I did."

"I moved to Mound City for a \$100 raise and started coaching football, too. It was the same thing at Hamilton the next two years."

What put him on the gridiron for good?

"The last game of my final season at Hannibal we lost to a good Savannah team on about a half-court shot in the final seconds. That ball seemed to hang in the air forever and I just knew it was going in. When it did, I thought to myself, 'This isn't for me.'"

Football, with its more complex strategies and greater potential for a coach to affect it through dedicated scouting and planning, had greater appeal and proved well-suited to Fairchild.

Although generally labeled by outsiders as a conservative coach, he showed strategic flexibility within a framework of discipline, utilizing passing talent when he had it, using simple schemes to create effective plays that are often overlooked by other coaches.

"You look at the places where they have consistent success in high school football and they all had good coaches — Cecil Naylor at Marshall, John Spainhour at Kirksville, Hugh Dunn at Macon. Pete Adkins at Jefferson City — who did a better job of scouting earlier, who made early use of strength training," Fairchild recalls.

Fairchild was among those pioneers in seeing the value of strength training.

"We didn't do it with weight," he remembers. "We used isometrics."

All along the way, he kept in mind that he wasn't just coaching a game, but rather teaching young boys important lessons in discipline, responsibility, respect, determination, perseverance that would help them in their academic pursuits and their adult lives.

Today, he worries that athletic participation is seen by some only as a weapon, rather than a tool.

"These programs are for the students," he asserts. "When we lose sight of that, when we start making rules aimed to keep them out of being on a sports team instead of getting them involved in a positive activity, we're in trouble."

"I always stressed academics when I was a teacher and administrator. Sure I loved football but I

Willard or Mapel likely successor; decision is expected in few days

When the 1998 Hornets hit the Jerry Litton Stadium field — and don't be surprised if that isn't Bob Fairchild Field at Jerry Litton Stadium by that time — against



WILLARD



MAPEL

Kearney Friday, Sept. 4, who will have the head coaching reins?

Wednesday's resignation by Fairchild after 35 years at the Hornet helm leaves the hot question of the next several days.

Almost certainly the new head coach will be one of two current CHS assistant coaches, Phil Willard or Dave Mapel.

"We'll have to do something in-house," Chillicothe Superintendent Dr. Scott Huddleston admitted Wednesday afternoon. "It's too late for us to go out and find someone to bring in."

Fairchild, in an exclusive visit with the C-T in announcing his retirement plans Wednesday, said he will not be involved in the naming of his replacement.

"That's out of my hands," he said.

Willard, Fairchild's defensive coordinator the past few seasons, has a number of years of head coaching experience at Moberly in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

He met with some early success there, but his later teams had limited success as part of a general schoolwide athletic malaise that school has suffered from the past 15 years.

At the time of his leaving Moberly and returning to his hometown and alma mater in the early '90s, the popular Willard was serving only as athletic director.

After resigning at Moberly, he told this writer he was not returning to Chillicothe with any arrangement or desire to succeed Fairchild whenever the longtime coach and his mentor stepped aside.

Several years removed then from his last coaching and having experienced some personal-life disappointment, he expressed a still-lingering sense of coaching burnout.

Once back in Chillicothe, the atmosphere of success, enthusiasm and dedication on the part of students and the community, along with a new marriage (wife Debbie is an elementary teacher in the Chillicothe system), seemed to rejuvenate his outlook and lured him back to coaching, albeit only in assistant's roles with the football and boys' basketball teams.

He has been credited with some measure of responsibility for the extraordinary success of those teams the past two years. The football teams went to the state quarterfinals and semifinals, respectively, in 1996 and 1997, while the boys' basketball team was state runner-up in Class 3A both years.

Willard, like Fairchild last season, underwent his own tragic episode during the 1996 football season when his young daughter Elizabeth died suddenly in her sleep. The Hornets' team dedicated the remainder of that season — which saw the team go 10-2 — to the young girl, a measure of the esteem the players had for the popular coach.

While having returned to

Chillicothe with no ambition to return to head coaching, Willard has indicated he now might consider taking the Hornets' reins.

He was asked to take the boys' basketball head coaching post in the spring of 1997 after Jeff Schnakenberg was stunningly fired as coach after taking the Hornets to the state runner-up finish. Citing loyalty to Schnakenberg, he declined the offer.

After serving only as a phys-ed instructor his first few years at CHS, Willard last year became coordinator of the popular A-Plus academic program on a half-time basis. He also continued to teach phys-ed part of the day.

Mapel, a former multi-sport athlete at one of Chillicothe's MEC rivals, Benton High in St. Joseph, is the senior assistant coach on the football staff.

He has guided the offensive and defensive lines — crucial positions that provided part of the foundation for success in the Fairchild system — for several years.

That has included helping develop the talents of recently-graduated behemoth Justin Bland, who some — including Fairchild — believe will one day be regarded as the best player CHS has produced. Bland, a two-time All-State offensive lineman, was considered among the nation's top prep football players last season and will attend the University of Missouri on a football scholarship this fall. He is expected to see extensive playing time — and probably win a starting spot at some point — in his first year at Columbia.

In addition to his football coaching, Mapel, a business teacher, has spent time as an assistant coach in wrestling before getting his first shot at head coaching when the school started a baseball program in the spring of 1997.

After a struggling first season, the diamond Hornets caught fire part-way through their second season this spring and finished with a winning record, a feather in Mapel's and the players' caps. Mapel was a baseball standout at Benton and played collegiately at Missouri Western State College in St. Joseph.

Whoever takes the job for 1998 will do so knowing he is replacing a legend and the difficulty that usually entails.

In addition, the 1998 Hornets will be without a number of stalwart veterans besides Bland who played large roles in the success (23-4 record) of the past two seasons.

While other talented players, led by 1,000-yard running back Wyatt Pickering, will be back, the coming season was being looked at by some as a significant rebuilding challenge, even for Fairchild had he remained.

The timing of the upcoming change will probably have district officials leaving the door open for considering a full-scale search for head coaching candidates before deciding on one for the 1999 season, especially if there is sentiment that the upcoming season didn't measure up to Fairchild-type standards.

wouldn't want a music teacher who doesn't love music or an English teacher who doesn't love English. But that never meant it was the only thing I thought was important."

In leaving his football post, he expects to miss the chance to participate in — and hopefully help improve — the development of young lives.

"I'll miss the relationship with the players the most, seeing kids develop. Having a kid listen to you and try to do what you are teaching them to do, to see them mature and change for the better in a short period of time."

He'll be removed from involvement, but he doesn't plan to abandon his interest in CHS football.

"I'll attend most of the games, I imagine, but I'm not going to hover around and be looking over the coaches' shoulders," he states. "I doubt if I'll be able to just sit and watch. I'll probably be over there (on the east side of the Hornets' home field), walking the fence."

EDITOR'S NOTE: The C-T plans a special commemorative section recapping the career of Bob Fairchild next week. Additional reflections by Fairchild as well as comments from former players, coaches, associates and others will be included.



Coach Bob Fairchild accepts congratulations from Hornets quarterback Burt Dickinson (17) after last fall's win over St. Joseph Benton. The victory was the 300th in Fairchild's career. — *Constitution-Tribune* file photo