



Frank Beamer has a



**T**here's no doubt that Frank Beamer has become a mythic figure throughout western Virginia. Everyone knows about his childhood in Fancy Gap, playing days at Tech, his eventual return to coach his alma mater to 12 consecutive bowl games since 1993, culminating in last year's heartbreaking loss to Auburn in the Sugar Bowl.

However, as shocking as it may seem, there's a great deal to the man that really isn't about football, but about someone who has found a way—a better way than almost any other coach in the country—to build up a team, the people around him and a community.

### **The man for the job**

In talking to those who know him, you'll frequently hear words like "consistent," "loyal," and even "relentless," but the heart of the matter may be the fact that he's what broadcaster Bill Roth, the "voice of the Hokies" for 18 years, calls "a perfect fit for the job." He explains that since Beamer's roots are here, "when he goes to a Hokie Club event, he absolutely loves it. Even if he wasn't the football coach, he'd be there anyway. As an alumnus, he wouldn't miss it."

His old friend and colleague, veteran sportscaster Greg Roberts, goes even further when he characterizes Beamer as "a good old Christian country boy" who believes in his faith, family and fellow human beings. "When you strip it down, that's who he is. He believes that if you work hard and treat people the right way, you'll be successful. He's never had anything come easy and he's had to bust his tail for everything he's accomplished. At the same time, he makes sure he treats people with respect, the way you'd want to be treated—what he calls 'the right way.'"

### **Letting others grow**

Beamer, who is known for preferring not to talk about himself, will tell you that he was very affected by coming up through the ranks and knowing how he wanted to be treated. That experience is a key influence in how he handles his own staff: bringing in the best people (and people he trusts) and then getting out of their way to let them do their jobs to the best of their abilities. This not only empowers those around him, but allows them to grow and engenders tremendous mutual respect and loyalty.

Billy Hite, associate head coach, is a prime example. Now in charge of the Hokies running game, he's worked with Coach Beamer for 18 years and describes him as "the most unique head coach I've ever been around" and the only one "who doesn't have an ego." As evidence, he points to the 1999 season when Beamer received eight national coaching awards. "I went and accepted two of the awards at banquets for him. He doesn't like all that exposure. It's amazing—he's voted coach of the year and the first thing he says is that it's a staff award, not his," Hite says.

### **Connecting to people**

Beamer's low-key style, common sense and innate ability to connect with people has produced some highly memorable moments behind the scenes. In 1995, Miami, a team Tech had never beaten, was on the schedule after the Hokies lost the opening two games of the season. Hite remembers, "We went into our staff meeting Sunday night. He came in and said, 'Our players want to win. Put them into a position to do it against Miami.' Then he walked out. If I was head coach I'd have fired everyone in the room, but that's all he said. We all looked at each other and realized we were the luckiest coaches in the country."

# better way

By Jeff Silver

Cornell Brown, the former Baltimore Ravens linebacker who's returning to join the Tech staff this fall, recalls that before that same game, Beamer told the players they needed to look at the faces in the room around them because they could only count on each other to be successful that season. "You ended up looking at yourself. We already knew what mistakes we made and that we had to play better than we had been. By him saying so little, you felt that you didn't want to let down the guy behind you."

Tech beat Miami for the first time ever and won all the remaining games that season.

## Father figure

It's no surprise that a college coach easily becomes a father figure to his players as he helps to create authentic adults out of young men (Beamer himself says, "I want them to leave better than when they came."), but there's a real extended family at Tech as wives and children are invited to share meals at the training table and the football office sometimes looks more like a daycare center, according to Billy Hite. It sounds obvious, but by not separating himself from his staff, Beamer establishes stronger ties with them.

Hite worked under Bill Dooley for 10 years and says, "He was from the old school and never stepped foot inside my house. Frank was there watching an ACC basketball game within the first two weeks."

Beamer has attracted support from what would seem to outsiders as unlikely boosters. Noted political activist, poet, University Distinguished Professor at Tech and longtime sports fan Nikki Giovanni says, "Frank is a great coach because he's a great man, not the other way around."

She has had a long relationship with him through the many Hokie players she has taught and believes one particularly defining moment came after 9/11, when Beamer spoke out for tolerance in the face of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiments. "He was the only Division I coach to address his student body and the whole community and basically say, 'If you care about me, you won't hurt anybody.' When I look back at my career, good or bad, I think I've been courageous and stood up for what I believe. Frank has done that, too."

As a result of his stance, Giovanni nominated him for the National Conference for Community and Justice's Humanitarian Award, which he won in 2004.

## Foundation for success

Another key element to Frank Beamer's approach is what might be called the "philosophy of opposition." He advises that when things get big, think small. In other words, in the face of overwhelming pressure (say, playing in a nationally televised bowl game) focus on the next block you're responsible for, not the bigger picture. His success with the Hokies proves the converse: He took on a program that was on probation that no one else would touch, a program for which no one had high expectations—except Frank Beamer. From those "small" beginnings in 1987, he had a larger vision that slowly but surely laid the foundation for the broad success the team enjoys today.

Don Thacker played with Beamer at Tech and says his old teammate still uses that philosophy. In response to a comment that the team's success would allow him to recruit the best players from all over the country, he says Beamer explained that they actually needed to recruit from a smaller area so they could "get to know more about the kids ... what their parents are like, what their values are."

When things get big, think small. It applies to both successes and disappointments. In the locker room after the Sugar Bowl, Beamer never spoke about the game, but about the personal lessons to be learned. He spontaneously told his players that sometimes all the preparation in the world couldn't ensure success. Bill Roth remembers, "He told them the way they'd be judged was by how they bounced back, how they handled failure. He never talked about football, but it was a tremendously powerful moment."



Dave Knachel/Virginia Tech



Dave Knachel/Virginia Tech

Coach Beamer with (l to r) son, Shane; wife, Cheryl; and daughter, Casey.

## The better way

Common wisdom says that Frank Beamer's "better way" boils down to integrity, character and demanding no less of himself than the devotion and loyalty he inspires in others. You'll hear about his caring and compassion for his players, his relentless hard work and how he gets the best out of everyone around him—perhaps even better than they knew they had to give. In short, he has come to master the very best qualities we all aspire to.

The real difference between Frank Beamer and the rest of us, however, may lie in something less tangible. Poet Nikki Giovanni summarizes it best when she says, "Frank and I are both good at what we do. No one tells me what I do is football, but they tell him constantly that what he does is poetry." **V**