

June 11, 2007

A LOT OF THINGS HAVE CHANGED IN THIS WORLD, BUT NOT VINCE DOOLEY

The first time I met Vince Dooley was at a restaurant at St. Simons Island. It was early 1965, and he was sitting alone in the near-empty eatery having dinner. I walked over and introduced myself and congratulated him on the winning season in his first year at UGA. Despite my having interrupted his meal, he was gracious and acted as though he was genuinely pleased to have my assessment of his coaching performance.

A few years later, I was named public relations manager for Southern Bell's Georgia operations, working for one of the most rabid University of Georgia supporters of all time, Jasper Dorsey, the company's vice president. Jasper was deeply involved in every aspect of the university: Academics, fund-raising, alumni affairs, politics and athletics — especially athletics. He took every win on the football field as a given and every loss as unsatisfactory. In truth, there were very few losses. Still, Jasper would call Vince Dooley, or have me call him to discuss how things might have been better the previous week.

One of my most memorable calls came on a Monday after Georgia had whipped Georgia Tech on national television Thanksgiving night, 1975. The Bulldogs had run up 42 points on Tech in the first half. At intermission, Vince was interviewed by a sideline reporter as he headed for the dressing room. His responses were clipped and curt. On the following Monday, Jasper instructed me to call Dooley immediately and ask him why the short answers. "If the momma of a big ol' high school tackle saw that interview," Mr. Dorsey fumed, "she is going to say, 'I'm not letting my boy go to that school. If that coach is that mean when he is leading 42 to nothing, what is he going to be like when he is losing?'"

Dutifully, I passed that message along to Coach Dooley, who laughed and admitted that he had been so stunned at how perfect his team had been in the first half that he wasn't even focused on the interview. Only later did I realize that he could have told me (and Jasper) several times where to stuff our opinions on his way to a Hall of Fame coaching career. But that isn't Vince Dooley's style.

I mention all of this because Dooley, now 74, recently had a malignant tumor removed from his throat. The prognosis for recovery is excellent, thank goodness, but the episode has prompted me to remind us all that Vince Dooley is more than a legendary football coach. He is a good man.

Ironically, not long before his own health scare, I asked him for a favor for one of my son's best friends. In the early 1970s, Ken and his pal Rick attended Dooley's football camps each summer, and even though Rick moved to California as a teenager, he has remained a loyal Bulldog. Alas, Rick, too, is dealing with some health issues. I asked Vince if he might autograph a Georgia cap and send it to Rick as a morale booster. Not only did he do that, he also included a letter to him detailing what his wife and soul mate Barbara had been through in her own fight with cancer. That tells you more about the man than anything I could say.

Perhaps most telling of Vince Dooley's personality is to watch him interact with fans. I chauffeured him to a meeting at a downtown Atlanta office building some months back. Everyone from the parking attendant to the maintenance people to strangers in the lobby did a double-take and came over to speak to him. He acted like theirs was the most important conversation he was going to have that day. I was impatient to get him to his meeting and tried to hurry him along. Then I realized that even after the illustrious career he has had, the man treats people today exactly like he treated a young man at a long-gone restaurant on St. Simons Island 42 years ago.

A lot of things have changed in this world, but not Vince Dooley. He remains a first-class individual. I pray for his good health.