

Walking it off: Mike Pope lost his legs, but he didn't let that separate him from what he loves: coaching football

Jonathan Kay
Independent-Mail
Sunday, October 29, 2006

Mike Pope asked, "Will I coach again?"

Dr. Jim McGeorge replied, "Were cutting your legs off, not your head. That's up to you whether you get up and go or stay down!"

Walhalla football players and coaches joke that when 54-year-old Mike Pope barks out pointers from his golf cart beside the practice field, his crackly, high-pitched calls can be heard in town, a mile and a half up SC 183.

The chatter is relentless.

"I imagine he talks in his sleep," senior wide receiver Matt Dixon said. "He'll talk before the play, during the play and after the play."

When Pope arrived at Walhalla for the beginning of spring practice, no one knew how much this volunteer "consultant" could provide the program. Less than a year had passed since McGeorge had given him the choice, all too easy to make: His legs or his life.

As a result of complications from diabetes, doctors amputated each leg, inches below the kneecap, on July 20, 2005.

Eleven days later, before Pope had learned how to roll over in bed, he closed his eyes but could not sleep. His thoughts were on tomorrow.

It would be another day in Oconee Memorial Hospital, his stumps still swelling against the casts, trying to expand. A week remained until he would begin at AnMed Health Rehabilitation Hospital in Anderson: in and out of bed, on and off the toilet, into the shower chair, which he will need the rest of his life.

But tomorrow, throughout South Carolina, high school football coaches and players would brave the humidity for the opening day of state-sanctioned practice.

For the first season in 32 years, Coach Pope did not have a team.

"Every day at practice, Coach Pope was on you. He would tell you, 'It's in YOU. It's in YOU. Can you get the job done?'"

Cameron Ford, Indian Land
Defensive End, 1992-94

Desire — to return to coaching, walk his three daughters down the aisle ease his wife's burden — helped push Pope to maximize his capabilities in a new reality. But the catalyst for his recovery was an undersized former defensive end named Cameron Ford.

Ford played at Indian Land High, where Pope served as head coach for eight years. Ford stood only 5-foot-11 and weighed 165 pounds, but he earned all-conference honors his junior and senior seasons of 1993-94, because, as Pope said, "I have never coached, in 33 years, a guy that loved to play the game like he did! Anything he did, he did full-bore."

Pope would offer players more than lessons in discipline, camaraderie and teamwork — especially when they needed more. He fed some boys and gave them odd jobs so they could earn enough money to buy clothing. Ford grew up surrounded by love, he said, but his family stuffed nine people into a singlewide mobile home. He shared a bedroom with four brothers.

"I learned right from wrong, and what I should do and what I shouldn't do, a lot from Coach Pope," Ford said.

A little more than two years after his graduation, one of Ford's brothers acquired an old pickup truck, and the two went on a reckless joyride. The vehicle crashed, Ford was ejected, and he broke his neck. Pope stopped by the hospital every day on his way home, trying to boost the spirits of a 20-year-old who was paralyzed from the chest down.

The coach spoke to Ford as if addressing his team after a devastating loss.

"He told me, 'You've got to get up; start the day tomorrow,'" Ford would later tell Pope's wife, Ginger. "If it wasn't for Coach, I'd probably still be lying in that bed, feeling sorry for myself."

Ford, now 32, coaches Indian Land's 11- and 12-year-old recreation football team from his wheelchair, as he has the past five seasons. Away from the field, he raises his 4-year-old son, Chase.

"I'm telling you, I got a lot of my strength from him," Pope said.

"When things got kind of tough, I'd see Cameron, and I said, 'Well, God Almighty — if he can live through all that, I guess I can do it without two legs.'"

But it was not immediate strength. First, he felt pressure and despair. And it seemed overwhelming.

"Remember what you told me, Coach, when this happened to me," Ford would say. "That's what I'm telling you now, Coach. You've got to do it" Pope would hang up the phone and begin to cry.

As Ginger recalled, "He'd say, 'I can't let those boys down. They'll think I'm a liar.'"

The punishment for slacking during a Mike Pope practice usually comprised of running laps around a football field, an exercise known as a "400."

Ford explains:

"Now, I have had it where Coach Pope would tell me to run a 400, tell the whole team, 'Run 400s!' because we had messed up on the field.

"The next daggone time (around the field), 'Run a 400!'

"Guess what? We'd run a 400!

"The next daggone time, the coach would say, 'Run a 400!'

"What do you do? You run the daggone 400!

"The next daggone time, you tell yourself the whole way around, you say, 'one more 400, and I'm done. I am not running. If he says 400, I will take off my pads, throw them down on this field, and walk up to that locker room. So many times I'd said that.

"'400!'

"What do you do?

"You run it, baby. And you try to finish up there with the top guys.

"Coach Pope preached pride. And my pride would not let me fall back to be a daggone finisher with the offensive linemen."

"I don't think I ever realized how sick I was until afterwards."

-Mike Pope

Eventually, Pope would admit that Barry Yates saved his life.

In 1988, Pope coached Blackville-Hilda to a 14-1 record and the Class A state title, earning state coach of the year honors.

The next season, he departed for Indian Land — a team that had not reached the playoffs in 17 years — to be closer to Ginger's parents and farther from the teenage mother and father of their toddling, adopted daughters, Elizabeth and Sarah.

Pope's Indian Land teams advanced to the playoffs in five of his first seven seasons, but in 1996, the school finished 0-10.

Yates, a member of the Lancaster County School Board, asked Pope to resign quietly. When the coach refused, Yates launched a public campaign, as contracts came up for renewal.

At a packed school board meeting, pulsing with angry residents, the board refused to recognize the thick stack of letters, including one from Sen. Strom Thurmond, protesting the firing.

Following a closed-door session, in which Pope reiterated he had no reason to resign, the board voted 4-3 against retaining him.

As Ginger recalled, one woman hollered, "Barry Yates, you will rot in hell for what you've done!" Yates and his fellow board members quickly filed out of the meeting, with some protestors following Yates to his car.

Meanwhile, inside, players surrounded Pope in tears.

"We let you down," they said. "We lost, and that's why they fired you."

To which the coach replied, "You have never let me down. You have never let Indian Land High School down. It was not about you."

Mike used to tell Ginger that God would give him only boys.

Ginger gave birth to a daughter, Taylor, in 1982, and a few years later, they served as foster parents to Elizabeth and Sarah before adopting them.

Now a school psychologist for Oconee County, Ginger told Mike, "Probably you didn't have boys because you would expect them to play football. And what if they didn't?"

Mike responded, "Why wouldn't they play football?"

The night of the board meeting, the Popes realized they had sons who played football.

The next day, the phone rang with 14 job offers. Mike turned down head-coaching opportunities for the chance to lighten his load — and slow his pace — as the offensive coordinator for his friend Danny Sawyer at Goose Creek High, near Charleston S.C..

At Blackville, Pope learned that he had been living with diabetes for about 10 years. But he found it difficult to take care of himself while teaching a full class load on top of his duties as football coach and athletic director at a Class-A school, where there is little assistance with everyday long hours.

Years of 16-to-17-hour day's show on Pope's face, which, he readily admits, should belong to an older man.

"Many nights, I'm telling you, I don't know how I got back (home)."

During his first season at Goose Creek, Pope returned home from practice several nights short of breath. His condition had been misdiagnosed as asthma. Eventually, he checked into a hospital, where they found blockages surrounding his heart and the doctors performed five-way bypass surgery.

During the next six seasons, divided between four schools, including Goose Creek High, Seneca High, Hillcrest High and Lakewood High, Pope's maladies included an amputated right big toe, an intensification of his diabetes as a result of 18-hour days, and a torn Achilles tendon.

Pope spent the 2004 season at Lakewood High, in Sumter, while his family remained in Seneca, so Sarah could finish high school where she had started.

One day in February of 2005, with her father at Lakewood, Sarah lost control of her car, ran off the road and totaled the vehicle. She was fortunate to come away with only a broken collarbone.

"Well, God did that, because He brought me home," Pope said. "And when I got home, I was feeling so bad, I said, 'Ginger, I'm going to the hospital.' And I went to the hospital, and I had congestive heart failure."

During Pope's 14 days in bed at Oconee Memorial Hospital, he developed sores on his heels. They burst open at home in the following weeks and had not mended by the time he was due at St. Francis Hospital in Greenville to have a pacemaker and defibrillator implanted for his heart condition.

Although hospital socks covered the sores, Pope caught a staph infection in each leg. The disease combined with his poor circulation — a result of the diabetes — and his legs began to rot.

"Every morning, it seemed like when we woke up, we just didn't know which issue we would be dealing with," Ginger said.

Between February and July, Mike was hospitalized 18 times. Masked nurses would clean his legs frequently, but everyone could tell that the condition was worsening.

With the arteries in his legs hardening, not enough blood was flowing to his heart, and, as a result, not enough blood was flowing to his brain. He often became disoriented.

During one of his daily, in-home health surveys, Pope, standing on the scale, turned to Ginger and said, "I'm going down."

Mike's wife and daughters tried to catch all 6-2, 285 (and dropping) pounds of him, as he passed out and plummeted to the floor.

In the middle of spring, Greg Loving, one of Mike's closest friends, who had lived with the family and served as an assistant coach at Blackville in 1987, visited Pope in the hospital from Monroe, N.C. Ginger found Loving nearly in tears afterward.

"I've never seen him give up," Loving said. "He's given up."

Ginger attributed this to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

"He just had no control," Ginger said. "He would say, 'We're doing everything we're supposed to do, and I'm just getting sicker.'"

Amputation offered a solution and thus brought relief.

"We never saw it as a negative," Ginger said. "We knew what the worse outcome was."

A person does not have to strain to hear former offensive linemen and coaches lumbering up a hospital hallway.

It is even harder to miss them when they cry.

Pope lost his legs on a Saturday. The following Monday, Greenville played host to the state high school football coaches' clinic. Along with the letters that poured in, "just gobs of coaches came over to see me." Ginger would walk out of the Oconee Memorial Hospital room to greet them and help settle their emotions.

They would take a deep breath and enter to Pope's trademark crackle, booming:

"What are you doing!? Don't be crying out in the hall!"

Mike would tell them they had no idea how lucky he was.

"I said, 'Guys, this is the best thing that's ever happened to me.'

"Because, I mean, what's worse: You gonna sit there and rot? You gonna die? Or are you gonna lose two legs? It's kind of a no-brainer."

With the coaches inside, nurses would turn to Ginger and laugh.

"Don't 300-pound men know that they're not supposed to wear short shorts and T-shirts?"

Ginger replied, "No. They don't really know that."

Mike had two stints, of about four weeks apiece, in the rehabilitation hospital: The first with stumps, the second with his starter set of prosthetic legs.

"I think he was probably the highlight of our day — to be able to work with somebody that motivated and that willing," said Kellie Elgin, a physical therapist's assistant. "He said, 'I'm here, but I've got to get better, because I've got to get back to coaching.'"

Therapists scheduled him for three hours of workouts each day.

As soon as Pope learned how to get out of bed, he regularly rolled down to the exercise facility at 8 a.m. and began lifting weights on his own. That booming, crackly voice would trumpet his arrival, with talk of the current high school football season or an experience from the past three decades.

"His whole life, he's looked at kids and had to teach kids how to push past pain, work harder than they felt their body could," Greg Loving said. "I think that gave him an edge."

In the hospital, the coach found struggling players — his fellow patients — everywhere who needed a boost.

"He would be there giving them their pep talk, just like he would his football team," Elgin said.

Pope's words: *"You can do this. It seems hard now, but you're going to come through."*

After Mike had spent a few weeks on his new legs, the hospital granted him and Ginger a date pass so they could get a feel for a night out with prosthetic legs. As Mike prepared for a Carson's steak, following days of hospital food, Ginger asked if he would wear pants or shorts.

Shorts, he said.

Ginger warned that people would stare.

Mike smiled and replied, "I've been a 6-foot-2, 300-pound ugly man my whole life. People have been staring at me since I was little. It doesn't bother me."

Ginger had planned to purchase a van with a ramp, after Mike's surgery. McGeorge recommended against it.

"He has to see you struggle," the doctor told her.

When they would leave the house, before Mike had learned to walk, Ginger would help her husband into the car, fold up the heavy wheelchair, and then lift it into the trunk.

Watching, Mike would call out, "You're not going to have to do that for long, because I'm going to be up on my legs soon."

The Popes realized that they did not have to forge a new social life. They attended high school and college football games, went to church and dined out.

"I have people all the time now come up and say, 'You're just an inspiration,'" Mike said. "Well, that's great. I'm glad I am.

But it's not like you invented the automobile or spacecraft or something.

"You just deal with what you've got."

In admiration of his attitude, people have asked Mike to speak with others in similar situations.

"You go, and the poor guy's sitting there, and you can just see it in his eyes that he knows his life's over," Pope said. "Sometimes I say, 'Guys, I'm going to tell you something. They sent me to talk to you, but until you decide what you want to do; there ain't much nobody can do for you.'"

Once Pope emerged from the surgery healthy — healthier, in fact, than he had been in years — his course was set.

"If he couldn't coach, it would be a whole different thing," Ginger said. "As he used to tell me, 'I was a coach when you met me, I'll be a coach when I die.'

"It's like breathing air to him."

"I went from being 14-1 in '88, supposedly one of the best coaches in the state, to eight years later being fired. And I'm telling you — the year I was 0-10, I was a better football coach than when I was 14-1."

-Mike Pope

Pope and Walhalla coach John Boggs met in the late 1990s, through the Hawg-Tuff! Offensive Line Camps that Pope runs each spring and summer for offensive linemen. What started with 40 kids in 1990 has grown into 14 daylong sessions, spread through the Carolinas and Georgia.

The entry fee started at \$15 and has risen to \$40. The goal: provide an alternative to the major university camps that can cost nearly \$400.

After Pope pays the staff, feeds the players and hands out T-shirts, his profits are negligible, he said.

"You've got a guy that loves kids," Boggs said. "His attitude's so positive, and he's so dedicated to everything that he's doing, that he finds a way to get around it (his handicap). And we've been committed to helping him."

Pope had not been up on his new legs long when he arrived at Walhalla, his 10th school. Receiving full disability pay from the government, Pope signed on as a volunteer offensive consultant.

His role expanded quickly, as everyone realized that, physically, he could do more than even he had expected. He began leaving his cane in the car — which he was driving — and walking around the football offices and weight room.

Pope motored up and down the practice field in a golf cart to praise solid performances and chew out players who made careless mistakes. When the situation required a lighter touch, he would threaten that if the offending player repeated an error during a game, he would open the press box window and throw his legs at him.

The Razorbacks' season ended Saturday with a 36-22 loss to Palmetto.

"You talk to kids all the time about overcoming adversity," Boggs said. "And then you've got a guy here that's walking proof that no matter what your adversity is, if you really love something and want to do it, you can."

Mike turned to Ginger and said, "It's hard to believe that I'm probably going to be wearing these for another 20 years or so."

"For the rest of his life," Ginger said. "That's pretty much a long time."

The past year and a half provided Mike with insight into his career, and thus into himself.

"I got by, through all this, because I learned how to be tough," he said. "When you get beat 43-0 or 50-something to nothing, you've got to go to work the next day. And you really don't want to go. But you go. I think all the things you tell the kids, I think I found out I believe what I told them. Because I kind of lived up to what I told them."

Pope said he relished every bit of his return to football, from the aromas of a Friday-night locker room to the Sunday morning gatherings, where coaches would break down game film.

"There's nothing that could keep a Coach Pope, there's nothing that could keep me, off a daggone sideline," Ford said.

"Listen, if that's all you've done your whole life, and that's your passion in life, and that's what you want to do, that love for the game will just carry you through.

"Carry you through no matter what kind of legs you're walking on, no matter what kind of wheels you're rolling on — the love for the game will just carry you through.

"People can say whatever they want to say. They can try to make a story out of it; it can be an inspirational tale; it can be whatever they want it to be!

"Hey, we can put any part of a fairy tale or a saga in it. But I'm telling you right now, **it's a love for the game.**"



The POPE WALKS !!

