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PCMH, UHS officials call 2008 a year of healthy progress

By Tom Marine
The Daily Reflector

Friday, January 02, 2009

The year 2008, a time covering the completion of the East Carolina Heart Institute and implementation of the HealthSpan information system, will go down as one of the best years ever for Pitt County Memorial Hospital and University Health Systems of Eastern Carolina, two local health care officials said this week.

As a new year begins, PCMH President Steve Lawler and Dave McRae, chief executive officer for UHS, said 2008 was the top year of the past two decades and set the foundation for future success in providing medical services to eastern North Carolina.

"I'm most proud of the work our people have done in regard to partnering with our patients," Lawler said. "I think the level of engagement has been fun and rewarding. When you look at what drives success, it all boils down to the level of engagement our health care teams have with the community."

Lawler said some of the highlights that demonstrate that partnership include their MRSA program — standing for methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus — and the construction of the East Carolina Heart Institute. The ECHI, a joint effort of the hospital and East Carolina University, includes a six-story patient bed tower at PCMH and a $60 million research, education and outpatient facility at ECU.

"We did have a very good year in 2008," McRae said. "I would consider it to be the key year when quality took an equal step forward with financing. We became a leader in quality initiatives."

McRae also said a highlight of the past year was installing HealthSpan at all UHS hospitals, a sophisticated software that could connect health providers throughout eastern North Carolina on one network.

These integrated electronic medical records will provide instant access to patient information and improved communication with referring physicians, according to the health care system.

Both Lawler and McRae noted the importance of the Brody School of Medicine's new dean, Dr. Paul Cunningham.

Cunningham returned to the medical school in September, after spending six years at the State University of New York Upstate Medical University in Syracuse. He has stated his goals for the Brody School are to expand student enrollment, stabilize the school's financial situation and diversify the faculty and administration.

Still, McRae said there were some challenging times throughout 2008, most notably the economic recession and its effect on their finances.

"Our financial department refinanced all of our debt in the midst of the banking meltdown, which stabilized our debt expenses to free up money for other health services," he said. "That is so fundamental to our future."

Looking forward, Lawler and McRae said the coming year could be just as productive as 2008, with the opening of the ECHI bed tower and the plans for a new Childrens Hospital.

"2009 will be one of the most exciting years ever," Lawler said. "It will be a year of growth through partnerships in the region. It will require the effort and attention of us all."

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Moving forward

Some 2008 highlights for Pitt County Memorial Hospital and University Health Systems of Eastern Carolina:

The construction of the East Carolina Heart Institute, a joint effort of Pitt County Memorial Hospital and East Carolina University, which includes a six-story patient bed tower at PCMH and a $60 million research, education and outpatient facility at ECU.

Installing HealthSpan at all UHS hospitals, a sophisticated software that could connect health providers throughout eastern North Carolina on one network.

Hiring Dr. Paul Cunningham as the new dean of the Brody School of Medicine. Cunningham has stated his goals for the Brody School are to expand student enrollment, stabilize the school’s financial situation and diversify the faculty and administration.

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Editorial: Spotlight - Eyes on ECU for bowl game

Friday, January 02, 2009

East Carolina University assumes a rare spot on the national stage this afternoon as the football team meets the University of Kentucky in the Liberty Bowl. The prestigious bid was earned thanks to the Conference USA championship captured in December and puts the Pirates in living rooms across the country.

While winning today's bowl game is the goal — and it should be — this community, region and state should be proud of this team's remarkable accomplishments. Like the university itself, it persevered through adversity by embracing a spirit of achievement that seems particularly unique to East Carolina.

The Pirates and their fans endured a roller-coaster season this year. Beginning with upsets of traditional powers Virginia Tech and West Virginia, East Carolina earned a national ranking before stumbling to in-state rival N.C. State University. However, a strong Conference USA campaign won the Pirates a division title, and a remarkable performance against the University of Tulsa gave the university its first conference championship in 32 years.

More than 13 years have passed since the Pirates last visited Memphis, Tenn., to compete in the Liberty Bowl, a wait that East Carolina fans would wish never to repeat. In that contest, the local team clipped Stanford 19-13, one year after Illinois routed the Pirates in the same venue by a forgettable 30-0 score. But the allure of that bowl is tremendous for East Carolina, a goal level with the annual aspirations for a bid to the College World Series in Omaha.

But the goal of a Liberty Bowl bid offers players, coaches and fans a firm focus for the season, and it is a destination that smacks of accomplishment thanks to a 9-4 season. While Kentucky may not capture the nation's attention in football as it does in basketball, toppling a Southeastern Conference team in postseason play would be a laudable triumph and place the team on solid footing for next year.

There are, of course, more pressing matters related to the university that would receive similar attention in a just world. One could imagine national television coverage for the opening of the East Carolina Heart Institute next week, or fawning media coverage for commencement exercises in the spring. Were it only so that academic research and achievement could be celebrated on par with athletic success.

Yet, to see the spotlight shine on East Carolina represents a moment to remember. The university reflects the region's spirit, a determination to overcome adversity in spite of the effort and energy required. Pirate fans should celebrate that fact — even as they hope to celebrate another win.

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Holtz has Pirates fans all shook up

ECU's leader is a coach on the rise, and he's taking the program along for the ride

A.J. CARR, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

Skip Holtz arrived in Memphis this week, hoping to accomplish at least two goals: beat Kentucky in today's Liberty Bowl and tour Graceland.

Check off Graceland.

Holtz, 44, squeezed in the Elvis scene with his East Carolina team between practices and press conferences, almost 35 years later than he would have liked. As a young boy, he made a previous Liberty Bowl trip to Memphis in 1973 with the N.C. State football team coached by his father, Lou Holtz. Dad took the Wolfpack that year to Elvis Presley's mansion, and the King himself led the Wolfpack on the tour.

"My mother thought I was too young," Skip Holtz said. "So I went to the zoo and pitched peanuts to the tigers."

It wasn't easy getting back to Memphis after all these years. Despite an avalanche of adversity, Holtz guided the Pirates to a 9-4 record. There were multiple injuries, player suspensions, and a three-game losing streak, plus five nerve-grinding, down-to-the-wire wins. After all that, there was some additional drama in December when Holtz showed interest in but ultimately withdrew as a candidate for the head coaching job at Syracuse.

A triumph over a third BCS Conference opponent today would only add to his burgeoning resume.

"He's really done a nice job," said Gene Corrigan, a former ACC commissioner who consults on national coaching searches. "As he keeps winning, his name will keep popping up."

ECU's Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium had darkened into a dungeon of defeat prior to Holtz' arrival four years ago. He inherited a program that had won three of its previous 25 games and triggered a quick turnaround that has produced three straight bowl teams. That's an attention grabber, one that leads to musings about what would happen if he ever got the chance to coach at Notre Dame -- where he played and where his icon father won a national championship.

"He would be a great fit there," said Corrigan, who was also a former athletic director at Notre Dame. "He's such an engaging guy. He understands the place, has been through every phase of it."

Holtz prefers talking about East Carolina, about continuing to build the Pirates program. But when pressed about the lure of the Golden Dome, he said: "I think everybody would like to have the opportunity to coach at their alma mater."

There may be no finer fit for East Carolina than Holtz, whose amiable, outgoing personality endears him to his players, his staff and alumni.

But early on, Holtz aspired to be a business man with a briefcase, not a coach carrying a clipboard. That changed his junior year at Notre Dame, where he played mostly on special teams.
When he announced to his father his desire to coach, Lou Holtz asked, "Have you told your mother? When you do, make sure she's unarmed."

"He tried hard to talk me out of it," Skip Holtz said. "I think he wanted to make sure I was getting in it for the right reason. I had been around the game all my life. Couldn't get away from it. [And] I wanted to mold young people."

The journey began with a graduate assistant job on Bobby Bowden's staff at Florida State, where he landed his all-time top recruit: his wife Jennifer, an FSU alumnus who was working in the Seminoles football office. After a year under Earle Bruce at Colorado State, he spent four seasons on his father's staff at Notre Dame before taking the head coaching job at Connecticut. Holtz pumped life into a dormant Huskies program, taking UConn to top-25 Division 1-AA status in his last four seasons.

Though thriving in snowy Storrs, he rejoined his dad's staff -- this time at South Carolina -- to be closer to his mother, who was suffering from cancer.

"Some people thought I hired him because he was my son," Lou Holtz said. "That wasn't true. He's smart, has a good football mind. I'm glad he's shown a couple of people that he is a great coach."

At South Carolina, Skip was assistant head coach and offensive coordinator for five seasons, earning a national assistant coach of the year honor. But in 2004, he was switched to quarterbacks coach in what was publicly perceived as a demotion. Mike McGee, who was South Carolina's athletic director at the time, downplayed that notion. McGee said the title of offensive coordinator in Lou Holtz's system was somewhat irrelevant because Lou Holtz essentially ran the offense.

While in Columbia, S.C., Skip Holtz turned down two head-coaching opportunities in hopes of landing the Gamecocks' top job when his dad retired. But the Gamecocks selected Steve Spurrier to succeed the elder Holtz.

ECU athletic director Terry Holland said via e-mail that he was reluctant to hire a coach who wasn't being retained at an area school.

But former South Carolina basketball coach Dave Odom, a close friend of his who knew Holtz, kept encouraging Holland to "at least interview him."

"It took about 15 seconds to know he was our man," wrote Holland, who was impressed with Holtz's "contagious enthusiasm."

**Personality plus**

After pushing ECU into the national limelight this season with early wins over Virginia Tech and West Virginia, the Pirates plummeted to three straight defeats and dropped out of sight.

It was then that Holtz's leadership skills shown brightest. Remaining positive and enthusiastic, he soothed bruised egos and patched together an injury-riddled team. The result was six wins in the last seven games.

"He's upbeat all the time, spirited," offensive lineman Terence Campbell said. "And everything he does teaches you a life lesson. If I wanted to be a coach, I'd want to model myself after him."

A master of multi-tasking, Holtz can pack a pre-dawn hunting trip, staff meetings, a noon speaking engagement, a team practice and a night Pirate Club meeting into one whirlwind day without complaining.

Since arriving in Greenville, he also has taken time to help raise several hundred thousand dollars for area charities. Holland says his main job is to make sure the coach doesn't get
worn out "because he can't say 'no' to anybody." Although he is not the quipster that his dad is, Skip Holtz's bits of wit and rapid-fire delivery keep audiences entertained and engaged. And in the coaching arena, Lou Holtz said his son is more controlled.

"He's calmer than I am. He will figure it out. I'd try to knock the wall down," Lou Holtz said.

**Family comes first**

Skip Holtz might dart out following practice to attend one of his children's events. And when the weather turns warm, there are boating trips to Lake Gaston.

Holtz's faith and family -- Jennifer, their two sons and daughter -- remain at the top of his priority list, he and his wife said.

"He prioritizes family; we are blessed in that way," Jennifer Holtz said. "[And] I think being a family man transcends through to the players."

Holtz and Jennifer share Bible verses daily, finding strength in the scriptures. Prior to this season's game against UTEP, Jennifer recalls that her husband had 20 minutes to study more tape before trotting onto the field. Instead, she said, he spent that time reading his Bible. While quietly sharing his beliefs, Holtz says his passion and positive outlook comes from his faith in God.

He doesn't proclaim to know what his football future might be, but he expects to exude that same passion today as he tries to guide ECU to its first 10-win season since 1991. And that would be a win that could only elevate the program -- and Holtz's profile -- even higher.

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**When Kentucky has the ball**

With versatile freshman quarterback Randall Cobb on the injured list, senior Mike Hartline is back in the starting role that he lost earlier this season.

Hartline is a tall pocket passer who will be throwing against a Pirates team that loves to pick on opposing quarterbacks.

ECU's defense, the team's strong suit, has 21 interceptions -- including five in the Conference USA title game against Tulsa.

**THE PIRATE KEYS:** Don't give up big plays and keep creating turnovers. Overall, the Pirates have come up with 32 turnovers, the most in coach Skip Holtz's four seasons.

**Highs and lows**

**KENTUCKY**

**HIGH POINT:** Two weeks after losing 17-14 at Alabama, the Wildcats rallied from a 13-point deficit to edge Arkansas at home, 21-20. It was one of their two Southeastern Conference victories.

**LOW POINT:** Getting devoured, 63-5, by Tim Tebow and Florida in "The Swamp" on Oct. 25.

**EAST CAROLINA**

**HIGH POINT:** After opening the season with a 27-22 upset victory over Virginia Tech, the
Pirates followed up with their most complete game of the season, beating West Virginia 24-3. The defense, which emerged as the team’s strength, was superb in containing Mountaineers star quarterback Pat White.

LOW POINT: With a 3-0 record, a No. 14 national ranking and dreams of playing in a BCS bowl game, the Pirates -- missing injured linebacker Quentin Cotton -- lost 30-24 in overtime to rival N.C. State. That started a three-game slide.

**Skip Holtz**


PREVIOUS COACHING STOPS: Florida State -- graduate assistant; Colorado State - wide receivers; Notre Dame -- wide receivers, offensive coordinator; Connecticut -- head coach; South Carolina -- assistant head coach/offensive coordinator, quarterbacks; East Carolina -- head coach.

**Rich Brooks**


PREVIOUS COACHING STOPS: Oregon State -- assistant freshman coach; Notre Del Rio High School -- assistant; Oregon State -- defensive ends, defensive line; UCLA -- linebackers; Los Angeles Rams -- special teams; Oregon State -- defensive coordinator; San Francisco 49ers -- defensive backs, special teams; UCLA -- linebackers, special teams; Oregon -- head coach; St. Louis Rams -- head coach; Atlanta Falcons -- assistant head coach, defensive coordinator; Kentucky -- head coach.

**When East Carolina has the ball**

Look for ECU to try to control field position by mixing the run with a conservative passing game to take care of the football.

"We can’t make turnovers," co-offensive coordinator Steve Shankweiler said.

In Kentucky the Pirates will be going against one of the strongest defensive fronts they will have faced, a solid set of linebackers led by Micah Johnson, and a second-team All-America cornerback in Trevard Lindley. ECU must be especially cognizant of Lindley, who has a penchant for making game-changing plays.

Coach Skip Holtz has compared Kentucky's defense in style and physicality to Virginia Tech's.

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