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McNeill radiates his love for ECU

ETHAN HYMAN - ehyman@newsobserver.com
East Carolina coach Ruffin McNeill acknowledges the home crowd after the Pirates' 33-27 overtime victory over N.C. State last Saturday at Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium. 'I want to be a great ambassador and role model,' McNeill says.

By Edward G. Robinson III, staff writer

GREENVILLE – East Carolina coach Ruffin McNeill greeted freshman Justin Jones with one of his standard lines.

"Be safe," he said. "I love you."

Jones, a 6-foot-8 reserve wide receiver, had 30 minutes earlier made an unbelievable touchdown catch - leaping above defenders in the end zone - on the game's final play to secure a come-from-behind victory at Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium over Tulsa in the season-opener on Sept. 5. He walked into the interview room to speak with reporters and was stopped by the Pirates' new football coach.
"I love you, too, coach," Jones responded.

By now, after 10 months on the job, it's commonplace to hear such exchanges - even though none of the players was recruited by his staff. "Those are our boys," McNeill said.

It's part of his down-home, Eastern Carolina, bear-hugging style that's more ingrained in McNeill than the "Air Raid" spread offense he brought from Texas Tech after 10 seasons there as an assistant coach. Thirty-four years ago he was one of the boys playing for former ECU coach Pat Dye and known as a pad-popping strong safety from Lumberton.

Last Saturday he led the Pirates to an upset victory over in-state rival N.C. State. ECU is now 4-2 overall and 3-0 against Conference USA teams, a place in the standings few envisioned this season. They play Marshall at home on Saturday.

McNeill has returned to his alma mater for his first head coaching job. He takes over a program that under Skip Holtz - now at South Florida - won back-to-back Conference USA championships.

McNeill, 51, plans to build on that success. He's come back home to share the work ethic gleaned from his father, Ruffin McNeill Sr., and the pride he gained with the Pirates.

"I want to be a great ambassador and role model," he said. "I want to make sure that I'm a great influence for my players. I want our players to know that I love them."

Every day McNeill verbalizes his love.

"At first it takes you off guard," senior defensive lineman Josh Smith said. "You're not used to hearing that from a coach, but he means it."

'As country as corn'

McNeill is quick to tell someone he's "as country as a row of corn," one of the many folksy sayings his players find hilarious. That true-to-himself style has helped gain their trust.
He's engaged at practices, trying to make it feel less like a job. Players say he is not afraid to have fun - it is his iPod stereo they use in the locker room on game day. He gave fans a little dance after the Pirates defeated the Wolfpack.

But players also know he's serious about his job.

When McNeill spots a player on campus, the first thing he often asks is: "Give me a grade, give me a class?"

His typical response to the player's answer is, "That's the best you can do?"

If they say they can do better, he follows with, "Well, do it."

His door remains open for conversation. And players say they feel comfortable entering.

"He actually loves us," ECU senior receiver Dwayne Harris said. "We're family to him."

Families share Sunday dinners, and it's no different for the Pirates. Barbecue is always on the menu.

"I hate that this is my senior year," Smith said. "I love that man to death. ... It's such a fatherly relationship ...

"At the same time, if you mess up, he's going to do just like your daddy is going to do - short of beating you. I love that because that's how I was raised and how a lot of the guys were raised."

'Tough love'

McNeill, too, was raised that way by his father.

"Tough love," he said. "He had high demands for us and of us. He had high expectations for us and of us."

Ruffin McNeill Sr. graduated from Johnson C. Smith College in Charlotte, where he was eventually inducted into the school's hall of fame for his accomplishments as a 5-foot-8 football player.
The elder McNeill attended Fayetteville E.E. Smith High School and played on the basketball team that won the black high school state championship in 1950.

He graduated from college in three years and became an advanced science and math teacher. He also coached basketball and football, working part of his career at Lumberton Junior High School.

Though they lived in Virginia for a few years, the younger McNeill and his brother, Reginald, grew up in Lumberton. It's where their mother, Bonnie, was raised. They lived 300 yards from their church and two blocks from the school where she taught.

Their grandmother's house has remained in the family for 90 years, and in McNeill's youth it served as a boarding house for black teachers who came from the North to teach in the South.

In their home, educational excellence was encouraged.

"From that type of environment there was a sense of discipline and aspiration that was expected from young people," Reginald McNeill said.

"But the overt sense was a sense of love. No matter what you do. No matter if you succeed or you didn't meet the mark, you still must be loved."

Academics were non-negotiable. Do your best. McNeill Sr. demanded balance, so there was football but also Sunday school and Easter poems and service projects.

"It was a high level of engagement," Ruffin McNeill said. "He talked to us and not at us. That's a big difference."

**Father's interest**
At 78, McNeill Sr. still shares his love of football with his son. Before every game, McNeill calls his father for a "short and sweet" pep talk. His wife, Erlene, relays play-by-play to McNeill Sr. over the phone if games are not televised.
After games, McNeill dials his father, a former defensive backs coach, who walks through plays called and evaluates progress. "There's always words of wisdom," McNeill said.

His father's passion for sports influenced him. He ran track and played baseball and basketball, eventually settling on football.

McNeill enrolled at ECU from 1976-80 and received a bachelor's degree in education. He became captain of the team. Those around ECU during that era remember the slim sophomore defensive back tackle N.C. State running back Rickey Adams on the 3-yard-line with seconds left on the clock to secure victory for the Pirates and end a 1977 contest between the rivals.

He has coached at Clemson, where he earned a master's degree in secondary counseling, Austin Peay, North Alabama, Appalachian State, Nevada, Fresno State and Texas Tech. He got his start at Lumberton High, his alma mater, as an assistant in 1980.

**Family pride**

McNeill considers it a "blessing" to coach just two hours from the family's home, where he can now take a role in caring for his father.

In 2007, his mother died as the preseason was starting at Texas Tech. He wears a white arm band with the word "Mom" written on it. He said she was the only one missing during that thrilling victory over Tulsa in the season-opener. His father surprised him by attending the game and then walked into the locker room at the end, having witnessed his son's first victory as a head coach.

McNeill introduced him to the team, and the emotion of the day overcame them all.

"I felt so proud," McNeill Sr. said.

If there's one characteristic McNeill will try to instill in players, it's pride. This year's squad, despite losing 29 starters from two previous Conference USA championship teams, has exhibited a steel-wool grit brought on by the head coach. He's demanded, as his father did of him, effort beyond what they thought was possible.
"He coaches them hard, gets after them hard, but he loves them hard, too," ECU offensive coordinator Lincoln Riley said.

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ETHAN HYMAN - ethyman@newsobserver.com - Ruffin McNeill hugs Justin Jones (84) after a TD.
Queen of comedy brings her iconic characters to ECU

By Kelley Kirk
The Daily Reflector
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Lily Tomlin emerged on the stage and screen at a time when there were very few female comedians. But that didn't stop her. During her 40-year career she has created more than 10 characters that perform monologues in a one-woman show.

The actress got her comedic start doing standup in nightclubs in Detroit and New York after graduating from Wayne State University, and in 1965 she was on “The Merv Griffin Show.”

In 1969 she joined the cast of NBC’s “Rowan and Martin's Laugh-in” and quickly rose to fame. On “Laugh In,” she brought to life Ernestine, an irascible telephone operator who is easily recognized by her catch phrase, “one ringy-dingy, two ringy-dingy”; the precocious 6-year-old Edith Ann, who often sat in an oversized rocking chair; and the privileged Tasteful Lady.

Tomlin will perform as some of the characters when she visits Greenville for a one-night performance at 7:30 p.m. Monday at East Carolina University's Wright Auditorium as part of the S. Rudolph Alexander Performing Arts Series. She said her characters each reflect a little bit of herself.

“All you have is your face and body and voice to use,” she said by phone from her home in Los Angeles. “You use whatever you can glean from your own life.”

Another Tomlin character is the gender-bending Tommy Velour, a role that broke new ground. Tomlin as Tommy Velour sang to Elizabeth Taylor on her 65th birthday, going so far as to parody Michael Jackson, who was sitting beside Taylor.
Her talents have been recognized with two Tony Awards, two Peabody Awards, six Emmy Awards, a Grammy, the Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle awards as well as the Mark Twain Prize for American humor. But despite her theatrical success, Tomlin's original goals were far more serious. Her intention was to work in the medical field.

“But I wasn't such as good student,” Tomlin said. “In those days, in the '60s, you wanted to make a contribution to society. You wanted to do good ...”

Taking to the stage was a natural for Tomlin, she said, since she'd performed shows on her back porch while growing up in Detroit. A chance encounter while working in a coffee shop pushed Tomlin toward the stage and, more specifically, her trademark character monologues.

“I was about 17 or 18 and a man said to me that I reminded him of Ruth Draper. At the time I didn't know what an extremely laudatory comment that was,” Tomlin said. Draper was the undisputed queen of the one-woman theater from her 1920 debut until her death in 1956. She would fill theaters all over the world and transform herself into an array of characters. To find out more about Draper, Tomlin went to the Detroit Public library to listen to recordings of Draper's monologues.

“Then I had a watermark,” Tomlin said.

She had what some would call a charmed early career, meeting several influential and famous people within her field.

After her first Broadway show in 1977, Tomlin met Charles Bowden, producer of “The Night of the Iguana” and other Tennessee Williams plays.

“He was friends with Tennessee Williams and introduced me to Helen Hayes and Lillian Gish,” said Tomlin.

Tomlin and Gish became friends. Gish was a prominent stage, screen and television actress who began acting in 1912.

As a main character in 1980's “9 to 5,” Tomlin said she invited Gish to attend the New York premiere. She sent a limousine for Gish, who was 87 at the time, along with a single flower.

After the premiere was over the New York streets were packed. “It was winter and it was just a traffic jam. And they took Dolly, Jane and me and shoved us into a car. When we got in I saw the flower and said ‘Oh God, this is Lillian's,’” Tomlin said. “I turned around to see Lillian Gish running down the middle of the street and she jumped into an old Firebird.”

Concerned that her much-respected friend might be angry, Tomlin hurried to the restaurant for the after party.

“She beat me to the restaurant and was waiting for me at the door. She grabs me and takes me into the ladies' room,” Tomlin said. “She said to me, ‘This movie is going to be a hit. You better have part (ownership).’”
A good piece of advice considering the movie has grossed more than $103 million in the U.S. alone, according to The Internet Movie Database website.

The best advice that Gish gave to Tomlin?
“Never let them shoot up your nose,” Tomlin said.

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East Carolina University's School of Music Opera Theater presents “A Midsummer Night's Dream,” at 7 p.m. today and 2 p.m. Sunday in A.J. Fletcher Recital Hall. The opera was written by Benjamin Britten and is based on the play of the same name by William Shakespeare.

The story is set in the woods at night near Athens, where fairy queen Tytania and fairy king Oberon argue. The king's spirit attendant, Puck, is sent to find an herb that causes people to fall in love with the first live creature they see after they wake. Lysander and Hermia are forbidden by Athenian law to marry, so they flee to the woods. Demetrius, Hermia's betrothed, follows the couple. Pursuing Demetrius is Helena, who is in love with him.

Oberon tells Puck to anoint Demetrius' eyes with the herb to make him fall in love with Helena. When the herb is applied to the wrong characters, chaos ensues until they are all commanded to sleep, and everything is cured. Oberon and Tytania also make peace with each other.

John Kramar is director of the ECU production. Oberon is played by Bryan Pollock, and Tytania is portrayed by Alyssa Howell today and Erin O'Leary on Sunday.

Tickets are $15 for adults, $12 for seniors, ECU faculty and staff and $5 for students. Call 328-4788 or visit www.ecuarts.com.
NC governor restricting Cabinet agencies' rules

PITTSBORO, N.C. Gov. Beverly Perdue said Thursday she'll restrict new rules issued by North Carolina state agencies to carry out state or federal laws, a move she said will prevent bureaucracy from trumping common sense.

In a news conference at a Chatham County elementary school, Perdue tried to push her administration's theme of "setting government straight" by ordering Cabinet-level agencies to avoid creating new regulations unless they're absolutely necessary or protect the health and safety of citizens.

The Democratic governor also said her administration would embark on an annual review of current regulations and initiated a Web page to accept comment on rules. Her executive order taps into a common thread heard from chamber of commerce luncheons to the stands of high school football games - government regulates too much or the wrong way.

"If you hate it and it doesn't work in your mind, let us review it and if there's no purpose, we'll get rid of it or we'll fix it," Perdue said behind Perry Harrison Elementary School in Pittsboro. "This is a chance to have your voice heard and to help us bring to North Carolina commonsense together."

Perdue used the school's playground equipment as a backdrop because state childcare regulations previously prevented children enrolled in after-school care programs statewide from using playground equipment at the schools because they had different standards. The General Assembly changed that in 2009.

Cabinet agencies also pointed out two rules that Perdue said are in the process of being reworked. One rule in place could bar wind turbines or wind farms from being installed off the North Carolina coast because they aren't classified as water dependent structures.
Plans also are under way to reduce the amount of bonding money general contractors for state projects must put up to land a state construction project. The bonding levels are higher in North Carolina compared to other states, she said, but that makes no sense when small businesses are struggling to survive.

Ivan Urlab, executive director of the North Carolina Sustainable Energy Association, said North Carolina has the greatest potential for harnessing wind energy on the East Coast and could potentially create 10,000 related jobs over the next decade. The rule change, he said, is "an early step toward realizing this wonderful opportunity that's before us in North Carolina."

While she can't force Council of State members and their departments, as well as community colleges and the University of North Carolina system to follow her executive order, Perdue requested that they follow her lead. Local government officials at the event praised the undertaking.

Daren Bakst, director of legal and regulatory studies at the conservative-leaning John Locke Foundation in Raleigh, said Perdue deserves credit for her efforts but said she's got to back them up with action in the months ahead.

"Certainly there is excessive regulation in North Carolina" and reform is needed, Bakst said.

While Senate Minority Leader Phil Berger, R-Rockingham, had no immediate reservations about Perdue's plan, state GOP Chairman Tom Fetzer criticized her for taking nearly two years into her term to tackle the problem.

Perdue's office said new rules could be issued only if they're agreed to by her state budget office. The executive order said agencies must perform a cost-benefit analysis on a proposal, identify potential alternatives to regulation and ensure public comment. The public input will be taken seriously, said Jonathan Womer, deputy budget director for management "We're really hopeful some great ideas will come through," Womer said.

Any rule changes will still be subject to procedure that allows the Rules Review Commission to sign off on changes to ensure they're in keeping with the law. The General Assembly also has time to disapprove rules, too.
Thursday's announcement was separate from her expected announcement next month to unveil a reorganization plan of state government.

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Online:
Governor's Office suggestion box for regulation review:
http://www.setgovernmentstraight.nc.gov
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Average College Debt Rose to $24,000 in 2009

By TAMAR LEWIN

College seniors who graduated in 2009 had an average of $24,000 in student loan debt, up 6 percent from 2008, according to an annual report from the Project on Student Debt.

The increase is similar to those of the past four years, the report said, despite the recession, probably because members of the class of 2009 took out most of their debt before the economic downturn began.

“This consistent growth in debt over the last few years really adds up,” said Lauren Asher, president of the Institute for College Access & Success, the research and advocacy group that operates the debt project. “It’s important to remember that the experts all agree that if you’re going to borrow, you should take out federal loans first, because federal student loans come with far more repayment options and borrower protections than other types of loans.”

In troubled economic times, Ms. Asher said, the income-based repayment and unemployment deferment available on federal loans are especially important.

Using a different data set, Sandy Baum, an economics professor who has analyzed debt for the College Board, found similar average debt loads, and also stressed the benefits of federal loans over private ones.

Many of the high-debt states are in the Northeast, while the low-debt states are clustered largely in the West.

Paying back student loans is likely to be especially difficult for recent graduates, the report said, because the unemployment rate for college graduates ages 20 to 24 was 8.7 percent in 2009 — the highest annual rate on record and a substantial rise from 5.8 percent in 2008.
“The unemployment rate is higher than ever for everyone, including people who didn’t go to college, and obviously that’s a huge concern,” Dr. Baum said.

The student debt project’s averages are based on voluntary reports from about 1,000 public and private nonprofit four-year colleges. For-profit colleges were not included, because very few report their student debt data, but surveys by the Department of Education indicated that generally, their graduates borrowed more than those who attended public or private nonprofit colleges. The unemployment figures are based on unpublished data from the federal government’s Current Population Survey.