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The mission of Florence District One is to prepare students to become productive, responsible citizens and life-long learners who are able to succeed in an ever-changing society.



A rewarding battle

West Florence DB Coach Files fights diabetes with support from students, family

By BOB GILLESPIE - bgillespie@thestate.com

Neville Files was a star defensive back at USC in the 1970's and has been a coach and, now, athletics director at West Florence High for many years. The past year he had to deal with complications from diabetes, the result being that his leg had to be amputated below the knee in November. He continues his work as AD and coaching the defensive backs, except at the moment, he does it from a wheelchair.



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(Above) Files talks with head football coach, **Trey Woodbury**, during lunch Tuesday. Photo by TIM DOMINICK, 1/8/08, tdominick@thestate.com

FLORENCE — On Nov. 18, 1972 at Williams-Brice Stadium, Neville Files enjoyed what was, until recently, the most rewarding experience of his long athletics career.

A starting defensive back for a 4-7 South Carolina team facing a powerful Florida State squad and its quarterback Gary Huff, the 21-year-old Files picked off three interceptions (of his four for the season and six for his career) in the Gamecocks' 24-21 upset victory. Sports Illustrated chose him as its Defensive Back of the Week.

"That was a big day for me," Files said.

Not as big, though, or as meaningful as the Monday after Thanksgiving, 2007. That day, Files learned what he means to students at West Florence High School, where he has worked, coached and served as athletics director for the past 28 years.

In early November, Files, 56, underwent surgery to remove his right leg just below the knee, the result of a decade-long battle with diabetes. A man who once roamed USC's secondary and last fall coached the Knights' defensive backs returned to work in a wheelchair, ahead of his doctors' schedule, because ... well, he said, that was where he needed to be.

"Only a few students knew what had happened," said West Florence principal Pam DePreete Quick, daughter of a high school coach. "Neville usually does lunch duty, and we told him that day we had it covered. He said, 'No, I'm coming (to the school's mall area where students eat).'"

When Files rolled to his usual duty station, everything stopped. Students stared, whispered. Then a group of football players came in. They crowded around him, smiling, laughing and hugging Files. He grinned back at them.

"Good medicine," Quick said. "He missed this."

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Athletes, no matter their age, remain young, strong and fearless all their lives — in their minds. They know hard work and never-say-die are keys to success. Files learned those lessons in Greenwood in the 1960s, playing under the legendary (and notoriously demanding) coach Pinky Babb.

So 10 years ago, after blood work for surgery to remove a cyst from his lower back revealed diabetes (a grandmother had died from the disease), Files faced it like an athlete. He began taking oral medication and watching his diet; eventually, two shots of insulin were part of his daily routine.

Five years ago, an infection cost him two toes; Files soldiered on. Then in August 2006, Files developed a blister on the bottom of his right foot that would not heal. He took antibiotics, applied ointments. Nothing really helped.

After a Knights regular-season game vs. South Florence, Files was sick, with chills and vomiting. His doctor, Jeffrey Muha, who had been treating him for three years, hospitalized Files. A blood flow study showed little circulation in his lower right leg.

“The No. 1 problem with diabetics is neuropathy,” Muha said. “When you’ve had diabetes long enough, the foot becomes numb, and you can walk on a wound or open sore, and it gets infected without you knowing it.”

Muha gave Files options. He could have half of his foot amputated. Would it heal completely? Probably not, Muha told him. Or he could have the leg amputated below the knee.

“I told him, ‘Doc, those aren’t great options,’” Files said.

He spent days agonizing over his choice.

“It was a very tough decision,” he said. “How do you give up part of your body? One night, after my wife (Charlotte) went home, I lay there thinking: Will it heal? Can I continue to work, to coach?”

“And yeah, I thought: Why me? You feel sorry for yourself.”

But not for long. In talks with West Florence football coach Trey Woodbury, Files recalled his football experiences, his battles, all the way back to high school.

“Sports helped me get through this,” he said. “It makes you mentally tough. I thought, ‘Heck, I went through worse than this with coach Babb.’”

Said Woodbury, “Once he decided (on the amputation), he was fine with it, very upbeat.”

Files knew, too, that his players would be watching. A former head coach at West Florence, he had approached Woodbury last spring about coaching again.

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“He walked into my office and said, ‘I miss it. If you want me back, I want to do it,’” Woodbury said. “We were glad to have him.”

If players wondered how a balding, 56-year-old assistant coach would be, they soon found out. “He was one of the best defensive backs coaches I’ve ever seen,” said Landis Lane, a junior cornerback, who was named all-conference in 2007.

“He knew a lot about the position from playing it at USC. The drills and stuff ... you knew he knew what he was talking about.”

Last fall, Woodbury watched as Files’ secondary shut down Hartsville’s all-state receiver, Jordan Lyles, in a 17-3 victory. The Knights finished their 7-5 season with a school-record 24 interceptions. But because Files had a goal of 25 picks, there was no celebratory cookout for the players.

His hard-nosed attitude, he said, came from Greenwood. “Coach Babb had a sign over the locker room door: ‘Quitters never win,’” Files said. “Working with the kids in weight-training, I’d tell them, ‘Don’t quit. If I did, I would be home in bed.’”

After surgery, Files met with specialists at Palmetto Prosthetics (his new leg should be fitted and fully adjusted by March), and they asked Files: What do you want to do? He had a list — play golf, ride motorcycles and a jet ski — and in each case he was told, yes, you will be able to do that.

His final item? “I want to coach,” Files said. “They said I might have to use a cane walking on sandy ground.” He laughed. “I told them I could use the cane to whack players on their heads.”

Charlotte, Files’ wife of 32 years, said she knew he could overcome whatever the amputation threw his way. She knows his perseverance. The two met in 1975 at an Atlanta nightspot (both lived in nearby Newnan, Ga.) where, she said, a friend of his approached her and said, “Neville Files wants you to dance.”

“I had just had my wisdom teeth out and was hurting, so I told him, ‘If you want to dance, go find me some aspirin,’” she said. “Thirty or 40 minutes later, he showed back up with the aspirin.”

Nowadays, she said with a chuckle, Files “backseat drives when I chauffeur him. And he always asks, ‘Can you get me a Pepsi?’ as soon as I sit down. But,” she said, “I reckon I’ll keep him.”

They feel that way at West Florence, too. Lane, looking toward his senior season, said the Knights in 2008 “should be pretty good with the talent we’ve got coming back. But most of what we’ve got is heart.”

The players know where much of that comes from, too. □