

Remembering Coach Charles Vicknair

By Carl Dubois

At its core the life of Charles Vicknair is a love story. Instead of arriving wrapped in lace, it presents itself in leather. The football, not the pink Valentine's Day heart, is the lasting icon.

Like all love stories, this one is filled with drama — in this case, tension and conflict most often played out on a field of grass, in practice and in more formal competition. There are pages with X's and O's, but rather than signifying hugs and kisses, they symbolize Buccaneers, Broncos, Cowboys, Gators, Golden Tornados, Rams and Saints. They represent the good guys and the bad guys, the individual match-ups and assignments designed to work in unison to succeed against the other team's strategy.

Every love story finds obstacles that threaten to block the path of the protagonists in their quest, and there is no shortage of such roadblocks here. A coach learns, then relearns again and again, his goal is essentially the same as that of the people around him, but there is nothing approaching a consensus on the right path for getting there. Coaching is often about making adjustments, at halftime and during a game with no more timeouts or breaks. Those unwilling to compromise, to roll with the changes, can be left behind. Charles Vicknair wasn't that kind of coach. He embraced change — perhaps too frequently, even his most ardent supporters said then and now.

His story, as presented here, contains few of the

obvious trappings we're accustomed to in the genre of the love story, but the essential component is easy to spot. It's tucked inside details that at first glance don't seem to fit the definitions ingrained in us by more stereotypical narratives of passion and romance.

In the master bedroom of the house there is a trunk filled with love letters, but not in the traditional sense. They are the hundreds of sheets of plays he drew, notes he scribbled at coaching clinics, the handwritten proof of Vicknair's love of the game and his love of learning.

In the memories of others, there are the terms of endearment: nicknames, pet names. He rattled them off like a roll call, and he was more likely to give you a name of his choosing rather than call you by the one on your birth certificate.

June Bug. Pahds. Pancho. Bootsie.

He could remember the name he gave you. It wasn't a given he could recall the name your parents gave you. Charles Vicknair reserved the naming rights to his world and the people in it.

Love? It's there in the consistency of the man who met his 89-year-old mother for coffee every day at 6 a.m. It's there in the effort to be home each night in time for family dinner together. It's in the sameness of commitment to players in the 1990s as in the 1960s, so much so from one generation to another they use almost verbatim phrases and sentences to describe the side of Vicknair that was, in fact, unchanged.

To put his longevity into perspective, consider he began coaching at what is now called S.P. Arnett Middle

School in Westlake in 1964, two years before Joe Paterno became head coach at Penn State. Vicknair began his last season, cut short by his sudden death, in 2008, years after the first questions about the inevitability of JoePa's retirement.

Vicknair's story here isn't about statistics. His won-lost record in 25 seasons as a head coach was unspectacular, although the highlight remains one of the golden seasons in Southwest Louisiana prep football history. A 14-game winning streak and a 14-1 season in 1980 at Barbe High School in Lake Charles, La., a season that ended with a bittersweet trip to the state championship game, was the standard of excellence at that school a decade into the 21st century. Coach Vic, as he was known by many, wouldn't return to a state championship game as a participant until 2007, when his career came full circle as an assistant coach at Westlake.

He spent 16 seasons as a high school assistant, four as a college assistant at his alma mater.

But that's just football. We promised you a love story. Peel away the shoulder pads, the grass and mud stains, the sweat and blood and the real and choreographed machismo of amateur football, and the more than four decades of Vicknair's coaching career reveal the slow, steady hand of love of the game, of tough love, of a love that isn't always fully understood until years later.

A father makes his son do the work, whatever form that work takes, knowing he is preparing him for manhood. A father who also happens to be a coach and teacher has many sons, and when the light of recognition comes on for

them as adults, they find meaning they couldn't grasp as teenagers.

They get it.

Coaches, who often scrape by on wages shockingly low when calculated by the number of hours they devote to the job, find there is a bonus waiting for them at unexpected times. Former players come back or call or write to say thanks. Some do it eloquently, and some have to mask it behind the comfortable language and rituals of coach-player dynamics years after they've raised children themselves, but too many players to count let their coach know they finally understand.

Football coaches — especially those who came of age in the 1950s and '60s — have never been known for having the vocabulary of group therapy. In their world an "I love you" from man to man is more socially acceptable as a punch line in beer commercials or movie titles. Otherwise, it is too touchy-feely for many coaches, so the manifestations of "Thank you" and "You're welcome" and expressions of gratitude in the same area code as the heart are frequently taken in trade: a simple gesture, a favor for a favor, and the silent recognition that a brief reunion or conversation 15 or 20 years later is the way some men work these things out between each other. The coach knows the visit from his former assistant carries meaning beyond the simple swapping of new ideas and the strategy du jour. He knows nobody forced the former player to come and see or e-mail him. The message is tucked inside the ritual, just as it was years before during two-a-days, during punishment laps, during nauseating drills that seemed

conjured by a dictator rather than a loving father figure. In these moments of sometimes awkward, always sincere "thanks," coaches receive a bonus check they will never cash, one they will carry with them through the next season because it reminds them that maybe all the frustrations, the defeats both big and small, are ultimately worth it.

And so these tough guys, whose walls are adorned with framed posters of John Wayne and Vince Lombardi and the most popular sayings and images of those iconic tough guys ... well, they say "I love you, man" in whatever manner they can muster. Charles Vicknair, 66, died Sept. 20, 2008, the morning after helping coach Westlake High School to a victory against nearby Sam Houston High. When months of grieving and remembering became a year, then longer, former players and assistants of Coach Vic kept looking for ways to say it — to his memory, to the world, to his family, and to the next generation, and to the next.

He coached for 44 full football seasons and part of a 45th, all in Louisiana, all on high school campuses except for his four years as an assistant at McNeese State University in Lake Charles. That city in Southwest Louisiana was never more than a 15-minute drive from the office, yet he made an impact that stretches wide.

It wasn't always about football, even when it appeared to be. Long after Vicknair's death, and decades after he coached at Barbe, one of his players at the South Lake Charles school found himself teaching seminars in the business world and making his point with words and lessons that came from Coach Vic.

Coaches often find themselves locked in battles with academicians and administrators who lament and counter what they see as too much emphasis on sports in schools, but the coaches with a player's long-range interests at heart understand it's often not as simple as outsiders see it. They find out there are benefits to participation in athletics that can give a teenager much-needed structure and discipline – and the experience of being a part of something larger than one person. At times, meeting the minimum requirements for playing sports in school is dismissed as just getting by to serve the team and its goals, but coaches discover there are students whose lives are at risk for veering off into any of a number of ill-fated directions without a regular routine, without constant monitoring and without the sense of belonging they derive from being part of a team. Sometimes, their mere participation in a team sport is the difference between becoming an adult with a set of skills that allows them to function in the structure of society rather than becoming a statistic and a cautionary tale about what can happen when young people fall through the cracks.

It's in that context that many coaches will take the heat for doing everything they can to keep a player on a team rather than cut him loose and increase the odds of him continuing down a path with consequences that can permanently alter one's destiny. The former Sam Houston High School player who commissioned the research and writing of this story, a man who credits Vicknair with laying the foundation for his successes as a businessman and as a family man, decided to memorialize his long-ago

coach by creating the Web site CoachVicknair.com. He said Vicknair turned his life around.

Others helped persuade the American Press, the newspaper of record throughout Vicknair's career, to name an award for Coach Vic. Longtime Westlake assistant coach Jamie Schiro was recognized as the first winner of the Charles Vicknair Award, now presented annually to the top assistant in the Lake Charles area. Other finalists were DeQuincy's W.A. Ashworth, St. Louis Catholic's Wayne Cespiva, Barbe's Mike Cutrera and DeRidder's Mitch Mills.

Schiro first went to Westlake as a student assistant in 1978-79 and was offensive coordinator in 2008, when he won the award. Cespiva, who coached with Vicknair at Barbe, was named the second recipient of the award Dec. 26, 2009.

Former colleagues, friendly rivals and friends of Vicknair also began exploring other ways to pay lasting tribute to him.

Those and other gestures are a testament to the longtime and consistent influence of a coach who never won a state championship and was rarely in the spotlight. Those he helped to find their way know the far reach he had upon Southwest Louisiana football and the young men who populate its history and its future.

"He molded a lot of people's lives," said Kirby Bruchhaus, whose coaching career began as a student teacher under Vicknair's employ and crested at McNeese State as defensive coordinator and, briefly, head coach. "He molded my life, and I would have never had the

opportunity to get where I got into the coaching field without him. I'll just be indebted to him for all my life, and it didn't start with me, and it didn't stop with me."

Jimmy Shaver, an assistant to Vicknair at Barbe before taking his place as head coach in 1982, talked about the extent of Vicknair's influence.

"He had a big impact on our community and all the coaches in this area," Shaver said before the first anniversary of Vicknair's death. "Some of them might not have been directly under him, but somebody on their staff has been or they worked with somebody before that was under Vic, so all of us (were affected by him). I can't think of anybody that hasn't been influenced somehow by him."

Shaver's long stay at Barbe and many Southwest Louisiana Coach of the Year awards earned him more frequent attention than Vicknair, but the former pupil said the mentor did not come and go without leaving his mark.

"He's been a part of every community," Shaver said. "He's coached all over this area, from Sam Houston to St. Louis to LaGrange to Sulphur to here. He's been all over. He knew way more people than I do, because he was pretty visible. I don't think it went unnoticed."

In many ways, Vicknair's story represents thousands of high school coaches who let others pursue the dream of coaching in college or the NFL for the bulk of their careers. They let others chase better-paying jobs that in many cases don't require any more of a time commitment from them. They let others become household names regionally and nationally.

They are content to be high school coaches and

teachers, to be father figures to their players during the teenage years when the choices a quarterback or receiver or lineman make can affect the rest of their lives. Vicknair was one of those coaches, consistent in his approach, hopeful of making a difference when a young man's future could be in the balance.

"The guy was one of the best offensive line coaches, one of the best coaches I've been around," said Ed Orgeron, whose career includes stops at the University of Miami, USC, Ole Miss and with the New Orleans Saints before he became assistant head coach at the University of Tennessee. "I've been around some great guys."

When Orgeron became a graduate assistant coach at McNeese State in 1985, he worked under the tutelage of Vicknair, who was in the last of his four years as a college assistant.

"The guy could have coached at any level he wanted to," Orgeron said. "He could have coached in the NFL if he wanted to. That's how good he was."

This is a story told by those he prepared for the time when he'd be gone, whether family members who would outlive him or assistant coaches who would continue to work without him after he'd moved on to another school. This is a story told by the players he turned into men and the assistants he turned into head coaches. This is a story of the assistant coaches who see new ways of doing things come and go, but few methods that convince them to change from some of the basics they learned from Vicknair.

This is a story from the lips of those who see Charles Vicknair in the things they do, the organizational

parameters he taught them that have become as natural and automatic to them as breathing.

"I'd never coached offense before," Orgeron said, recalling his year with Vicknair, "so all the things I do today I learned from him. Like, I'm able to draw a blocking scheme and do everything because of something he taught me. He was fantastic."

Orgeron played defensive line at Northwestern State and spent one year after that as a graduate assistant there. His year at McNeese was his first away from the familiar surroundings of his five years in Natchitoches, and he said Vicknair made it special.

"The guy treated me like gold," Orgeron said. "He spent a lot of time on how to coach, what to do, how to prepare, mannerisms ... believe me, the guy was fantastic to me. He remained a good friend for me the whole time. You know how it is when you go to a new place, it's your first time? The guy took me under his wing and treated me great. He was awesome."

Some of Vicknair's pupils didn't stay in coaching, but they never forgot him.

"My father died at 53, the year before Charles Vicknair talked me into being a high school football coach with him at Sam Houston High School," said Tom Brandow, who left the profession and is an educator at the Calcasieu Parish Elementary Alternative School in Southwest Louisiana.

"Through most of my adult life, Charles Vicknair was the closest thing that I had to a father," Brandow said. "We didn't always agree or see eye to eye, and we had vastly

different lifestyles, but Coach Vic was what I thought a coach should be. He didn't care that I played music in the offseason, or that my interests were different than his. Coach Vic loved football coaches, and I was honored to have had the experience to work for a man that has left a legacy among high school football in Southwest Louisiana that will never be equaled."

Brandow is the first in this story to touch on what will be a recurring theme, and the first of many.

"Coach Vic often stated that he didn't want to ever feel like we had lost a game because we had been outplayed or outcoached, which translated into long tedious hours of preparation, but looking back it was this attitude that sums up the man," Brandow said. "Charles Vicknair was Charles Vicknair — honest, no hidden agendas, often not politically correct, and probably the worst speller in the history of the world. He was definitely one of the true giants as a coach but more importantly as a man."

What follows, section by section, is a series of snapshots of Vicknair's life and loves. It's unlikely the reader will navigate all of it in one sitting, so this Web site features a link to each section for the sake of convenience. The story isn't always in chronological order, so it doesn't have to be read in any particular sequence, but if time and patience allow, it helps to start at the beginning and finish at the end.

That said, there really is no end. Just as it's impossible for this story to tell everything about the coach and the person, it's folly to consider this a complete record of his

life. This Web site allows for readers to post comments, their recollections of the man, and to extend the story in an organic and personal way.

Like the impact Charles Vicknair had upon Southwest Louisiana, his story continues to be told.

Horse trailers and wallpaper

Sam Smith worked for Vicknair at St. Louis High School in Lake Charles from 1996-99, coaching all three of Vicknair's sons. He left for Texas, eventually becoming offensive coordinator at Tomball, a Class 5A high school near Houston. That's where Smith was when Vicknair died in September 2008.

"When I left and came to Texas, my relationship with Coach Vic only grew stronger, and we grew closer," Smith said. "I'm originally from DeQuincy. Mom said that if it weren't for Coach Vic that I would never come back home and that she would never see me."

Smith and Vicknair attended nearly every coaching clinic in the region from January to April for 10 years.

"Our wives always joked that we spent more nights together during clinic season than we did with them," Smith said.

The time together made an impression.

"His passion for the game of football and his wife and family has given me a model that I try to live up to daily," Smith said.

"He treated me like another son," he said. "My dad's still living, and we're real close, but I always said I felt like

Coach Vic was my second dad. He was also such a good mentor."

One thing coaches learn the longer they stay around the game is how much they don't know. Smith discovered this while he worked with Vicknair, and he saw something else that stuck. It is a recurring theme in the life of Coach Vic.

"He had a knack of understanding there's always something else out there about there about the game," Smith said, "and you can never know everything there is to know about football. He always said it's a constantly changing game, and he coached for more than 40 years and never let the game pass him by.

"A lot of coaches get in it, and they get to a point where it's like, 'I'm done with learning, or I want to take my career in this path,' and they kind of let the game pass them by. They don't quit being good coaches, but it's just the X's and O's of the game kind of pass them by. Coach Vic never let that happen."

More on that later.

Smith said he and Vicknair spoke by phone at least five times a week after Smith left for Texas, extending the friendship for nearly 10 years after their coaching partnership ended. They bounced ideas off each other.

In the football-themed love story "Jerry Maguire," the agent whose name is the title of the movie has a heated debate with a player he represents. When the agent walks away, the player addresses the nature of the perceived conflict.

"See? That's the difference between us," he yells. "You

think we're fighting, and I think we're finally talking."

There was no such confusion between Smith and Vicknair, but it wasn't always obvious to Smith's wife that the two men, mentor and pupil, were on the same page about the nature of their exchanges even when they weren't in agreement about the specifics.

"We were at lunch at St. Louis, and we were changing from a split defense to the 4-3, and I'd played in a 4-3 under David Paine at DeQuincy, and so we were talking about linebacker reads and drawing it up on the board during lunch," Smith said. "In the coaches office, we talked like coaches. We were fussing back and forth, fussing back and forth, and people often said, 'God almighty, it sounds like y'all hate each other when y'all are talking football.' Well, no, not at all.

"But my wife walked in while Coach Vic and I were going back with each other, and all of a sudden our tone changed, and she came back later and asked, 'Well, y'all are not mad at each other?' We just kind of looked at each other like brothers and said, 'No, not at all. We're just talking about football.' That's just the type of relationship he had with his coaches, and that's just how comfortable you always felt with Coach Vic. He never took offense to being questioned because he always questioned everything."

The first year Smith coached for Vicknair at St. Louis, Smith's wife taught in Deweyville, Texas. They lived in DeQuincy, roughly halfway between Deweyville and Lake Charles. The next year, the Smiths moved into a house in Lake Charles.

"We had a horse trailer we moved our stuff in, and he

and his wife came up and helped us move," Smith said. "Then they came for the next week and helped us put up new wallpaper and do things like that around the house. That was the type of guy he was. Since then, I've never had a head coach offer to help me move. I've moved a lot since that second year with Coach Vic, and never since then have I had a head coach do any of that."

'I hope I get paid'

Vicknair was head football coach at Barbe High when Mike Abshire, a 1981 graduate, played for the Bucs. They next crossed paths when Abshire got his first coaching job, at Moss Bluff Middle School, a feeder of nearby Sam Houston High School in the Moss Bluff suburb of Lake Charles. Abshire helped at the high school.

"I can't say I really helped him up there, but Coach Vic never ran anybody off," Abshire said. "If you were up there, he was going to put you to work. As soon as I would finish my duties at the middle school, I'd go up to the high school."

This was after Vicknair left McNeese after four years as an assistant coach and begin a long stay as head coach at Sam Houston High in 1986. Matt Viator, who would later become head coach at McNeese, was the offensive coordinator at Sam Houston. Mike Johns, later a head coach at LaGrange and St. Louis high schools, was defensive coordinator. They and others worked for Vicknair, and Abshire volunteered to do whatever they needed.

"I'd be a fly on the wall, but Vic never allowed that. He was going to put you to work. I'd walk in, and they'd be passing out paperwork with their coaches' names on it, and I'd get one," Abshire said. "I was lost in that office with him. He'd be talking about stuff, and I didn't know what he was referring to. I didn't even know what sport he was referring to. I just knew he was the football coach, and since I knew him for so long I knew he was all about football.

"They were leaving to go to a clinic, and he said, 'You're coming with us, Abshire.' I didn't know that we were leaving at 5 o'clock the next morning for San Angelo, Texas. I thought we were just going a couple of days. I went home that evening, and I hadn't been married a year yet, and I told my wife I was going on a football clinic."

She asked where, and he said, "Texas."

That's all he knew.

She asked how long he'd be gone, and he said, "Well, I really don't know."

He didn't ask Vicknair any questions. He went home and threw some stuff in a bag. It was enough for a couple of days.

"We left Wednesday morning at 5 and came back Sunday, and at the time the speed limit was 55, so it was about a 12-hour drive," Abshire said. "I didn't know then, but I know now, that Vicknair was pretty much the pioneer of all the coaches going to clinics. I don't think he missed a clinic. Ever."

Abshire said there were 2,500 coaches at that first clinic he attended at Angelo State, and Vicknair didn't miss

a meeting. Other coaches attended some of the meetings and socialized the rest of the time, but Vicknair sat through every presentation and took detailed notes.

"I learned how helpful those clinics were, and I learned how to go to one, what to get from it and how to put it to use," Abshire said. "I came back just in time to stop the divorce."

This was before everyone had a cell phone, so Abshire's bride didn't know what had happened.

"She thought I was kidnapped," he said.

Abshire later moved up to the high school. His wife was an alumna, and before the promotion she had told him, "You're going to coach right here," meaning Sam Houston High School.

He did, at first for Vicknair, and then coming back years later to work with a different set of coaches.

"You know how you hate when they're right?" Abshire said, referring to wives. "That was one of those times."

Being a first-year coach and based at the middle school, Abshire didn't know much about the logistics and school board procedure when Vicknair called and, fulfilling the prophecy of Abshire's wife, asked Abshire to come to work for him at the high school.

"I didn't even know if I was going to get a check," he said. "It was pretty much that quick. We were already doing football, busy with that, and I said, 'I hope I get paid.'"

"That was that. I was on his staff."

Complete with paycheck.

Viator had been head baseball coach, and when he left to coach football at Vinton High School, Abshire took over

the baseball program at Sam Houston. Abshire and Viator grew up together, and Abshire was already helping Viator coach baseball at the high school.

"Typical of those days, the old-school football coach fought the spring programs because they'd take away from offseason football work and things like that," Abshire said. "I'm trying to make it work together, but Vicknair would always tell me, 'You can't do that. Baseball's gotta wait. Baseball's gotta wait.' That's all he ever told me.

"One day I walked in the office, and his oldest son, which he referred to as No. 1, was starting to play baseball," Abshire said. "I walked in early in the morning before school, and Vic hit me right at the door: 'How do you throw this damn baseball?' I said, 'What in the hell are you talking about?'

"He said, 'Oh, my boy wanted to throw in the yard yesterday, so I grabbed a glove and went out there, and hell, I know he's not doing it right, but I don't know how to do it.' So, he wanted some coaching."

Abshire thought about it before responding.

"Coach," he told Vicknair, "baseball's going to have to wait."

Abshire laughed as he remembered Vicknair's reaction.

"He looked at me and said, 'You're sorry. I knew you were going to say something.' I said, 'Vic, you told me all my life, even when I was in high school, that baseball's gotta wait. Just tell him it's gotta wait.' I always held that against him, jokingly, and we got a laugh out of it, because here comes No. 2, his second son, and he liked baseball,"

Abshire said. "I'm in the yard with him, helping him, and here comes No. 3. He loved baseball. They all did.

"I'm over there, and Vic's cooking steaks in the back and we're working in the yard, trying to teach them how to throw and hit a baseball. It was when they were real young, and it was funny how it all transpired with a guy that I really looked up to, and still do."

Abshire said he thought, as a player, he knew what it would be like to coach. Then he became a coach and found out how little he knew about it.

"I realized I didn't know what the hell was going on," he said, "and then a guy like Charles comes along and catches me right at the beginning, thank goodness — right when you're on the bubble of going either way or quitting and doing something else — and he gives you insight into how you need to do it.

"In my mind, I don't know any other way now. I really don't. I hear a lot of different other ways, and I just don't know any other way."

The most lasting message was to put in the necessary time and effort.

"If you lost, it wasn't going to be because you didn't work or you got outworked," Abshire said. "That's probably what everybody else has told you about Charles, but that's just how it was."

Years later Vicknair became an assistant coach at Sulphur High School, where Abshire was already on staff. Abshire went there to work for Viator, who left to become offensive coordinator at McNeese. Lark Hebert became head coach, and Abshire stayed as an assistant coach.

It was another chance for the pupil to needle the mentor.

"Coach Vic walked in the first day, and I knew he was getting hired," Abshire said, "and I was going to take him around and show him where everything was. I knew it wouldn't take a day to show him what's going on, and he'd have it down pat, but when he walked in I had a chair next to me. I pulled the chair back and said, 'Sit down. I'm going to teach you how to be an assistant coach.'

"I told him the first three letters in assistant are a-s-s. Don't ever forget it."

Vicknair laughed, but the punch line was yet to come.

"I said, 'You old fart, you forgot: I learned that from you.' We laughed and laughed about that," Abshire said.

Do the deal

In whatever way coaches and players discovered Vicknair's work ethic, it stayed with them.

"Vic was definitely the mentor. He was the teacher," Shaver said. "He was the guy that taught us all — not only made us learn football, but he taught us how to practice, how to work hard. Had I not been under him, I know my chances for success would have been very, very slim, because he showed me how to work."

One of Vicknair's favorite sayings — "Do the deal" — had multiple meanings, but the man who said it again and again demonstrated to those around him a tireless commitment to the assignment, including those self-imposed.

Shaver, who called him "a working machine," recalled feeling guilty when he sat down to make out his practice schedule or start a phase of his program, because he knew Vicknair was already ahead of him.

"Even though he didn't even know it, he made us work harder because we knew he was," Shaver said. "Even if we weren't playing him. Everybody would say, 'Look how hard they're working, and y'all are not working.' He was that type of guy, and he had the ability to make you stay on top of things."

Especially with those who worked for him.

"He could just look at you, and you knew you were supposed to be doing something else," Shaver said.

Bruchhaus, who was on the staff at Barbe with Shaver when Vicknair was head coach, said Vicknair pushed assistants to the limit. It was something Bruchhaus got a taste of as a student teacher and coach for Vicknair a few years earlier at Westlake High, and Bruchhaus experienced it in greater detail as defensive coordinator at Barbe. He knew things would never be the same for him.

"Then it was on," Bruchhaus said, grinning and laughing.

When you worked for Vicknair, Bruchhaus said, you didn't do anything but coach. That was it. You went to work early in the morning, and late at night you were still coaching. It was seven days a week.

"I didn't go into a store from probably July until December," Bruchhaus remembered. "I can remember going to a store after the season, having to go buy clothes because I lost about twenty-something pounds during the

football season."

Vicknair hired Max Caldarera from Merryville in 1974 and brought him to Westlake. Caldarera worked for him for four years and succeeded him as head coach when Vicknair took over at Barbe.

"He brought me and Mike Ortego in together," Caldarera said. "Mike was offensive coordinator. Vic was teaching me to be defensive coordinator. He called defense those first few years. That last year he pretty much turned it over to me."

Thirty years later Caldarera was Vicknair's boss at Westlake, hiring him as an assistant coach and giving him the job he had until the day he died.

"He knew only one speed when he was coaching," Caldarera said. "Vic went after everything just full blast and didn't accept failure from kids at all. They were going to do it right, and they were going to continue to do it until they did it right."

Matt Viator, who began coaching as a student teacher under Caldarera's wing, then with Vicknair at Sam Houston High School, said Vicknair was a pioneer in Southwest Louisiana with respect to having players work hard in winter, spring and summer.

"He was one of the first ones to really major in offseason," Viator said. "You didn't just lift weights. You had the speed work, the conditioning, the weights, and how it all went together, and he was one of the first to make it a comprehensive program. "

Viator said Vicknair was one of the first coaches in the area to institute an athletic period during the school day,

then a freshman athletic period, and one of the leaders in finding new ways to work the freshmen into the program.

Lark Hebert played on the offensive line at McNeese, where Vicknair was an assistant coach after leaving Barbe in 1982. Vicknair was the position coach for Hebert, who nearly two decades later hired Vicknair to be one of his assistants at Sulphur High School. Hebert said Vicknair's work habits set him apart and made the most lasting impression.

"If there was a team meeting at 2, the offensive line would meet with Vic at 1," Hebert said of his playing days at McNeese. "If practice started at 3, we were going to be on the field at 2. When the rest of the team would come out for stretching, the offensive linemen were already soaking wet." Hebert said Vicknair taught the players team play and work ethic, stressing they should leave no stone unturned.

"He was in great shape," Hebert said as he recalled Vicknair coaching for him at Sulphur on the cusp of his seventh decade of life. "He always had great energy. It caught me by surprise."

Mike Collins was a high school player in Ruston when he first met Vicknair. Pat Collins, Mike's father, was a coach at Louisiana Tech, where Vicknair would bring his coaching staff to summer football camps. The relationship continued when Mike Collins became a McNeese assistant coach in the 1990s, while Vicknair was coaching at area high schools.

"I think anytime you were around him, you felt his energy," Collins said, "because he had great energy. I think that's important as a coach, and it seemed to affect

everybody around him. It was a positive energy."

Vicknair had an effective way of communicating, Collins said.

"He was going to make sure it was (done) right, but at the same time it made you feel good as a coach or as a player for him. It affected you in a positive way," Collins said. "I don't think there's any question that just being around him and him having the energy he had at his age, still, and the passion that he had for football could not help but rub off on whoever was around him."

Collins saw first-hand and heard from Vicknair's assistants about the effort he required from himself and from them.

"He was just a real grinder when he worked at it," Collins said, "and he expected his coaches (to do the same)."

Shaver said that's an understatement.

"He never sat around," Shaver said. "There was no down time for him. He was not a guy that would go sit on the couch all afternoon. He was doing something. He was drawing plays, he was out working in the yard, he was doing something. He didn't sit around."

"On the other hand, me? I can sit for days. But he can't do that."

There, in that quote, is another telling piece of Vicknair's reach. His pupils often speak of him in the present tense, and they were doing so a year after his death.

"I know he's a hard worker," said Hebert, sitting in his office at McNeese, where he was entrenched in his role as defensive coordinator when Vicknair died. "Probably the

biggest thing with Coach Vic is you learn so much football from him. He teaches you how to be a coach and how to be professional and all that stuff."

Never stop learning

Nowhere was Vicknair's drive for perfection, his attention to detail and his work ethic more in evidence than in his yearly attendance at coaching clinics and his insistence that his assistant coaches hit the road to learn whatever new wrinkle Vicknair wanted to install for the upcoming season.

"He believed if you want to run the Wing-T, you go somewhere to learn the Wing-T," said Viator, one of many Vicknair pupils who went with him to Angelo State, in San Angelo, Texas, for an annual clinic Vicknair regarded as a must.

"San Angelo had the best coaching clinic in the U.S.," Viator said, "and it's a long drive. He'd get (wife) Debbie's van, and whoever wanted to go, you just piled in."

Johns said Vicknair practically rounded up area coaches and either invited or persuaded them to go with him. It didn't matter if you coached for him or against him, he wanted you to come along for the ride. Johns said the camaraderie and football conversations were special.

Hebert said Vicknair was insistent about him attending.

"When I first started coaching," Hebert said, "he would call me: 'Hey, we're going to this clinic. You've got to come,' and 'You need to get to this clinic, and you need

to go do this and go do that, and you need to find out about this and that.'

Sometimes they would travel in the mobile home of football booster Joe Jordan.

Nolan Viator, Matt's late father and another important figure in the Southwest Louisiana coaching tree, was in the habit of tweaking his son and Vicknair about those coaching clinics. They happened every Father's Day weekend.

Matt's dad would joke that Matt was spending Father's Day with Vicknair, so to even things out, Nolan Viator always said he was going to go spend Father's Day with Vicknair's children.

"Go learn the game," Matt Viator said, the words drilled into his head. "You'd go places. You'd change if you have to change. He got a lot of people involved in that."

Viator didn't recall Vicknair having many hobbies in the offseason, saying he didn't play golf and didn't hunt until much later in life. Older coaches and family remembered a few more things outside the football world occupying Vicknair's attention at an earlier age, but not for long. Football was what he loved to do.

"If there was a clinic that he could get to, he was going to be there," Viator said. Others agreed. It was almost always the first thing everyone associated with Vicknair said about him as the anniversary of his death approached in September 2009.

In 1984, after many years at LaGrange Junior and Senior high schools, Mike Johns went to Sam Houston High. Vicknair became head coach in 1986, and Johns

worked for him until becoming head coach at LaGrange in 1989.

Speaking in 2009 in his office at St. Louis High School, Johns talked about Vicknair's passion for coaching clinics. He would say if you learn only one thing at a clinic, it's worth going. Go and pick up something you can use for your team, or at least to see what other teams are doing, Vicknair would say.

"Before he died," Johns said, "we were talking about the next clinic we were going to attend. He was like an encyclopedia, he had a library on clinics. He kept it organized."

That's putting it mildly, as Caldarera noted. He said when Vicknair returned to Westlake to be his assistant coach in 2006, he required twice the cubicle space as the rest of the assistant coaches so he'd have room for all his notebooks, his files from clinics.

Caldarera said he teased Vicknair, calling them his trophies from the clinics and saying Vicknair probably hadn't looked at them in years.

Vicknair replied that he opened them at least once a year.

"Whatever," Caldarera would say.

Still, he knew those notebooks and files represented the drive within Vicknair, who never stopped being a student of the game and a seeker of new ideas.

"He was always searching," Caldarera said. "He was searching."

Colleagues remembered Vicknair going to defensive lectures even if he coached on the offensive side, and vice

versa. In this case, as in most others, he did whatever he required of his assistants.

When Shaver was Vicknair's offensive coordinator at Barbe, Vicknair sent him to Monroe to learn the split-40 defense.

"I said, 'OK, Vic, I don't mind going, but you know that I coach offense.' He said, 'I know that, but you can't block the split-40 until you know how it's run, so I want you to go learn it, come back and teach it to me, then we'll be able to run an offense against it.' So I did that and spent several days up there with Wossman back in the old days when they were really good and ran the split-40," Shaver said.

When Vicknair saw Emory Bellard running a wingbone offense at Mississippi State, the Barbe coaches went there to learn it and returned to Lake Charles ready to run the wingbone — for one year.

"He found the trends," Caldarera said. "He was a leader in that."

He'd do something until he wore it out, Shaver said, and then he would do something else.

"He was always looking for a better way."

Bruchhaus knew that as well as anyone. He said Vicknair was adamant about getting better. He said Vicknair taught him, "Don't be afraid to ask."

Vicknair sent Bruchhaus to Florida State to see Bobby Bowden's coaches and to Arkansas to visit with Lou Holtz and Monte Kiffin. Kiffin invented defenses to counter the veer after it became popular at Nebraska and other places, and he's considered one of the pioneering defensive

coaches in America.

Larry Lacewell, who was on Barry Switzer's staff at Oklahoma, became head coach at Arkansas State, where Bruchhaus went to learn what Lacewell could teach him.

While at Barbe, Bruchhaus taught P.E. classes and athletic periods, leaving plenty of time for him to visit with college coaches who stopped at the school on recruiting visits. The NCAA rules governing recruiting were less restrictive than they would become years later, so some college coaches could stay at the school all day if they so desired.

"We used to have coaching clinics every day," Bruchhaus said, "and those coaches liked to come to our school — at Barbe — No. 1 (because) we had good players. We had Scott Ayres, who was a great player. We had Randy Edwards, who was recruited by LSU, and Doug Quienalty, and David Womack and all those players that were great players and good kids, and a lot of people came in to evaluate those players."

Bruchhaus said he would bring the college coaches to the office, where there was a chalkboard, and they'd talk football. He said he got a lot of ideas that way.

"If I wouldn't have met Charles," Bruchhaus said, "I probably would have gone back to a smaller school and coached and been a principal right now somewhere and never got the opportunity to get into the coaching field like I did. It wouldn't have been for him, I would have never gotten an opportunity to do what I did, learn what I learned. He taught me to try to learn."

Bruchhaus and Viator are two who learned from

Vicknair and went on to become college head coaches without having played college football. That's a rarity.

After leaving McNeese, Bruchhaus entered the business world, tried his hand at assistant coaching again in Westlake but decided things had changed too much for him to be able to coach the way he preferred. He moved on to be director of a technical school that prepares students for work in building and contracting.

Perhaps it's fitting. Vicknair prepared him in some ways, teaching him how to learn — at clinics, and in informal gatherings with other coaches.

Bruchhaus learned he had to have answers for Vicknair's questions when Bruchhaus returned from a quest for knowledge.

"He was going to ask you," Bruchhaus said. "When you came back, you'd better have learned something, because you were going to tell him what you learned — because he was going to try it."

Johns saw that as a coach on Vicknair's staff and as a coach at rival schools in the area.

"He believed in change," Johns said, "not getting stale on something that people could pick up what you were doing all the time. Have something in your arsenal that is a little bit different, even if it's just to make them work on it."

Bruchhaus said he wasn't sure Vicknair's inability to be content with his offensive and defensive schemes was always a good thing.

"To be honest with you, I thought sometimes that he went overboard on a lot of that stuff," Bruchhaus said.

Vicknair would have changed defenses more often

than he did at Barbe, but Bruchhaus liked to stay with what worked. They argued a lot.

"I can remember him and Kirby getting into some knockdown drag-outs over defense," Shaver said.

Bruchhaus, he recalled, would tinker with things and make them better. Bruchhaus said Vicknair wanted to change things regularly, completely overhauling them.

"A lot of people don't like change," Bruchhaus said. "If you were going to be with him, you'd better be ready to change."

Despite their disagreements about the extent of change necessary each season, Bruchhaus said there's no way he can explain the impact Vicknair had upon him.

"I like him because of what he did for me. I didn't agree with everything he did, and he didn't agree with everything I did, but I respect him a whole lot for what he stands for and what he did and how he did things," Bruchhaus said. "We're never going to ... none of us are always going to do the same thing other people do, but it's the big picture you've got to look at, and the big picture was good.

"I owe him my life, as far as coaching."

Bruchhaus gave himself credit for taking advantage of the opportunities Vicknair gave him to learn.

"He created other opportunities for other people, and they didn't learn," Bruchhaus said. "He created a lot of opportunities for other people, but they didn't go and learn. Matt Viator did."

Viator learned from his father, Nolan, but he knew his dad wanted his sons to go out and get it on their own.

Because Nolan Viator liked and respected Vicknair, he was happy to see Matt go with Vicknair and learn from him.

Matt Viator, sounding almost verbatim like more than a handful of other coaches in Southwest Louisiana, said Vicknair taught them how to work, how to organize, how to set up programs, how to organize a coaching staff and how to organize a team.

"He was an unbelievable worker," Viator said, emitting the type of laughter that springs forth from a place of awe, not humor. "He had a work ethic like I've never seen."

Was he too fond of change?

"He did change a lot," Shaver said, "but you know, over my years I've learned that change is good. There are some people that do a great job of staying with the same things they've always done and always been successful. My experience has been you've got to change with the times, you've got to change with your personnel, and you're better off.

"I guess I kind of got that from Vic. He was always moving from one thing to another. Sometimes he'd make me mad about that, because I'm running the offense, and all of a sudden he's telling me, 'Go see Nolan Viator. We're fixing to run what they run.' So I've got a little pressure on me. I've got to go learn that and get it over here and present it to them. It made it a little difficult, but you know as I've become head coach, I spend all my hours thinking about this stuff too, and I understand where he's coming from. As an assistant, I didn't because I didn't spend all my time thinking about it.

"The only time I thought about it, other than just thoughts, was when I just walked through the door (to the coaches office). Not him, and that's the way I am now. It's 24/7. That's all I think about. That's all I want to do, and that's the way he was. When I'd walk in the door I was behind already, because he'd had thoughts all night, and he was ready to go with them."

Shaver said he eventually started calling his coaches and telling them what he was thinking about, preparing them for the next meeting better than he'd been prepared for meetings with Vicknair.

Viator said Vicknair wasn't a golfer and didn't hunt a lot until later in life, so football was his hobby as much as his job. That's part of why he loved change, Viator said.

"He was ate up with it, and I think if he just ran the same offense and the same defense, he'd have gotten bored. He really would have."

Mike Collins, who became friends with Vicknair after they intersected for years at summer camps, understood.

"Offensive line and defensive line guys are true technicians," Collins said. "You never can have enough toys. You never can have good enough technique. There's always some kind of little thing, and I think that's what he really was."

Relax, I got it

All of the talk about the serious side of Vicknair eventually led colleagues and pupils to mention his wry sense of humor. Hebert said if he wasn't able to go with

Vicknair to a clinic, Vicknair would call him when he got back.

Hebert would answer, and all he'd hear was "Bzz, bzz, bzz."

Then, Vicknair would hang up on Hebert, who had to call him back so he could listen to what became a familiar refrain.

"Boy, I've got some buzzwords for you," Vicknair would tell him, alluding to phrases and terminology he learned at clinics.

"I've got some buzzwords for you," Vicknair would say, "but I can't tell you because you weren't there. If you want these buzzwords, you've got to pay \$60 for the clinic fee."

On the way to the clinics at San Angelo, Vicknair took charge, taking the wheel and telling the others to enjoy the ride.

"Don't worry, I got it," Johns said, quoting Vicknair.

"Relax, I got it."

Caldarera knew that expression well.

"Don't worry, I got it," Caldarera said. "Just sit down."

Vicknair's signature was to put some bite into it, he recalled.

"Oh, yeah, very sarcastic," Caldarera said.

It had the same ring as another Vicknair staple.

"I'll make the coffee. Don't get up."

He said it when nobody showed the slightest interest in getting up, in making the coffee.

That, in a nutshell, was Vicknair's sense of humor.

"He'd buy you a Coke or something," Johns said, "and

you'd say, 'Let me pay you,' and he'd say, 'No, I want you to owe me.' Things like that."

Once a meeting or seminar began at a clinic, Vicknair was all business, Caldarera said.

"He never could not learn something. He was a person for clinics. I missed many. Vic never missed a meeting," Caldarera said. "If it was boring or whatever, he sat through the whole thing."

If the others left to get a bite to eat, Vicknair stayed.

"Bring me back something if you can," they remember him saying.

In later years, the San Angelo clinic gave way to the Lone Star Clinic at Texas A&M in College Station, Texas. The last time Vicknair went there, the Westlake booster club funded a plane ride for the coaches to attend, Caldarera said.

"The last day," he said, "they had the last couple of meetings, and everyone was tired and ready to go to the airport."

Not Vicknair. He wanted to be at the last meeting, taking notes as usual.

When the usual suspects returned in 2009, less than a year after Vicknair died, they felt the void.

"When we go to clinics or I have to speak at a clinic," Hebert said, "I think about him."

Vicknair would also show up at McNeese on the weekend and whenever the Cowboys coaching staff has something going on he was interested in learning.

"Anytime we'd have something going on here," Hebert said, "I know he'd always be here."

That consistency was why it was so noticeable in the summer of 2009 when area coaches went back to the Lone Star Clinic.

"It struck me that he wasn't there," Johns said.

Someone else had to drive the van or car. Someone else had to get the coffee.

Organization, attention to detail

Vicknair sent Bruchhaus to learn from longtime Georgia defensive coordinator Erk Russell. Russell later coached at Georgia Southern, where Bruchhaus picked up some things from Paul Johnson, who would become a successful offensive-minded head coach at Navy, Georgia Southern and Georgia Tech.

Johnson was one example of what Vicknair looked for from coaches he wanted his assistants to learn from: He had something, something different, or a creative way of doing things Vicknair appreciated.

Decades later, Johnson would become the talk of college football, confounding opposing defenses with a triple-option offense he called the flexbone, which Vanderbilt coach Bobby Johnson raved about in the Sports Illustrated issue of Nov. 16, 2009: "There is no way to figure it out," Johnson said.

Johnson has defenses scrambling to learn his offense, and it's a good bet he's already working on staying a step or two ahead of them. That's the kind of coach Vicknair wanted his staff to mine for strategic gold.

One thing Bruchhaus noticed was how important it

was to watch what was called "film" in those days and is now video in one form or another. When Bruchhaus was on site learning about a team's offense or defense, he'd watch all their games on film, then watch their practices.

"It wasn't about talking," Bruchhaus said, "it was about looking."

Vicknair called him into his office and said they were going to sit down and watch film of an opponent. Vicknair asked what the team was going to do on first-and-10. Bruchhaus said he didn't know. Vicknair asked what they were going to do on third-and-short. Bruchhaus said he didn't know, and Vicknair gave him a new assignment.

"He said, 'Well, you'd better go watch some film, and when you can do that (tell me what they're going to do), you need to come back and let me know.'"

Bruchhaus said he learned the art of studying film.

"You get a feel for it," he said.

Years after leaving the coaching profession, he said he didn't know how good an X-and-O coach he was, but he was pretty sure he knew how to call a game. That, he said, came from film study.

It's a trait Vicknair had, and it was invaluable at Westlake, where his insights from the press box helped the Rams win games right up until the night before he died.

"He taught people how to break down another team's offense," Calderera said. "He was very good at it. He could call a team's plays."

The Rams beat Sam Houston on Vicknair's last night, and Calderera said Vicknair could call the plays and know what was going to happen when the Broncos had the ball.

"When Vic broke you down, he knew exactly what a team was going to do against him," Caldarera said.

Striving for perfection was the way Caldarera remembered Vicknair being most consistent. Westlake's 14-1 season in 2007, Caldarera said, owed a great deal to "him being on top of the press box calling the game down, and to the kicking game."

Vicknair was in charge of the kicking game too.

It was rare for a high school head coach to have someone with Vicknair's experience and knowledge working for him as an assistant coach, and Caldarera knew and appreciated it.

All of the coaches who knew Vicknair appreciated his attention to detail.

He watched spring practices at McNeese. He watched the spring game. He attended McNeese clinics. He didn't want to just watch practice; he wanted a copy of the practice script. Viator learned to make a few extra copies every day, just in case Vicknair showed up to watch.

"He'd walk out there on the practice field and say, 'Where's my script?' You had to be ready because he could be there and he'd want it there," Viator said.

When Nick Saban was coach at LSU, Viator and Vicknair would attend practices in Baton Rouge when they could. Viator said Vicknair loved Saban's practices and the way he organized them.

Saban, who was extreme in protecting anything he thought should stay within the walls of the athletic department and the football practice facility, wasn't the sort of person to make extra copies of scripts for visitors. Viator

said Vicknair put the pressure on him to come through, and as luck would have it, there was a connection there.

Mike Collins, a once and future McNeese assistant, was on Saban's staff at LSU in 2003 and '04. A script found its way into Vicknair's hands, and when he and Viator were looking it over, one of Saban's practice spies pounced on them.

Sam Nader, a longtime liaison between high school coaches and LSU's football program, saved them. Nader said he could vouch for them. Viator said he likes to remind Collins, who became one of Viator's assistants when he returned to McNeese, that he didn't throw Collins under the bus. He didn't say where they got the script.

Collins remembered the incident, and he recalled Vicknair's interest in the practices.

"He was curious about Nick's defense," he said.

If Vicknair and Saban were both perfectionists, Saban didn't appear to enjoy himself as much as Vicknair did. A few hours after LSU won the 2003 BCS national championship, Saban was in his hotel room in New Orleans fretting about the next season. His agent, Jimmy Sexton, noted he didn't seem able to savor the moment.

After Westlake lost the 2007 state championship game in the same Superdome, Vicknair was able to let go and enjoy the rest of the weekend in New Orleans, one of his favorite cities. His wife suggested his age (65) had something to do with that, that if he'd been the same age Saban was (52) in 2003, it might have taken him longer to get over the defeat.

But it wasn't lost on those who knew both that Saban

had a harder time enjoying a championship than Vicknair did in walking away from a championship loss and enjoying the company of those around him.

Shaver, who was on Vicknair's staff at Barbe when the Bucs lost the 1980 state championship to East St. John, saw plenty of Vicknair's serious side. There was no joking on the practice field, Shaver said.

"It was business," Shaver said. "He was prepared. He made sure we were prepared. He made sure we took care of that. He made every practice schedule. He assigned every person what to do."

Shaver learned that was Vicknair's way, so he quit talking about it and just did what Vicknair told him.

"Now," Shaver said before the 2009 season, "things are a lot different. I have an offensive supervisor, a defensive supervisor, and I just tell them the time (of practice).

"Vic was in control of everything. He'd let you know if you were doing it wrong."

Vicknair's sons saw evidence of their father's attention to detail.

"A lot of coaches would send younger coaches to go get films" on upcoming opponents, Cody Vicknair said. "He did it for years, way past when he needed to. He'd do the small things. He was big on taking care of uniforms."

Viator worked for Vicknair for three years at Sam Houston before becoming head coach at Vinton. Later, when Viator coached at Jennings, they traded practices. If Jennings had a day off, Viator would watch Sam Houston practice. If Sam Houston had a day off, Vicknair would

watch Jennings practice.

They did this despite the schools being scheduled to play each other during the season.

Viator said Vicknair would tell him what looked good and what needed more work, despite knowing he'd have to coach against Viator during the season. He was always there to help, Viator said. He was always honest.

"That's who he was, and I always appreciated that because he was trying to help us," Viator said. "If you were loyal to him, he was loyal to you to no end, and I always appreciated that fact."

Vicknair's search for perfection wasn't limited to his team. There was always something he could find on another team that needed improving.

"We won the state championship at Jennings," Viator said, "and the next day — we had stayed over (in New Orleans) — I saw he and my dad were talking, and we were just kind of shooting the bull or whatever, and Coach Vic said, 'I wanted to tell you this for a few weeks, but let me tell you: You'd better learn how to punt. Y'all don't have a clue, and you got lucky that y'all won, and if you're going to do this, your punter's this,' and ... he got all over me."

'You can't take the coach out of him'

Ronnie Johns met Vicknair soon after moving from DeRidder to Sulphur in 1983, a year after beginning his career with State Farm. He moved for a better business opportunity, and it helped he had family in Southwest Louisiana. His only brother, Mike Johns, was coaching at

LaGrange.

The connection between Vicknair and Mike Johns helped start a friendship between Vicknair and Ronnie Johns. The latter watched all three of Vicknair's sons grow to manhood.

Common interests — cooking, spending time with family and friends — sealed the deal, and Ronnie Johns said he came to admire Vicknair more and more over the years.

"His whole thing was about young people," Johns said. "He loved what he did, and he loved having an impact on young people."

Growing up in a family with a coach, Johns saw behind the scenes, where fans rarely catch so much as a glimpse. The view enabled Johns to gain a deeper appreciation for Vicknair.

"I watch how dedicated and how many long hours these coaches put in, and Charles was like that, but the thing that I really admired about him the most was that when he came home from that school, he could leave it there," Johns said. "He dedicated that time when he got home to his family."

"Debbie — that was his best friend. It really was. They did everything together. They enjoyed doing things together. They really enjoyed entertaining a lot, and we would do that together."

If Vicknair wanted people to nurture and care for their corner of the world, he was a great teacher by example, Johns said. Whatever he did, he did with a passion.

Johns began having a regular pig roast, a cochon de

lait, at his uncle's house.

"From the time I lit that fire at 4 o'clock in the morning on, Charles was there," he said.

The social element was an important link, but a love of food and a desire to try new foods and recipes had something to do with that too.

"He probably had as many cookbooks as Barnes & Noble," Johns said. "He'd call me, 'Man, you wouldn't believe the new cookbook I got. You've got to come see this thing.' I remember when they moved to their present location, he built that outdoor kitchen that he was just incredibly proud of. That was his sanctuary, being out there.

"He was just a wonderful cook. It wasn't just rice and gravy, the typical man dishes that we usually like to cook: barbecue or sauce piquante or etouffee. He was an accomplished cook and was always trying something new."

As busy as coaches are, Johns said, many don't become involved in civic activities. When Vicknair was at Sam Houston, he became active in the Kiwanis Club in Moss Bluff, later becoming president and helping the group become of the most successful in the area.

Johns recalled members telling him Vicknair made it fun, bringing a different energy level to the club.

The Vicknair boys attended Our Lady Queen of Heaven Catholic School, and their parents helped organize a fundraiser. They asked Johns if he'd like to participate, and he agreed to work with them and others on putting together a Mexican fajita dinner for a group of two or three dozen people.

Debbie Vicknair said Debbie and Gerald Link, Rosanna and Jay Lafleur and Vickie and Gerald Smith joined the Vicknairs and Ronnie and Michelle Johns in coordinating the event.

They went the extra mile – or miles, beginning with decorating a Catholic school bus in a Mexican motif.

"We actually had some live roosters on the bus," Johns said. "Gerald Smith – we called him 'Killer' – we had Killer driving the bus, and we went and picked up everybody at their house and brought them out to the camp where we were actually cooking the dinner."

"It was a fun time, and we raised a lot of money for Queen of Heaven," Johns said, "and those are the kinds of things that he really, really enjoyed doing."

People will tell you football was Vicknair's life. Johns saw a different side of him, on weekends and away from the game.

"Those boys were his life," he said of the three sons of Debbie and Charles Vicknair.

Charles, known as Little Vic, is the oldest. Johns became his mentor, teaching him the insurance business for about a year and a half. A year after his father died, Vic Vicknair was poised to become a State Farm agent in Katy, Texas.

Chad, the middle child and a registered nurse, moved into orthopedic equipment sales.

Cody, the youngest, went on to work in real estate.

"I nicknamed him 'The Legend' years ago," said Johns, who used Cody Vicknair as his real estate agent when buying a house for his daughter before her November 2009

wedding.

In the wedding party: The Legend.

Hebert, who played for Vicknair at McNeese and later was his boss at Sulphur, said he saw father-son relationships in a different light because of his time with Vicknair.

"I always thought of Coach Vic as another father figure to me," Hebert said.

If that's true, Vicknair was the kind of father who knew when it was time for the son — or pupil — to be his own man.

"To have him work for you, and you've kind of got to tell him what to do a little bit and maybe correct him a couple of times, that was difficult," Hebert said, "but he always made it easy."

The more Vicknair worked for Hebert, the more the latter had a chance to see his personal life, which a child of the 1960s found revealing.

"You know that all our fathers weren't loving and hugging and all that stuff, so just to watch him" was special, Hebert said. "He put notes in his kids' ... when they went on trips he'd stick a note, telling them he loved them and he was proud of them, in their bag or something, that they would find."

Hebert, who has a son, took a cue from Vicknair, updating the gesture for the times.

"We text now. I text him instead of sticking notes, but it's still the same deal," Hebert said. "It kind of teaches you how to still relate to your kids. I learned on both sides. I learned the football and family side from him. I loved him.

Like I said, I thought of him as a father, and it was just good being around him, working with him."

The more Johns and others talked about all of the areas of Charles Vicknair's life the late coach tended to with attentive devotion, the more Vicknair's energy level took on an almost legendary quality.

He drove often to Alexandria to see his mother when she lived there, and after moving her to Lake Charles when she was in her 80s, he had coffee with her every morning unless he was out of town.

"He was just very, very dedicated to her," Johns said.

Family meant something to him, and he was proud he and Debbie could see three sons graduate from LSU.

"To be able to send three kids to LSU on a coach's salary is pretty tough," Johns said. "It's not easy, and they sacrificed a lot to be able to do that, but that was what was important to him."

Along the way, there were laughs. During a beach vacation enjoyed by the Johns and Vicknair families, Vicknair waded out into the water for a bit, then came back to join the others back on the beach. He reached inside his swimming trunks and pulled out his cell phone, which had been with him the whole time.

"You know what salt water does to a cell phone?" Johns asked, not expecting an answer.

The story is even better when you learn, as Johns did, that three weeks earlier the same thing happened during a Vicknair family vacation.

"Debbie was all over his case about him ruining two cell phones in about a three-week period," Johns said.

"Typical him, he just laughed about it. Surely he wasn't upset about it."

Football, coaching, teaching, cooking, socializing, civic work ... was there anything else Vicknair found time for in a 24-hour day? Yes, said Johns, a former state representative.

"In the 12 years I served in the Louisiana Legislature, he discussed politics with me at a level that not a whole lot of people would," Johns said. "He kept up with it. He was interested in it. He understood it. It surprised me at first that he would have an interest in that, and it wasn't just about football with him, or with other sports. It was about being very well-rounded in a whole lot of aspects, and he had a great interest in politics. We spent a lot of time, a lot of nights, particularly in that 12-year period, talking about political issues, and he was very well-read and very well-educated in that arena."

There was the occasional swing of the golf club, but Vicknair found it required too much time to work on the finer points of the sport, and Johns said it never became a regular thing.

"Ronnie, I don't have time for that," he recalled Vicknair telling him.

Johns said he misses the time they spent together, especially cooking on weekends.

"There's a void there," he said.

The 12 months between Vicknair's death and the first few weeks of the following football season drove home that gap.

"The football seasons are when a lot of people will

think about him and miss him," Johns said, "but in my case, I miss him almost every weekend, because that's when we spent our time together.

"I miss him. I think about him a lot."

Johns said one of his favorite stories about Vicknair was a reminder of his passion for teaching the game of football, even to boys who didn't play for him. Vicknair's place in the world, his bubble, was far-reaching and generous.

About a year before Vicknair died, Johns said, their families were vacationing at Orange Beach, Ala. While they sat on the beach one morning, they noticed some kids throwing a football while they ran around on the sand. Vicknair began talking with the father of one of them and found out the son was soon to be a high school senior and was receiving attention from college coaches. That was all it took.

"Instead of sitting there and enjoying himself and relaxing," Johns said, "he spent most of that morning out there coaching that kid on how to throw a football and giving him some pointers on this and that. He was coaching on the beach in Orange Beach, Ala."

That's what he enjoyed doing, whether it was at a high school, at McNeese or a summer camp at another college.

"You can't take the coach out of him," Ronnie Johns told his wife that night.

"Here was a kid he never met before, that he would never see again, and he spent half of his vacation day coaching him on the beach."

Johns said Vicknair often asked him how his oldest

son, Vic, was doing as he learned the ways of the insurance industry through the coaching of Johns.

"When I had the opportunity to do something for his son," Johns said, "I never hesitated to jump on that opportunity, and now, God bless his soul, he's not around here to see it, but his son is going to have an incredible opportunity to have a great business career, and that's what he wanted for his son."

Johns didn't miss the connection between what he'd seen of Vicknair as mentor and what Johns had become for Vicknair's oldest boy.

"Charles kind of played a part in showing me that you needed to do that for these young people," he said.

One yard short

The closest Vicknair came to a state championship as a head coach was Dec. 12, 1980. Barbe lost 15-8 to East St. John in Cowboy Stadium at McNeese. The next year, the Louisiana High School Athletic Association began putting all football state championship games in the Superdome.

East St. John, coached by Phil Greco and led by quarterback Timmy Byrd, scored in the second and third quarters for a 15-0 lead. Barbe scored on a 7-yard pass from Doug Quienalty to Randy Edwards, and tailback Scott Ayres squeezed over for the two-point conversion that made it a one-possession game with 4:35 left.

A little more than a minute later, the Bucs turned an East St. John fumble into one more chance on offense. Barbe reached the 4-yard line, and on fourth-and-goal, the

Bucs ran the bootleg pass.

"Doug fakes and cuts back around and looks for the open man in the end zone," Vicknair told the Lake Charles American Press after the game.

Quienalty couldn't find an open man, and he saw open space and headed toward the goal line.

"I thought he was going to make it," Vicknair repeatedly told the newspaper.

Shaver, the offensive coordinator, remembered calling that play from the press box.

"Backside F option," he said. "Doug Quienalty had the opportunity to get it in or pitch, and he thought he could get it in. That linebacker made an unbelievable tackle at the goal line."

The American Press credited Wade Delaneuville and Fred Cook with stopping Quienalty just short of the goal line. Shaver said the player most responsible for the tackle broke his nose on the play.

"I mean, Doug is going in," Shaver said, recalling how the play unfolded in front of him as he watched from the Cowboy Stadium press box. "I'm telling you, he is going in. I'm on the phone, on the headset upstairs, and I'm saying, 'He's in. He's in. He's in.'"

"Unbelievable. That guy jacked him up and put him down on the 1. He is leaning forward, he is going in."

Shaver said Quienalty made a good decision. The newspaper quoted Vicknair as saying the same thing.

"He did the only thing he could," Vicknair said. "He looked like he could get in there."

East St. John walked away with a perfect 14-0 record.

Barbe finished 14-1.

One loss. One yard short.

Vicknair had already decided to go for two points — to win the game or lose it — if the Bucs scored at the end.

Shaver looked back fondly on that season. Ayres, who rushed for more than 2,000 yards, was "phenomenal." Bruchhaus ran a defense that didn't have a lot of size but excelled at stopping opposing offenses.

"Winning 14 straight was special," Shaver said 29 years later, still waiting to coach in another state championship game.

Bruchhaus was on the coaching staff at Northeast Louisiana University in 1987 when the Indians won the Division I-AA national championship. Pat Collins, the head coach, told Bruchhaus it's not about coaching, it's about recruiting.

"You win if you have the players," Bruchhaus said, adding that's something people should keep in mind about Vicknair's career.

"We played with good players," Bruchhaus said of their days at Barbe, "and we coached them up. I think when you get to the top, then you coach them up, but you'd better have the players or you're not going to get to the top."

It was during those years Shaver realized what good friends Charles Vicknair was with Nolan Viator, the friend he replaced as coach of the Bucs, and how much Vicknair trusted Viator's opinion about offenses.

"Vic was a defensive guy," Shaver said. "Nolan was an offensive guy."

Not just an offensive guy, but one who learned from

Faize Mahfouz, whose innovations still influences coaches and their teams.

"Faize Mahfouz could spend two days talking about the center snap," Shaver said, chuckling as he said he could probably talk for about two minutes on the same subject.

That kind of thoroughness rubbed off on Nolan Viator. Shaver first came in close contact with him while a student teacher at Barbe, during Viator's time as head coach of the Bucs. After Shaver worked as a St. Louis assistant and returned to Barbe to coach for Vicknair, Shaver discovered he had to run his offensive ideas past Viator. That was Vicknair's idea.

"Even though Nolan was at another school, if he said something wasn't good on offense, you didn't do it," Shaver said. "He was the authority.

"Back then, it just kind of hacked me off because I thought I had a good idea, but Nolan would just scratch it out. It kind of hacked me off, but looking back on it, he was right — absolutely, he was right, without a doubt. I'm glad I did have him to know that, because if I'm going to run the offense, hopefully I'm doing the right things."

That became a Sunday morning ritual as Shaver prepared for Barbe's next game.

Vicknair went on to coach at schools that didn't have the players to get him back to the level of state championship contender. His only other experience coaching in a state championship game was as a Westlake assistant in 2007.

Getting to the top of the local district in the state's highest classification wasn't easy at Barbe. Sulphur, with

longtime coach Shannon Suarez in charge, was the kingpin for much of the 1960s and '70s.

"They outworked everybody," Bruchhaus said.

"They're great people. Shannon molded a lot of lives."

Bruchhaus said he'll never forget the day Barbe finally beat Sulphur.

"I believe it took 10 years, but we beat them,"

Bruchhaus said.

It didn't take that long. Barbe opened in 1971, but it took a couple of years before the Bucs had a full complement of sophomore, junior and senior classes to compete at the varsity level.

The Bucs got their first victory against Sulphur in 1978, Vicknair's first season at Barbe. The American Press called it Barbe's "six-year war" to get the best of Sulphur. The score: 20-9.

Barbe shared the district championship with Lake Charles High.

"I can remember John Nicosia, who was the principal, getting in front of the whole school and crying when we beat them," Bruchhaus said. "It was at a pep rally. It was a big thing."

To have a rival, a measuring stick, is important, Bruchhaus said. Competition within a team's roster, within its coaching staff and from school to school help raise the level of effort and push people to get better, he said.

Barbe decided it would have to outwork Sulphur to be better than Sulphur.

"We were going to do whatever it took to do that,"

Bruchhaus said.

It helped that Vicknair hired good coaches, and Bruchhaus learned from that.

"Surround yourself with good people," he said. "You can't do it by yourself."

Charles Vicknair and Nolan Viator went their entire coaching careers without winning a state championship. Matt Viator, who learned much of his trade from both of them, won one in his fourth season as a head coach, at 29 years old. Among the people he surrounded himself with, who helped him win the title long before that championship season, were his mentor and his father.

Jud Siebarth played at Barbe through that 1978 season and watched Vicknair turn the Bucs from a 2-8 program to a 10-3 team that made its first trip to the playoffs.

"My freshman year, they were 2-8," Siebarth said. "That was 1976. In '77, they were terrible. They were 2-8. In '78, that's when we went to the quarterfinals, and then my senior year, Ayres and all of them came along right behind us, and we won (a share of) district that year but didn't go to the playoffs. The year after I left, they played for the state championship."

Later in Vicknair's career, others went deeper into the postseason, but Vicknair became known as someone who could put a program in the playoffs for the first time in a few years or longer.

"He was really good at salvaging programs, going to programs, rebuilding them, getting people involved, making money for the team and going first-class in everything, and getting them back going," Shaver said. "He was really good at that. I thought he did that at several

schools."

Cody Vicknair was the last of three sons to play for his father at St. Louis High School. He talked about watching the oldest, Vic, experience a turnaround before graduating in 1997.

"Within one year he had that program turned around," Cody said. "That was his niche, taking a program and changing it around, and he thrived off that."

The size of the school or the classification — 5A, 4A, or whatever — didn't matter. What mattered was making the team successful and seeing the pride and other changes in the faces of his players.

Siebarth said it was special to be part of the building of what has proved to be the most successful program in Southwest Louisiana in the decades since.

"We were there when it all started, when they got it going," Siebarth said. "Coach Vicknair was a great coach. Kids loved him. He was like a dad to me. He was in and out of my life ever since junior high. As a matter of fact, I touched base with him about a week before he passed.

"We were going to go play golf. It just didn't work out."

His three sons

Coach Vic coached his three sons at St. Louis. Charles "Vic" Vicknair, Class of 1997, was a linebacker. Chad Vicknair, Class of 1999, was a free safety. Cody Vicknair, Class of 2001, was a linebacker.

"I played with both of them," Chad said. "Vic didn't

play with Cody, but I played with Vic and I played with Cody."

Vic was a freshman at St. Louis in Vicknair's last year at Sam Houston. When Vic was a sophomore, his dad was an assistant with the Saints. The next year, he became head coach.

"I was a freshman at that time," Chad said. "My freshman year I didn't play, but my sophomore year, I started. I was a free safety. Vic was a linebacker. We played on the same side of the ball, which was a unique experience — one, because not many people get to experience that, and two, we knew the head coach."

That's no small thing. It's common for high school players to have reservations about the new coach, but in this case, familiarity bred a comfort zone among the Saints.

"With Vic and his friends and me and my friends, who all grew up around us and knew our dad, they could automatically feel comfortable and trust him, and anything he said, we could do, and we knew he was doing it for the right reasons, whether it be on or off the field," Chad said.

Coach Vic wanted them to do it for themselves without him directly coaching them.

"There was certainly no favoritism," Vic said. "He didn't hesitate to jump one of our asses if we did something wrong, and that was fine. We expected it."

Their father coached on the other side of the ball, on offense, so those moments were rare. There were other coaches more directly in line to handle that.

"He would not hold back any coach from doing whatever they had to do to punish us, coach us, teach us, to

make us become a better player," Cody said. "He made sure the coaches knew that, and they did, and so they drilled us harder than anybody else."

The boys said Vicknair was fair, treating every player the same. He gave them a lot of respect, and they returned the favor. The sons grew up knowing he did things professionally, at 100 percent, they said, so they expected nothing different when they played for him.

Still, Cody said playing for his dad was one of the hardest things he's ever done.

"Where do you draw the line between a coach and a dad?" he said. "It was one of the most special things, but also one of the most difficult. You want to please the coach, but you also want to make your dad happy. Where you find that balance was kind of tricky for me. You don't know whether sometimes on the field to call him Coach or Dad, so you just give everything 120 percent because you want to make him happy — and because it all reflected on you.

"The one thing I can tell you, when we talk about a coach and their son on the field, we were probably his biggest critics, because he did not show any favoritism to us by any means whatsoever."

Their mom, Debbie, remembered Chad getting hurt in a game. Coach — Dad — went to check on him.

"If Chad was down, he was hurt," Debbie said. "He was that kind of kid."

Debbie's recollection is the father and coach of her sons told her middle child something that later make all of them laugh.

"OK, your momma's watching; get up and get off the

field."

Almost a year after losing her husband, Debbie smiled when she remembered that story.

"It was hilarious," she said.

Months after Debbie told the story, Chad remembered and gave his version. It was his only injury, he said, and it came when South Beauregard ran the guard-around trick play. Chad saw it coming, and when he tried to tackle the 300-pound lineman with the ball, a wide receiver blindsided him.

He couldn't breathe, and trainers ran out to him on the field. His dad was there too.

"He looks at me and he says, 'Get up. Your momma's over there worried about you on the sideline, so come on.' I got up and walked off, and in retrospect looking at it, it's pretty funny. I guess it says a lot, that he was always worried about Mom on the sidelines even though he had to coach a game and try to win. Now that I look back on it, it was pretty funny."

Cody recalled the few injuries he and Vic suffered during games.

"Dad wasn't the first one out there," he said. "The other coaches were. He knew we were all right. He didn't come up to us after games, not like a father would come up to a son and ask. He took care of the team. He knew he'd see us that night. He knew we were all right.

"But when he would come home, dad was dad. Dad wasn't Coach Vic at the house. He would take care of family things and keep the relationship between the son and the father, but at the same time still talk football."

Of course. All three boys were fall arrivals. The doctor who handled one of Debbie's pregnancies called one day to ask her if she was ready to give birth, and she checked with her husband before giving an answer.

"That might work out well," she remembered him saying. "We don't have practice this afternoon."

Years later, the boys tagged along at times to be with their dad at the office.

"They're all grown now, but I remember when they were running around in diapers," Siebarth said. "We'd be watching film in the film room, and here comes little Vic."

As they grew up, they learned that if they were going to see much of the coach in Coach Vic, they would have to go to the office. At home, he really was Dad.

"It's funny, because he had never brought his work home," Vic said. "If we were home and were having dinner, we'd ask how practice was. 'Oh, it was great.' He would always tell you it was good. It was not like he would have a bad day and come home and take it out on us. It was always good.

"He was always Dad."

"Unless we brought it up," Chad said. "There were times when I would ask him questions — do I need to do this, do I need to do that — but only if we brought it up."

Vic said there was seemingly nothing their father wouldn't plan for, just in case.

"He even had Chad and I during the summers throwing the ball as a backup quarterback," Vic said. "We were working those drills, and you'd do that at lunch, and then we were with the receivers, and after that it was

weight training."

"And we never saw a snap at quarterback," Chad said, laughing, "but we'd have to go throw and do drills. We didn't second-guess him. We said, 'OK, let's go,' and we did it."

The boys remembered their father taking trips to Alexandria, where he grew up and played for Bolton High School, and where his mother stayed until the last few years of his life. Vicknair would visit Butch Stoker, longtime coach at Alexandria Senior High, and draw up plays with him. Coach Vic would drag the boys to a coach's office and talk about football for up to four hours, or what seemed like it to young boys. They couldn't imagine someone talking about the game for that long at one stretch, but they learned that was their dad's passion for the sport.

Mike Veron, a Lake Charles attorney and sports enthusiast, would often tease Vicknair.

"You've been doing this how long? You're still going to school for it? You're still trying to learn?"

The sons said Vicknair's ever-changing schemes and new approaches were based upon his knowledge of the talent he had coming back in a given season and what he thought his players were capable of doing.

Despite his penchant for change, Vicknair remained an old-school teacher in the classroom during civics class or other courses he taught, Vic said.

"There were no PowerPoint presentations or projects," Vic said. "He made you outline every chapter of the book, bring your notes to class, take notes — don't forget your book — and there were no group projects. He lectured from

the start of class until the end."

Those who worked for him were students in a different way, as the boys discovered.

"He would take his coaches away before two-a-days for a weekend," Chad said, "to a camp or somewhere. It could be hours away. They would have to sit there all weekend, and he would go over what their job was, each coach, what they were going to be in charge of for the season, and they would break each position down and talk about it, all the way down to form tackling.

"I had a coach tell me, 'We went over form tackling before we started two-a-days.' (laughing) It seemed like it was a mini-camp for the coaches, and this is how the season's going to go, and that's how organized he was. This would go this way, and practice would go this way, and special teams, offense, defense."

One summer Vicknair was writing a defensive playbook. After he died, the boys found it and looked at it, and they remembered when he was working on it at home. He would break down each player on the defense and explain his role, how it fit in with the team, how the player's mental and physical makeup worked within the team concept and many other details.

"The organization of it was just amazing," Chad said. "I've never seen it before. He'd go out to our cookhouse for hours a day and start that playbook each day until it was completed, working on the white board. It was fun to see the progression of it, because you never get to see behind-the-scenes type stuff like that."

Organization was of paramount importance, whether it

applied to football or family vacations, the boys said, laughing at the memories. Clark Griswold of the National Lampoon "Vacation" movies had nothing on Vicknair when it came to planning trips in intricate detail.

"We're waking up at this time, we're getting in a van and heading it, we're going to be at this city at this time, we're going to eat here," Chad said, recalling their father's instructions down to the tone of voice.

"One of his things is he never liked to be late," Vic said, interrupting Chad's trip down memory lane. "It would aggravate him waiting to go to church on Sunday and Mom was still in the back trying to get ready. (Our Lady) Queen of Heaven was two minutes down the road, but it was 10 minutes to 9, and we weren't in the van getting over there. I kind of got that from him. He was a pretty punctual person."

They'd go snow skiing, and Vicknair drove. They'd pile in a van with a VCR and movies on videotape, and he'd drive all night. The boys couldn't believe his stamina.

"He was the first one to get to the office and the last one to leave," Chad said. "Always."

"He always went to bed early," Vic said. "Eight-thirty, nine o'clock, he was in bed. He'd wake up at 5, 5:30 in the morning and he was up and going."

At one point in Vicknair's career, players' moms would ask more and more frequently about what was going on with the team, game plans, and why things happened the way they did.

He was asked often enough, he said, "OK, let's watch film."

"He started inviting the parents to come out on Monday nights and go over film, the previous game's film," Chad said. "I think a few parents came, but it mainly started being a lot of the moms. He started breaking down films for the moms and explaining the positions and why things are happening, this is a run, a pass, and this is what the line-backers do, and I want to say he would spend almost two or three hours with the moms, going over film with them.

"They were enjoying the hell out of it. He would pick with them and have fun with them, but I've never heard of any coach doing that with parents, taking the time to say 'This is what's going on, this is what you're looking at, and this is what your son is doing,' and I remember stories coming out about those moms being tickled to death about knowing what's going on out on the field at the time."

As the first anniversary of his father's death approached, Cody sat in his mother's living room and talked about seeing his father as a coach before and during the years he played for him at St. Louis.

"One thing I knew about him that amazes me still today is that he was always open to learning," Cody said. "He never put himself above anyone else. He always acted like he was a first-time guy — first year doing this, first time doing this — and his teaching ability just surpassed anything I ever could have imagined of an educator, a coach and a dad."

One aspect that stood out for the son was the father's way of connecting with different people.

"He found a niche to not just be able to work with his coaching colleagues, but players, players of different

backgrounds, players who were rich, players who didn't have money, players who had to walk to practice every day. He was able to connect with everybody no matter where they came from."

He would talk the same way to a coach from LSU as he would the water boy or managers of his team, the son remembered. Everyone was treated the same, and each day was always about teaching, about coaching.

"It never got old. Every day he walked up with the same amount of energy like it was his first day on the job. I just never could understand."

The boys had trouble remembering a day he missed school or practice, and that was typical of the kind of consistency of work ethic he instilled in his players and assistant coaches.

"He walked the walk, and he talked the talk, and that was very evident as a son, as a former player, and I think that's what mom saw throughout her 31 years of marriage with him," Cody said.

He remembered his father's pregame and postgame speeches, becoming animated as he told a story about one his brother experienced when St. Louis went into a game as an underdog. Vicknair had a way of pacing, of walking back and forth, and that's basically all he did before getting to the point.

"Let's go kick their ass."

The way the players from the Class of 1997 remember it, the entire room went crazy, and the Saints won and went on to compete in the playoffs.

June Bug

Relax, I got it.

Do the deal.

I'll make the coffee. Don't get up.

Love your bubble.

Don't worry. Football will pay.

It's been a slice of heaven.

Charles Vicknair said a lot of things often enough for people to remember them as his favorite catchphrases. His family put some of them on a card with his picture on it after he died.

Along the same vein, as you might recall from early in the story, he had a habit of giving people nicknames. Shaver, saying he understands that side of Vicknair the older he becomes, recalled Vicknair making up names for players whose real names he couldn't remember.

"He'd just make up a name, and that's what he'd call the kid," Shaver said. "Instead of having to learn the name, it was just 'Pancho' or 'Pahds.' This guy was 'Pahds,' and this guy was 'Bootsie.' That ended up being their name for four years."

There is no standard spelling of "pahds," an approximation in writing of the sporting short-hand for partner or "podnuh."

Ronnie Johns, the State Farm agent who befriended Vicknair in the early 1980s, got to know this side of him.

"Nicknaming those kids, that was his trademark," Johns said.

Vicknair didn't stop with football players.

"My daughter Claire, who's 20 years old now," Johns

said in the summer of 2009, "from the day she was a baby until the day he died, he called her June Bug."

There was the junior high student with the last name of Evans who discovered Vicknair was talking to him without getting his name right. He would say "Evers" or "Everson" instead.

"Get over here, son!"

The young Mr. Evans realized he wasn't receiving special treatment.

"Of course, he messed up everybody else's name as well."

Vicknair's oldest son, Vic, said his father was bad with names.

"In order for him to remember," Vic said, "he had to give you a nickname so that he could remember your nickname. He couldn't remember names."

At a seminar in the early 1990s where high school coaches learned the new rules and points of emphasis game officials would use in calling their games, Vicknair referred to Scooter Hobbs, sports editor of the American Press, as "Scooter Pooter Pooter."

Shaver said there was imprecision that cropped up in other ways, a bit of comic relief around a coach so well known for focusing on the details. After Barbe received new belts for the weight room, Vicknair wanted to write 'Bucs,' the team's nickname, on all of them.

"Vic could not spell anything, now," Shaver said, trying to prepare a visitor for what came next.

"B-U-C-K-S, on every weight belt. Big, blue letters on every weight belt. So now we've got to get White-Out and

white out what he did. He wasn't much on spelling, even on kids' names."

Especially on kids' names.

Another Vicknair favorite was to say, "Let's pull a Hank Snow."

That expression is a reference to the country music artist whose first big hit was a 1950 song called "I'm Movin' On." Vicknair, who came of age in the '50s (he was born Oct. 7, 1941), joined those in his generation and others in using the songwriter's name as a way of saying it's time to move on, to leave one place for another.

After Vicknair went to St. Louis High School, Saints soccer coach Jason Oertling became acquainted with Vicknair's frequent use of that expression. During the playoffs of the first soccer season after Vicknair's death, Oertling made his players T-shirts on which he urged, "Let's Pull a Hank Snow."

Oertling did some research and explained the history of the saying to the players.

When it was time to pull a Hank Snow, Vicknair sometimes said, "It's been a slice of heaven." He'd say it in good times, and in not-so-good times. Anyone close to him understood the sarcasm when the reality of the moment may have been a tad south of heaven.

Mostly, he said it as if he meant it.

Then there are expressions with origins that may never be explained. One such saying was "Love your bubble."

The family had heard it enough to put it on the small bookmark-style card they prepared for Vicknair's funeral, but more than a year later, nobody in the family could

identify the origin of "Love your bubble," nor any specific context in which he said it.

There was speculation Vicknair meant one should love his or her place in the world, to love and tend to one's corner of it. Speculation ended when Sam Smith, who coached for Vicknair at St. Louis in the 1990s, explained the far less metaphysical meaning of the expression.

"I gained a lot of weight when I was coaching for him," Smith said, "and he was always talking about people's bellies. He said you can't lose any weight when your belly's always full.

"That's one of the things he was always talking about when he said 'Love your bubble.' He was talking about your bubble around your waist."

Smith didn't remember it being anything critical or mean-spirited.

"He always had a way of making you feel good about yourself," Smith said. "That was one of those things he said that made you smile. You never really knew where they came from. They were just things Coach Vic said. You never knew what saying at what time. He'd just come out with one."

Coach, father figure

There is far more to the Charles Vicknair story than the way he influenced younger coaches in Southwest Louisiana. Forty-five school years began with him working with young men, trying to get them to improve as players and as people.

"He impacted a lot of kids at a lot of different schools," Mike Johns said.

Players and coaches liked to tell stories about Vicknair standing up for his players and his program, even against a school administration that didn't always agree with him. There were conflicts when Vicknair was a head coach, and later when he was an athletic director too.

Bruchhaus said he was strong-willed.

"He was always fighting for something all the time," Bruchhaus said. "He always had a project."

Vicknair often used one of his standard responses straight off that card the family prepared for the funeral — "Don't worry, football will pay" — about something the athletic department needed, and friends and colleagues were quick to quote the line when talking about Vicknair. So was his wife.

"Don't worry, football will always pay," she said.

He pushed hard for what he thought the program needed, and it didn't always win him support.

"A lot of people got mad at him," Bruchhaus said. "No. 1 is because he pushed to win. He could get things that other people couldn't get in the younger days. But now as it got older, he couldn't get those things, and it really frustrated him."

If he couldn't run the program the way he thought was best for the players, he moved on. If that meant briefly taking a job teaching at an elementary school rather than let boosters dictate some of the details, so be it.

"He fought for his players," Matt Viator said. "He fought for his coaches. He was always the leader of trying

to get coaches better pay. That was just him."

Viator said Vicknair constantly told him to never lose sight of the reason they were coaching: to help young men.

"He used to say that, 'If you don't have players, then they don't need you.' He used to tell me all the time, 'If it ain't for the players, Matt, you ain't got a job. They don't need you.' It's about the players and about trying to obviously make them better football players, but (also) to make them better people, to give them the best quality of life you can give them," Viator said.

It's one thing for Vicknair's former colleagues to recall a long list of teenagers who learned from the coach. It's another to find those who, as adults with families, social and professional networks, wish to share the troubles they overcome and the transformations they made because of Vicknair's guidance.

One who played offensive line for Vicknair at McNeese in the early to mid 1980s looked back later in life at a time when he and his position coach weren't on the same page. If the player was waiting for the coach to change, he would be waiting a long time, and it finally dawned on him.

"As with most personality conflicts, youthful arrogance keeps you from realizing that the player needs to get along with the coach a lot more than the coach needs to get along with the player," said Jay Gallagher, who went on to investigate claims for an insurance company long after his McNeese career ended. "It was a valuable life lesson to learn."

Gallagher said he was one of a few who knew how to

modify basic cable TV wiring so they could get free Showtime in the dorm. One night during curfew check, Vicknair stumbled upon the procedure and asked what was happening. After finding out the details, he grinned, asked about the raw materials and returned the next day with a roll of antenna wire. He asked the players to come with him to wire all the coaches' houses.

Years later, Gallagher reconnected with Vicknair man to man, away from the game and the player-coach relationship.

"I grew to like Coach Vic a lot, but it was mostly after football," he said. "Though, in hindsight, I came to appreciate how he conducted himself as a coach a lot better as I got older. Maturity does that, I think."

Nobody knows that in this context better than Blayne Rush, who played for Vicknair at Sam Houston and went on to be one of the top offensive linemen at McNeese during the Bobby Keasler years. Rush grew fond of telling people to do a Google search on Vicknair's name and spot testimonials on his influence on the social network pages of his former players and others.

Vicknair's sons noticed at an early age their father's influence on his players, especially those in need of a strong father figure.

"When we were young, we saw Blayne and a couple of others from Sam Houston that he would take in, and they would be around the house and hang out," Chad said. "We got to experience our dad hanging out with them, teaching them things, but we were young, so we kind of didn't understand, probably until later in life, what he was

actually doing. In retrospect, he did it the whole time, all 45 years of coaching."

The boys saw their father make sure these players went to class, were doing well academically, were going to practice regularly.

"There were kids that I found out after the fact about, and one in particular, without naming names, he would call him up in the morning to wake him up to go to school," Chad said. "This guy told me about it. He'd say, 'Hey, are you awake? You're going to class.' I said, 'Really?' He said, 'Yeah, he'd wake me up,' and I found out the guy didn't have a father. He lived his life without his father. Dad would call him up to make sure he came to practice. At times, he would go by his house.

"I didn't really notice the impact on guys like that until the funeral, when I saw all these people, and after the fact stories started coming in."

The stories had a familiar ring to them.

"It was the same with us," Chad said. "Try your best. A hundred percent. Not only with us, but with these certain guys that didn't have father figures and that he was drawn to and wanted to help lead their life in a good direction.

"Like with Blayne, it showed, and I'm seeing other guys that are successful in life that he had tried to steer in the right direction. I thought it was pretty neat what he did. Not only was football a big part, but he was taking these kids that he coached in high school and making sure that they were going to make something out of their lives instead of doing something bad or being lazy or whatnot. Probably one of his biggest pet peeves was being lazy."

He walked the walk before and after talking the talk, as his oldest son recalled first-hand and from talking with others who worked with Vicknair. The consensus was he was not going to be outworked.

"As the head coach, he wanted to set the tone for what he expected out of his coaches," Vic said.

All of that filtered down to the players, who found out quickly they had a standard to maintain.

No story of Vicknair's involvement in a player's personal development is more compelling than the one Blayne Rush has told many times to explain what he thinks he owes Vicknair, and it was in the retelling in the spring of 2009 that he began thinking about ways to pay tribute to him.

Rush eventually decided to commission this story and the creation of a Web site where people could find the story of Charles Vicknair and learn about the effect he had upon Southwest Louisiana.

Now a successful businessman in Texas with a wife and two children, Rush didn't realize the extent of his role in this story until after it was written. Without him, it couldn't have been told.

"I am a rags-to-riches story, but I was not smart enough to know any shortcuts," he said in mid-2009, writing to the reporter who covered the end of his college career and hoping to convey the turnaround Vicknair helped bring about in his life.

Broke at 30, thriving financially three years later, he started his own companies and during one five-year span worked seven days a week.

"I was just going to outwork people," Rush said, aware he'd put one of Vicknair's lessons into practice.

He overcame a learning disability to earn two master's degrees and hours toward a third.

"I left McNeese a little scared and lived in some questionable places working in the plants for a while, but I kept on pushing," he said.

He found himself in a position to help someone who was out of work, and he offered advice based on his hardscrabble experiences.

"Keep pushing, and it will pan out," he said. "It seems bleak as hell when you are in the middle of the storm. It is scary, and there is no light at the end of the tunnel, but you keep pushing forward, because the sun will rise and this will all just be part of your great history."

Rush spoke with humility as he related part of his history for the purposes of giving credit to Vicknair.

"While I am not wealthy in the financial sense, I have been able to change the legacy of my family," he said.

Without Vicknair, he said, it wouldn't have been possible.

Rush left home when he was in high school and playing for Vicknair, who understood the importance of having a strong father figure in the years when a boy becomes a man. Vicknair grew into adolescence without knowing his father, who was out of the picture before Vicknair had a chance to know him.

Vicknair's mother, Enez Aldret, said it didn't surprise her when her son took such an interest in shaping the lives of the young men he coached and taught in school. Rush

was one who credits Vicknair with changing his destiny.

Rush suffered a major knee injury during the summer before his senior year and moped, as he put it, after thinking he'd lost his ticket to a more prosperous future.

He quit high school for a week, then was kicked out by the same administrator who later worked with Vicknair to reinstate him. In those days, Rush slept in empty apartments in Moss Bluff and in the press box at the school, and he took naps in the woods.

Ivory Stevens, a former high school football player who later worked at McNeese, washed what few clothes Rush had during those days. Rush took shelter wherever he could, sometimes with friends, sometimes with those who proved not to be.

With help, he found a job. He planned to try out for McNeese as a walk-on, but eventually Sonny Jackson gave him a partial scholarship, and he rehabilitated his knee during his first year on campus.

Bruchhaus, who left NLU to coach on Keasler's staff at McNeese after that, was prepared to offer Rush a full scholarship when he learned Jackson had arranged for it before leaving the program.

Rush went on to play for McNeese's first Division I-AA playoff teams and become a first-team All-Southland Conference offensive lineman in 1991 and 1993.

Vicknair helped him mature along the way. As circumstances changed, so did the methods. When Rush was a junior at Sam Houston, he needed to take the ACT but couldn't afford the \$18.50 application fee. Vicknair walked him to the counselor's office, pulled a \$20 bill out

of his wallet and paid for the test.

After the knee injury jeopardized Rush's college plans, Vicknair often drove him to physical therapy. While there, the coach asked questions of the staff, prepared workouts for Rush and supervised him while he worked at the rehab plan.

Vicknair called the coaches at McNeese and told them in detail about the extensive exercises Rush was doing to get his knee ready for college football, and when they doubted what they heard from the coach, he told them to come and see for themselves. They did, and they left convinced.

"During that time (Vicknair) taught me a lot about commitment, perseverance, singular focus, trust and believing that set the foundation of who I am today," Rush said.

After leaving Sam Houston for McNeese, Rush stayed in touch with Vicknair, but he said the coach never asked him about football.

"All he cared about was that I was staying out of trouble, going to class and passing," Rush said.

Years after arriving at McNeese with one pair of jeans and a couple of shirts, no bed sheets and a learning disability, Rush had become the owner of multiple businesses, with two master's degrees and designs on earning a third. He learned from reading books, and he learned from several mentors, including Vicknair.

Rush became tearful when he pitched the idea of a story and Web site commemorating the life of his most important teacher and coach, saying he owed everything to Vicknair.

"He was the most impactful person in my life," Rush wrote in an e-mail, "and I grieve because I did not have the chance to show him just how much of an impact he has on my life."

Rush began exploring the idea of working with others to memorialize Vicknair, a gesture that put a smile on the face of McNeese assistant coach Mike Collins.

"That kid could have been strayed wrong a long time ago, and somebody got a hold of him, and it was Vicknair," Collins said. "He got him headed down the right path, and that's why, there's no doubt, he's the success he is right now, today."

Lark Hebert, himself a former McNeese lineman, said he could see why Rush grew to love Vicknair.

"Vic was his father," Hebert said. "He took that role for him, and then he coached him and he disciplined him and he made sure he did the right things. He wouldn't let him get away with things, which I'm sure now as a man and in business and being successful Blayne appreciates — all that discipline and correction — just as we all do as we get older."

Vicknair didn't let Rush run wild, Hebert said. He took care of him, made sure he was OK, and until he died, Vicknair spoke with Rush at least once or twice a month on the phone. All of this continued after Rush moved to Texas years ago, and Hebert said that's special for a high school coach to stay so connected with a former player.

"It was a unique relationship they had," Hebert said.

Mike Johns was an assistant coach at Sam Houston when Rush played on the line for him and for Vicknair.

"Blayne came up the hard way," Johns said. "He walked or rode his bike to practice many days. Charles kind of took him under his wing to make sure he did the right things."

His brother, Ronnie Johns, joined with Rush and others to form a committee to explore ways they could memorialize Vicknair. They began informal discussions after connecting at Vicknair's funeral, and over the next 15 months they weighed short-range and long-range options for accomplishing their goal.

"We want to do something to keep his name out there in the forefront," Johns said, "and to honor him in some way out at McNeese, and we're going to do that. Coach Viator was very, very close to him also, and Coach Viator wants to be a part of this process of memorializing his name, along with other personal friends and other coaches out there."

Johns didn't see it as an accident Vicknair embraced Rush and helped him turn his life around.

"Here's a young man that came up in a very difficult situation, and Charles saw something in him and spent a lot of time with him, and now look at the success of that young man," Johns said. "I'm sure there's a whole lot of Blayne Rushes out there that he made an impact on somewhere."

How many, in pay-it-forward fashion, did the same for others as their own way of honoring what Vicknair did for them? Johns helped one of Vicknair's sons launch his career in insurance, and he and his family check on the Vicknair family often. Vicknair's former assistant coaches continue to influence others, and the ripple effect is immeasurable.

While Rush grieved Vicknair's death in 2008 and began planning a series of memorials in 2009, the finishing touches were under way on "The Blind Side," a film about a family that helped Michael Oher go from a troubled life with no bed to sleep in to a fast-developing football player who became a first-round NFL draft pick and a professional offensive lineman.

Rush's story, with further details he will choose to reveal if and when he is ready, is no less compelling, and the central stabilizing figure in his turnaround was Charles Vicknair.

"I get choked up when I talk about it," Rush said by telephone in December 2009, his voice shaking as he brought back good and bad memories.

Without Rush's devotion to his coach and the drive with which he chose to share Vicknair's legacy with the world and with future generations, you wouldn't be reading this story. It wouldn't exist, except that Blayne Rush made it happen.

After Vicknair's death, Rush put into words his feelings, ending a written tribute with a reference to a song he passed along to Debbie Vicknair. The song, Rush said, spoke to much of how he saw his mentor.

The note:

Coach Charles Vicknair,

I love you. Because of you, I am who I am. Because of you, I have accomplished what no other man had thought possible. Because of you, my family's future generations will have a different legacy. All because of you....

Thank you for the help, lessons and my best memories. Even though they will never have the pleasure of knowing you, I love you and my family is forever indebted to you. You will live forever through us.

Frank Sinatra said it best:

The tribute ended with the lyrics to the song "My Way."

Family man

Cody Vicknair moved back to Lake Charles after college and said it was the best four years he spent with his father. He saw his dad become an assistant coach again, in time for the 2006 season at Westlake, and he saw him become more relaxed.

"What he became was a promotion in my mind," Cody said. "From head to assistant, everyone else was taking it easy, but he became a player's coach and a coach's coach. He was there to be the consultant, to be the friend, to be the teaching coach to these coaches, to mold them, so that Southwest Louisiana football could continue."

Ronnie Johns saw Vicknair as devoted to and worried about his boys as he'd been when they were toddlers. The boys, now adults, were seeing a different aspect of their father.

In the summer of 2009, Cody wanted to talk about it. He found out his mother would be meeting one day with someone who wanted to write about Charles Vicknair the coach, father and husband, and the youngest son of Charles

and Debbie wanted to be with her for support and to help her tell stories about the man who left behind a void impossible to miss.

They sat in the living room, surrounded by keepsakes and other tangible reminders as they reflected.

"Mom lost one of her best friends, unexpectedly, and then we lost (two family friends), two sons of Kirby Bruchhaus," Cody said. "Going through those experiences as a family, we realized life is precious. We realized at any moment we might not be here anymore.

"So it was like a different chapter in our lives, where the past four years were even more family driven and opening up communication more with Dad: 'We know football is your life, but we want to make sure we have each other for as long as possible.' He continued to work, but when it came down to family, he wanted us here too."

They caught up on doing things there was never any time for earlier in his career and earlier in their lives. The shared experiences helped sharpen the view the boys already had of their father.

"Everything he did was first-class," Cody said.

"Not monetarily," his mom said, quickly correcting him.

True, son replied, but ...

"He wouldn't cut corners," Cody said. "He did it the best he could — not just a rinky-dink tree stand for deer hunting, but we called it the Taj Mahal. If the job was to do the landscaping or polish up the yard, he gave you the most elaborate looking flower arrangement he could create."

Debbie said her husband was like an older brother to

Darrell Guidry, her brother. Vic Vicknair said the deer lease was an idea hatched by the brothers-in-law. They had been hunting at another place, and Darrell did a lot of the legwork, with Vicknair's assistance, in finding a lease where they could build their own blinds and hunt.

If it was worth doing, it was worth planning, and if it was worth planning, it was worth designing in painstaking detail.

"He did elaborate drawings," Debbie said.

That included a sketch, while they sat at a table in a restaurant, that puzzled everyone in the family until Vicknair revealed he was helping them understand how to find a deer he'd just seen on the deer lease.

"He tried to draw the deer he saw on a napkin," Cody said. "He always drew like that. He always carried a pen on his shirt. Matt Viator got that from him. You never know when you've got to draw up a play or have an idea. Wherever we were, he'd get a napkin — restaurant, wherever.

"So he tried to draw the deer. My brother Chad was next to him, and he described to Chad what he saw, and it was unbelievable. It looked like five stick figures sitting around at a picnic table, and Chad took a picture of all of us trying to figure it out."

Dad became frustrated.

"Are you not seeing this?" he asked everyone.

The sight of the deer's rack inspired him to speak with a cadence all too familiar to family members.

"When dad talks, dad just doesn't talk, he talks with enthusiasm," Cody Vicknair said, slipping back into that

present-tense mode that returns now and then when the subject of Charles Vicknair surfaces.

"He gets excited about it."

Vic and Chad remembered the story a few months after Cody's telling of it.

"He brought all of his tendencies to deer hunting," Chad said. "He and I went hunting, and this one time he went in one blind, and I was in another blind, and we get back, and I said 'I didn't see much.' He said, 'Well, I saw something.'

"He gets his napkin, gets his pen and starts drawing the buck's antlers. I laughed, and I said, 'I don't know what you're drawing here,' and I took a picture and e-mailed it out and people started laughing. He was dead serious. He said, 'This is what it looks like. You need to go find it,' and ..."

"Are you listening to me?" Vic said, picking up the flow of the story from Chad as he's done many times before, mimicking his father's words as he remembered them. "Are you listening? Are you paying attention? Here are the main beams, and here are the G2s, and see, what it's going to look like is this, and it's going to come out from this direction,' and Chad's just kind of looking at him with this puzzled look like, 'You've got to be kidding me.'

"So Dad says, 'You know what? The hell with you. Shoot, I'll go kill it next time.' He was serious."

Darrell Guidry wasn't there, but Chad e-mailed him the picture of the drawing. Darrell called after seeing it on his cell phone, and they all laughed about it.

The attention to detail doesn't stop there. Vicknair was

like an investigative reporter when it came to seeking reports on others' hunting trips.

"Every time we'd go and get together," Vic said, "even if he wasn't there, he had to talk to everybody that went to find out exactly who saw what at what blind and at what time, what the conditions were, and he kept this journal ..."

"He kept a journal," Chad said, shaking his head.

"... where he wrote all this down," Vic continued. "We'd come in, and we'd be eating breakfast talking about it, and he'd go down the list: 'All right, what did you see? What time was that?' He wanted to know every little detail from everybody."

Details. Vicknair knew no other way to approach anything but to exhaustively research the details.

The flat-panel TV in the Vicknair living room sold for nearly \$8,000 years ago when Vicknair began pricing that model, but he set out to find a more affordable one. Without much of a knack for the Internet, Debbie said, he got online, figured out how to shop and researched that specific TV.

A few trips later to big box stores in and out of Louisiana, and with more research, he found it somewhere and bought it for about \$5,000, a price that included shipping.

"Whatever his project, he went full out," Cody said.

Debbie, who was 11 years younger than her husband, didn't see much of him because of the nature of his job. They woke up early every morning to compensate.

"We did have our time," she said.

"We always had supper together," she said, fighting

tears as the first anniversary of her husband's death and another football season grew closer. "Always."

She said they never had a large den or living area, so they had a sitting area in the master bedroom. If the boys had company, they were in the living room or back in the sitting area.

Cody said his dad would wake them up in morning before he left and tell them all goodbye, then return for dinner in the evening. They'd talk more on weekends, he said, even if he was at work, coaching.

"He called them all the time," Debbie said. "Even when they were grown, he'd call them. No matter who they were with or if they were on the road, he was going to call them, no matter what — especially when they were on the road.

"He'd say, 'Are you there yet? How fast are you going?' "

If he could get away, he'd visit them when they were in Baton Rouge. They appreciated that.

"We never said, 'We never get to see him.' We respected (that their parents) put their energy into their jobs to provide financing for us to get an education, and so we felt honored," Cody said. "He would come running to us. He really did. We had good times at LSU. We got a condo. He'd spend spring and summer time with us there."

Debbie, who is an educator, said they made trips to New Orleans when they could. That was his hot spot, where he loved listening to blues and Cajun music. Mostly, she said, he loved spending time with family.

"Work is work, and fun is fun," she said.

The family experienced more of the latter with him in the last four years of his life. To see a serious coach cut loose, that was special. As the boys got older, their relationships with him strengthened more, and on a different level. Cody said it took on a different feel, but it was just as special.

Vicknair went to New Orleans every year for the Superdome Classic, the state finals of Louisiana high school football. He had fun, entertained, ate and drank with Debbie, with friends and with other coaches. Vicknair's sons tagged along on those trips when they came of age. When they saw their father stay out until midnight, 1 or 2 a.m., it amazed the boys he could stay out that late and have so much fun after being such an early-to-bed, early-to-rise man for years.

"He never went to the games," Chad said. "It was a social trip."

The only time the boys went to the games was when Westlake made it to the finals in 2007. They enjoyed seeing the coaches interact off the field, teasing each other and being friends rather than competitors or co-workers. This was something their father didn't allow them to see until they went to college and were old enough to spend time with him as adults.

"I think he got to be more comfortable and could let loose," Chad said, "and we saw a different side of him that you really couldn't see in high school because ..."

"Well," Vic said, "he was athletic director slash coach slash teacher, not to mention we were there, so it wasn't until we got to college that we started changing the bond

with him."

The boys said they appreciated how strict their parents were in raising them, but they also enjoyed the way things became more relaxed as they matured.

Oh, that night after Westlake lost in the state finals in 2007, when Debbie saw her husband unwind and enjoy the rest of the weekend? Well, as the boys will tell you, that's what she saw — only after he had a chance to vent with his sons between the end of the game and their night on the town.

"It's me and Vic and a few friends," Chad said, "and we're sitting at the Royal Sonesta waiting for him to get back, and he gets back. You could tell he was amped up. He was fired up. I said, 'Dad, relax. It's over.'

"He said, 'We should have won it. We had it.' I said, 'Let's go get a drink,' so he and I and a few others sat down and got a cigar and a beer, and he takes a napkin, pulls it out, takes a pen, and 'We should have done, this, this, this and this.'

"I said, 'Are you kidding me?' And he's explaining, 'This is what happened,' and he starts drawing plays. I said, 'It's over. (laughing) Relax.' Usually you'll see people and they'll say, 'We did what we could do,' but not him. He was figuring out ways they could have stopped them or should have stopped them."

Debbie didn't remember it that way, but her boys said that might have been part of their dad's plan. His friend, Gerald Link, was with Vicknair and the boys. Link's wife, Debbie, was with Debbie Vicknair.

"Debbie and Gerald Link traveled with us to the New

Orleans getaways and were there for the Westlake state championship game with us," Debbie Vicknair recalled. "Gerald and the boys stayed up replaying the game after Debbie and I turned in for the night."

That is when Vicknair worked through the aftermath of the 19-18 loss to Parkview Baptist in the Class 3A championship game.

"He might have even been trying to get away from her to talk about it, now that I think about it," Chad speculated. "But yeah, he got it out of his system, and after that we unwound. It was probably one of the best trips we had to New Orleans. He let loose more than I've ever seen that weekend."

Vic still has a photo from that night on his cell phone.

"You'd have thought we'd have won the state championship," Vic said, looking at the smiles on the faces in the group picture.

"He was learning to relax," Debbie said of the years after Coach Vic returned to Westlake to be an assistant coach. "The summer of 2008 was the first summer he didn't work — ever."

Nobody knew it at the time, but they were the last few weeks of his life.

It was a slice of heaven

No one remembers exactly when it started, but somewhere around the time his fourth decade of coaching gave way to the start of his fifth, Vicknair began hearing the same question again and again.

"When are you going to retire?"

Max Caldarera asked. Jimmy Shaver asked.

"Why are you still coaching?"

Debbie made a good point in September 2009.

"Well, look at them," she said, a year after her husband's death. "Look at Max and Jimmy. They've been doing it for a long time."

She said her husband told her 2008 would be it, but she wasn't so sure he meant it.

After he left LaGrange following the 2005 season, asked to resign after a winless season wrecked by hurricane season, he was looking for another place to work. Caldarera found himself on the verge of hiring as an assistant the very man who hired him to be a Westlake assistant three decades earlier.

Caldarera didn't know how Vicknair would accept working for him, but they talked and talked.

"I need a job," Vicknair told him. "I want to coach. I'm not through coaching yet."

If he got the job, he would be returning to the town where his coaching career began in 1964.

Former Westlake principal Gary Anderson played football at the school in 1967-68 as a senior. Vicknair was there as an assistant coach, working with the offensive line.

"He wasn't your typical coach as far as not interacting with the rest of the faculty," Anderson said. "Nobody outworked him. Sometimes that ran some kids off, but those that played for him respected him as a coach."

Anderson, who spent eight years as assistant principal and nine as principal at Westlake before taking an

administrative position with the Calcasieu Parish School Board in 1997, remembered the concerns about Vicknair's ability to work for another head coach after many years of running the show.

"That was a question I had in my mind: How good an assistant coach could Charles be?" Anderson said. "He'd been a head coach for years, but he and Max had that kind of relationship where it worked out well for them. I don't think there were many problems at all."

Vicknair had been an assistant at Sulphur to start the decade, but the subject came up during his interview at Westlake. He said he didn't think he'd have a problem. Anderson knew Vicknair had not been real successful at the end of his stay at LaGrange, but he understood some of the reasons.

"I think those kids at LaGrange weren't used to the type of work ethic that Vic demanded out of his players," Anderson said. "I just don't think he got some of the players that could have been playing for him because of that, that it just wasn't instilled in them at that point."

Vicknair was long past the point of having an ego that required him to be a head coach. In fact, after spending the 1994 season as an assistant at St. Louis, he became head coach of the Saints only because Jim Hughes vacated the position, and the school asked Vicknair to take over the program.

"I'm still mad at Jim about that," Vicknair told the American Press, tongue in cheek, in an interview just before the start of the 1995 season. "I spent my time as a head coach. I really didn't want it. Just give me some kids

to coach, and I'd feel comfortable. But this happened so late, I had to take it."

Just give me some kids to coach, and I'd be comfortable. That, in a nutshell, was Charles Vicknair, whether he was on a beach during a summer vacation and saw a boy throwing a football, or one of his friends and colleagues needed his help.

When he and Caldarera talked about him joining the Westlake staff in 2006, Caldarera said: "As long as Westlake wins, I don't care who gets the credit. Make us better."

Some of the dynamics of their new relationship had yet to be worked out completely.

"Every now and then," Caldarera said, "we'd butt heads a little bit. 'Hold it. You forgot: I'm the head coach.' And that happens, sure. It's going to happen. It's just like a damn marriage. There are going to be squabbles in coaching, on the staff, but it always worked out good.

"Whenever we got through with the meeting or the fussing and everything else, well, we went in the same direction."

Caldarera began the 2009 season saying Vicknair's impact on Westlake's special teams was still evident, even without him.

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Sitting in the home his parents shared, Cody Vicknair spoke solemnly, but with a smile, as he talked about the final full day of his dad's life in September 2008.

"That last day was something," he said. "His mother was almost 90 years old. He was so proud of that. 'Mother, you're about to turn 90,' he'd say. When we had lunch with her, she said, 'He was so tickled I was going to turn 90.' She was talking about dad at that last visit with her, on Sept. 19, before the Sam Houston game. They had a great visit.

"That last morning he did share with her, 'Mother, I'm glad you're happy here. It really makes me happy.' Well, he questioned her. 'Are you really happy?' She said, 'Yes, I am.' And he said, 'Good, because that makes me happy, and I love you, and I just want to make you happy and I want to tell you that.' "

Saying they're not a real "lovey dovey" family, Cody said his grandmother told his father to stop talking that way, asking him why he was so directly expressing his love for her.

"He said, 'Mom, I just love you. I just want to tell you that, and I really think this will be my last year.' She said, 'Charles, you say that every year.' He said, 'No, mom, I'm telling you. I think this is it. I want to be able to spend more time with the family and you,' and he gave her a hug and a kiss, and he told her he loved her again, and that was the last time she saw him."

Enez Aldret celebrated her 90th birthday in July 2009 in the same nursing home where her son, Charles, visited her at 6 every morning for coffee and conversation. She lost weight after he died, unable to force herself to eat. By December 2009, more than a year after his death, she'd regained some of the weight and said she felt good.

"Every time he'd have to help me in the truck, he'd

tease me and say, 'Momma, you've got to lose some weight.' Now, if he knew I lost weight, he'd be thrilled over it."

It's impossible to imagine him being happy about the reason for her weight loss.

"I had some bad mornings," she said. "Bad. I wouldn't tell Debbie and the boys that, but Debbie knew what I was going through because I knew what she was going through.

"I came down here, and two or three of the ladies that knew him would always come over and talk with me, and that's all I was able to do, sit and talk with them. Oh, I missed him. Very much. I still miss him a lot. The first year without him was the hardest."

Mornings would never be the same without his visits. During her four years at a different Lake Charles nursing home, residents and staff would come to the dining area to see him when he visited his mother each morning. Vicknair would pick at them, as he did with everyone, and they loved it.

"He had to ring the bell, and the aides would know it was him, and they'd say, 'Look who's there: Pest is here.' They called him Pest," Vicknair's mother said.

Other residents, including many who didn't have a frequent visitor, would come downstairs to see Vicknair when he had morning coffee with his mother.

"They loved hearing him talk about his football teams," she said. "They'd come down from their rooms and have coffee, and he'd cut up with them. He was the type of person where he had something smart to say — you know, cut up with them."

She'd only been at her new nursing home a couple of weeks when her son died, and on the day before he died, when he came for a Friday morning cup of coffee with his mother, he wanted to make sure she was happy at her new residence.

"I said, 'Don't worry about me anymore. I want you to quit worrying about me.' He said, 'Well, you know I'm going to worry about you a little bit.' I wasn't a sick person. I'm not a sick person. I'm a diabetic. That's about all.

"The last time I went to the doctor he told me I don't have a speck of arthritis. I asked him how he knew that, and he said the tests showed it. All the ladies here can't get over it. All of them do have it."

Vicknair was rarely sick — "Just baby diseases," his mother recalled — and when he died, no one who knew him could remember him being in the hospital for anything other than visiting someone else.

He tore his ACL at McNeese – in the school's media guide, he's listed as a letterman in 1961, and never again – and he didn't undergo surgery. He wore a cast, then lived the rest of his life with the aftermath. By his 50s and 60s, the cartilage was gone, and it was just bone on bone, family members recalled.

"He died with that bad knee," his mother said.

So was he really considering retirement?

"That morning the day before he died," she said, "he told me, 'Momma, you know what? I'm not going to have a team next year.' ... I said, 'Charles, don't talk like that. The season's not over with yet.' He said, 'No, I think I'm going to retire.'"

"I said, 'Now, I've heard that before. I've heard that so many times, that you told me that you were going to retire, but you haven't done it yet.' "

She said he pressed on about it.

"He said, 'Mother, I'm not sick, but I got my kids through school. That's what I wanted.' He did. He did just exactly what he wanted to do. He said, 'Mother, you know I love you,' and I said, 'Yes, I know you do.' He was a great son to me, and I couldn't ask for any better son than him.

"He did what he wanted to do. He wanted to coach, and he did that for 45 years."

Those sons he and Debbie put through school took different professional paths than he did.

"He said, 'Well, I thought maybe one of them would be a coach, Momma, but that's OK. I'm still a coach, and I will be until I die.' That's what he told me," his mother said.

Sitting in the dining room where she had her last cup of coffee with her son, she mentioned how often visitors will talk about him.

"My God, do I miss that man," she recalled one man saying. "I said, 'Well, I do too.' And I do. I still miss him. I miss him every day. I think about all the things he did for me. He did so many good things for me."

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As he sat in his parents' home amid souvenirs of his father's coaching career, the youngest of Vicknair's three boys paused to choose his words carefully.

"The one thing I'll tell you about Charles Vicknair is

that he lived every day like he knew it was going to be his last," Cody said, "and that's how we live today."

The son became teary-eyed as he recalled Westlake winning that last game, at Sam Houston, the night before his father died. At this point, the story came from places within Cody Vicknair where linear chronology wasn't necessary. He was letting stream-of-consciousness touchstones guide him.

He looked at his mother, and he recalled having a conversation with the sons of other coaches.

"Dad helped her be a coach's wife," he said. "The sons of coaches notice most of the wives become strong, disciplined women. That's what we notice we have, a strong, disciplined mother. I look back now, at how things happen, and you start to ... it starts to make sense."

Speech was becoming harder as his throat filled with emotion.

"It starts to make sense," he said, "that the reason why things happen the way they are, the reason ... if I can make any sense of ... the reason why he was so tough and so disciplined, it's because he prepared us for this time in life. The coaching and the fatherhood that he gave us was to prepare us to get ourselves together to go on without him.

"He prepared my mother too."

There is a term, accepted without the blink of an eye in most circumstances, describing what football seasons are like for many women whose husbands are coaches, players and even fans. There is no harm intended, nor any harm felt, when the casual term "football widow" is employed, sometimes jokingly by the wives themselves. After the

death of a coach, there is a bite and burn in that expression.

Debbie Vicknair, who will never hear that term in the same way again, didn't describe herself like that, saying she always felt connected with her husband even during the busiest times, largely because the two of them worked at seeing each other as much as possible. Early wakeup. Dinner together. Getaways when they could.

"Debbie was always an incredible mother, an incredible supporter of Coach Vic," family friend Ronnie Johns said. "You knew where you'd find her on Friday night in the fall — in the stands. She wasn't a stay-at-home coach's wife. She was there to support him through the good times and the hard times."

Now that Vicknair is gone, the void is unmistakable, but the family said they have the benefit of a large support group created by Vicknair being who he was — a person who touched many lives.

When Debbie looks back, just like her youngest son did, she views the past in a different light too.

Coaches' wives have to do a lot because the coach is gone so much, and that was true for her. She finds a deeper meaning in it now that her husband is gone and isn't coming home.

"It was all in preparation," she said.

In the larger view, it doesn't seem at all unlike Vicknair to be preparing others for the future.

Bruchhaus never played as a lineman, but he started out coaching offensive line. Then Vicknair switched him to defensive line. Then he wanted him to coach something else.

"He wanted to teach you the whole game," Bruchhaus said. "I didn't understand why, but I understand why now."

When he said that, a year after Vicknair's death, he was no longer in coaching, but he knew his career would not have reached the heights it did without his mentor forcing him to prepare for as much as possible early in his career.

"I'm glad he took an interest in me," Bruchhaus said. "I'm glad that I was smart enough to try to do what he wanted me to do."

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And so, the start of the 2008 football season, delayed by another active hurricane season, had the potential to mark the final season for Vicknair, at least if his comments to family members were to be believed.

"It could have been his last year," Cody said. "It turned out to be what I call his final retirement."

Westlake couldn't play its first game in 2008 because of Gustav, its second because of Ike. The game at Sam Houston was the season opener.

In his office overlooking the football field at Westlake a year later, Caldarera briefly shifted gears, away from Vicknair's final game to the discussion they had when he agreed to work for Caldarera as a Rams assistant coach. Every coach on the staff has an extra duty, and they needed to assign one to Vicknair.

"I'll take the equipment room," Caldarera recalled Vicknair telling him.

"He ran a tight ship in there," Caldarera said.

Taking care of the grass on the field became an increasingly important role for Caldarera over the years, after Vicknair joined the staff, "he really worked me over about that practice field," Caldarera said.

"The spring before that last season, we put five tandem loads of sand, spiking it, leveling it, just to make him happy," he said. "We had to get it right."

Westlake installed a synthetic playing surface on the stadium field after the 2007 season. Vicknair never coached a game on it. The Rams practiced and scrimmaged on it, but the hurricanes took away the early home games in 2008, so the only game he coached was at Sam Houston.

Caldarera said Vicknair spent time in the summer of 2008 in one of the offices overlooking the field, watching workers install the synthetic turf. He was fascinated by it.

When the season opener finally rolled around on Sept. 19, 2008, Matt Viator went to the game in Moss Bluff, where he began as an assistant coach under Vicknair in the 1980s. Viator said he knew Vicknair was having fun at Westlake, and he wanted to visit with him before the start of another season.

"What I do remember is at 6 o'clock, when they put the music on in the press box, he got mad: 'I hate that music.' It was nothing out of the ordinary."

Westlake won, and when it was over, Vicknair was talking about the uniforms. Caldarera said the Rams had a new set of jerseys, and Vicknair was concerned about how they were going to clean them after a game on a wet field.

"We're going to wash them," Caldarera said. "Don't

worry about it."

Not good enough.

"But listen," Vicknair said, "we need to soak them, and ... "

"We need to do this, we need to do that," Caldarera remembered hearing, the specifics escaping him one year later.

"He worried about different things, now," Caldarera said. "He worried about whatever he was in charge of."

Debbie made Vicknair a sandwich when he got home, and they went to bed. Before sunrise, she could tell something was wrong. She had trouble waking him.

Rushed to the hospital, Vicknair was in pain. Word spread there was a serious problem, and coaches and friends headed to the hospital.

He died soon after. The cause of death: an aortic aneurysm.

The possibility of a long convalescence or a slow, torturous death was something the family couldn't imagine, and in that way they counted their blessings.

"He wouldn't have wanted to go any other way," Cody said.

"No," his mother said, agreeing with him. They both seemed confident he'd have wanted to be coaching up to the last day of his life, that he would have been restless in retirement.

"He had never been in the hospital," Cody said. "It was such a shock. He wouldn't have wanted to be crippled or in any other state of mind."

His friends and colleagues were stunned when Debbie

called them early that Saturday morning, and they rushed to the hospital. He died before they could get in to see him.

Shaver said the hospital lobby was like a coaching clinic, a gathering of men who coached with Vicknair and for Vicknair.

"Debbie gave us all an opportunity to go in individually in the room and visit with him before they brought him away," Shaver said, "so that was a special time. I wish he had been alive to hear the things we had to say, but he never really ... Vic was not a guy that you talked about personal things like that too much with. It was all rough. He was a rough talker. There wasn't any 'I love you, man,' you know what I mean?"

A year later, Calderera tried to put it in perspective.

"It was just a shock and a blow," Calderera said, "and a blow that it took a long time for this program to get over, and we're still trying to get over it a little bit right now."

The Vicknair family asked Matt Viator do eulogize the coach, so he went to their house that Sunday morning. They sat outside, and Viator opened a manila folder he brought with him. When he did, the Vicknair boys looked at each other.

"They looked at each other," Debbie Vicknair said, "like 'Oh my God.' Charles had reams of card stock. That's all he ever wrote on. And when Matt opened his manila folder, that's what he was writing on.

"This is the Coach Vic thing."

The card stock. The manila folder. The pen on the shirt, just in case. The precisely planned practice days. Viator learned all of them and so much more from Vicknair.

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Zeb Johnson became a Barbe High School parent while Vicknair was head coach of the Bucs. Johnson's involvement in the program grew into a role as color analyst for radio broadcasts of Barbe games, booster and coordinator of fundraising events — and, really, whatever the school needed from him for the better part of three decades. Vicknair's family placed their beloved Charles in Johnson's hands after his death, making arrangements for services through Johnson Funeral Home.

As investigator for the Calcasieu Parish Coroner's Office and founder of the funeral home bearing his name, Johnson has been around grieving and memorials longer than he's been associated with Barbe athletics. The only death he'd seen bring more people through his funeral home and nearby Our Lady Queen of Heaven Catholic Church was that of the latter's longtime pastor, Msgr. Irving DeBlanc.

"The church was full," Johnson said, recalling Vicknair's mid-afternoon funeral the Monday after he died. "I mean, packed, which is about 800 people. We estimated that during the visitation and everything, about 1,000 people came through the funeral home.

"An average funeral, you might have a couple of hundred people that will come by the casket and that would be in the church. A large funeral, just a huge funeral, you'd be looking at 400 people, 450 people. Charles had more than twice what you would expect from a big funeral, a huge funeral."

The outpouring did not go unnoticed by Vicknair's family.

"We knew it was a testament to what he's done for this community," Cody said.

Johnson understood it two days earlier, when he arrived at the hospital to find a gathering of coaches.

"I happened to be on call that night, then in the morning when the call came in about Charles," Johnson said. "when I got to the hospital, the parking lot was full of coaches — high school coaches, college coaches. Some of them were in the emergency room."

It was something Johnson was not accustomed to seeing.

"When somebody calls you and tells you somebody just died, you usually say, 'Well, I'm sorry to hear that,' but these guys actually got up and went to the hospital to meet with the family," he said. "I guess that was also their way of paying tribute to him. You don't see that. I see a lot of deaths, and to see that many people show up at the hospital, it was something.

"It was like, 'We're here because he would be here for us.' There were people everywhere, there for Charles."

The more formal gathering for the funeral two days later was unlike anything the South Lake Charles community had ever seen. The entire Westlake football team arrived wearing their black and orange jerseys, the same ones Vicknair volunteered to wash after every game, the ones he cared for with the same attention to detail he brought to all of his duties.

"The players lined up outside the church, and then we

moved them inside the church, and they formed an honor guard for us to roll the casket between," Johnson said.

Ronnie Johns wasn't able to attend. He and his wife were in Italy, on a two-week trip celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary, and he got a phone call from his brother, Mike Johns, giving him the bad news.

"It literally knocked me to my knees," Ronnie Johns said. "He was bigger than life, and you say people like that just don't die that young. It's way too young to die, and I was just devastated that I could not get back here for that funeral."

He tried to arrange a flight, but they were 5 or 6 hours from the nearest major airport. It was a weekend, and they couldn't get a flight booked in time to get them all the way home in time for the funeral.

"That weighed really, really heavy on our hearts that we couldn't be here, but we made a commitment that we would be there for their family in the coming months and years, and we've done that," Johns said from behind his desk in his Sulphur office. "We spend a lot of time with Debbie, and I talk to his boys all the time, especially the oldest one, Vic, who I tried to be somewhat of a role model for with his career. I talk with him on a weekly basis. We do that."

Had Johns and his wife been there at the funeral, they would have seen the Westlake Rams in school colors, then a tribute by another team that brought the memorial full circle on many levels and made an impact upon those who followed the funeral procession to the burial site. Barbe players, whose school was on the route from the church to

the cemetery, lined up along McNeese Street, dressed in their uniforms for practice and standing at attention as the hearse rolled past them.

"Coach Shaver asked about the procession, and he took all his players who were practicing and walked them out to the neutral ground in front of Barbe," Johnson said, "and they all stood there as he passed. What the military would do is salute, but the players did the salute by placing their helmets on their hip, bowing their heads as the hearse went by."

Some of the Barbe players had fathers who were coached by Vicknair.

"They knew this was something important," Johnson said. "They never met the guy, but they knew that the name Vicknair was synonymous with football at Barbe High School. The kids were really touched by it."

Johnson said one of the players came to him after the burial and talked with him about Vicknair.

"I never did know him," Johnson recalled the player saying, "but I had this funny feeling when he passed by. It was something that you can't describe. It was an emotion that I couldn't describe, but I knew he was someone very important to the history and the legend of our Barbe football program."

Johnson connected the dots between the emotion the player struggled to put into words and the father-like connection Vicknair had with so many players and assistant coaches he touched.

"There's kind of a bond that can't be explained," Johnson said. "For three or four months out of the year,

these coaches become like a parent. A kid's got problems in school, and he doesn't go see his parents — he goes to see his coach. You've got issues on and off the field, and the coach is their counselor. That may upset a lot of parents, but that's a fact. That's who they come to. They bond with these coaches, and they become parents to the kids."

Johnson said he's seen players return to Barbe years after graduation to seek out their former coaches.

"They come back year after year after year and sit down and talk with the coaches," Johnson said. "They'll say, 'I've got this problem,' or 'I came back to see how you're doing,' and Coach Vicknair had that. In fact, he was like a father to those kids and was now in his second or third generation with some families, and he had to give the same advice to the sons that he'd given to their fathers earlier in his career."

Johnson, who came of age during the Vietnam War and understands how football terms evolved from military language, said there is something about the sport that creates a connection between players and their coaches that features some of the same dynamics found in the various branches of military service.

"They're out there on Friday nights, playing football," he said, "and to them, to a lot of them, that's the closest thing to being in a battle, in a war, that any of them will ever experience. It's kind of hard to explain, but it's like a crisis, and the coach is the guy you look to and say, 'Hey, we're in a battle here. Help me out.'"

"He was that guy. He was the guy that stood up for them and backed them up and took care of them."

When Westlake played St. Louis later in the 2008 season, the Saints had a special night to honor Vicknair. They wore CV decals on their helmets, displaying the initials of the man who coached his three sons at the school.

Westlake's players wore the decals too, and both schools kept them on the helmets all season.

Mike Johns, the St. Louis coach, had known Vicknair since they met at McNeese as college students in the early 1960s. Their sons were friends, and they started coaching at the same time.

Johns is one of several Southwest Louisiana Coach of the Year Award winners influenced by Vicknair.

"He's left a legacy here In Calcasieu Parish," Anderson said, speaking from the office where he works as assistant superintendent for the school board.

Vicknair's family continues to learn about that legacy.

"It was kind of a shame that we didn't know more about him until after the fact," Vic said.

"But he didn't want to take credit, never wants to take credit — never did, never will," Chad said as his older brother nodded, "and I guarantee you he would be mad that we're talking about him right now. He never wanted to take credit."

They remembered watching their dad walk around the track at Westlake after a victory, on his way to the equipment room and letting everyone else soak up the celebration and the accolades. It was his way, they said, especially after so many years of being the head coach. It was time to let others be front and center.

Now, the mentor's former pupils work as head

coaches, assistant coaches, businessmen and teachers. To a man, they say it is important for future coaches and players in Southwest Louisiana to know who Charles Vicknair was and the role he played in the development of high school football in the region.

Friends are left with a void to fill.

"I miss him greatly," Ronnie Johns said a year after Vicknair's death, "but I was just proud to be a part of his life. I can get pretty emotional about it."

The family works on one day at a time.

"The emptiness doesn't go away, but as time goes on you learn how to cope with it," Cody said. "We've done that as a family."

Talking, it seems, helps.

"We love talking about him and his legacy, because he'd never do it. He'd never talk about his career," Cody said.

All of our words come back to us in one way or another, it seems, and after the funeral friends and family were left with a reminder of Vicknair's most remembered expressions. Those sayings would have to do much of the talking for Coach Vic in his absence.

Be careful what you say. We never know how we're going to be remembered.

A slice of heaven? Who would look for heaven in an office of football coaches, on a practice field, from a man who couldn't spell and couldn't remember your name? Yes, he often said it in a way that was open to interpretation, but late in the first year after his death, those words had a different ring that resonated with much more poignancy

than he ever intended when he spoke them.

As Debbie Vicknair sat quietly on the sofa, nodding in agreement, her youngest son spoke familiar words.

"It's been a slice of heaven," Cody Vicknair said.

"That is just the story of his life. We were able to see a slice of heaven seeing a coaching legend that was down here for 66 years, and who gave 45 years to just an unsurpassable amount of coaching that he instilled in this community — that brings Southwest Louisiana football to what it is today."

END