

Woody Lombardi Durham '63

DSM

Through athletics, the University reaches North Carolinians who have never sat through Spanish I in Dey Hall, people without a Carolina heritage, good folks who never imagined themselves as college students. Years ago, that reach extended to Woody Lombardi Durham's parents, and for the last quarter century Woody Durham has been the chief agent of that reach to new generations of Tar Heels.

Durham's father and mother both worked in the textile industry. They were never Carolina students, but they were Carolina fans. They had season tickets for Kenan Stadium and Woody would sit between them at an age so young he did not need a ticket. The youngster went to J.C. Penney's for a Choo-Choo sweatshirt and got the famous tailback to autograph it. So when the time to choose a college neared, Durham had no doubts.

Already Durham was an experienced sportscaster. At age 16 he taped Albemarle High School basketball games for later broadcast on WKZY, a daytime-only station. He would listen to the rebroadcasts and learn from his mistakes.

A radio-television student, he was on the air on WUNC-TV by his sophomore year and on WCHL radio by his senior year, calling Carolina baseball for five dollars a game.

After his 1963 graduation, Durham went to a television station in Florence, South Carolina, but after only a few months, Charlie Harville, a well known North Carolina sportscaster, quit as sports director at WFMY-TV in Greensboro. At that point, one of the legends of North Carolina sports television spoke up on Durham's behalf. C.D. Chesley, generally regarded as the father of televised Tobacco Road basketball, told the WFMY management that he knew a bright kid who could do the job, and Durham, at age 22, became sports director for one of North Carolina's oldest and largest television stations. Very soon, Durham was on the air calling his first college football games—for Wake Forest! He even had a television show with the Demon Deacons' head coach!

Between 1968 and 1971, Durham worked for Chesley on the ACC basketball telecasts with Bones McKinney and Jim Thacker. In 1977, Durham left WFMY and came to a television station serving Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill, and in 1981, he became vice president and executive sports director for Village Sports, Inc., of Chapel Hill.

In 1971, Bill Curry, sports director for a television station in Charlotte and for years, as the "mouth of the south," the play-by-play man for Carolina football and basketball, left for Pittsburgh. Athletics director Homer Rice approached Durham, and a twenty-five year partnership between Durham and Carolina athletics — still going strong after more than 1,000 games — was born.

Over those years, the oft-repeated phrases have found a home in the Carolina fan's subconscious ("Touchdown, Carolina!" "The Carlisle, Pennsylvania, senior." "Stanicek looks left, now rolls to his right...") as well as the occasional exclamation that captures the emotion of the contest ("The Tar Heels are GOING TO WIN the National Championship!")

Durham's success — he has been chosen repeatedly by his peers as the North Carolina Sportscaster of the Year and was the initial recipient of the J. Robert Marlowe award from the North Carolina Association of Broadcasters—is grounded in his empathy for the fan, his devotion to preparation, and his sense of proportion. He says that he is always aware that "while I don't work for the University, I am representing The University of North Carolina. I think about that in the way I present what I do."

Durham subscribes to Dean Smith's description of Carolina football and basketball, as the University's front porch, a welcoming place that attracts people from across the state. "If we're going to have a journalism department on this campus, I want it to be the best," he says. "If we're going to have an athletic department on this campus, I also want it to be the best —within the rules."

In Albemarle and Rocky Mount and Laurinburg right now there are Carolina fans who listen to Woody who have never drunk from the Old Well. Someday, their children will.