

Sunday, August 24, 2008

A new breed of Michigan man

Every so often, the Wolverines look outside their family for a head coach (remember Bo?) and now hope that Rodriguez can reinvigorate the program.

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ANN ARBOR, Mich. | The outsider's door is always open. That's the first difference. People come and go throughout the day, hoping to make their initial judgments, and the outsider makes time.

Rich Rodriguez knows that many of his visitors aren't convinced he's the right guy to man the captain's seat of Michigan football, arguably the country's steadiest ship, but he chats them up anyway. He doesn't sound like them with his easy Appalachian drawl, his mix-and-match grammar. He knows that, too.

For years, Schembechler Hall was an impenetrable fortress. With an arrogance that drove nearly all of its peers crazy, Michigan was content to sit at the top of the hill and look down on the changing world around it. Isolationist policies eventually die, though, and Rodriguez, the program's first outsider in 38 years, has arrived to begin the process of modernization.

Rodriguez wants the program to be transparent, so come on in and get to know the new guy. He has nothing to hide. Sure, it's been a tough year. He missed out on playing for a national championship. He's been called a liar by people he thought were his friends. He's been accused of having no family values. Now, the old guard at Michigan worries that he is going to blow up the whole damn thing.

"People say, 'He's changing the culture,' " Rodriguez says. "I'm not changing the culture. I'm trying to embrace the history, but yet we're going to do things the way we do it. You gotta be yourself."

Rodriguez *ain't changin'*. That's how he says it, and he means it. But he wants to understand this whole "Michigan man" thing, too.

"I'm studying up on it," Rodriguez says. "Reading books. I got 500 books sent to me. I got four or five of the same book, 'Bo's Lasting Lessons,' and it gave me some perspective on things."

Rodriguez has realized Michigan is unique. Fans and former players who want their football coach to spend his time reading

"I'm not a big voracious reader," Rodriguez says.

But he's trying to fit in.

"I care very deeply," Rodriguez says. "But I can't let it affect policy or change who we are."

That's a fine line to walk in Ann Arbor, but Rodriguez had the blueprint for outsider success right in front of him. All he had to do was look at the name on the building: Schembechler.

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The phone rang all over the country, and the 1969 Michigan Wolverines answered. Rich Rodriguez was inviting them to come back to campus and talk to his first UM team about the arrival of one Bo Schembechler.

Before Rodriguez, there had been three people with no Michigan connections hired to run the program. They just happened to be the three best-known coaches in school history: Fielding Yost (1901), Fritz Crisler ('38) and Schembechler ('69). There was a pattern, too. Every 30 or so years, it seemed, Michigan got stale.

The similarities between '69 and this 2008 team were too many to ignore. Both teams were 3-7 against archrival Ohio State in their last 10. And, in each case, word had gotten around that the Wolverines had become a bit flimsy.

"We had heard rumors that Michigan had good athletes but they were soft," says Jerry Hanlon, a Michigan assistant under Schembechler. "They were the Izod sweater guys."

Before he died in November 2006, Bo was known to say similar things about Lloyd Carr's program behind closed doors.

"I'm just expressing something that was told to me by Bo," says Reggie McKenzie, an offensive lineman on the '69 team. "He said, 'We don't have the tough practices anymore.' He didn't like how sometimes they wouldn't hit."

"We got soft. And so we welcome this change."

The 1969 Michigan team wasn't soft.

"I'm going to treat you all the same. Like dogs!" Bo told them, according to John U. Bacon's "Bo's Lasting Lessons."

Within one offseason, Schembechler's workouts had run off nearly half the team.

Bo was certainly making changes, but he showed an appreciation for Michigan's history from the start. When his staff first saw their sorry excuse for a coaches' locker room, Bo said, "Just remember, Fielding H. Yost hung his jockstrap on that nail! If it's good enough

for him, it's good enough for you."

These were the stories that Rodriguez had read, that the '69 boys relayed. That team, the most beloved Michigan team of all-time, finished the season by upsetting No. 1 Ohio State, the defending national champion, 24-12. The next era of Michigan football was born.

Rodriguez's players got a lot out of the meeting, but Rodriguez didn't need much advice. He would always cling to his own creation story, the one that began in the mountains of West Virginia.

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Rich Rodriguez's office window shows a glimpse of his future. Cranes have taken over Michigan's South Campus. Michigan Stadium is undergoing a \$226 million renovation to add luxury boxes. A new \$26 million indoor practice facility takes shape next to Schembechler Hall. Michigan has finally joined the college football arms race, and make no mistake, Rodriguez was the last investment.

But, before he could occupy this office, Rodriguez had to get his hands dirty. And since he didn't want to do it like his father, Vince, in the coal mines of Grant Town, W.Va., he had to find another way.

"I didn't wanna go in the mines," Rodriguez says. "That's a tough way of life."

Rodriguez didn't have it easy, either. He walked on to play defensive back at West Virginia under Don Nehlen and earned a scholarship within one year. After his playing career, he knew he wanted to coach.

By age 26, in 1990, he was hired at Division II Glenville State. Rodriguez was the equipment guy, the strength-and-conditioning guy. He probably handled his own media relations, too. Rodriguez's wife, Rita, helped put down the chalk lines on the field.

Football was not important at Glenville when Rodriguez arrived. At home games, they were lucky to get 100 fans. The good thing for Rodriguez, though, was he could experiment with the offense and nobody would ever find out what he had cooking. Rodriguez had always noticed that teams seemed to score more often when they went to a two-minute drill, so why not play that way all the time?

Within three years, Glenville State was playing for the Division II national title, throwing 60 or 70 times a game.

"He brought that program from the dead," says Tony Gipson, who played at Glenville and now coaches the Michigan defensive backs. "We played with a certain passion there that he taught us. That's the one thing that never changed in 15 years."

The locations changed, sure, but the success of Rodriguez's spread offense didn't. There

was Tulane, where Rodriguez was the offensive coordinator for Tommy Bowden. He threw the ball all over the field, and the Green Wave went undefeated. Then there was Clemson, where Rodriguez began to use the spread option attack. Finally, his career would come full circle. In 2001, he would take over for Nehlen at West Virginia.

Rodriguez's program took off with the arrival of quarterback Pat White and running back Steve Slaton. West Virginia went 32-5 the last three years and beat powers Georgia and Oklahoma in BCS bowl games. Amazingly, they did it with a system not all that different from the one concocted in those trailers they called offices in Glenville.

Rodriguez admits that he doesn't spend a lot of time reflecting. Really, he has done nothing but think about football since he was 18 years old. He may not be the most well-rounded guy, but he knows who he is.

"I don't coach football," Rodriguez says. "I live it. I live it because it helps me do my job better. Three-hundred sixty-five days a year, you can go on vacation, it's never not on my mind. When I quit needing football to be a part of my life, I won't coach anymore."

And that might be the biggest difference between Rodriguez and the man who previously sat in this office. Lloyd Carr just wanted to be a teacher.

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The man wearing the black sunglasses loves his Starbucks. He drinks his coffee slowly. The attempt to go unnoticed was typical Lloyd Carr.

"Lloyd just wanted to fit in," says Dan Dierdorf, a former Michigan offensive lineman and Pro Football Hall of Famer. "He wore that grey sweatshirt on the sidelines. Lloyd really understood the concept of just being a part of Michigan football. You are just a cog in this machine that has been running pretty smoothly for well over 100 years. Lloyd never wanted to be the story."

Carr hasn't granted many interviews in the last eight months. He's been doing his own thing. Traveling to China. Playing golf in Scotland. Visiting the Civil War battlefield of Antietam, Md. Hanging out with Russell Crowe on the set of his new movie in Washington, D.C.

Oh, and reading. Lots and lots of books. He tells you about one of them and delivers a classic Carrism.

"You read that book, and then you call me, and I want a book review," Carr says with delight.

Carr, Michigan's coach for 13 seasons, could have been just as happy as an English professor. Before a player could walk into Carr's office, they would have to look up a word in the dictionary and be able to tell him the definition before they left the room.

"He kind of had his players explore a little bit of what he found interesting," says Jim Brandstetter, the voice of Michigan football. "It was part of him being that teacher that he wanted to be."

Carr had his successes as a coach, too. The Wolverines won the 1997 national championship behind a defense led by Heisman Trophy winner Charles Woodson. But in the years after, Michigan struggled to reach that level again.

In 2000, the Wolverines lost a 54-51 game to Northwestern, which ran a spread offense. Over the next eight seasons, Michigan failed to adapt. That much was obvious in embarrassing losses to Appalachian State and Oregon last season. After many defeats, opposing players called out Michigan's offense for being predictable.

"Everybody knew exactly what we were going to do," Michigan defensive end Brandon Graham says. "That was like the arrogance of being at Michigan. 'Our players are better than yours.' That's how it was. That kind of got to (players) when it stopped working. The big games, like Ohio State, we would want to show them something we didn't do during the season. But we'd go out there and do the same thing."

Carr was 5-1 against Ohio State coach John Cooper. But Jim Tressel flipped the script, going 6-1 against Carr. All of a sudden, there were Web sites like firelloyd carr.com. The pressure was rising. The players were different than they were 10 years ago.

"What has happened is there is a presence of agents in college football," Carr says. "Those people influence recruiting. You gotta make a decision. Do you want to deal with an 18-year-old kid with an agent? And sometimes, it isn't official, but it's the same, you know?"

When Carr retired, the question immediately became: Would his replacement be a Michigan man? What does that mean, anyway?

"A Michigan man loves Michigan," Carr says, "and respects that he is a representative of something bigger than himself."

Carr always understood that. He knew that, if they did go outside the program, it would take time for the new guy to understand.

"Love," Carr says, "is something that grows."

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The most trying nine months of Rodriguez's life began on the night of Dec. 1, 2007. His Mountaineers were ranked No. 2 in the country, and a win over 4-7 Pittsburgh would vault them into the BCS title game. But Pat White went down to injury and West Virginia went down with him, losing 13-9.

"It's painful just thinking about it," Rodriguez says.

Earlier on that same day, the wheels were already set in motion for an outsider to end up in Ann Arbor. Hours before the SEC championship game between LSU and Tennessee, ESPN reported what most expected would happen, that LSU coach Les Miles would coach Michigan, his alma mater, in 2008.

It certainly made sense. Miles played for Schembechler, and years later, when he decided to become a coach, Schembechler brought him on as a graduate assistant. Miles had been working in Cleveland at a trucking firm.

When the news broke, the old guard at Michigan rejoiced. One of their own was coming home. Except, he wasn't. Suddenly, there was Miles on national TV, saying once and for all that he was staying at LSU. Soon after, the Tigers announced a contract extension. Where was Michigan athletic director Bill Martin during all of this? He was sailing and unable to communicate. Oh, boy.

"It just didn't look like we had a clue what we were doing," McKenzie says.

Adds Dierdorf, "There are a lot of guys who would like to know exactly what happened, how was it that Les Miles didn't end up being the Michigan coach. That's not going to go away for a while."

Next up was Rutgers' Greg Schiano, who turned down Martin. Rodriguez was next on the list. Martin met with Rodriguez in Toledo, Ohio, and a deal was struck. Rodriguez was leaving home.

Then West Virginia revolted. Not just the school administration. The whole state. Rodriguez's family was threatened. The school accused him of trying to hide something when he put documents through a paper shredder on his way out. The school wanted Rodriguez to pay his entire \$4 million buyout, but Rodriguez didn't think he should have to. Every day, it was something.

"It was a nightmare that wouldn't end," Rodriguez says, "and you couldn't do anything about it. I was the same guy that five months ago nothing was wrong with. I'm sitting here today the same person, just a little wiser into how people can be so mean."

Not everybody at Michigan was welcoming, either. Three months into his tenure, an offensive lineman, Justin Boren, transferred to Ohio State. Boren's father, Mike, was a captain under Bo Schembechler. Justin Boren left with guns blazing.

"Michigan football was a family, built on mutual respect and support for each other from Coach Carr on down," Boren said in a statement. "I have great trouble accepting that those family values have eroded in just a few months."

That was the first in a series of blows to Rodriguez's perception. In May, he made the mistake of giving away the No. 1 jersey, worn by Michigan's top wide receiver since Anthony Carter, to a defensive back (Rodriguez eventually fixed the problem).

He also did away with Michigan's longstanding tradition of having senior captains. Rodriguez instead elects 18-20 upperclassmen to be "apostles" and names new captains each week. It's the way he's done it since Glenville. He's not going to change.

"Rich Rod so far has proven to be almost completely immune," Bacon says. "He can laugh over it. He doesn't care. He keeps moving."

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Rich Rodriguez points to the framed pictures behind his desk. There's his wife, Rita, and his two kids, Raquel and Rhett. They're his "personal family." Then there's his "football family."

Just outside his office, a member of that family, freshman quarterback Justin Feagin, waits to see Coach. He looks nervous.

"Hey, Justin!" Rodriguez yells. "I'll be just a minute. You're not in trouble."

Rodriguez invited Feagin, who is from Deerfield, Fla., to come see him this afternoon because he thinks Feagin might be a bit homesick.

"He's been here about six weeks," Rodriguez says. "I worry about him."

The one criticism that truly got to Rodriguez was Boren's. It caught him totally off-guard. His assistants, too. Six of them followed him across the country, and that's not counting the entire strength-and-conditioning staff and other staff members. They came with Rodriguez because they can't imagine working for anybody else.

"I came to Michigan because of Rich Rodriguez," says Mike Barwis, who has been Rodriguez's strength-and-conditioning guru since 2003. "It's pretty simple. I'll stay with him as long as he wants me."

Rodriguez forces his players to memorize the names of every worker in the program, from the secretaries to the janitorial staff. He wants them all to feel important.

Fred Jackson has been the Michigan running backs coach for 17 years. He is the lone re-hire from Carr's staff.

"This man is a big-time family man," Jackson says. "He wants everyone to be treated the same. He really tries to stress it more than anybody I've ever been around."

That's comforting for Michigan fans to hear, but Rich Rodriguez wasn't brought to

Michigan to raise a family. His \$2.5 million salary - Carr made \$1.5 million last season - says enough about the expectations. For Michigan, this was no get-Rich-quick scheme. The investment has been made, and it's substantial.

Here's what Michigan expects to get from Rodriguez: Exciting football. Home-run capability. Speed unseen before in Ann Arbor. A coach who will not sleep until the Wolverines are feared again.

"There probably was a time when we'd come out of that tunnel in that winged helmet and that'd be worth 10 or 14 points," Rodriguez says. "That's not the case anymore. In fact, it's probably just the opposite."

For years, Michigan football was built on a belief that it had superior athletes and could win with pure Midwestern brawn. Rich Rodriguez believes in the system. His system. Michigan has turned to a football academic of sorts, one of the most-renowned experts in his field, to turn the tide.

"He is a teacher just like Lloyd," Brandstetter says. "Instead of Churchill and World War II quotes, he's teaching the spread offense."

Rodriguez will be judged on many things at Michigan. Off the field, his graduation rate will be closely examined. His players will be expected to stay out of trouble. On the field, simply extending Michigan's 33-year bowl streak won't be enough.

"I can tell you right now, Rich Rodriguez has to start beating Ohio State," Dierdorf says. "Losing to Ohio State every year is unacceptable. It's got to change. I'm sure nobody knows that more than Rich Rodriguez."

What Rich Rodriguez knows or doesn't know about Michigan is changing by the day. There's little time for reading now, the first game less than a week away. The outsider knows he's being watched. And he knows what he has to do.

"It takes winning," Rodriguez says. "It takes winning big on a consistent basis. You can't talk your way into it, you can't hope the past is going to do it for you."