

It's About Phipps Now

_ Commentary

They're called Division III moments, and in the 22 years he's led the Bridgewater College football program, Michael Clark has come to know them all too well. Those moments scattered between the "Frank Beamer decisions," he says he has to make that humble him. They remind him of where he's at and his role in the football world. And it's not just his small office cramped with a desk and a tiny round table with four chairs. It's the other things, when the head football coach has to play the role of graduate assistant on a regular basis, or every now and then has to be the equipment guy. "Because somebody has to go get it done," Clark says. "And you just do it."

There are a lot of those moments, and Clark talks about them with a smile.

"You get humbled on a regular basis," he says.

But at times, Clark could count on feeling big-time, and that's important to a coach. He enjoys it. And when it came to feeling big-time in a small town, nobody does it better than Bill Phipps, the longtime voice of the Eagles who, for the second time in two years, is battling brain cancer. And even as Clark talks about visiting Phipps this past weekend at the University of Virginia Medical Center, his smile gets wider. Phipps did his homework. He knew the personnel, he went into each pre-game and post-game show knowing who the next opponent was and what they brought to the football field.

"A fan, but not a cheerleader," Clark says. "And I told him 'I always appreciated when I was around you. In those settings, I felt big-time. That's something about our job we enjoy.'" For 20 years, Phipps has done play-by-play on the radio, and more recently, live-streaming on the Bridgewater athletics website for the Eagles football team. And the smile leaves Clark's face when he says Phipps won't be on the air this fall. Phipps told the school he couldn't do it this year because he didn't think it would be up to the standards he set for himself, Clark says. Phipps also missed his summer gig as the public-address announcer for the County League's Clover Hill Bucks.

"Number one, he's a great person," says former Clover Hill star Addison Bowman, who retired after last season as the league's MVP with the Bucks. "He always had a smile on his face and a good sense of humor."

And down at the ballpark, Phipps has a penchant for making RCBL players feel like big-leaguers.

"He made you feel like you were really important," Bowman says, "and what you did mattered."

What matters now is that Phipps, two years after a full-scale craniotomy to remove a brain tumor, is back in the hospital. What matters now is his recovery. What matters now are places like Clover Hill jumping in to help with medical expenses, hosting a Pie-A-Player night earlier this month as a fundraiser.

What matters now is Clark letting Phipps know that he had fans in Iraq, a group of away-from-home Americans huddled around a computer at some ungodly hour on Saturdays — or whatever day it was in Baghdad — listening to Phipps call a game in 2004.

One of those Americans was Clark's brother, David, an FBI agent who spent four months in the wartorn city listening to his brother's team play.

With Phipps on play-by-play, that Division III game might as well have been the NFL.

“I remember Dave telling me ‘those guys doing your games are pretty good,’” Clark says. “I told Bill that. I said ‘I wanted you to know.’”

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