



Photo: University of North Carolina Athletics

# Seize Your Opportunity

It was a call that would reverberate throughout the college football landscape through the entire 2019 football season and is a microcosm of the pressure coaches face to balance long-term program health and short-term success.

By Paul Markgraff

Driving late in the fourth quarter against conference foe Clemson Tigers — the same Clemson Tigers that dismantled the Alabama Crimson Tide in the 2018 College Football Playoff National Championship 44-16 — the North Carolina Tarheels commanded the field for 8 minutes and 32 seconds, converting not one but two fourth downs to give them a chance at victory.

When North Carolina running back Javonte Williams capped the drive with a 3-yard burst for a touchdown, the Tarheels came within 1 point (20-21) of tying the game against the No. 1 team in the nation. With 1 minute, 16 seconds left on the clock, North Carolina head coach and 2013 AFCA President Mack Brown raised his arm, two fingers held aloft.

Having matched each other blow for blow over the course of the game, both teams knew that the contest of wills could end right here, on the business end of a two-point conversion. Everyone in that stadium, everyone on the national television broadcast, knew it too.

“When you get an opportunity to put pressure on the No. 1 team in the country and you’re a team that won two games the year before, the longer the game goes on, the better team has the best chance to win,” says Brown. “So I needed to get it over as fast as I could and I trusted our players would feel the same way. We had five starters out on defense during that game. We didn’t need to go to overtime. When we crossed midfield, I knew. There was no question in my mind — then or now — that I would go for two.”

Freshman quarterback Sam Howell ran a speed option to the right, searching for a crease, but Clemson’s defense was too fast. He was met at the 1-yard line, and he pitched the ball out right to wide receiver Dazz Newsome. Clemson’s defense collapsed on Newsome, and even with Newsome’s valiant

second effort, he was driven out of bounds. Brown’s gamble failed just 1 yard short of pay dirt. Game of inches, indeed.

At the time, it was a gut punch for North Carolina, who so boldly fought to unseat the defending national champion from its pedestal. In the aftermath, Brown stuck by his coaches, his players and himself.

“I think that earlier in my career, I probably would have worried about what people thought,” says Brown. “At this stage in my life though, I only worried about what was best for our team; I didn’t worry about anything else.”

After the final seconds ticked off the clock, with the score unchanged, Clemson escaped Kenan Stadium in Chapel Hill, N.C., surviving an extremely close brush with fate. Since then, Clemson has continued its undefeated streak (as of Dec. 27, 2019), but the close call with North Carolina hung with them. Despite completely dominating Alabama in the 2018 national championship, and rolling all other opponents on their 2019 schedule, Clemson was unable to maintain their No. 1 ranking after that game. Even in a loss, North Carolina raised enough questions among voting coaches about the Clemson program that Clemson lost their No. 1 ranking anyway, falling immediately to No. 2 and then to No. 3 in the Amway Coaches Poll just one month later. This is shocking, considering Clemson beat all other opponents on its 2019 schedule with an average score of 48-10. But so goes football, a game where wins and losses matter, but so too does belief.

## 2020 Hindsight

It’s curious how many naysayers came out of the woodwork to question Brown’s call. Immediately after the game, critics and pundits began sanctimoniously proclaiming about “the right thing to do,” as though they understood even a

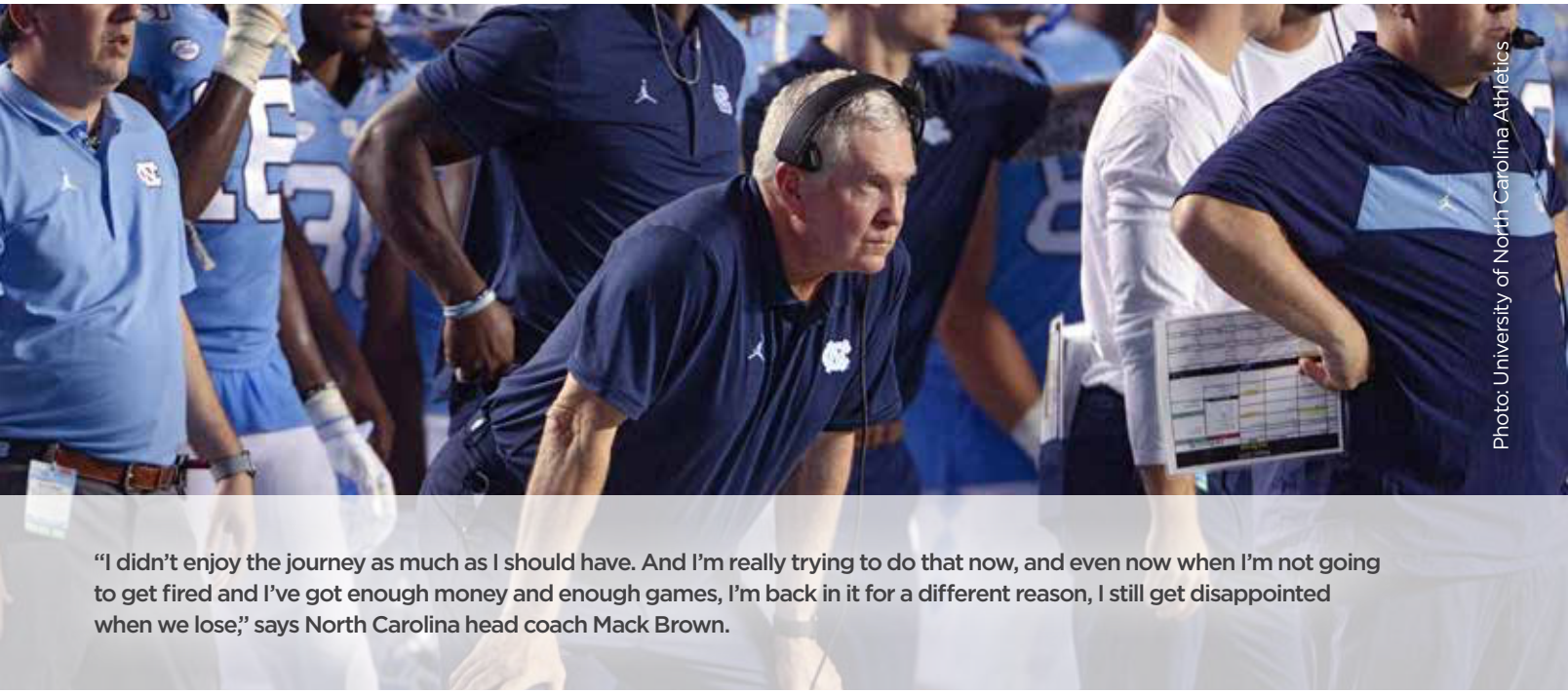


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“I didn’t enjoy the journey as much as I should have. And I’m really trying to do that now, and even now when I’m not going to get fired and I’ve got enough money and enough games, I’m back in it for a different reason, I still get disappointed when we lose,” says North Carolina head coach Mack Brown.

fraction of the information that Brown used to make the call. Though some supported it as gutsy, many more of the so-called journalists questioned the call.

“I was one of them for five years, and what they are paid to do is have a strong opinion of something one way or the other,” says Brown. “Those that were negative — if we’d made it going for two — would have said it was a genius call, but they can wait and see how it works out and then form their opinion. I didn’t have the luxury to wait and say, ‘Well, I didn’t make it. So let’s redo, redo, redo.’ So I didn’t really care because I had more information. It wasn’t a bad call; we just didn’t execute it right.”

It’s a microcosm of so much in football coaching, a coach trying his best to do what’s right for his players and his program, only to be second-guessed at every turn by outsiders looking in. In many ways, it’s a no-win situation. Coaches strive to make the right decisions for their programs, make the right play calls in every instance, use the right words when trying to connect with players and coaches on a personal level. But every decision, every play call, every word choice is made with the Sword of Damocles hanging above the coach’s head.

According to that old yarn, Damocles was a Greek courtier who — in pandering to his king Dionysius — proclaimed how truly fortunate his king was because of his power and authority. Dionysius offered to switch places with Damocles so the courtier could experience the power, authority and luxury firsthand. When Damocles sat in the throne, it was only then that he noticed the enormous sword hanging above his head suspended by a single horse hair. It served as a reminder to the king that as power and authority waxes, so too does the specter of anxiety, fear and ultimate demise.

Coaches are all too familiar with this feeling, and it shapes and informs the decisions they make, especially

in-the-moment decisions, and especially when the eyes of a nation fall upon them, decisions like whether to go for the win against the No. 1 team in the nation with just over a minute left to go in the game.

Since 1983, when Brown held his first head coaching position at Appalachian State University, he’s struggled with this all-too-common anxiety, but as he’s grown in his career, gaining untold experience coaching some of the best college football teams in the nation (including a 2005 BCS National Championship with Texas), he’s learned that it’s more important to forget about the critics and just do what’s best for the program.

“It’s a very liberating way to live,” says Brown. “I never saw or read anything bad about the call because I didn’t care what they thought, and I don’t think about whether I would do it again or not, because it was 100 percent.

“After my five years in broadcasting, I told all the young coaches, ‘Enjoy the moment. Enjoy the journey.’ To which they said, ‘Yeah, you can do that. You’re financially set up. You’re in the hall of fame. You’ve won enough games. Come on man, my life’s not like your life.’ And they’re really right in some ways.”

## Do The Right Thing

It’s that level of introspection that defines the man, and the coach, because it’s true. It’s nice to think that maybe any coach could just call his shot, and as long as it was in the best interest of the program, everything is just gravy. But that isn’t reality. Incorrect choices lose games, and a string of them loses jobs. The fact is, all football coaches get fired or resign eventually, even national championship coaches.

At the same time, great coaches understand that their ultimate fate doesn’t need to taint their players’ futures. Case in point, Michael Bolognesi. Or rather, Dr. Michael Bolognesi.



North Carolina head coach Mack Brown says coaches can help limit the number of student-athletes entering the transfer portal by recruiting players that fit at your university, academically, culturally and athletically.

The distinction is important. From 1989 to 1993, Bolognesi played defensive back for Brown during the coach's first stint at North Carolina, a 10-season run that saw North Carolina vault onto the national stage during an ACC era dominated by Brown and Florida State's Bobby Bowden. Bolognesi graduated from North Carolina and went on to earn his Ph.D., eventually working as an orthopedic surgeon at Duke University Hospital. Long-story-short, Bolognesi was the surgeon that performed Brown's knee replacement in June 2019.

"It was one of the coolest things I've ever been involved with," says Brown. "I was back here a year ago for the Hall of Fame celebration and [Michael] was there. He saw me limping and said, 'Somebody's going to need to fix that knee.' I laughed because we weren't thinking about being back in this area or this community. I actually had some plans to get it fixed elsewhere but I hadn't gone further."

Brown's knee got worse and worse. He called Bolognesi two weeks before he needed it fixed. He had camps scheduled just days later. Bolognesi was confident he could successfully complete the surgery and have Brown — if not running around at the camps — at least vertical in a golf cart and walking a little.

"I was laying there right before the surgery; I was gassed up pretty good, and I said, 'Michael, I ever make you mad?'" says Brown. "He said, 'Coach, you made us all mad.' And he smiled and said, 'But we're good. Go to sleep.' They did a tremendous job. So very few head coaches have ever been able to have a player operate on them, and he did such a great job. My knee's been perfect."

Still, all coaches who've been doing it long enough know the feeling of a player who's graduated that comes back and verbalizes the impact that coach had on the player's later life. To a coach, there is nothing more rewarding than that feeling.

That's the reward that comes from making the right choices for the program and the right choices for your players — and to heck with the Sword of Damocles. It's part of the bedrock of the AFCA and the football coaching profession in general. The coach's influence extends far beyond the field of play and resonates through all walks of life fortunate enough to encounter those players.

"We talk about building young men so they can be productive husbands, fathers and citizens," says Brown. "It was a blessing in my life, and to think about [Michael] as a student and a player, to think about those days when he was covering kicks and playing safety, now he's operating on my knee. I'm just so happy for him and I'm happy we were able to play a small part in his development."

## The Next Generation

Stories like going for two against Clemson in the waning seconds for a chance to win — and having your knee operated on by a former player, who after competing for you, went on to thrive in life outside of football — are the types of stories that draw true believers to your program.

When players know they can trust their coach to call the right shot in a selfless manner, those players will do whatever a coach asks. In addition, that killer instinct is a magnet for recruits searching for the right fit. It's a character, an intangible attitude, that pervades a program, and it is helping Brown attract recruits from all corners of the nation.

"I think it's the fact they know that I know what I'm doing," says Brown. "They've seen my past and they know we've got the process. We've got the path to get to the championship, and they want to be a part of it."

And vice versa, if that sentiment doesn't resonate with a player, then that's not a guy the Tarheels want filling out a uniform come Saturday, or any other day for that matter.

"We constantly talk about that too," says Brown. "We want to recruit people who want to be here. They want to work, and they want to play for me and with me. They want to be on this team, and they want to be at this university. We all get to make choices in life, but the guys who want to be here are the ones we are going to win with."

It's a mentality best summed in a speech by Theodore Roosevelt in 1910, in which the former president sneered at cynics and critics who — though vocal — would not "accept contact with life's realities." And it's an important philosophy that can guide a coach during difficult days, especially when life's realities have that coach on the brink.

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat." **AFCA**