



## Former Wolf Pack basketball coach Sonny Allen's remarkable recovery leads to 'My winning season'

**T**here is really no earthly explanation for it.

Former Wolf Pack men's basketball coach Sonny Allen shouldn't be alive on this rainy January afternoon in Reno.

Sometime in August 2006, the then-70-year-old Allen lapsed into a 10-day coma at Renown South Meadows Hospital as a severe case of West Nile Virus gripped his body. His life should've been over.

The West Nile Virus—contracted when Allen and his wife, Donna, had visited New Orleans for five days a month earlier—had taken over so completely that it had led to secondary cases of meningitis and encephalitis.

"With an elderly patient who has West Nile Virus and secondary cases of meningitis and encephalitis, most of the time they may not make it," said Guy Gansert '80 (zoology), '86M.D., a Reno emergency physician and Allen family friend whose brother, Gary, led Allen's treatment. "There just isn't a lot you can do. When Sonny first got sick, to be honest with you, I wasn't sure he would survive."

Added Donna Allen: "It was just so devastating. Once the doctors determined that Sonny had West Nile Virus, it didn't make all that great of a difference because they told us, 'Really, there is nothing for you that we can do.'"

And yet, more than two years later, as a soft rain falls in Reno, Allen is alive. In fact, after remaining in the hospital for a month after he finally pulled out of his coma, and after months of hard work to regain the use of his left side, which was temporarily paralyzed, and after losing—and then re-gaining—20 percent of his sight and his hearing, Allen's recovery has been remarkable.

"It really is a miracle," says Allen's son, Billy '83 (physical education) the Wolf Pack Hall of Fame guard from 1982-83 now living in Dallas.

A miracle, yes.

And maybe something more.

*Former Wolf Pack men's basketball coach Sonny Allen, who was at the helm for Nevada from 1980-1987, has made a miraculous recovery from a near-fatal case of West Nile Virus in 2006. Here he is shown in January in the den of his west Reno home.*

"Throughout it all, it would've been easy to give up," said Allen, who celebrated his 73rd birthday on March 8. "When people get sick or hurt, they don't always have people to help them. That wasn't the case with me. When I came out of the coma, there was never any doubt in my mind that I was going to be OK. I had too many people helping me and encouraging me along the way not to recover."

## The fast break coach

More than 20 years after coaching at Nevada, Sonny Allen remains one of the Wolf Pack's most successful coaches. He was the first coach to ever lead the Wolf Pack to the NCAA Tournament—twice, in fact, in 1984 and 1985. It would take Nevada another 20 seasons before it appeared in another NCAA Tournament.

Yet the soft-spoken Allen, whose words have a gentle sway to them, like a willow branch in motion, has coaching accomplishments that reach much farther than NCAA Tournament bids. He has helped change college basketball for the better, both in strategy and in cultural substance and significance.

Allen is credited with creating what is known today as the "numbered fast break." In 1966, to simplify the fast break offense at Old Dominion University, he assigned each player on the floor a number and a responsibility on the fast break. To this point, teams traditionally ran a "three-man" break. Allen's "five-man" break, with its new lexicon—point guard became a "1," shooting guard a "2," etc.—revolutionized the game and made it next to impossible to defend. And, Allen's position numbering system has become permanently ingrained in the language of basketball. Today, everyone—from television commentators to college coaches to fans—knows that a "2"

guard is a shooting guard, thanks to Allen.

The acclaimed novelist Pat Conroy, in his lyrical and poignant memoir of being a college basketball player during the 1966-67 season at the Citadel, *My Losing Season*, vividly described what kind of havoc Allen's numbered break wreaked when Allen's ODU team met the Citadel early that year: "Let it be known that the two five-foot-eleven guards Bob Pritchett and Arthur Speakes (of ODU) were that night kingly with their gifts and magical with their skills. The guys, as they say, lit it up, and we white boys looked as though our Converse All Stars had been glued to the floor."

As Conroy noted, both Pritchett and Speakes, who was known as "Buttons," were black. With little fanfare, Allen had quietly welcomed them to Old Dominion—the first black athletes to ever play basketball for a predominantly white school in the state of Virginia.

Donna, a tall, lithe woman with a ready smile, said moments such as the one Conroy described are what make her most proud of her husband's coaching career.

"Kids like Buttons Speakes and Bob Pritchett weren't allowed to eat in restaurants at that time," she said. "Sonny would park the bus, and he would say to the people in the restaurant, 'We've got some black players on our bus, will you serve them?' And they would say, 'No.' And Sonny would go back on the bus and say, 'You know what guys? Their food is crummy in there. This isn't good enough for you guys.'"

"And then he would find a restaurant that would serve his team."

Allen, when he had played basketball at Marshall University in Huntington, W.V., in the late 1950s, had been the road roommate for a silky smooth guard named Hal Greer, who would go on to become a 10-time NBA All-Star for the Philadelphia 76ers. Greer was black, and no one on the team would room with him on road trips—except for Allen, who didn't think twice about it.

"Hal was a guard... I was a guard," Allen said. "It didn't seem like it was that big of a deal."

Said Donna: "Sonny has never seen anything, black or white. To him, all of his players

were just people. They were just athletes, and they were just people."

As a coach, though he was clearly always in charge, Allen was no snap-jawed tyrant.

"It's pretty amazing, really," Billy said, "when people come up and they know you're Sonny Allen's son, and then they go on to tell you that there is no one nicer or better than your dad." Billy's voice breaks for a moment. He gathers his emotions, perhaps remembering that his father always coached from a place of basic kindness, that his father has always spoken of "following the golden rule... you treat everyone the way you would want to be treated... and that you can be firm, but there is no reason to ever be mean or nasty to a player."

"When you hear about how your dad cared for everybody," Billy finally continued, his voice regaining its strength, "and wanted to see everybody succeed... you feel really blessed to have him as your dad."

## 'My Winning Season'

Sonny Allen always believed that he could win every game he ever coached. Often, the odds were against his teams. When Old Dominion ran the Citadel out of its gym in 1966-67, Old Dominion was a Division II school—the Citadel was Division I. When he coached at Southern Methodist, Arkansas and Houston cast extraordinarily long and talented shadows that often reached to the Final Four. At Nevada, the Wolf Pack toiled in the obscurity of the Big Sky Conference.

Yet Allen, whose playing and coaching career has found places in the athletic halls of fame at Marshall, Old Dominion and Nevada, has always believed.

"I always felt that if we could do certain things, and played the way we were capable of, we could win," he said. "Basketball, after all, is a team game."

As Allen learned, so is recovering from West Nile Virus.

"You can't do it by yourself," he said. "Having a great team, a great support system, can make all of the difference. It's just like basketball: If you work together, you can get it done."



Sonny Allen and wife Donna enjoy the view from the back yard of their home in west Reno.

Allen had no idea, though, how far-reaching his support system would be.

He was released from Renown after a month, and attended physical therapy for several weeks. It didn't seem like it was enough. Gary Gansert, along with his brother Guy, began visiting Allen regularly. The two physicians encouraged Allen to push the calories and protein needed to regain the 20 pounds lost from his 175-pound frame.

Gary Gansert began taking Allen for walks, with a walker, around the block of Allen's neighborhood in west Reno. Soon they graduated to a lap or two around the track at nearby Reno High School. It took several months, but soon the two were walking a few miles together, as Allen gradually weaned himself from his walker, then from his cane.

"Sonny never whined or complained," Gary Gansert said. "He was always motivated. He's one of the most receptive guys. You can see why he was such a great basketball coach. He doesn't beat around the bush, and he's a great decision-maker. Once he makes a decision, he really knows how to make a commitment to it."

Guy Gansert, who received both his undergraduate and medical degrees from Nevada, said he was amazed at Allen's resiliency.

"Not once, during this whole time, has he ever seemed, or did he ever feel sorry for

himself," he said. "He was just always going to get better. He was not going to let this thing defeat him."

Allen said he found support from surprising places. His step-son, Jim Warner, often would meet Allen at the Olympic-sized pool at Lakerridge Athletic Club. Early on, Donna would have to take Sonny to the sessions in a wheelchair. Jim would have to hold Sonny upright as Allen thrashed forward in the water, trying to re-awaken his left leg from its paralysis.

The hard work helped; it also impressed a group of a half-dozen elderly ladies working out at the other end of the pool.

"They would start cheering when I would get in the water," Allen recalled, his brown eyes seeming to shimmer from the memory. "One day I told Donna, 'Let's go in without the wheelchair.' So I walked in, and those ladies all jumped out of the pool and started clapping.

"It just made their day. It made mine, too."

### 'Lots of Love'

The blessings of the great mystery behind Allen's recovery have been many—a kind of confetti shower that seems to happily fall on Allen's shoulders each morning when he awakes for a new day. He has regained his strength and learned to walk again without even the slightest bit of a limp because of the thoughts, prayers, words and actions of many.

Recently, as Donna and Sonny prepared to join members of their church, The River, to help feed and hand out jackets, gloves and sleeping bags for 90 homeless citizens in Barbara Bennett Park in downtown Reno, as the light of day vanished and the temperature plunged into the 30s, a phone message was left for Allen.

It was a voice from the past; a ghost from the 1966-67 season, when Allen and "Buttons" Speakes and Bob Pritchett chased the out-manned players of the Citadel off their court in a small gym in Charleston, S.C. It was the first time black players had ever competed on the beautiful hardwood of the Citadel's Armory, a small moment that would help open the floodgates of integration throughout the south in the coming months and years.

Pat Conroy, the author of best-selling novels such as *The Prince of Tides*, *The Lords of Discipline* and *The Great Santini*, had taken a moment in the flurry of finishing his latest novel in January to leave Allen a message.

Conroy, his voice slender, patient and kind, said the following:

"This is Pat Conroy... I was horrified to hear about what had happened to Sonny Allen. West Nile Virus? I had no idea it was that serious. Please tell Coach Allen that I was very concerned about him, but I maintain my admiration for his team all these years... and Bob Pritchett and Arthur Speakes.

"And tell him my cousin is named Ed Conroy and now he is the head basketball coach at the Citadel. And tell Coach Allen also that most of the Citadel basketball team today is black... and he had a large part to play in that.

"Lots of love, Pat."

Allen, clearly touched by Conroy's message, couldn't believe his good fortune.

"And you know what the best part was?" Allen said. "Once Donna and I got there to help out at Barbara Bennett Park, it stopped raining. None of us got rained on at all. It was great."

A miracle?

Lots of love, indeed. **N**