Like clockwork, the blue eyes snap to attention every morning at 3:45 a.m. It has been this way all of Chris Ault's adult life. No need for an alarm. No need for his wife of 47 years, Kathy, to gently prod Ault from a deep sleep.

3:45 a.m.
Time to get up.
Time to get to work.
Time to keep building … something.

And yet, Ault admits to a visitor in his south Reno home in mid-February, something strange has been happening since his announcement on Dec. 28 that he was stepping down after more than four decades as a Hall of Fame football coach at the University.

For the first time, Ault hasn’t been the first person out the door in the morning. Lately, that honor has been worn proudly by Kathy, on her way to her morning workout.

"It’s been interesting," Ault says, with a smile. He is sitting at a counter near the kitchen. At 66, for the first time in perhaps a decade, he seems more like the Chris Ault northern Nevada has always known, the youthful-looking coach who always somehow appeared to be 10 years younger than he really was. He laughs. "I’ve been around the house a little bit more, and I’ll tell you what: I’m getting my eyes opened up a bit to how the real world is now."

Since he was named the Wolf Pack’s head coach in December 1975, Ault hasn’t necessarily had to worry much about the real world. There wasn’t time. He was too busy creating, assembling, building the pieces of a football program that, even when surveyed today,

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Quite the Pistol
Chris Ault ’69, ’73M.Ed searches for the next big challenge

By John Trent ’85/’87, ’00M.A. & Photos by Jeff Dow
“What Coach Ault always preaches applies to everybody—it’s about life, and it’s about accountability. The discipline, the focus, the right mentality that you need to succeed; that’s what Coach Ault teaches his players.”

—John Bender ’10, a four-year starter at offensive tackle for the Wolf Pack from 2007-2010

seems remarkable.

Consider that during Ault’s 28 seasons as head football coach, he amassed 233 victories, won 10 conference championships and qualified for the postseason 16 times. During his final eight seasons as coach of the Wolf Pack, the team qualified for a bowl every year.

Unlike some coaches, whose careers crisscross the country in search of a better job, in a larger conference, for more money, Ault chose a different route. The former Wolf Pack quarterback and University graduate and, for nearly two decades, also the program’s athletic director, simply brought the program along with him. The Wolf Pack, during Ault’s tenure, moved from Division II to Division I-AA to Division I, and was a member of four different conferences (Big Sky, Big West, Western Athletic and now Mountain West).

“Building something, building an athletic program, a football program, that was exciting to me,” Ault says. “Most coaches go from a school that’s in one division and move up to another division. I’m proud to say that wasn’t the case with me. I was able to move with the University.

“That became very exciting to me, the whole idea that you’re always building something special,” he adds.

Those 3:45 a.m. starts were always the start of something special, he says.

“You have to have a vision, and you have to have a clear picture of what you want to be,” Ault says. “And that’s what I worked to accomplish every day I was at the University.”

John Bender ’10, a four-year starter at offensive tackle for the Wolf Pack from 2007-2010, says Ault’s driven nature has always been on display. In fact, the good-natured 25-year-old Canadian says during a recent phone conversation from his business office in Calgary, it is what he will always remember about Ault.

Bender is asked if Ault’s demands on his players help those, like former Wolf Pack and current 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick ’10, who have gone to excel in the athletic pressure-cooker of the NFL.

“Forget the next level in the pros,” Bender says. “What Coach Ault always preaches applies to everybody—it’s about life, and it’s about accountability. The discipline, the focus, the right mentality that you need to succeed; that’s what Coach Ault teaches his players.”

“You learn pretty early on that it isn’t OK to be late … for anything,” Bender adds, with a light chuckle. “Being late is not OK to Coach Ault. And, I’ll always remember what he taught us about losing: Acknowledge it, but then it’s time to go on to the next step, the next time when you are going to have the opportunity to do better, to be better.

“That’s the big thing with Coach Ault: Every day is an opportunity to get better. It’s up to you.”

Perhaps that’s why the past several weeks, even on those mornings when Kathy has actually beaten him out the door in the morning, Ault’s life has kicked into overdrive.

“Oh, so you want to ask some questions about the Pistol,” Ault says, as the conversa-
tion turns to the offense he created in 2005, and then was run very closely to perfection by Kaepernick during the Wolf Pack’s historic 13-1 season in 2010. This season, with the advent of mobile, strong-armed quarterbacks such as Kaepernick and Robert Griffin III with the Redskins, the Pistol has found a professional foothold.

Perhaps the strongest testimony of the Pistol’s allure happened just recently. Bender was asked by the coach at the University of Calgary to supply game tape and insight on the downhill blocking schemes involved with the formation.

The Pistol has now officially galloped across international borders.

“I just dropped off film with the University of Calgary head coach and I’ve gone over it with him,” Bender says. “And here’s the funny part: They always ask me if I have a playbook, and I tell them there is no playbook. “This is a formation that Coach Ault created,” he adds. “No one has a playbook. It all springs from the knowledge in Coach Ault’s head.”

Jeff Rowe ’06 (general studies) was the first Wolf Pack quarterback to run the Pistol, during the 2005 season.

To say Rowe was a little dubious when Ault announced he had invented a new formation in the winter of 2004-2005, would be an understatement. Ault came to Rowe, who would later go on to stints with the Cincinnati Bengals and Seattle Seahawks as a backup quarterback, and Rowe’s center, Jimmy Wadhams ’07 (political science), and told the players he wanted them to try something.

“Coach Ault was nervous,” says Rowe. “He came down to the locker room, he told Jimmy that Jimmy was going to snap it and I’m supposed to stand just three yards away from him (the quarterback would stand seven yards behind center in the Pack’s regular shotgun formation).

“I’m thinking, ‘This seems kind of crazy. Man, I hope Jimmy snaps it over my head, or dribbles the snap back to me.’ And then Jimmy, who was always a great center, nailed the snap. And Coach Ault turns to all of us and says, ‘That’s it. It’s in for spring practice. That’s it.’

“And looking back on it now, it was one of those important moments where you think, ‘OK. Wow. Here we go.’”

“It’s spread like wildfire in the college ranks over the past three years,” Ault adds, “and I’m really proud when we say that we created the Pistol right here, right here in Reno, Nevada.”

The Pistol was one of the keys to the 49ers’ and Kaepernick’s run to the Super Bowl. Ault turns to his smartphone to show why. He pulls up some analytics on his smartphone.

“The game where Kaepernick truly became a national obsession, rushing for an NFL record...
181 yards and passing for another 263 yards during the 49ers’ 45-31 dismantling of the Packers in the NFC divisional round, the 49ers ran about half—34—of their plays from the Pistol formation.

In the one game where Kaepernick struggled, in a late-season loss to the Seahawks, only five plays were run from the Pistol.

“I think it’s a formation that has some staying power,” Ault says. “I think it’s a formation that NFL teams can use to their benefit, whether it’s a quarterback who can run the ball or a quarterback that does the play-action off of it. That’s what the 49ers did so well in their win over the Falcons (in the NFC championship, where another healthy dose of Pistol plays were run). They ran the play-action out of it. That’s really why I think it has some staying power. There are so many different degrees to it.”

Rowe says any professional team could benefit from Ault’s insight.

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“I wouldn’t be surprised at all if Coach Ault became a consultant for an NFL team,” he says. “I think a lot of people would like to pick his brain. I know he’s intrigued by the NFL.”

“The Pistol offense has caught the imagination of a lot of different people, and whether it’s the blessed offense or not, the offense and the formation can bring something to the NFL world,” Ault says. “I do feel like I can contribute and help a team or a program. And that’s what I want to do. I want to share my experiences.”

Since his announcement that he was stepping down, Ault says the reaction from his former players and coaches, from his family (his three children all graduated from the University, and he has 10 grandchildren) to friends in the community, has been heartwarming.

“It’s been touching, it really has,” Ault says. “I reflected on the fact that you really do affect lives while you are coaching … that you are passing along some core values about family and accountability and work ethic.

“It was very meaningful … very inspirational … to me. You can’t put a price on that.”

The next chapter, whatever it promises to be, should be just as meaningful for the University’s former football coach.

There is only one real certainty. Starting at precisely 3:45 a.m., whether or not his wife of 47 years beats him out the door, there will always be something waiting for Chris Ault to accomplish.