

Ex-'Dogs football coach Baxter at home with his new gameplan

Posted at 07:32 AM on Sunday, Feb. 13, 2011

By Matt James / The Fresno Bee

This last fall, USC football coach Lane Kiffin made a request of McKenzie Baxter, the 13-year-old daughter of one of his coaches.

Could you please stop wearing Fresno State clothing to USC functions?

She is, not surprisingly, the daughter of former Fresno State associate head coach John Baxter, the man Kiffin hired away from the Bulldogs.

Kiffin happened to be wearing a bright blue shirt that day, and she calmly told him maybe he should stop wearing Easter shirts all year long.

The Baxters are loyal, and you'd have better luck trying to bend a tire iron. Not long after Baxter arrived at USC last spring, one of the associate athletic directors started giving him a hard time about the Fresno State sticker on his pickup.

Baxter told him it wasn't coming off. The guy thought he was kidding and kept ribbing him about it. Baxter wasn't kidding.

On Saturday, nearly a year later, Baxter's red Ford F-250 was sitting at Clovis Hills Community Church, proudly displaying that same Fresno State sticker, with an additional USC sticker.

Inside the church, the Chicago native was dressed in a Chicago Cubs Ernie Banks jersey, talking to a packed house about his baby: Academic Gameplan.

Not many college football coaches can say their largest contribution to the sport was in the classroom, but whenever John Baxter finally leaves the game, that will likely be true.

And that is not a shot at his athletic coaching accomplishments, it's a compliment to something bigger. Baxter has been teaching Academic Gameplan for years, when he was a graduate assistant at Iowa State and then as an assistant at Maine, Arizona, Maryland and Tulane. It was only in his head, though, until he and his wife Jill copyrighted it in 1999, a couple years after arriving at Fresno State with coach Pat Hill.

They turned Baxter's program into one anyone can buy on the Internet, a packet with notebooks and schedules and calendars and a four-DVD set. It sells roughly 5,000 copies a year, some to individual parents and students and teachers, but mostly to places like Stanford and Cal and USC, and California high schools like Crespi and Servite and Edison.

People tell Baxter all the time he should quit coaching football and concentrate on speaking to young people and developing Academic Gameplan. He really has a gift, a personality that is entertaining and disarming and downright perfect for motivating kids.

"I use the fact that I'm a college football coach, the allure and the attractiveness of that, to deliver an important message," he says.

Baxter hasn't stopped caring about academics just because he's at a big-time BCS school. It was a lot of Baxter's appeal to Kiffin, who went through the Academic Gameplan when he was a player at Fresno State in the late '90s.

Jill Baxter is an attorney and sports agent. She represents football players, including former Fresno State guys like Clint Stitser, Robert Malone and Stephen Spach. There are no rules keeping her from representing USC players now, but she says she won't because of the recent agent issues at USC.

Baxter's wife and two daughters are still living in Fresno, at least until May when they will follow him down to a house on the Palos Verdes peninsula where they can keep their three horses and two dogs.

The family had to make a decision as to whether they wanted to let Academic Gameplan fade away or try to make it a national product. They decided to run with it. They already have plans for an online course and a smart-phone application.

It could explode. It should. There are so many common-sense lessons to learn in the seminar Baxter gave Saturday and continues to give about once a year. He looks at academics the way most coaches look at sports, as if it matters.

It would be justice if it made them millions, because the program has only been breaking even for years. That's not why Baxter started it and not why he's still keeping it going even though he doesn't need to.

Jill had to remind him Saturday that during his seminar he should remember to mention that there is a product for sale.

He told her he would try to work it in if he had time.