



BY TIM PEELER

**B**obby Purcell was caught between two mountains during a Mitchell County snowstorm, trying hard to land his first big contributors to NC State athletics.

They happened to be coveted recruits up in the North Carolina high country, when the newly promoted full-time assistant football coach went to visit them during the winter of 1981.

Both lived on mountain peaks. Purcell descended into his first in-home appointment at dinnertime, just as the snow started to fall. By the time he reached the tiny motel room to call the other family from an outdoor payphone, he knew there was no way he could get back up the other mountain without getting snowed in overnight.

Instead, the family offered to come to him. With the mom sitting on the room's only

and eight athletics directors, and with 19 Wolfpack football, men's and women's basketball, and baseball coaches. There have been countless other coaches, administrators, faculty, interns, students, athletes and various familiar faces who have passed through his doorway.

If you can find any of them to say an ill word or cross thought about him, check their credentials.

"Bobby is just a special person," former football coach Mike O'Cain said. "He did a great job and treated people the right way. It's a tough business, but NC State fans respect what Bobby has done, and they all love his passion.

"If someone ever said something negative about him, I'd be leery of that person."

The coach's thoughts were echoed with unanimity throughout generations of Wolfpack fans, coaches and the donors that Purcell and his staff at the Wolfpack Club have carefully cultivated through his time with the booster organization.

## A PACKED CAREER

For Almost 40 years, Outgoing Wolfpack Club Executive Director Bobby Purcell Has Had A Positive Impact On NC State Athletics

chair and the player and his dad sitting on the bed, Purcell stood up to make his pitch.

And it was not successful. Neither of the two players signed with the Wolfpack. One went to Clemson, the other to Wake Forest.

And Purcell, as he has done every day for nearly 40 years, got up the next morning and went back to work, knowing that even though there would be mountain highs and valley lows to come, he would do all he could to make things better for NC State athletics.

### Continuity and Loyalty Are Key

For nearly four decades, the 65-year-old Purcell's consistency and longevity in the world of athletics fundraising and college administration has been remarkable.

Since arriving back on campus late in 1981, he has worked under six NC State chancellors

**Purcell has worked for NC State athletics or the Wolfpack Club since 1981. He has served in a number of roles, including as the executive director of the Wolfpack Club since 1991.**

PHOTO COURTESY WOLFPACK CLUB

Purcell has a firm set of guiding principles, the biggest of which is to treat every donor equally, to never look at the ledger sheet when answering a call, to always be patient with every caller when they reach out about ticket priority points or football parking places or the previous weekend's results.

Because sometimes calls come in about increased donations, too. Treating donors and fans the same has helped maintain a consistent, passionate fan base.

"I'm proud of what we have done here," Purcell said. "It wasn't just me, obviously. My staff and the people we have worked with have made it all possible.

"I was talking to [former football coach] Chuck Amato the other day, and he said, 'You've held this place together for about 30 years, through all the athletics directors, all the chancellors and all the coaches. We didn't always have consistent success year after year, but we always had consistent support and steady leadership.'

"That meant a lot to me."



## The Short Journey Home

There was never any doubt about where Purcell would have wanted to spend most of his working career.

"I've been a State man all my life," Purcell noted. "My grandfather went to school here, my father went to school here, and I started school here in the fall of 1973. My freshman year, I was in the stands for the 1974 national championship team. We won the ACC football championship, the basketball championship and national title, and the baseball championship. I thought it was going to be that way forever."

He also knew that he might have to go elsewhere to pursue his lifelong dream of working in athletics, either as a coach or administrator. He transferred to UNC Chapel Hill to get the degree in business administration he wanted, even though he never became a Carolina man.

"I was always the guy at the State-Carolina games wearing a red T-shirt," he recalled.

After graduation, Purcell spent some time in corporate sales for Whirlpool, traveling all over Eastern North Carolina, but he always wanted a job in athletics. On a whim, he asked for appointments to talk with NC State director of athletics Willis Casey, North Carolina director of athletics Bill Cobey, Georgia director of athletics Vince Dooley and Georgia Tech director of athletics Homer Rice.

They all told him the same thing: go to graduate school.

At the time, Georgia had just started a graduate degree program in sports management, and Purcell was in its second cohort.

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Longtime NC State baseball coach Elliott Avent

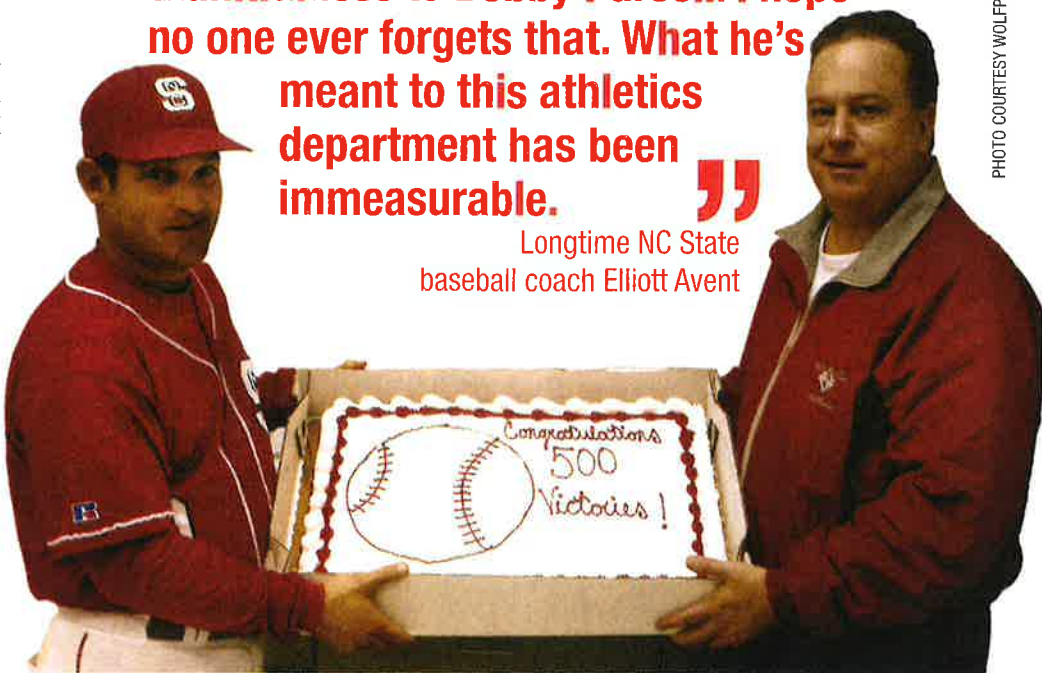


PHOTO COURTESY WOLFPACK CLUB

While in school, he worked as a volunteer graduate assistant for the Bulldog football team, an office intern for the Atlanta Falcons and, with a week's vacation, for his uncle Gus Purcell's football camp in Charlotte.

Gus Purcell was the innovative and decorated head coach of Myers Park High School from 1952-71 and operated one of the country's first summer camps for high school quarterbacks.

Atlanta Falcons director of pro personnel Bill Jobko was a good friend and former Ca-

nadian Football League teammate of Monte Kiffin, and following the 1980 season Kiffin called to ask Jobko to give undrafted Wolfpack placekicker Nathan Ritter a tryout.

Jobko said, "Fine, but we have this kid down here who is a State guy through and through. Do you have an opening for him?"

Kiffin had a job available for a part-time assistant coach, which paid the value of a football scholarship. At the time, that was \$3,200 a year.

It was Purcell's dream

**While serving as the executive director of the Wolfpack Club, Purcell oversaw numerous updates and additions to Carter-Finley Stadium, the construction of PNC Arena and the Close-King Indoor Practice Facility, and the \$35-million renovation of Reynolds Coliseum.**

PHOTO COURTESY WOLFPACK CLUB







**Purcell, from left to right, with late golf legend Arnold Palmer and former Wolfpack Club executive secretary Charlie Bryant, with former NC State basketball superstar David Thompson, and with former Wolfpack head football coach Dick Sheridan.**

PHOTOS COURTESY WOLFPACK CLUB

job, working with assistant coaches like Pete Carroll and Johnny Rodgers, and for a defensive genius in Kiffin. He lived with the players at the College Inn, ate with them in the dining hall and ran all their study halls as the program's academic coordinator.

On the field, he ran the defensive scout team and worked with running backs, but he had no recruiting responsibilities.

The position lasted exactly two years. After the 1982 season, Kiffin and his staff were on the verge of being fired by Casey after a 6-5 season.

Kiffin eventually agreed to resign if Casey would give the football staff a few more months of salary. Purcell had no idea what he would do next.

"Everybody was in the office making calls and getting jobs, but I didn't have anyone to call," Purcell remembered. "One day, [assistant athletics director] Howard Hink came to the office and said, 'Mr. Casey wants to see you.' I thought I was in trouble."

Instead, Casey invited him into the office and told him the program needed some stability during the transition time. In his gruff manner, Casey told Purcell he had just been promoted to full-time assistant, with a salary of \$18,000 and a loaner car.

Never looking up from the work on his desk, Casey tossed Purcell a set of keys to a Chrysler K-car and said: "Now get your ass out on the road and go visit every player in North Carolina we've been recruiting and tell them to wait until we have a new coach before they make their decision."

And, Casey warned, "This is not permanent. The new coach will decide if he wants to keep you."

The new coach was Tom Reed, who was hired from Ohio University and had few

connections to North Carolina. Purcell was the perfect fit to become the staff's recruiting coordinator, traveling the state to find football talent.

After three consecutive 3-8 seasons, Reed and his staff were also fired, and Purcell was again in limbo — at least until new head coach Dick Sheridan got to know his first-ever recruiting coordinator.

"I didn't have a recruiter on my staff at Furman," explained Sheridan, who has been retired to the South Carolina coast since 1993. "I didn't know Bobby, and he didn't know me. I told him we would work together for a couple of months and see how it was going."

It went fine.

"I couldn't have gone out and found someone better than Bobby for that job," Sheridan said. "He fit like a glove with our staff. He shared the same principles, work ethic and judgment."

"I could have searched the whole country over and interviewed coach after coach and

never found anyone who would fit with our staff the way Bobby did."

## From Recruiting to Soliciting

In many ways, being a recruiting coordinator was the perfect prerequisite for becoming a fundraiser. There were successes and failures, big misses and some surprises along the way. There are a lot of rosy scenarios, promises and expectations — some of which come true, some of which just don't pan out.

In 1984, Purcell went to California to recruit three junior college quarterbacks. All of them decided to enroll at NC State. Probably the least accomplished of the three was a part-time starter for Los Angeles Pierce College who arrived in Raleigh in January of that year.

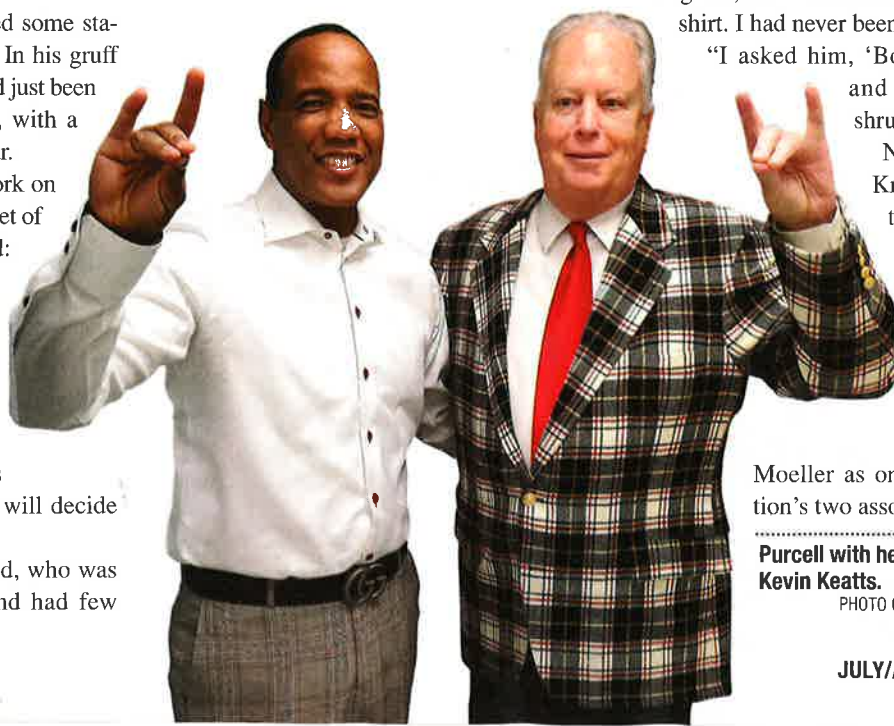
"Bobby came out here on a day that was 70 degrees," recalled 1986 ACC Player of the Year and former NFL quarterback Erik Kramer. "He said, 'You are going to love North Carolina. The weather is just like this.' When I got off the plane, it was probably 20 degrees, and I was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. I had never been so cold in my life."

"I asked him, 'Bobby, what gives?' and he just kind of shrugged and smiled."

Not long after Kramer completed his two-year Wolfpack career, Purcell was recruited by former Wolfpack Club executive secretary K.M. "Charlie" Bryant to replace Mark Moeller as one of the organization's two associate directors.

**Purcell with head basketball coach Kevin Keatts.**

PHOTO COURTESY WOLFPACK CLUB





He used his recruiting skills to help harvest money by maintaining memberships and seeking the gifts needed to build much-needed facilities like PNC Arena and the expansion of Carter-Finley Stadium.

"Both of them are about creating relationships and maintaining them for a long period of time," Purcell said.

## A People Person

Purcell knows how to tell a joke and accept one. He's been kidded mercilessly over the years for his UNC Chapel Hill business administration degree and the fact that he has ties to the light blue.

"Whenever I introduced Bobby I would talk about how much he loved NC State and everybody already knew that," Bryant said. "I started telling people how he started school at NC State, but transferred to North Carolina to get the business degree he wanted. I always said, 'He went from NC State to North Carolina and improved the academic standing of both institutions.'"

Purcell eventually told Bryant to stop telling that one.

Both his current and former staff love telling the stories that make Purcell so genuine. Like the time, somewhere smack dab in the middle of his mid-life crisis, he showed up for a Monday morning staff meeting sporting a Mike Krzyzewski-worthy black

hair dye that no one dared talk about. Or a water skiing trip where he got to know more about fellow associate director Joe Hull than he wanted. Or the time he completely flummoxed a donor with a friendly greeting.

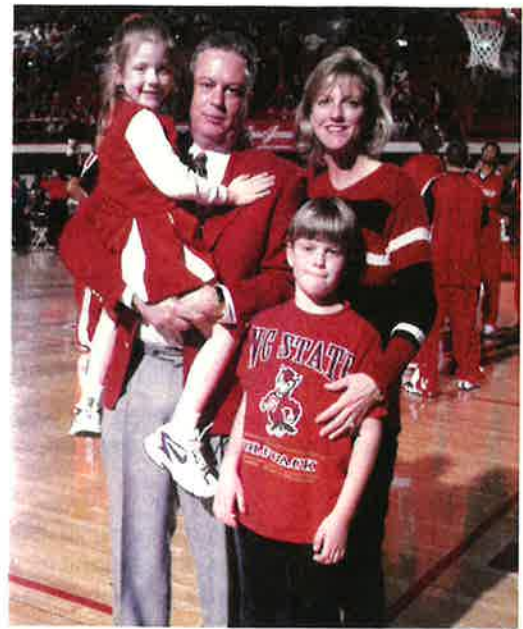
"He always asked people when he saw them, 'How's your mama?' or 'How's your daddy?'" former associate director Chris Wyrick noted. "Eventually, everybody expected it. We would kind of laugh about it because it was just so Bobby.

"One day, he saw someone he knew for a long time and he asked him 'How's your dog?' The guy didn't know what to say."

Good-natured ribbing is the lifeblood of creating productive relationships, as any member who ever attended a Spring Caravan meeting or a Summer Jamboree knows.

"There was nothing I enjoyed more than laughing with and busting on people, because they always did that to me, too," former men's basketball coach and director of athletics Les Robinson said. "We were down in Bobby's hometown of Clinton, and his mom and dad were there. It was a big night for him around all the people he knew. I was responsible for introducing him.

"So after I said a few things, I go into my long introduction: 'Ladies and gentlemen, I want to recognize a young man from here in Clinton who has made his mark in coaching, in recruiting, in athletics administration. A



**Purcell with his wife, Lori, and their then-young children Paige and John. Paige, now 27, is married, a doctor and doing her residency in Pediatrics at Northwestern Hospital in Chicago, while John, 28, is a relationship banking specialist at North State Bank in Raleigh.**

PHOTO COURTESY THE PURCELL FAMILY

person of great character, a person you all know has represented his beloved hometown of Clinton with pride and class. So let's take a moment or two to recognize and appreciate a great Johnston County native — Terry Holland. ... Now, here's Bobby Purcell.'

"His mom and dad both got a big laugh out of that ... I think."

## A Lifelong Legacy

During Purcell's and Bryant's overlapping tenure at the Wolfpack Club and through Purcell's years of solo leadership since becoming executive director in 1991, the athletics department has been the beneficiary of the \$165-million PNC Arena; some \$150 million in expansion and improvements at Carter-Finley Stadium, including the Murphy Center and Vaughn Towers; the \$14-million Close-King Indoor Practice Facility and the \$35-million renovation of Reynolds Coliseum.

And every year, the club has raised the money to pay for all the athletics scholarships, plus a few more for trainers, managers and other student support personnel with endowed grants. Last year, that bill neared \$14 million.

*The Wall Street Journal* once called him

**Purcell and his wife, Lori, were presented with NC State jerseys during ceremonies at PNC Arena when the Wolfpack played UNC in late January.**

PHOTO COURTESY WOLFPACK CLUB





"The Don of Donations," shortly after the Wolfpack Club became just one of three booster organizations in the nation to reach 20,000 members.

He appreciates the outside recognition, but nothing means more to him than the thanks of his staff, the camaraderie of his deep-rooted coaching tree and the interactions he has on a daily basis with donors, whether they give \$100 or \$10 million.

Purcell has managed major gift-givers like Wendell Murphy, Curtis and Jacqueline Dail, Richard Vaughn, and Randy and Tiffany Ramsey, as well as the grassroots donors that have been the foundation of the Wolfpack Club's success for its 80 years of service as an independent contributor to the university.

Paying the bills is not always easy, of course, especially in economic downturns and a worldwide pandemic that has put the coming fall and winter sports seasons in jeopardy.

Purcell leaves in place a full-time staff of more than two dozen fundraisers and staff members, with total assets in excess of \$100 million, including real estate, facilities and pledges. He has launched the careers of more than 20 fundraisers and administrators, including Kansas athletics director Jeff Long, UNC Wilmington athletics director Jimmy Bass and Denver athletics director Karlton Creech.

And his reach around the state spans all 100 counties, all municipalities and innumerable households.

He leaves with recognition from across the country, including numerous prestigious laurels from the National Association of Athletic Development Directors (NAADD). Purcell served as president of the organization from 2004-05, won its University Division Fundraiser of the Year in 2007 and was given its Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014.

Not long ago, the NAADD named its mentor program in Purcell's honor.

"What Bobby has done to maintain consistency and continuity at NC State, through a lot of highs and lows, has been amazing," longtime baseball coach Elliott Avent said. "If we had been changing fundraisers through all of the difficult and lean times, I think things would be a lot different within our athletics department.

"We all owe a great deal of gratitude and thankfulness to Bobby Purcell. I hope no one ever forgets that. What he's meant to this athletics department has been immeasurable." ■

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## What They're Saying About Bobby Purcell

"Bobby Purcell has been synonymous with both the Wolfpack Club and NC State athletics for over three decades. He is a pioneer in his profession, has always put NC State's best interests above his own and his profound impact cannot be overstated. Bobby is connected to every generation of Wolfpack athletics, and he has created a true legacy that will endure. We are grateful for all that Bobby has done and meant to NC State athletics."

— **Current NC State director of athletics  
Boo Corrigan (2019-present)**

"When I first got into this industry in 2004, the first industry conference I went to was either that summer or the next, and the brand of the Wolfpack Club and the name Bobby Purcell came up pretty quickly, as in this is a good way to do this business. They have something figured out at NC State.

"Then around 2010, I had the pleasure of meeting Bobby personally at a conference meeting where he went out of his way to be kind to me.

"I've known Bobby for seven or eight years personally, and professionally from a distance for probably 15 or so, and I've always admired the work that he and the Wolfpack Club have done at NC State."

— **New Wolfpack Club executive director Ben Broussard**

"In this day and age, staff members come and go far too frequently, usually for perceived or real advancement in careers. The fact that Bobby remained at NC State for more than three decades is a tribute to his loyalty to all things Wolfpack-related. That extensive tenure allowed him to develop deep roots with many people, relationships that have made a positive difference in the life of the athletics department."

— **Former NC State director of athletics  
Debbie Yow (2010-19)**

"Bobby knows everybody, and everybody at NC State knows him. But I told him the other day he has to stop calling me, because every time he calls me, it's to tell me that somebody died. I told him he needed to call me with some good news. He called me about two days later and said, 'Everybody is still here.' It was good to hear."

— **Former NC State director of athletics Lee Fowler**

"Bobby has been a loyal friend to me for almost 40 years. He just came out to visit me, with a couple of former players and coaches, for my 80th birthday. He is an exceptional person who loves NC State, something I've known since I first hired him for my staff in 1981. He's done a great job, something he should be proud of and something the Wolfpack Club should be proud of."

— **Former NC State football  
coach Monte Kiffin**

"In any job, it comes down to relationships and obviously Bobby has been a master with relationships and a great friend to every-

body. Every single person associated with NC State is important to Bobby — and to his great credit, I never saw him treat somebody differently based on the amount of money they potentially could donate or did donate. He took time for everybody. He was kind to everybody. He's the ultimate gentleman.

"And over those many years, he developed incredible relationships and friendships, and that — coupled with his expertise in his job — made him somebody that every chancellor and every athletics director wanted by his or her side."

— **Former men's basketball coach Herb Sendek**



"Bobby was such a great part of my time at NC State and a really, really good person. He was in exactly the right position, for him and for NC State. From my end of it, he was fantastic to work with. I couldn't have asked for any more support.

"And he was smart enough to get out of the coaching end of it, I have to give him credit for that."

— **Former football coach Mike O'Cain**

"This is the kind of person Bobby Purcell is: My granddaughter is a high school senior and she wanted to visit NC State to learn more about its communication department. Bobby arranged for her to sit in on a class and take a tour. She had a wonderful experience. She saw everything she wanted to see.

"It was the same kind of thoroughness he had as a coach. Taking care of every detail. He would have been great in any job he had. I just love the guy. NC State is going to miss him more than it thinks."

— **Former football coach Dick Sheridan**

"I look around the country and I've seen some of these programs just completely fall apart. There have been two or three programs along with the Wolfpack Club that have been able to thrive. We've been fortunate. We've had good leadership at the university and in the athletics department, and we've had great leadership within the Wolfpack Club for a long time. Bobby has been a big part of it all."

— **Former Wolfpack Club  
executive secretary  
K.M. 'Charlie' Bryant**

