



FSU great Charlie Ward aims to ‘share Christ with kids’

Former Heisman Trophy winner sees gridiron as mission field

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HOUSTON (FBW)-Everything, they say, is bigger in Texas.

It’s the land of the Alamo, Wild West yarns, massive oil drills, and brightly lit football fields. In Texas, high school football is plenty big, too. While some states might attract 5,000 fans for a marquee state championship game, many Texas schools *average* that number during the regular season. Texas’ powerful love affair with football inspired, among other things, “Friday Night Lights” – a best-selling novel, Hollywood movie, and network TV series.



Photo Courtesy of Westbury Christian School

Heisman Trophy winner Charlie Ward cherishes “teachable moments” while trying to build the football program at Houston’s Westbury Christian School.

Russell Carr. “I’m not saying it doesn’t happen at other schools, but what Charlie does is a little different than everybody else does. It’s neat to see his vision and plan. It’s more of a ministry than a football team.”

And Westbury’s executive administrator, Greg Glenn, said it’s hard to believe Ward, who is retired, will be 39 in October. “Looks like he could play in the NBA to me,” Glenn said.

“Things are starting to need some oil,” Ward told *Florida Baptist Witness*.

With these kind of cattle ranch-sized expectations, what Texas prep coach in his right mind would sacrifice a precious day of preseason practice in favor of a team sleepover where players watch a church-produced football movie and listen to a sermon on sexual purity?

Charlie Ward, that’s who.

Ward, the former Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback at Florida State University and an 11-year NBA veteran, now leads the football program at Westbury Christian School in Houston. But Westbury Christian is not your typical school, and Ward is certainly not your typical field general. One can discard, however, the typical frothing-at-the-mouth coaching stereotype. That’s not Ward.

“It’s much more of a cerebral approach in what he does, which is really refreshing in a state like Texas where football is so important,” said Westbury Christian athletic director

Still, the mere mention of "Charlie Ward" for some immediately invokes memories of the magical autumn in 1993. That season, Ward held the college football world captive. Powered by his dazzling run-pass versatility at quarterback, Florida State outscored its opponents by an average of 34 points per game and beat previously undefeated Nebraska squad, 18-16, in the Orange Bowl for the Seminoles' first national championship.

Ward won more than 30 national awards and became the first player since Tony Dorsett in 1976 to claim the Heisman and a national championship in the same year. He set 19 school records in only two seasons as a starter, and in 2006, he was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame.

After being spurned by the NFL, Ward was drafted by the New York Knicks in the first round in 1994 and embarked on an impressive, 11-year NBA career (he also played basketball four years at Florida State). He spent nine and a half seasons in New York before ending his career with short stints in San Antonio and Houston. He averaged 6.3 points per game in his career and made six straight playoff appearances with the Knicks between 1996- 2001.

After two seasons (2005-07) as a Rockets assistant coach, Ward decided to leave the high-pressure, travel-heavy lifestyle of the NBA to spend more time with his family and learn coaching at a grass-roots level. In June 2007, he met Glenn through a mutual NBA friend and was hired at the 550-student K-12 school. Besides coaching, he also works fulltime in the school's admissions/development department.

Not exactly the post-playing career that comes to mind for a former world-class athlete. But it was a perfect fit for the unassuming Ward, who was raised by Christian parents in Thomasville, Ga., and became a believer at age 10. Despite the fame and riches he earned as an athlete, he has never been a self-promoter. And it's not the way he coaches now.

"That's not how Jesus went around, and it's not something we should have," Ward told the *Witness*. "His boast was in his Father. That's our goal, to not boast about ourselves."

Ward helped the Wildcats' football and basketball teams as an assistant coach in 2007-08 and became the head football coach last year, turning around a 0-10 team from 2007 into a 4-4 squad barely missed the playoffs (Hurricane Ike nixed two games).

Because of his past achievements, Ward's hiring initially caused a local buzz, but the Westbury Christian community soon learned there is much more to the former two-sport star than name recognition and ESPN highlight reels.

"You wouldn't know he won the Heisman and played in the NBA," Glenn said. "He doesn't throw that at you. He is more secure in who he is as a Christian than to use those titles that others look at. He is sincere, passionate and he has the fruits of the Spirit living inside of him."

Ward, who eventually wants to become a NCAA Division I coach, sees the gridiron as a mission field. That's why, on Aug. 3, the first permissible day of practice, Ward had only his players participate in an overnight lock-in at the school. The team watched the faith-based film "Facing the Giants" and listened to a sexual purity message from a local Houston pastor.

Ward also provides daily team devotionals and wants to be remembered as a coach "who was dedicated to serving kids and sharing the Gospel."

"I get an opportunity to influence young people on a daily basis," he said.

On the sideline, Ward displays little of the razzle-dazzle that made him a household name during his playing days. He is quietly intense and rarely raises his voice. When he does, it's often "when guys say they're committed but don't show it," he said.

Ward and his wife, Tonja, and their two children – Caleb, 9, and Hope, 6 –are active at Greater Houston Church in Stafford. Tonja recently launched, Fititudes, a biblically based wellness program and wrote a corresponding book she hopes to get published.

Ward's goal this fall is to lead the Wildcats to only their second playoff appearance in the program's 12-year history. But his true mission extends well past end zones and uprights.

"This is a good starting ground for me," Ward said. "I have an opportunity to build a program and traditions here. The main goal is to share Christ with kids and to mold young people's minds. There are a lot of teachable moments."

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