



Charlie Bryant Interview

Retired Executive Director of Wolfpack Club
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I first met Mr. Finley in 1964 when I came to NC State as assistant basketball coach. They were in the process of finishing up the fundraising effort for the Carter Stadium at the time, and Mr. Finley's group...they and all of his associates were active in helping with the fundraising, and of course Mr. Finley contributed money for the Field House. I had heard so much about Mr. Finley, but I had never met him, so of course I had the opportunity to meet him during that process and got to know Mr. Finley a little bit at that time. Then as I extended my work at NC State as assistant coach, I got to know Mr. Finley and many of his associates, and it was just a pleasure to get to know Mr. Finley and his people and watch that development of their company and see what they did for, not only NC State but for all of the other universities around, the city of Raleigh, the county of Wake, and...everyone! His name was everywhere, and he was just an absolutely amazing individual. There aren't enough superlative adjectives and nouns to adequately describe Mr. Finley and what he did for this community and this state.

Later on, I left coaching for a while, and then I came back to NC State and headed the Wolfpack Club. That's when I really got to know Mr. Finley and his associates. I say his associates because...his entire company, the A.E. Company Foundation was a result of Mr. Finley hiring some absolutely unbelievable people, demanding a lot from them but giving a lot back to them as well. W.C. Calton, Drury Jones, George Wilson and "Patchy" Smears and many other of his associates I got to know really well. Mr. Finley, I got to know him quite well through the Wolfpack club and...he was such an easy person to deal with. He would give you such a nice contribution and ask for very little. In fact, I can recall him asking me one time for a couple of extra tickets to the ACC Tournament. This was back when tickets to the ACC were very scarce, and he was almost apologetic for asking about these tickets. Of course, I would have given him my tickets if I had to, but I was able to get him a couple of tickets, and he wrote me the nicest note which said: "I now know why Mr. Webster puts gratitude in his dictionary!" That was just the type of person he was. I got another letter from him one time; I had written a letter thanking him for an annual contribution that he had made, and he wrote me a nice note back on that same letter that I sent him. It said: "This is a nice letter, Charlie! If I had hired you many years ago, I could retire a lot earlier!" He always made you feel like you were the customer. He was just such a great guy, and all of his people...W.C. Calton, who was the head of the North Carolina Equipment Company and was president of our Wolfpack Club. Later, "Patchy" Smears was the head of our Wolfpack Club, who was another one of his associates. They've all contributed immensely, and when we had our Wake County drives back in those days, A.E. Finley's companies were always the leaders and would always win the prizes. It was just a great group to work with.

Mr. Finley had a wonderful team of people. As I said before, he hired some great people and developed some great people, and everybody that I knew that worked for Mr. Finley absolutely worshiped him. I'll give you an example: I was treated very nicely one time by Mr. Finley one time and he sent Mr. Wilson over to my office. George came in and he said: "Write me a check for \$1000. Mr. Finley says he wants you to have a share of the RGA Golf Course." There were only a few shares at that time, and Mr. Finley controlled most of them. I wasn't sure if I had \$1000 or not, but I wrote the check. Mr. Wilson took it back, and I got one share of stock in RGA, and I still have that share of stock. To me, that was just an unbelievable and nice opportunity and gift from Mr. Finley. I just admired him and his people, as I've mentioned so many times. W.C. Calton, who was head of the North Carolina Equipment Company, and Drury Jones and Patchy Smears with A.E. Finley Company. They were just so appreciative of the opportunity to work for Mr. Finley and with Mr. Finley. Mr. Finley, as you know, gave them all the opportunity to buy into his company and eventually buy them out. Patchy Smears, for example, had an opportunity to buy into the A.E. Finley company. Mr. Finley told Patchy that he would let him buy some of the company, and Patchy was shook up; he didn't know how he was going to pay for it. Mr. Finley told him: "Don't worry about it, I've already talked to the bank and I've got the loan set up for you." That was typical Mr. Finley and the way he operated with his people.

I mentioned W.C. Calton; W.C. was a tremendously nice guy and a great businessman. He was president of the Wolfpack Club for 18 years. The year that the Wolfpack Club requested that Finley's name be added to the stadium was the last year that Mr. Calton was president. The next year, we presented Mr. Finley with a large picture of the stadium. We went over to present the picture to him, and Ronny Shavlik was president of the Wolfpack Club at that time. Ronny was a big guy; 6'8" and a former all-American basketball player and businessman in Raleigh. The two of us went over to present this picture to Mr. Finley and formally make the presentation about the stadium. We go in, and we passed through Bobby Brown, who was Mr. Finley's assistant there. We went in and we stayed in there for Mr. Finley for about thirty minutes. We came out and Bobby Brown said: "gosh, you guys were in there a long time, what did you talk about?" I said: "Well, it was a long time. I've never been to see Mr. Finley and I was in there ten to fifteen minutes maximum." We later found out that Mr. Finley thought that Mr. Shavlik was Bruce Polton, our chancellor who is also a big 6'7" guy. Mr. Finley had some vision problems at the time and wore some real thick glasses and...he thought that Ronny Shavlik was a chancellor and we never did tell Mr. Finley that it was otherwise because we were so appreciative and he was, too. It's a cute little story with Mr. Finley.

One story that Patchy Smears told me one time about Mr. Finley was...when he first went to work for Mr. Finley, Mr. Finley had just bought a recapping business and he had some recaps on the tires of the car that Patchy was driving. Patchy was on his way to Smithfield to make a

call, and a tire blew out. Patchy went over to the local tire company to buy his new Ford a new tire, and puts it on his car. A few days later, Mr. Finley gets the bill and he calls Patchy in and says “Patches, what is this bill for Uniroyal Tires?”. And Patches says: “I love working for you, I love this company, I love this family, but I’m never driving to work with these rickety tires anymore!” Mr. Finley said: “Okay, Patches, I’m going to approve of this, but don’t you tell any of the other sellers!” So Patches got four Uniroyals and got through that. That’s the type of guy Mr. Finley is, plus, as you know, Mr. Finley loved golf. He built the RGA Gold Course and every year, he’d have a golf outing with the athletic department, playing the A.E. Finley group out of the RGA, after which, we’d have a dinner. The loser would have to pay for the dinner, which was always a barbeque. Of course, Mr. Finley would never let us pay when we lost anyway, but we had a great time. We’d play golf, and then we’d get our wives and have a dinner, usually at the college inn. We’d have a nice social, and the dinners were always barbeque. Mr. Finley loved barbeque, and pork barbeque is what we would have. Then we’d have a short program, we’d eat barbeque, and Mr. Finley would get up and say: “You fellas can stay here and talk and enjoy yourselves all night long, but Marian and I are going home to bed”. So that happened a lot of times. I remember another time we had a dinner, Mr. Finley called me and he asked me if we’d be nice enough to let him use the meeting room at the college inn he had given us. Of course, I said yes, and he said “I’d like you and Willis Casey to come as well. I’m having a dinner for W.C. Calton and Drury Jones who have been with me for 40 years, and I just want to have a nice little dinner for them”. Well, we went there and he had all of these celebrities and all of his old associates. A lot of people remember that the real leaders of this community back in the ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s were there.

Raleigh took off during that period, the 40s, 50s, and 60s. Willie York... W.C. Calton who was also one of Mr. Finley’s associates, Ray Bryan Sr. who was from Goldsboro but also worked around here, and several others. They were just remarkable people who made things happen. Each of them had their own unique style of success. Mr. Finley, I think, had the most unique business style. He not only made a lot of money, but he gave it back to the people. His legacy is of being such a great benefactor. He’s such a remarkable person that it’s difficult to describe in words what a marvelous individual he was...

I learned from W.C. Calton, Drury Jones, George Wilson, and Patches Smears how well they serviced their customers. Their customers were the number one people, and they were treated with unbelievable kindness and appreciation. It was just marvelous company, just the fact that they did such a good job with selling, and they did a wonderful job of servicing their customers. I believe that it was Mr. Finley’s leadership that brought that about; he insisted that you sell properly and you service properly.

For years, I knew Mr. Finley and many of his associates, but I had no idea how big they were.

I mean, they were the largest distributor in the southeastern United States, and it happened fast. The truly nice thing about Mr. Finley is that he had a business plan that was so unique, and I often wondered why one of the universities around here didn't do a study of Mr. Finley and his operation. It was the most successful operation that ever hit North Carolina at that time. It would be really nice if one of the graduate schools here at State or Carolina or Duke had done a study; it would have been worthwhile.

He expected a lot, and he gave a lot. You had to know his people to appreciate it. That company had just an unbelievable atmosphere where the give-and-take was just indescribable. They loved one another and gave so much to the community that it was unbelievable. Like I said, I've never met anyone who worked for Mr. Finley who didn't just idolize him. George Wilson, who owned the Wilson-Finley Company and was a dear friend of mine...he would die for Mr. Finley. Most of everybody else would, he was just an amazing person.

Right after I came back to the head of the Wolfpack Club, Mr. Finley had just given the college inn to the athletic department, to the Wolfpack Club. We converted it into housing for our athletes and study halls, and that thing worked out great. In 1979, Liz Case, our athletic director, and I were talking, and Liz said: "You know, we ought to get Mr. Finley's name on the stadium." We brought it up at the Wolfpack meeting, and of course, everyone at the Wolfpack club and the directors were unanimously in support of putting Mr. Finley's name on because he had contributed so much to the athletic program and stadium and annual giving and everything. We brought it up, and it passed. Then Mr. Calton and I wrote letters to the chancellor. The chancellor supported it, so in 1979 we were going to name the stadium the Finley-Carter Stadium. We presented that to Mr. Finley, and he said that he would be willing to have his name attached to the stadium, but under no circumstances would his name be in front of Mr. Carter's. We reversed it and made it the Carter-Finley Stadium, and that's how it came to be in that take.

The Field House...that was a gift of \$300,000, and that was back when \$300,000 was \$300,000 big time. Then when he gave us the college inn, that was a million, probably worth five million and six million at the time. He was giving something like \$20,000 a year, so the foundation was very generous to the university.

The College Inn was a nice motel at one time. I think we have about 120 or so rooms in it, a large swimming pool, a meeting room, and there used to be a restaurant. Just a great place with a lot of office space. The Wolfpack offices were over there. That's where they were before they came over here to this facility where we're talking now. It was a great facility. Of course, when it aged out, the Wolfpack club tore it down, and built a new building over there, but it was a great gift and it gave us the opportunity to house most all of our male athletes from State over there. It was the athlete dormitory and my offices were over there as well, so it was a very timely

gift that worked out great because we needed more office space for the athletic department and we needed dormitory rooms for our athletes. It also gave us the opportunity to control our athletes a little bit better, knowing where they were and so forth.

Back when I mentioned the fundraising in Wake County, back then, understand that we didn't have television. We didn't have a lot of money coming in from outside sources, so the only way could pay for scholarships was through donations. So the Wolfpack Club became very active in the community. My predecessor, Warren Carroll, did a great job of digging the well, so to speak, for the rest of us to drink from. He started organizing fundraising efforts all over the state, and when I took his place, we were ready to expand and get much larger. Since then, it's grown more, but we had to have the athletic fundraising. We're one of the first athletic fundraising efforts in the country. A lot of major football schools, they had a lot of income coming in from football to take care of their scholarships, but we were playing in a small stadium that only seated about 15,000 or so; so we didn't have a whole lot of income coming in. So, we had to figure out a way to raise the money for scholarships, and that's how the Wolfpack came into being.

The thing I remember the most about Mr. Finley is that he always had a warm smile. When we had these barbeques that I mentioned earlier, he'd bring in a fellow called Harry Stewart who was in his ear, so to speak, and a very good storyteller. Just about every time Mr. Finley had one of his get-togethers, he'd bring Harry. Harry Stewart would tell a bunch of jokes and he was good at it; after he was done telling a joke, Mr. Finley would say "Marian and I are going home now, you guys can stay in and enjoy yourselves". He enjoyed a good, hearty laugh. One time we were having our little golf outing, and when Mr. Finley's associates played golf, when Mr. Finley had a putt within five feet, they'd go up and knock the ball back. Mr. Finley got up there with Willis Casey, our athletic director. Willis knew all about these short puts. They got to the first hole, and Mr. Finley had about a five-foot putt. George Wilson starts to knock it back, and Willis said "Nooooo, I want him to putt it!" Mr. Wilson just about fainted because Mr. Finley had a big kick out of it. Mr. Finley walked over and knocked it in. Willis said: "You're gonna putt out when you play me!" But, yeah, he was that type of guy. He could take a joke, and had a warm smile. In physical stature, he was a small man, but in true stature, as a human being, he was a giant of a man.

Mr. Finley, number one, loved NC State. He loved athletics, and he wanted to see us be successful. He knew that if you wanted to be successful, you had to have enough resources to pay for scholarships and that sort of thing. Not only Mr. Finley became involved, but all of his people. Everybody that worked for him supported NC State. He pushed and he pushed, but like I said, he was never one to ask for a whole lot. He sort of fit the mold that the largest givers usually ask for the least. That's the way Mr. Finley was. He did request one time for two seats for his friends to be put right close to him. I arranged his seats, and after this Mr. Finley realized that the seats

that I had assigned to him that he had requested took away two seats from a friend of his, and he didn't like that at all. He had George Wilson bring those two tickets back over. "I'm not violating one of my principles, and that is: 'Don't ever mess up the people you admire'." We worked those tickets back around and got that straightened out. He was very easy to work with as far as tickets were concerned. I wish everybody had been that nice.

Mr. Finley was close to the athletic department, and he would come up with the idea of: "what would it be like if I did this or I did that?", "Could you accept this if I did this?". He gave the College Inn the year before I took over the Wolfpack Club. I think he went to the athletic department and told them that he was willing to do that if the university would accept it and use it properly. I'm sure my predecessor Warren Carroll helped a little bit in that, too. That was a great gift. Annually, he was always doing well, plus, as I mentioned earlier, all of his people working on our drive. They were always not only giving significantly themselves, but they were out raising money for us from other people and other companies around the area. That's really how we were able to get the Wolfpack Club started. We had this contest, this annual drive. We had all these teams from all over the county working on the drive, and then we'd have a banquet to wrap it up and announce the winners. Every year, the Finley Foundation was the winner because they collected more members and money than everybody else. That's really how the Wolfpack Club got kicked off, and it was the biggest fundraising drive we had in the state. That's how it all got started and developed into what it is today. The Finley Foundation played a huge role in getting the Wolfpack Club started.

I didn't socialize with Mr. Finley, but I got to know him. If you knew Mr. Finley...I use the term "laconic" because he was very brief, when he was working he was all business, and when he played he was always a good time. All of his people were just great representatives of the A.E. Finley Company. That's probably the thing that stands out to me more than anything else, he trained people to be great businessmen and leaders. They not only contributed to the company, they contributed to the community in many ways. Everybody that I know who worked for him had been very devoted to Mr. Finley, all the enterprises and operations that he took part in outside of the company.

He was such a unique person. Once you met Mr. Finley, you never forgot him. He was just that type of person. Like I said, very brief, had a nice smile, nice joking ability, but he was also a very stern businessman. I wish I had more time to spend around him. I'm very proud to have been a friend of Mr. Finley's.

I remember the letters that I got from him; he was a good letter-writer. I still have some of the letters that he wrote, and, as I mentioned earlier, if I sent a letter to him, a lot of times he'd write notes on the letter and send it back. A double thank-you, so to speak. He was just a very

thoughtful person. As I said earlier, it's too bad that none of the other business schools had a real in-depth study of his business practices; it'd have been a great study for graduate and business schools.

His legacy is stamped all over this state in a very positive way, and it's something that'll last forever, too. It's never going to go away. When he was inducted into the Raleigh Hall of Fame, I remember being down there, and the many people he had worked with came from everywhere to celebrate that evening. He was just such a remarkable person.