

After eight years, USC's McGee has found his stride

BY PETE IACOBELLI
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Athletics director Mike McGee has been living his dream at South Carolina.

Things were running smoothly for him at Southern Cal eight years ago. But the North Carolina native wanted to return to the area and wanted a challenge. He found one as South Carolina's fifth athletics director since 1988.

The school's facilities were aging and fans stayed away. And the Gamecocks had joined the Southeastern Conference, but as its laughing-stock, known more for scandals than for championships.

"I'm sure we'll have our trials ahead of us," McGee said then. "But I see a lot of great success and a lot of fun here."

Seven seasons later under McGee: South Carolina earned \$33 million for the 1999-2000 year as part of the SEC, more than ever before.

Stadiums and fields have undergone \$42 million in improvements and

played host to NCAA tournaments for women's basketball, golf, tennis and baseball.

Williams-Brice Stadium was upgraded from 72,000 seats to more than 80,000 since McGee's arrival. It has been sold out the past three seasons and likely will be at kickoff on Saturday.

"We're now at a level with the upper third of schools" in the SEC on the basis of overall programs — coaches, revenue, Olympic sports and fan interest, McGee said. "It's been an exciting time."

"I think he's part of how the whole university has changed," said Dr. Edward Floyd, who led the board of trustees that hired McGee.

South Carolina had just entered the Southeastern Conference when McGee arrived with his experience from Southern Cal and before that, Cincinnati.

"I wasn't responsible for us getting in the SEC," McGee said. "But I wouldn't have come if we weren't going to the SEC."

Those who have worked for

McGee, now 61, say he demands full commitment from those around him.

"He a tough man to work for, I'll be the first to admit that," said Val Shelley, Presbyterian College's athletics director who spent five years in charge of NCAA compliance at South Carolina. "But he's a visionary; he's fair. He gives you the tools to do it. You better do it."

And McGee said he doesn't pay much attention to critics. "I've learned a long time ago that you can't look back," he said.

The former hard-nosed offensive lineman at Duke who won the Outland Trophy in 1959, dug in to stabilize the Gamecocks' program.

In his first month, he applied penalties to the basketball coaching staff for NCAA violations. That led to the resignation of coach Steve Newton.

His search for a new coach led to fan favorite and South Carolina alumnus Bobby Cremins, who accepted the job and was introduced to fans — then 48 hours later returned to Georgia Tech.

McGee rebounded by hiring national coach of the year Eddie Fogler, who in seven seasons at South Carolina has won an SEC title.

McGee's most visible struggle, though, has been building a football program to match the team's support.

He was here less than a year when coach Sparky Woods was shown the

door. McGee hired Florida State assistant Brad Scott, who in 1995 won the school's only bowl game. By 1998, however, the Gamecocks were 1-10 and Scott was gone.

"We had a nice conversation and left on good terms," Scott says.

McGee then turned to one of the most famous and successful names in sport, Lou Holtz, who promptly went 0-11.

"People want to know, 'Why aren't we doing it right now?' I wish we could," McGee said. "I take responsibility for that."

His schedule is a nonstop series of meetings and discussions. He's not afraid to talk business at the stadium or arena, but is as likely to yell into the press box at Sarge Frye Field about the Louisiana-Lafayette pitcher late in an NCAA tournament game: "You got a pitch count on him?"

Only four head coaches — Mark Berson of men's soccer, Joyce Compton of softball, and Ken DeMars and Arlo Elkins of tennis — remain from McGee's start. The changes were necessary, McGee said, to keep South Carolina competitive in the SEC.

McGee lures the best. Baseball coach Ray Tanner took a past-its-prime team to No. 1 in four seasons. Track coach Curtis Frye has developed stars like Terrance Trammell and Miki Barber, who are going to the Olympics next month.

"If we didn't have Mike, there's

no way we would have Lou Holtz," said Floyd, the former trustee chairman. "You can see [McGee's] vision crystalizing and see us getting closer to where we want to be."

McGee and his wife, Ginger, have four children and 10 grandchildren, and he can sound like a proud father when he talks about his coaches and staff. After learning Tanner was the SEC coach of the year, McGee rushed to the dugout during practice to congratulate him.

McGee has brought a lot of credibility to South Carolina, says Clemson athletic director Bobby Robinson. "He's been from coast to coast and people know him," Robinson said. "He's very good."

SEC Commissioner Roy Kramer says McGee's strong personality is "the glue that keeps South Carolina's program together."

"Mac brings a feeling of confidence to everything he's involved with," Kramer said.

McGee is part of the NCAA cabinet and chairman of its recruiting committee.

He founded the Sports Management Institute to train administrators. South Carolina, Notre Dame, North Carolina, Michigan and Texas now offer institute courses.

The latest statistics have South Carolina's athletics department graduating a higher percentage of students than the university overall. McGee is

proud of that and the school's progress on gender equity, but it doesn't always sit well with critics who want more winning and hold him accountable.

When Scott was dismissed, fans on Internet chat rooms and sports talk shows wondered if McGee should be the next to go.

He took heat when the NFL's Carolina Panthers played their first season at Clemson's Death Valley instead of Williams-Brice. People thought a season of NFL football would enhance the program, but McGee thought the pro game would cut into South Carolina's fan base.

Fogler, never a wallflower, was bothered when McGee did not extend his contract in 1999 after the basketball team went 8-21. McGee said he did not reward losing seasons.

And a vocal group of fans who pushed for a minor-league hockey team to play at the school's arena complained McGee was slow to let that happen.

But Clemson's attendance has only recently begun to improve since the Panthers were there five years ago.

Despite a 15-17 mark this past season, McGee lengthened Fogler's contract.

As for hockey, "I've said all along that we want hockey. Some people have misunderstood that," McGee said. "But that's fine."

The Columbia Inferno are scheduled to begin playing at the Carolina

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