

Big 12 Fall Sports Preview

return of the mack

"We shook hands. My inability to recall that particular moment more precisely is disappointing: the handshake is the threshold act, the beginning of politics."

— Anonymous, Primary Colors

DALLAS, Texas — The opening glimpse of Texas Football Coach Mack Brown finds him standing at the bottom of a first-floor escalator in a 30-floor glass palace called the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

He stands alone.

He's wearing a charcoal gray shirt with a little Longhorn symbol on the pocket. His hair is just enough out of place to look tousled.

The escalator whirs.

Someone spots him from 100 feet away. His face lights up. And Brown doesn't wait for his supporter to come to him. He meets the man more than halfway.

"Hey," he says. "Look at *this* guy." Big, genuine smile. Hearty, Texas-sized laugh.

The handshake comes in stride, as Brown dives his right hand firmly into that of his acquaintance. Brown's left hand rides up the other man's right arm, stops at the elbow and slides back down into a two-hand lock.

The man asks Brown something, inaudible.

"Well," Brown says, loud enough to hear, "we're confident. We think we've got that kind of team. We don't plan on going backward."

Brown brings the man closer.

Is he sharing an intimate trade secret? Maybe. Is this moment, and other ones like it, the secret of his success? By most accounts, definitely.

Many say Mack Brown works a room as well as he coaches, maybe better. You hear he's a master of the meet and greet, a pigskin politician of sorts.

He's the kind of man who "holds court," as one sportswriter said, during his press conferences. The kind of man who picks up the nation's No. 1 recruiting class after one season at a school.

The kind of man who many UT faithful believe can lead the program to its first national title in 29 years.

Brown was on the stage at the Big 12 Media Day, July 22-23, already dispensing his philosophy about how to attract fans' support at Texas.

"As a younger coach, I used to sit there and people would say 'Do you have a chance to win all the games?'" Brown said. "And I mean you'd work for 30 minutes to try and figure out a way to say no and still want them to buy season tickets."

"Now how dumb are we? To sit there and say 'Hey we're going to be really bad but we still want y'all to come watch us now. Everybody to show up and buy tickets.'"

"Why sit here and act like we don't want to win all of our games? We do."

Brown — who arrived in Austin, Texas, a year ago from a North Carolina program he helped resurrect — runs counter some coaches in the college-football

business who play their optimism close to their vest. Some of the those coaches are winning coaches.

But at Texas, it seems to take more than winning to stick around. It takes popularity, which Brown has worked hard to get.

Before Brown, that popularity went to Darrell Royal, who won three national titles between 1958 and 76 for the Longhorns. The first college coach to implement a wishbone offense in 1968, Royal set the standard by which the three coaches that followed him failed to live up to. Brown has to now. And Royal thinks this newest UT boss is off to a good start.

"I haven't seen anything that he's done that I think is a mistake," Royal said, "but I've seen a lot of things he's doing that I wish I'd have done. He's hopefully what I would have been if I were in modern days."

Those three coaches that followed Royal after he retired — Fred Akers,

Please see BROWN on 14