

A behind-the-scenes look at Lloyd Carr's last few days as

ORLANDO, Fla. - "How about those Michigan Wolverines!?"

Those were Lloyd Carr's last words to his players as he boarded a bus headed to the team hotel Tuesday night, shortly after ending his coaching career with a 41-35 victory over Florida in the Capital One Bowl.

He looked relieved that his pressure-packed job was over as he sat down next to his wife, Laurie, in the front row on the right side of the bus.

Carr, one of college football's classiest coaches, tried his best to make the preparation and practices for his final game like any other, but it clearly was not.

It marked the end of an era as Carr retired after 13 seasons as head coach and 28 on the staff. It paved the way for former West Virginia coach Rich Rodriguez, the first non-Michigan man to lead the program since 1969, when Bo Schembechler was hired away from Miami of Ohio.

Carr granted behind-the-scenes access to an Associated Press reporter for his last two-plus days in charge of the Wolverines, providing a rare glimpse of practices and meetings and letting down his guard just before stepping out of the glare.

Final practice, Sunday.

Carr conducts his final practice at Michigan barking instructions with a whistle around his blue collar and a folded, white piece of paper flapping from the front of his waistband.

Florida's fight song blares from two speakers, attached to a golf cart trailing the first-string offense, as Carr attempts to simulate the Gators' home-field atmosphere at the Capital One Bowl -- just a 2-hour drive from their campus.

"Focus!" Carr screams into the Chad Henne-led huddle.

Toward the end of the workout at Freedom High School, a play Carr has always wanted to run is practiced. All-America tackle Jake Long catches a screen pass on the left side of the field and sprints toward the end zone.

After Carr huddles the players and dismisses them, team spokesman Dave Ablauf asks Henne if he wants to introduce his teammates on tape for ESPN's broadcast on ABC.

"Let Mike do it," Henne says, referring to teammate Mike Hart, whose gift of gab is unparalleled.

A few feet away, a parent bemoans Rodriguez's choice to fire every assistant and rehire only one before the bowl game while talking to quarterbacks coach Scot Loeffler.

"It breaks my heart," says Jody Wright, whose son, Bryan, handles kickoffs. "It's just not going to be the same around here."

Lunch at team hotel.

Defensive back Brandon Harrison walks past defensive coordinator Ron English with flip flops, a white T-shirt and blue shorts -- violating Carr's dress code twice.

"What are you wearing?" English asks.

"I've got to let my toes breathe," Harrison says.

"Where is your collared shirt?" English replies. "You better not let Coach see you."

Harrison borrows a jacket from teammate, Greg Mathews, and heads into a ballroom for a buffet lunch.

Relaxing after his meal, Carr chats about his plans following the game.

"When I get home, I'm going to watch movies all weekend," Carr says. "I can't remember the last time I was at a movie theater."

TV production meeting.

Carr walks into a conference room, where ESPN/ABC broadcasters Mike Patrick, Todd Blackledge, Holly Rowe, a producer and news editor sit around an oval table.

"We've never seen you in shorts," Rowe says, grinning.

"Excuse my attire," Carr responds. "I haven't had a chance to go upstairs to my room."

Carr answers a series of questions about his final game and the Gators, recalling Schembechler's last game at the 1990 Rose Bowl, where the famed coach refused to use his retirement as a motivating factor for his team.

"He wanted it to be about the team," Carr says. "I made up my mind that I'm not going to get into the nostalgia, either, because we're trying to win a game and there will be time for all those things later."

Carr adds he is proud of the way his players practiced in Florida after acknowledging the coaching search and firing of the assistants distracted them in Ann Arbor, Mich.

"It's a challenge, especially for the coaches because they're going to have to uproot their families after the game," Carr says. "Change is never easy."

Even in the casual setting, Carr declines again to say how much he was consulted by the school during the search process.

He also admits he doesn't know what his job as associate athletic director, which begins Wednesday, entails.

"Honestly, I don't have a clue," he says. "I've got to figure out what I'm going to do."

As Rowe wishes Carr well and says she'll miss him, tears well up in her eyes.

"He just has done so much for college football," Rowe says later. "And, he's such a great guy when you get a chance to know him."

Team meeting.

In a ballroom in The Peabody hotel basement, Carr assembles the team for a meeting and reminds the players that limiting penalties and turnovers will be keys to win.

Carr speaks in a clear and controlled tone.

"This game will not be about who has a Heisman," he says, referring to Florida quarterback Tim Tebow. "It will be about playing with great heart, intensity and poise.

"And like all Michigan teams, it will be about playing as a team."

Defensive meeting.

"Eyes up!" English shouts to Michigan's defensive players.

After giving brief instructions, the defensive staff leaves the room as the lights are turned down.

Captain Shawn Crable points to the door, signaling for a visitor to leave, too, so that the defensive players can be alone for a ritual they've done for more than a decade under the well-read Carr.

"I've never been in there, but I know they recite one of Rudyard Kipling's poems," English says while waiting for an elevator.

"Do you still know it?" English asks graduate assistant coach Glen Steele, who helped Michigan win the 1997 national championship as a defensive end.

"The strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack," Steele says, ending the passage without hesitating in an elevator.

Team meeting, Monday afternoon.

Chatter turns into silence as soon as Carr steps in the front of the team. He introduces guest speaker Jim Mandich, a former Michigan star who played for the undefeated and championship-winning Miami Dolphins in 1972.

"I've played in a perfect season and in Super Bowls," Mandich says. "But I'm proudest of playing for the maize and blue."

For the first time in at least a couple days, someone stands before the players and says what many have said.

"They're saying that you'll be out of focus for the game because of all the chaos and change," Mandich tells the players. "Concentrate on what you can control. That's all that matters."

Mandich asks who is "R2" on the kickoff team, a role he played for the Wolverines.

Sophomore Jonas Mouton answers, and Mandich tells him to stand up.

"Jonas," Mandich says. "I want you to give a solemn vow in this room that you'll give 100 percent for 60 minutes against the Florida Gators."

Mandich asks Crable to do the same, then tells the players and coaches to repeat the words while extending handshakes and hugs all over the room.

"This is a service," Mandich says as goose bumps pop on forearms in the room. "Give a vow to your brothers."

After the players and coaches return to their seats, Mandich says what has been whispered by many in the program since Carr announced his retirement plans on Nov. 19 and Rodriguez was hired a month later.

"I don't know what the future of Michigan football is," Mandich says. "But I do know Michigan will never forget Lloyd Carr, one of the greatest leaders I've ever known.

"Lloyd, I salute you."

Offensive and team meetings, Tuesday morning.

Offensive players file into the ballroom one last time, silently finding a seat.

"There's a lot of energy in this room, isn't there?" offensive coordinator Mike DeBord asks. "Don't forget to stay focused and remember the vow you made to your teammates -- play hard on every play for 60 minutes."

Carr sits in the back of the room with gray slacks and a blue sport coat, holding a piece of paper with his hands clasped, head down and eyes closed as if he's in prayer.

After the defensive meeting next door breaks and those players join their offensive teammates, Carr walks to the front of the room.

"We want to be the smart team out there today, and a smart team doesn't turn the ball over or commit penalties" he says. "We want to be the most physical team today. Knock them off the line of scrimmage!

"Today, play for each other and play for Michigan. Play with great poise, great pride and great toughness. And gentlemen, when this day is over we'll be celebrating."

Bus ride to stadium.

The 15-minute drive to the stadium, thanks to a police escort, is so silent the clicking sound of hazard lights is the only sound you hear.

As the offensive and defensive buses pull closer to the Citrus Bowl, Florida supporters taunt the Wolverines with their signature Gator chop.

The coaches and players file out of each bus, making a 3-minute stroll -- dubbed the "Victors Walk" -- through a tunnel of Michigan fans and its band, belting out the school's famous fight song.

Hart walks past team managers holding bowls of gum just past the doors of the locker room, then turns around to grab a handful of the colorful pieces to chew on as he gets out of his suit and into uniform

Locker room, pregame.

Jon Falk, hired by Schembechler to be his equipment manager in 1974, runs the show behind the scenes in the locker room and is the program's historian.

"It's a businesslike day, but also a sad one because this is the end of Michigan football as we've known it for almost four decades," Falk says as the players finish up pregame warmups. "But Michigan will always be Michigan."

And Falk will always be Falk.

"There's no respect for Michigan!" Falk screams at the players as they re-enter the locker room. "We're going to beat them -- even if it takes all day!"

Players hoot and holler, curse and scream as they find a place to sit in rows of chairs facing one end of the locker room.

"Let's make this our house!" Crable shouts.

English grabs Crable's helmet and jabs it into the air, addressing the team with so much emotion he chokes up.

"It's a privilege to wear this winged helmet," English says. "It's about Michigan today. Show everyone why this is the best program in the country!"

Tight end Carson Butler chimes in.

"There will never be another Michigan team like this," Butler says as he paces. "Not only are our seniors leaving, our coach is leaving, too. Lloyd Carr is done. How are we going to end this? We all made those vows yesterday, let's live up to those words."

Cleveland Browns star Braylon Edwards, a former Wolverine, slips in the locker room just in time to hear Carr's final pregame speech.

Carr paces in front of the team for a few minutes, putting palms into his back pockets and staring at the carpet before talking to the team for 2 1/2 minutes with intensity and a voice louder than longtime observers ever recall.

"This game is about one thing -- winning!" he shouts. "Each time the ball is snapped and until the whistle blows, you fight with a fury and you play with everything you got and knock them off the ball!"

"Everybody is going to take a punch, but you make sure you give more punches than you take! There has been a lot of things that have happened this year, and you've held together and fought together and you're here on New Year's Day.

"On every play, play for your teammates for one last time and give it everything you've got!"

Locker room, halftime.

Michigan leads 21-14.

"This is the deal, we have the momentum and we are the more intense team," Carr says. "They can't stop us unless we stop ourselves. We're going to keep the pressure on them, and we're going after them! The crowd is as stunned as that team. This game is ours.

"This game is not about Florida! We don't care what they say or what they do. This next 30 minutes is about Michigan! Let's go!!!"

"Yeah!" some scream.

"Yes, sir!" others shout.

Just before the team goes on the field for the last time, Carr tries to share some parting words, but he's so overcome with emotion that his words can't be heard a mere 10 feet away.

English chimes in.

"Let's play for this man!" English shouts.

The players, already worked up into a frenzy, scream, shout, hop and dance.

"What time is it?" a player asks.

"Game time!" the team responds.

The exchange repeats itself several times as players bob their heads and even the normally stoic Henne gets into the act, shimmying his shoulders before taking the field for the second half.

Locker room, postgame.

Carr walks into a wild celebration in the locker room, steps on a chair and hears goofy requests from his delirious players.

"Lloyd, take off your coat! Lloyd, get naked!" the Wolverines scream.

After choosing not to disrobe, Carr reminds his players to cherish Mandich's words from the previous night, congratulates them for defining their team with a big win, thanks his coaching staff and expresses his love.

"Gentlemen," he says in closing, "you have given me something to remember for the rest of my life.

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