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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) \_ Two years ago, Bobby Bowden fell asleep in the locker room minutes before the kickoff of a Florida State-Miami game.

''Heck, I do that all the time,'' said the Seminoles' coach. ''There's no use worrying at the point, anyway. If your team ain't ready to play by then, they're never going to be ready.''

Bowden's team was ready. Florida State beat Miami 24-10, handing the eventual national champs their only loss of the season.

It's hard to imagine Lombardi or Rockne or Bryant taking a nap before a big game. But then, the man they call ''Saint Bobby'' has always done things his own way.

Part preacher, part stand-up comedian and part military historian, Bowden is also one of the most successful coaches in college football history.

The 61-year-old Alabama native has won 209 games during his 26-year career, more than any active coach except Penn State's Joe Paterno. The only others ahead of him on the Division I victory list are Bear Bryant, Amos Alonzo Stagg, Pop Warner, Woody Hayes and Bo Schembechler.

That's pretty fast company for a pint-sized, country boy who earned \$4,500 in his first head job at South Georgia Junior College. Today, he's got a lifetime contract at Florida State worth about \$700,000 a year. But they still call him Bobby, he still uses words like dad-gum and gosh and he still is so informal that he recently conducted an interview in his office while getting a haircut and watching game films on a giant TV screen.

''I don't pay much attention to this Saint Bobby stuff,'' he said. ''If you're looking for a halo over my head, you're going to be disappointed. I'm just a football coach trying to win a few games and have some fun.''

Bowden is doing both this year. His Seminoles are 4-0 and ranked No. 1 going into Saturday's home game against No. 10 Syracuse. If they get by the Orangemen, they appear to have clear sailing until their final regular-season contests against No. 2 Miami and No. 13 Florida.

Already, there is a growing feeling that this could finally be the year Bowden wins his first national championship. The Seminoles have come close the last four seasons, finishing second in 1987, third in '88, third in '89 and fourth in '90. Winning it all has become an obsession for some Florida State fans, but not for Bowden.

''Sure, I would love for it to happen. But I'm not going to slit my wrist if it doesn't,'' he said. ''Frankly, I'd rather go 13-0 and not win it than go 12-1 and win it. I like perfection.''

Almost as much as he likes trick plays.

No coach has ever gotten more pleasure from baffling the opposition with flea-flickers, fumblerooskies and fake kicks. Last week, Florida State used a double-pass play called ''The Crocodile'' and a sneaky shovel pass to help beat Michigan 51-31. But Bowden's most famous fake was the ''puntrooskie'' he called against Clemson in 1988.

With the score tied at 21 and Florida State facing a fourth-and-4 at its own 21 with 1:30 left in the game, the Seminoles lined up in punt formation. However, the center snapped the ball to one of the up men, who then placed it between the legs of blocking back LeRoy Butler.

By the time Clemson realized Butler had the ball, it was too late. He ran 78 yards before being knocked out of bounds on the Clemson 1, and two plays later Florida State kicked the game-winning field goal.

Bowden says his fascination with fakery dates back to his childhood.

''I was always the smallest kid in the neighborhood,'' he said. ''I couldn't run anybody over, so I had to figure out other ways to win.''

Some of Bowden's daring decisions haven't worked out as well as the puntrooskie. Last year, a ''fumblerooskie'' backfired against Auburn and sparked a comeback victory by the Tigers. And in 1987, a failed two-point try against Miami in the final minute cost the Seminoles the game and the national championship.

''Gamblers don't always win, but they're never dull,'' Bowden said.

Bowden has been entertaining football fans for a quarter century. He spent four years at his alma mater, Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., and six years at West Virginia before coming to Florida State in 1976.

The Seminoles were 4-29 in the three years prior to Bowden's arrival. Since then, Florida State has averaged nine wins a season and been to 12 bowl games in 15 years.

"Bobby Bowden is Florida State football," said athletic director Bob Goin. "He's a perfect fit for this school. He's a down-to-earth guy who knows how to communicate with people in this part of the country."

Bowden is no bumpkin, though. He's a voracious reader, a sought-after speaker and a student of military history who has picked up a few pointers from the battle plans of Napoleon, Patton and Rommel.

"They're the types who would have called a puntrooskie," Bowden said. "They had audacity. They weren't afraid to try something new."

Like his military heroes, Bowden has a deep drive to win.

"He's a great competitor," said defensive line coach Chuck Amato. "He loves to laugh and joke around, but he also wants to beat you."

One of the keys to Bowden's success is his ability to keep his players loose without taking away their intensity.

"We were so psyched up before the Michigan game, he had to calm us down," said defensive back Terrell Buckley. "We were in the locker room slapping heads and going crazy. When coach Bowden saw that, he told us to chill out. He said, 'Relax, it's just a game.'"

West Virginia fans obviously didn't feel that way when they hung Bowden in effigy after the Mountaineers went 4-7 in 1974, one of only two losing seasons in his career.

"That taught me an important lesson," said Bowden, who has three sons in college coaching. "As long as you're winning, fans love you. When you start losing, they can turn on you in a heartbeat."

That's not likely to happen at Florida State, where Bowden has gained saintly status and the Seminoles are a perennial power.

Gone are the days when the former women's college had to play all its big-name opponents on the road to earn money and respect. Gone, too, are the publicity gimmicks Bowden once employed to sell tickets, such as posing in a boxing ring with a rival coach and dressing up as Michael Jackson for an interview.

As a young coach, Bowden dreamed of working at Alabama or Auburn. Not anymore.

"Why would I leave this place?" he asked. "I've got the best job in the whole world."

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