

Getting to Know ... Robby Gilbert

By Mike Faulkner
Staff Correspondent

Current Decatur head baseball coach Robby Gilbert has been hired as the head baseball coach at Brookwood for the 2022-23 school year.

Gilbert has been Decatur's head coach the past six seasons, reaching the 2019 state semifinals and the 2017 Elite Eight, along with winning four straight region championships. The Tucker native coached football and baseball for 17 years at Tucker, winning state titles in football in 2008 and 2011. He also spent five years in Gwinnett as an assistant at Providence Christian, helping the team to a state title in 2012.

In the latest installment of "Getting to Know...", Gilbert talks with staff correspondent Robby Gilbert about his future at Brookwood, being adopted as a child, his love of the Denver Broncos and more.

MF: What's your baseball background? Where did it all start for you?

RG: I was born and raised in Tucker, played at Tucker high school and graduated in 1993. I had the opportunity to play college baseball. I spent a year at DeKalb College and after that went to Truett-McConnell Junior college and graduated in 1996. Then I got married. I always wanted to stay around the game of baseball. I actually umpired a lot of games and went to Jim Evans Umpire School in 1997 but it didn't work out. One summer I went back to my old high school in Tucker and talked to my baseball coach and he hired me as an assistant. From there I got a job as a paraprofessional in special ed and the rest is history. I wasn't anticipating trying to work in school at that point, I was just trying to coach but God opened up some doors.

And literally I got hired the day before school started.

MF: What interested you about taking the head coaching role at Brookwood in Gwinnett County?

RG: Like I told the people at Brookwood, (athletic director) Jason (Dopson) and (principal) Bo (Ford), I think Brookwood is one of those elite jobs not just in Gwinnett but in the entire state and even country. The support from the community within the school system, you couldn't ask for a better situation in terms of you're going to have everything you need to be successful. I've always admired Gwinnett baseball and I have a lot of good friends who are coaches in Gwinnett. I've always tried to play Gwinnett teams because they're good at baseball. Night in and night out you've got to bring your A game because that's what you want to play, you want to play good teams.

MF: Is that why you think it's a good fit for you?

RG: I think the timing is right. I'm 21 years in. I've never been the grass is greener kind of guy to try to move on to somewhere. But when you look at the opportunity presented itself and me having the opportunity to work with Bo the principal and Jason Dopson the AD and the magnitude of that job and community there's no way I could've said no. I think it's an unbelievable fit across the board.

MF: What is your overall goal as a coach?

RG: My goal is to make better young men on and off the field through baseball. I've always told my kids it's bigger than baseball. We want to win, we want to compete hard and do all of these things but if I'm not making them a better young man by the time they leave high school and preparing them for the real world whether it's

college, trade school, work or whatever they want to do, then I feel like I've failed. To me it's about relationships, I'm a relationship guy. I don't waiver from that. I'm invested into these kids from the time that I have them, from the time that they leave me, to the time they become young adults and husbands and fathers. There's nothing greater for me than getting a text from a former player and simply saying, 'Hey coach this is what I'm doing in life, I've this promotion, I've got this degree, I've had a baby.' To me that's the greatest accomplishment a coach can have.

MF: What makes coaching in the state of Georgia so unique?

RG: It's so competitive. Every day you have to go to work knowing that you're going to face somebody that's really good and who's working just as hard if not harder than you are. I've got coaching friends all across the Southeast and other places and you have those conversations and they're like, 'Man, I wish we were able to play these teams.' There's so much talent in this area. The whole state is loaded with great talent, phenomenal coaches and great people.

MF: So a little bit about you, what do you typically do in your free time?

RG: I love to travel. I'm blessed with a wife, my wife Amy who I've been married to for 25 years. I have a son Morgan who's 23, still in school, a daughter Abigail who's 20 playing softball at Lincoln College in Illinois. We love to travel, we love to go to the beach. I'm blessed at the fact they love to go to ballparks. I've been to 21 of 30 major league ballparks, numerous minor league

ballparks. We love to play golf, not very good at it. I love to hang out with friends. I'm a simple guy, I like to think of myself as a simple guy though. Doing this profession when you get down time you want to get away from it and relax, I love being around my family. I'm blessed to have great family and friends.

MF: What is your favorite restaurant?

RG: That's a tough one. I'd have to say Longhorn or Olive Garden. I'm a simple guy. I like what I like, I don't try a lot of new stuff.

MF: What's your favorite food?

RG: I love seafood. Love shrimp, scallops, crab and lobster. That's one of the things we do on beach trips. We do a little country boil. I have a 100 quart pot that goes with us. It's funny each year you improve the way you do it. So now I have like a kiddie pool and put the lining in there and dump it in the kiddie pool so it doesn't get everywhere. My wife's family is a large family, we had 24 people down at Disney World under one house. It was great. I love my family so we did a country boil for 24 people.

MF: What are your personal goals?

RG: I always work as hard as I can work. I want to invest in these kids' lives. I never really set aside the desire to win this many games or this many state championships. I never set those goals. Early in my life when I started as a para my goal was to be a certified teacher if I wanted to be a head coach. I did life a little backwards, I was married when I was 21 and I had kids when I was 23 and 26. I didn't go back to school until I was 33. My son graduated high school and I graduated



Robby Gilbert

CARTER

From B1

knowing it was loaded with a senior pitching staff and he was not going to get much mound time, so he decided to redshirt his first year.

Carter encountered his first real adversity the following year.

"I was going to get more opportunities, but the mental side of baseball started to creep in, and I struggled for first time in my baseball career," Carter said. "I had never gone through major adversity until college. When that hit, I did not know how to react. I tried to change something, and it did not work. It put me in a hole mentally."

Looking back, the 6-foot-3

right-handed pitcher had invested three years at Columbus State and had only pitched 16 innings.

"I decided I wanted to leave," he said. "The Columbus State coaching staff was helpful in trying to help me find a new school. I sent out about 25 emails and (Lee) Coach (Mark) Brew was the first to reply. Out of 25 letters I sent, only three replied, and Lee showed the most interest. Once I researched Lee and came on campus, I knew this was going to be a good fit for me to grow and learn."

The new home and environment went well for Carter.

"I worked hard and earned a weekend starting-pitching role and that was a huge for me," he said.

His story took a different

turn when COVID hit and put many things on hold, including baseball.

Determination kicked in for the pitcher.

"I was able to go home in March (two years ago). I was 22 years old and getting no attention from professional scouts," Carter said. "My pitching velocity was around 88-91 miles per hour. During the quarantine, I had a good opportunity to really work hard and make some strides. I worked six days a week, eating more than I ever had and working on mechanical adjustment. I put on 20 pounds of muscle and came back to Lee at 205 pounds, the heaviest I had ever been. This coming after lots of hard work and plenty of leg workouts."

All the extra work paid off. Carter's speed was clocked at 98.6 mph.

"I never thought I could do that," he said "My top speed at Columbus was 88-91 miles per hour. Now I was consistently throwing in the 94-96 range. Our regular season came, and I was so happy. I was having the most fun I ever had playing baseball. We won the (2021) Gulf South championship. We qualified for the NCAA South Regional and I struck out 13 batters in 7 1/3 innings (against Alabama Huntsville)."

"Years of a lot of failing, suffering and hard work all accumulated into that one day in Pensacola and is something I will never forget. Years of not giving up and continuing to improve and it all came together."

After the 2021 season ended, Carter traveled to Wilmington, North Carolina to pitch summer ball for the Sharks. In his first outing with the team, he was throwing around 95 to 97 mph and the coach asked him if he could go another inning.

"As soon as the ball left my hand, I felt a pain and it turned out to be a partially torn ulnar collateral ligament in the right elbow."

He was frustrated again, knocked down but not out.

Carter returned home and then made the journey to Birmingham for Tommy John surgery.

"I worked all summer on rehab and came back to Lee," he said. "The hardest part of being hurt at the time was the

mental aspect. How far was I getting behind after being at my peak? So many thoughts about my future were going through my head. I wondered am I ever going to get back to where I was before? I kept telling myself to try to control what I could and accept the things now and just keep working."

Hearing Alan talk about his mother Maggie Zhang, who was born in Xi'An, China, and was the captain of her basketball team, explains why he refuses to walk away from his dream.

"Mother was very athletic and worked very hard in college in China and became a lawyer," Carter said. "She met my father (Nick) when she was 26 or 27 when Dad was selling memberships to golf courses. He had worked in Asia for about 15 years. Dad wanted to come back to the states and still work in the golf profession. My parents thought America would be a better opportunity for me. We moved to Chico, California and then to Georgia and Duluth."

His mother went from being a lawyer in China to having her first jobs in America at Subway and Gap. Carter said at the time his mom had a vision in a land of opportunity, and even though she had to start all over she was willing and determined to do what it took.

"She already spoke English but was always taking classes in English and reading newspapers, trying to get her English down perfect. Every single night she worked to improve," he said.

Maggie was a student at University of Georgia and pursuing her master's degree. She would take Alan to practice and prepare for her class while in the stands at his games.

"At the time I did not really realize how determined she was and fully appreciate her work ethic," Carter said. "My dad was working back in China when I was in middle school. He would send money back, but I only saw him about twice a year. I saw every day how much mother worked to improve. She never complained, just worked very hard. She is an amazing lady."

Maggie got her master's degree in business from the University of Georgia, and then

with my undergrad the same year. Which was really unique and the testimony behind that is there's never a wrong time but it worked out for me and I went ahead and got my master's. There's really no goal but I guess get to all 30 ballparks and see the Denver Broncos at every away stadium I can. I'm a big Denver Broncos fan.

MF: What is your family background like?

RG: I was adopted when I was 3 years old. I knew when I was 7, my adopted mom told me. It was no big deal to me. I didn't no know any different. When I was 39 my adopted mom passed away and the next year I started digging in and turned in paperwork to the Georgia adoption registry to find my birth mother. And sure enough I found her. I found out that I had a half brother and a half sister that I knew nothing about. They surprised me at halftime of a football game at Tucker when I was coaching. I came out of the locker room at halftime and they were at the 50-yard line. It was really cool. My birth mother and family lived 15 minutes away from where my wife grew up in Northern Kentucky. My birth mother and my mother in law had the same OBGYN, same pediatrician. My mother in law worked at a fabric store in Northern Kentucky where my birth mother shopped. So we know for a fact there's about a year window where they had conversations with each other and had know clue. There's no telling if we ran into each other or not. My half brother still lives in Kentucky.

My half sister lives here now in Henry County and she teaches. She's about to have her first kid in April. That's kind of cool. My birth mother lives here down in the Columbus area. We get together as much as

we can. I am obviously sensitive to understanding that doesn't always work out for other people. I've been extremely blessed by God.

MF: What's your favorite baseball team?

RG: The Atlanta Braves.

MF: How excited were you when they won the World series?

RG: I was there. A small thing. My son actually worked for the Atlanta Braves for five years as a ball boy down the right field line. When he started that, my wife and I decided to be partial season ticket holders. We started up in the upper level with four tickets and worked our way down now to two tickets. It's just 27 games in the Saturday night package. But we were there. Me and my wife went Friday and Sunday and flew my daughter on Saturday and let her and my son go Saturday night to the game. It was awesome, 1995 was a long time ago when the Braves won the World Series. I grew up a Braves fan, Dale Murphy, Bruce Benedict, Bob Horner. I can't tell you how many times I swung in the backyard like Dale Murphy because that's who I wanted to be. It was special and a long time coming through some painful games.

MF: Would you say Dale Murphy is your favorite baseball player?

RG: Growing up Dale Murphy was certainly my favorite baseball player. I think as I got older, Ken Griffey Jr. was that guy. He could do everything. I always tell our kids to have fun playing the game of baseball, don't take it for granted and enjoy it. That's what Ken Griffey did. He played with a smile on his face every day and was serious when he needed to be. You could never say he wasn't having fun doing what he loved to do.



Lee University

Duluth grad Alan Carter poses for a photo with his father Nick Carter, left, and his mother Maggie Zhang, right.

started working in IT. Alan said his mother changed along with technology.

"She is always looking to learn and improving," he said. "She studied IT relentlessly for about four years. She went to work at ADP and still works there, and loves her job, managing a lot of people. She would drive to Kennesaw State to take classes for free that her company offered, and she also runs a real estate business."

Alan says his mother now lives in Suwanee.

"My parents are divorced but still have a good relationship," he said. "I have really learned many qualities and values just watching my mother work and succeed in life, having that drive and having a goal to work hard to get there and set new goals. My dad is retired and has moved to Cleveland to watch me play. He is at every ballgame and is living his dream of watching his son play."

While Alan has been working overtime to return and has been impressive in limited action, he had high praise for Dan Heinbaugh (Lee's athletic trainer).

"I love that man. In the three years he has been working with me at Lee, I have never heard him complain," Carter said. "He always has a great attitude, loves what he does and has great pride and confidence

in his work. He cares about all of us players. He has been there every single day for me."

Through the entire process, Carter, who is a graduate student with a degree in marketing, says he has made so many great friends on the Lee team and wants to finish strong for his teammates.

"I'm 24 years old and I've not had any contact with pro scouts since I returned from my surgery," he said.

All that could change quickly. The Lee coaching staff is not rushing the fireballer back to the hill, but in two early showings he has fanned seven hitters in just 2 1/3 innings of work. "We are excited about getting Alan back after a long rehab process," said Brew. "He has worked extremely hard to give himself the chance to return this season and we are pulling for him to have a healthy 2022. He was selected as a team captain by his peers due to his work ethic and respect."

"Last year, Alan was a huge part of a conference championship and NCAA regional team and had one of our best performances of the year against UAH in the regional. In his time at Lee, he has developed into a professional prospect, and we all are excited to see the impact he makes on the team for the remainder of the season."

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