

FISKE BROTHERS DIVIDED & UNITED BY CITADEL-VMI RIVALRY

By Danny Reed

Bill Fiske is studious, academic and a Scrabble whiz. Bob Fiske is more relaxed, flamboyant and a natural on the tennis court.

Bill is a Citadel Bulldog, Class of 1956. Bob is a VMI Keydet, Class of 1957.

The basketball-playing brothers, each of whom started for their alma mater, will be back together again when the Bulldogs host the Keydets on Sunday at 5:30 p.m. on "Pack the Mac" Night at McAlister Field House.

"At our age this might be the last time that we have a chance to do exactly this," said Bill, 80, who has not watched a Citadel home basketball game in person since his senior season. "This will be a treat to go back to Charleston to show off The Citadel to my brother."

While the two seem quite different, they have shared a life-long friendship based on a similar competitive fire, mirrored career paths as Army colonels and a love of basketball.

"We're both appreciative of life, we just approach it a little differently," said Bob, 78, younger than Bill by 16 months and the second of five siblings.

Initially, it was challenging for the Fiske brothers to hone the craft of basketball. Their father, Leo, was a successful lawyer and entrepreneur whose business ventures forced frequent family moves, as all five siblings were born in different states and enrolled in 20 different schools in 12 states over a 16-year period.

Still, the two brothers cited their father for providing the impetus for youthful competition.

"When Dad would introduce us he said 'This is Bill, my smart son, and this is Bob, my good-looking son,'" said Bill, who now resides in New Bern, N.C. "But when it came to us going against other people, Bob and I bonded quite well."

Bill and Bob date their love of basketball back to middle school in Rutland, Vt. Brutal northeastern winters provided a momentary road block.

"We had the best court in the neighborhood with plenty of room, if we could shovel enough snow," said Bob, who currently resides in Ormand Beach, Fla. just outside of Daytona. "We never got to play varsity sports because of all the moving. I think it paid off because it gave us our first real opportunity to play."

As the oldest, Bill was the first to head to college while the family had temporarily settled in Miami, Fla. His selection process was not easy. He ranked among the top two percent amongst all high school students academically and had been accepted to all nine schools to which he applied, including Cornell, where he planned on playing polo while studying to become a veterinarian.

Ultimately, with the aiding of his guidance counselor and librarian, Bill chose The Citadel due to its affordability, high academic standards and opportunity to play basketball. He hopped on an Atlantic Coast Line railway car in September 1952 bound for Charleston and quickly made a lasting impression: he made the Bulldog basketball team and was named captain of the freshman team and later the varsity squad.

The next year, it was Bob's turn to decide on college. Seeing the success that Bill was having in a military setting, the younger Fiske brother selected VMI in 1953, having taken an immediate liking to Keydet basketball coach Chuck Noe.

"I had a chance to play at Stetson and the University of Florida, but I didn't want to be that close to home," Bob said. "I also didn't want to attend The Citadel because I thought I'd automatically be compared to Bill."

Of course, when The Citadel played VMI, both coaching staffs were well aware of the family ties. By design, the starting guards naturally defended each other, matching Bill's wits against Bob's athleticism.

From 1952-56, Bill's Bulldogs went 0-6 against Bob's Keydets.

Bill recalls a particular contest at VMI in Feb. 1955 when he beat his brother off the dribble only to have his shot blocked by imposing Keydet big man Tom Tait.

"Eat it," exclaimed Tait as remembered by Bill. Bob casually snickered in the background.

Whether it's Bob waxing poetic on the brilliance of West Virginia All-American "Hot Rod" Hundley's ambidextrous free-throw shooting or Bill reminiscing on the experience of guarding Furman's Frank Selvy, the NCAA's national scoring leader at the time, the memories run thick and vivid for the Fiske brothers.

"It was wonderful. I outscored him eight to three," said Bill of Selvy, in a contest that Furman won 154-67 on Jan. 8, 1955. "The only problem is by that time, he already had 33 points."

You won't find many athletic mentions for Bill or Bob Fiske in their respective yearbooks. Their post-graduate careers, however, have been purpose-driven lives of duty, service and integrity.

Both entered the Army, served tours in Vietnam and reached the rank of Colonel.

Bill served 26 years, notably with 48th EOD in Fort Jackson, the unit that helped dispose of the MK 6 nuclear bomb that fell in Mars Bluff on March 11, 1958. Bob served 23 years, achieving the rank of colonel at age 39, which at the time of promotion made him the Army's youngest full Colonel in combat arms.

Both succeeded professionally, as well. Bob started a national consulting firm to help individuals who were leaving the service find immediate employment, while Bill worked as federal contractor in Washington D.C. in military procurement specializing in munitions and explosions.

On Sunday at the old Citadel Armory – the way they remember McAlister Field House – they'll share stories of basketball and life, of whom they once were and whom they have become and how The Citadel and VMI helped get them there.

"The Citadel gave me the attitude to persevere, to continue," Bill said. "I'm so proud of the institution. It was – and still is – terrific."