

# A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Former Georgia Tech-star-quarterback-turned-big-time-developer **John Dewberry** has a vision to redefine the city skyline

BY AMY FLURRY PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS STANFORD

**O**ne of Georgia's wealthiest men and most eligible bachelors is late for our interview because he decided to give his dog a bath. Boarding his nine-seat jet, developer John Dewberry apologizes for running a bit behind as he folds his six-foot frame into the seat, clutching a copy of *Thoroughbred Times*. Earlier that morning he ran six miles with his German shorthaired pointer, Georgia, read a couple of papers and attended an early-morning service at Peachtree Road United Methodist Church. Admittedly, he overreached a little when he decided to wash Georgia before we all flew to see one of his horses run in Chicago. It's not even noon.

At 43, Dewberry looks like he walked straight out of a Ralph Lauren ad, with a chiseled jaw and steely blue eyes that—I've been forewarned—when he chooses to lock in, stun. He was born in Waynesboro, Virginia, but not into the privileged roots his name, blue-blood hobbies or delectable Southern accent might suggest. But he did, I will learn, arrive with enough charm, wit and attitude to more than make up the difference.

His company, Dewberry Capital, which owns \$1 billion in assets, is primed to develop what he sees as Atlanta's new cultural heart: a stretch along Peachtree from 17th Street to Collier Road. He has branded the commercially zoned, mixed-use land "Uptown."

Indeed, his vision has already been set into motion with One Peachtree Pointe, a seven-story office building that houses his firm, as well as MidCity Cuisine, the Ansley Park Playhouse and Seyfarth Shaw LLP. By the time you read this, he predicts the company will have completed an 18-story sister building next door a month ahead of schedule.

Friends, tenants, even Dewberry himself, are quick to compare the scope and impact of this project to the contributions of famed architect and fellow Georgia Tech graduate John Portman. "But residential was not on Portman's radar," Dewberry says. "My plan is to create a mixed-use, high-rise develop-

ment right on Peachtree that will reshape the Atlanta skyline."

But it may be a hop, skip and two jumps from developer to visionary; nobody confuses Donald Trump with Rem Koolhaas, after all. Equating these endeavors is risky business. Being a visionary takes more than mere enthusiasm and means, but also the ability to imagine a reinvigorated urban space. And that takes knowing the local ambition or, in this case, talent.

## THE QUARTERBACK

Dewberry confidently draws his point of view in leading this charge—and for doing most anything—from his tenure as a collegiate athlete. There is not one person, friend or detractor, that I talked with for this interview who doesn't mention football when discussing him.

We haven't even hit cruising altitude before he makes the first of many football references that day in his plane. "Smoken Rosa has the potential to be a great horse," he says of his three-year-old thoroughbred that we will later watch race. "She's like that young quarterback from the University of Georgia [he pronounces it "Jaawja"] whom everyone wants to see play but who is mentally just not ready yet to win."

In the early '80s, Dewberry was a great college quarterback for Georgia Tech, though his coach at the time, Bill Curry, did not initially share that opinion. When Dewberry threw the ball, it just looked funny. His passes weren't the consistently gorgeous spirals you'd expect from an ACC college recruit, but instead, 30-yard ducks of the wounded variety. To boot, he was small for the position, and his speed, thought his coaches, served him better as a wide receiver.

But Dewberry believed—he just knew—that he would be a winning quarterback, and he was young and impetuous enough to walk into Curry's office, pound his fist on the coach's desk and insist he be given a shot.

Curry, a former NFL center and a college football analyst for ESPN, agreed and gave him nine

months to work and prepare for his new position. "He would go on to take us from a very poor team to a very good one, all the while acting more as a junior assistant coach, always looking for an edge for his team," says Curry from his office in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he now serves as executive director of the Leadership Baylor program at the Baylor School. "I had to throw him out of the office a few times to let me do my job!"

By the end of his career, Dewberry was the leading quarterback in passing efficiency in his conference. Twenty years later, Dewberry is still ranked in the top five in passing yardage in the school's history. "He actually had the discipline to match his ego," Curry says. "He made himself into what he wanted to be."

## THE ENTREPRENEUR

That same unbridled determination has served him well off the field. At 25, when most post-collegiate athletes are facing the grim adult reality of a workweek with no pep rally, Dewberry had already begun to shape a future for himself. He would use his regional celebrity, charm and self-directed resolve to finesse a \$4 million loan, in the middle of a real-estate recession, to develop a shopping center in Charleston.

"I must have set a record, I banged on so many doors asking for money," Dewberry says. "I told the lender if he loaned me the money, 'I'll pay you back if it means I do so for the rest of my life.'"

Time and again, Dewberry's knack for seeing just beyond the line of everyone else's vision proved wildly successful. He would go on to borrow \$200 million from that same lender over the course of the next 12 years.

And as his company grew, he amplified a proven strategy hard-wired into his competitive consciousness: He assumed the intellectual challenge of developing an offense and assembling a team he thought could execute it.

He will rattle off the accomplishments of his staff like a proud parent. "My COO," he croons, "she's an aerospace engineer with an MBA from Harvard



**Sporting man.** John Dewberry, has been ahead of the curve in investing and real-estate developing ever since he graduated from Georgia Tech. Now he has a plan he hopes will transform a neighborhood he is calling Uptown.

Shirt and velvet blazer by **Ralph Lauren Purple Label**, sweater by **Prada**, all available at Neiman Marcus, Lenox Square.

and was ranked in *USA Today's* top 20 students in the country back in '93."

His brother Douglas, the company's executive vice president, was the first of his family to graduate from college. His former executive assistant, who recently left to become a CIA agent, was only points away from a perfect SAT score. Of the 28 people on his staff, half are women, and almost a third were competitive in some collegiate-level sport.

Dewberry's acumen as a businessman is an evolving mix of the Old South with the New that tracks with Atlanta's growing sense of self. Suddenly, everyone's finding out what he seems to have known all along: That there's really something here, and people want to make it work.

As the son of a self-taught, part-time preacher, the importance of doing something worthy and leaving things better than you found them was impressed upon him early.

He stands to do so by serving the interests of the wealthy elite, by creating a sense of place for "down-to-earth" snobs, of which he admits to being one. He looks to Chicago's Michigan Avenue, the Magnificent Mile, as a model of what he says Uptown can be: a pedestrian-friendly thoroughfare rich with retail, restaurants and public spaces. He plans to move into The Ansley, the high-rise boutique hotel that he's building here, once it's completed.

"His vision for Atlanta is authentic and stretches far beyond the economic considerations for himself," says friend Kent Matlock, chairman and CEO of Matlock Advertising & Public Relations, among the top-five largest multicultural ad agencies in the country. "It doesn't bother me if everyone doesn't see it. What compels me is that he sees it so clearly."

#### THE BACHELOR

Dewberry's natural curiosity and openness, a disarming facet of his personality as with many great entrepreneurs, seems to abet his knack for making money. "I tried to buy my first horse on the spot with a credit card," he says. "The owner laughed in my face when I scrambled to convince him I was good for it."

But as is always the case with Dewberry the story didn't end there. The owner of that horse, Nick Hartery, a top Dell Europe executive, took a shining to Dewberry's colloquial manners and business savvy, and the two developed a rapport, partnering in the purchase of 10 horses over the next four years.

Dewberry lives well, spending time between his houses in Atlanta, Charleston and the seaside hamlet of Doonbeg, Ireland. He counts former NFL star Dan Marino, Ted Turner and Sea Island proprietor Bill Jones III as friends and has dated Marla Maples.

He is constantly on the move, hitting Ireland this September for the Ryder Cup, courtesy of buddy and PGA golfer Stewart Cink, before dashing to Mexico to hunt dove. In between, he snuck in a trip to see the Rolling Stones in New York, where he bonded backstage with Stones keyboardist Chuck Leavell over their bird dogs. "They were showing pictures to each other on their cell phones like they were showing off children," says an associate who was there. "The next thing you know, they've planned a hunting trip down on Chuck's farm in south Georgia."

"One of the most admirable things about John is that he gets the job done without appearing to be working at all," says Joel Babbit, president of New York-based GCI, one of the world's largest public-relations firms and Dewberry's One Peachtree Pointe tenant and neighbor. "He's certainly got that part down."

At the track in Chicago, Dewberry is a portrait of tailored style in his Domenico Vacca sports coat, jeans and handmade Italian loafers, with a swagger as

relaxed as his accent. He introduces himself to just about anyone who comes close to making eye contact, including a few assistant trainers who don't speak any English. He passes through this day and then the evening at his favorite restaurant, RL (Ralph Lauren's ultrachic restaurant adjacent to the company's flagship store on Michigan Avenue), with the same unassuming affability.

In any language, he is a flirt. At a follow-up meeting a few weeks later, he locks onto one of my girlfriends, a very beautiful woman he's never met, and audaciously asks her out within minutes. Single at 43 and with the net worth of a small town—the evidence speaks for itself. This handsome dervish has made a career out of avoiding the loss. He enjoys playing the field far too much to be caught.

#### THE DEVELOPER

Dewberry began snapping up parcels of his future Uptown for \$25 per square foot nine years ago (the current going rate is \$250 to \$300). He recognized the indicators of a promising location—a developable main artery buffered and potentially fed by residential communities like affluent Ansley Park, Sherwood Forest, Brookwood Hills and Collier Hills.

"Uptown is a diamond in the rough," he says. "Peachtree should be like Michigan Avenue in Chicago. We need more architectural diversity."

When pressed to flesh out his architectural vision, the QB drops back, dances a little razzle-dazzle to avoid communicating a prevailing aesthetic. "I imagine it to be like New York's Upper East Side and the Upper West Side rolled into one," he says. "It will be a blend of the old and the new, mindful of the venerable neighborhoods and existing features, like The Temple designed by Philip Schutze, with nods to the new Renzo Piano High Museum a few blocks south. I want to create a first-rate pedestrian experience."

According to the plans, we can anticipate the "front lawn" of One Peachtree Pointe to be converted into the Shoppes at Peachtree Pointe, providing an additional

14,500 square feet of upscale boutique shopping plus two restaurants. Those may involve a collaboration with legendary chef-restaurateurs Anne Quatrano and Cliff Harrison of Bacchanalia. The Ansley will be located just south of the sister Peachtree Pointe buildings, continuing the same pattern of street-level retail space.

Riding on the momentum of the project's pioneer buildings, Dewberry has shown us where his values lie. "He understands that bringing on galleries and theaters upfront are vital to the success of what's to follow," says John Gibson, owner of the Ansley Park Playhouse and Peachtree Playhouse. "I don't think it's a coincidence that SCAD is right down the street. He wants to make this a culturally vibrant part of Atlanta, and that's a vision we shared."

And proving that economic development and environmental responsibility can coexist, Two Peachtree Pointe is Georgia's first speculative, Class-A office tower to obtain LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) status certification that recognizes energy-saving "green" buildings.

Bottom line, Dewberry is a billionaire developer who, when it comes to the details of implementing his vision, can be as elusive as the best ad-libbers ever to grace a backfield. Dramatic urban transformations demand that, plus the ability to manage the risks. This, we know, he has in spades. As for what Atlanta's main street will look like in 20 years, it's all about the first one over the line—and somebody's already given themselves great odds. ☉

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**Forward thinking.** John Dewberry achieved much of his success by having a vision for Atlanta before others had. “It doesn’t bother me if everyone doesn’t see it,” friend Kent Matlock says. “What compels me is that he sees it so clearly.”

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