

My Unforgettable Coach

By Craig Hillier

Ask any football player from Redwood Falls who played varsity from 1978-1991 about what comes to mind on Thursday night at about 5:00 and they will tell you the “pit.”

We played in an old stone stadium built in the 1930’s. There was a small dirt floor storage room that was musty, dark and smelled of high-jump mats. After the final preparatory practice forty-five exhausted, sweaty, smelly football players would walk into the cramped “pit.” The last player in the room would shut the door and it would become pitch black. You couldn’t even see a hand in front of your face. All you could hear was the player next to you breathing. After about 10 minutes of individually visualizing and mentally preparing for the game coach Ellingworth would enter the room.

Every Thursday night we would hear a powerful message about teamwork, commitment and leaving everything on the field. He never discussed X’s and O’s in the pit. It was about all the key things outside of the game we would need to do to have a great game and be a strong team. I start to get goose bumps when I think about it.

Occasionally, coach would invite a past player into the pit to follow up on his message. Some of the former players drove three hours to give a five minute talk. Of course, many of them stayed in town to watch the game the following night. It was amazing for a high school athlete to hear how the lessons that player learned several years ago were still with him.

After coach wrapped it up, he opened it up to any player to speak. Some guys would only say a few words others would speak for several minutes. I remember one teammate talking about the death of his father and how he wanted to make his dad proud of him as he watched from above. Other guys would express their appreciation for being there for them during difficult times. It was not uncommon for players to say how much they loved their teammates. The pit was a safe environment for players to drop the “macho” attitude the sport can often create and allowed us to say what needed to be said.

After everyone had their say, the door opened to shed light on the team. As each player walked out they would pound their forearms on the door banging it against the wall. That was in tribute to a former player who lost his life in a car accident. We would then run in silence four blocks back to the school.

At our twenty year reunion, I was able to retrieve a few videos of our games. As coach E and several of his former players wrapped up watching the last game film, we talked about the power of the pit. I’m sure he knew the tradition of the pit was important, but I don’t know if he realized it would be with his players for the rest of their lives.

Even though I’ve been out of high school football for twenty-plus years, the influence of coach E is still with me. In addition to creating the pit experience for his players I remember two keys that will be with me for the rest of my life.

Goal Setting

Before the school year ended we would have a team meeting. Coach E would hand each one of us a three by five index card. On one side of the card he asked us to write down our team goals. He instructed us to not just write down our team record goal but how we wanted to play and how we wanted to be remembered.

On the other side of the card, we were to write down our personal goals. Some of those goals might include how much we want to bench press or how many tackles we hope to make next season. He would then pull out the calendar and start to schedule forty-five minute meetings with each varsity member in the summer months. During those summer meetings we would show up at his house with our cards filled out. We would go over the goal card and then talk about whatever was on our mind, whether it was football or life. At the end of the meeting he would say something like, "I will do whatever I can to help you make the goals become reality." He would also say, "you have to do whatever you can to make them happen as well."

As with all goals, you seldom attain all of them. If you do, the goals were probably set too low in the first place. However, that three by five card was taped to my bathroom mirror from the beginning of the summer until the football season was completed.

That simple three by five card system is still used in my life today. Whenever I set a new goal I find myself writing on an index card and taping it in a place where I see it often.

Be a class act.

Coach E would constantly talk about being a class act on and off the field. Our shirts were tucked in at all times during the game. If he heard a player swear, we would all run. We were not allowed to argue or yell at officials. "You play, I'll take care of talking with the refs," said coach E. At the end of each quarter we would sprint to the other end of the field for the start of the next quarter whether we were winning or losing. We were asked to tackle our opponent as hard as possible and then extend a hand to help them up. "No matter what happens," we will be a class act.

To this day I have tried to keep that quality alive. I have had the chance to coach my son at several athletic levels. I find myself talking about being a class act to my team all the time. In my seminars with athletes I spend a lot of time talking about being a class act. No matter what the score is at the end of the game, one of my goals is for the other team and parents on both sides to see our team as a class act.

No doubt coach E is an unforgettable coach. There have been several times in my life where I can hear his voice running through my mind. Sometimes I hear a "kick in pants" talk other times it's "you can do this." No doubt, he has influenced me long after high school football.