

The Importance of a Coach



Before the 2011 season, Tony Osburn, the varsity football coach at Albion High School in small farming community in Western New York, was faced with the most heart-breaking situation he has ever faced.

Osburn was given the news that Nick Kovaleski, a sophomore on his team, had passed away after his battle with Leukemia.

"Nick was able to get a transplant of cells," Osburn said. "The cells killed the Leukemia but then they started to attack his own body. He went up to Strong and we knew it was bad."

Osburn found out Kovaleski was sick by chance. He and four of his players had driven to Strong Hospital in Rochester to visit a teammate who had been injured in an auto accident.

"We didn't even know Nick was there," Osburn said. "It was just by chance that I was there when they brought him in."

At that moment, Osburn had two of his players facing life-threatening situations in the same hospital emergency room.

"They don't go over this in the Coaches' Handbook," Osburn said. "There's no manual that tells you how to handle that."

Kovaleski did make one request while he laid in his bed.

"He wanted his jersey draped over him," Osburn said. "This kid is hooked up to every machine you can imagine. Doctors are talking about spleen damage and kidney failure. And the only thing he wants is his jersey. That's how important being on the football team is to these kids."

That summer, the entire team decided that they were going to issue Kovaleski's equipment to him.

"We wanted to hand him his equipment ahead of time," Osburn said. "Travis Downs and Pete Nesbitt went with me."

Osburn and two team captains went to the locker room and put a set of pads, jerseys and pants into a big Albion Duffelbag.

"We put our logo on his helmet," Osburn said. "We put some award-stickers on the helmet. We even put his shoes and a lock for his locker in there. Our two captains carried it

up when we went to his hospital room."

Kovaleski acknowledged the equipment but it was a struggle.

"He was still awake but it didn't look good," Osburn said. "He was responding but he wasn't talking. He was having a very difficult time breathing."

Osburn asked the boy what the Eagles should do if they won the coin toss in the season-opener.

"I asked him if we should take the ball or kick off," Osburn said. "It was probably the worst thing that I have ever watched. I couldn't believe how strong his mom and dad were, just sitting there, waiting for their child to die."

A few days after that visit, Osburn's player slipped into a coma. Within a week, he died.



Photo by Mark Adair

Albion coach Tony Osburn.

In a gathering of teammates and coaches, Nick's older brother Tom delivered a powerful speech.

"He talked about how important Albion football was to Nick," Osburn said. "You need to be grateful for every moment because no one knows when it will be taken away."

The entire experience changed Osburn. The coach now fully understands the awesome power a high school coach holds over his players.

"As coaches, we really forget what we mean to these young men," he said. "We forget what kind of role we play in their lives. It's huge."

Osburn says he always knew he was supposed to set a good example... but his experience with Nick Kovaleski brought his own understanding to a whole new level.

"We worry about how our linebackers make their reads or if our ends are lined up right," he said. "But, really, how we react in that our players will be watching

and learning from."

The job of "Role Model" is infinitely more important than game-strategy or conditioning drills.

"This sport in particular resonates with young men," he said. "Their interest in it goes way beyond the wins and losses. We take young men and teach them how to be a man and how to deal with adversity. Losing a football game is not the worst thing that will ever happen to you in your life."

And that teaching is constant.

"We coaches have to remember that we constantly have eyes on us," Osburn said. "Those young men are watching us to see how we react to things. How we conduct ourselves - on the field and off - is really what we have to be teaching... at all times."