

Father-Son Leadership RETREAT

By Ronnie Peacock

On August 11, 2000 the Greenwood Bulldogs began to lay a real foundation for the 2000 Arkansas AAAA State Football Championship. I have been coaching for 30 years and this is one of the best things that I've done in my coaching career. It was not necessarily directly related to football. We did not talk X's and O's, but we talked about things that would make us a better team. We talked about our team and our relationship with each other and with our dads. We had fun, laughed together and shared with each other. We talked about leadership and their responsibility to their teammates, community, the athletes who played before them and those who would come after them.

We had always taken the seniors to a ropes course and talked about the upcoming season, what we wanted to accomplish and how. We talked about goals, had fun and became closer as a team. This year was different. I had decided that the theme of the 2000 season would be "We're All In This Together." We had planned to involve the cheerleaders, student body, community and parents to help make this year special.

We had worked hard all year and decided to take our seniors and their dads to a Christian boy's camp in Batesville, Arkansas. It is a beautiful camp that is nestled among big pine trees and the bottom of a beautiful mountain, with a creek that flows right beside the cabins. Each of our seniors was to invite his dad to go. Some had stepfathers, and there were a few whose dads could not come. Every player was, however, represented by his dad, one of the coaches, a relative, or a close friend of the family.

Some of the dads were a little apprehensive and didn't know what to expect. God really blessed our time there because everything we did seem to work. We had a father-son fishing tournament, mountain-man competition on inner tubes and a discussion about "Victory with Honor at Home" which was the topic of Coach Bill McCartney at the American Football Coaches Association convention this past year.

It was all great and I really felt something good was happening with this group. We also had what we called the "Trust Walk." This is where we walked up the mountain in sets of two (father-son). It took about 20 to 30 minutes to walk to

the top, and there were places that were dangerous and had to be taken with extreme care. At the top there is a big cliff that overlooks the camp and the creek. The thing that made it special was on the way up the dads were blindfolded and had to totally depend upon their son to guide and lead them to the top. It was really special for me to watch the players and how they protected their dads and how they touched, guided and instructed their dads around obstacles. When they finally got to the top, it was interesting to watch them enjoy the view and discuss their adventure to the top.

On the way down, the sons were blindfolded and were led down the mountain by their dads. It was precious how the dads protected their sons, how they worked through frustrations and worked as a team. When we got to the bottom we talked about the experience and what really took place on the way up and down the mountain. One of the dads said with a big lump in his throat, "My son called me 'Dad' more today than he has in a month."

Another activity we did was called the "Mine Field." This is an area about the size of a basketball court but more narrow. It is filled with ropes, objects, branches and just about anything that you can find that would represent a mine. The object is to go from one end to the other without touching any of the objects in the field. This again is a mission that has to be accomplished with a blindfold on the son. Everyone is doing this at one time and the dads have to remain outside the field shouting instructions and directions to their sons. There is something scriptural about shutting out everything and everyone and listening only to your father. Your total focus is on the directions given by your father. What a great activity; things get pretty confused and everytime someone touches a mine they have to start over.

The last activity we did was where we asked the dad and his son to spend one hour together. We met at the center of the camp and gave them topics to discuss. They were to pick any place in the camp to get by themselves and discuss the topics. They were instructed to stay together one hour and the dinner bell, which could be heard all over the camp, would be the signal to come back to the center of the camp. One of the questions they were asked to discuss was, "Son, if I were to die today this is what I would want you and your mother to know and Dad, if I were to die today this is what

I would want you and mother to know.” At the end of the hour you could see some of the couples already coming back like it had been a struggle to discuss the topics and to be one on one alone for one solid hour. Later, when we discussed the experience, one of the dads said, “Coach you know that hour you gave us, I needed two or three.” That night he took his son from his cabin and continued the conversation which included the relationship he had with his son’s granddad.

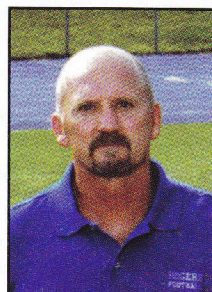
It was a great weekend. We bonded as a team, staff and as father and sons. “We’re all in this together” was mentioned many times, and it was the beginning of a state championship year.

We lost our first game of the year to the defending AAAAA state champions and then won nine straight to become AAAA conference champions. In the first round of the state playoff, the fathers of the seniors came to me and asked if throughout the playoffs they could come on the field and let their son run by and high five them before the game. It was a great idea! We always gather in the end zone and the seniors go down the sideline and then out to the 50-yard line. They then divide and get on both sides of the 50-yard line and the team comes out and goes in between them. For the rest of the playoffs, the dads would go to the 50-yard line and the seniors and team would run between them. It was really great for our seniors and our team.

We always have a theme of the week also. We have a team meeting on Thursday night and talk about the week’s theme and usually watch a section of video that emphasizes our theme. On the Thursday night before our state championship game, our theme was “Our best game yet with no regrets.” I was in front of the team talking about our theme and we had prearranged for the senior dads to come to our meeting. Thursdays were always a private special time for our team, and it was very unusual for us to share it with anyone. The dads came in and stood at the back. I played a short highlight of the father-son retreat with just the right music. It was real emotional and I could hardly swallow. Many of us were teared up, but this was only the beginning. I had asked the dads, after the film, to come up in front of the team and say one short thing to the team, and then go over to their son and say one thing to him. I was so proud of the dads and the way they came through. It was an experience of a lifetime to hear and see those dads stand before the team and then stand before their son and tell them how proud they were of what they had accomplished and the character and commitment they had demonstrated as a part of this special season. Each dad stood before the team and his son. It was great and I was so choked up I couldn’t even talk. After the last dad had come and gone, one of seniors said, “Coach I think we all ought to just hug for a little while,” and we did!

We went through the playoffs and outscored our opponents 150-30. We beat our opponents in the state championship game, 30-2. It was the largest margin of victory in the history of AAAA state playoffs. We won the first state championship in the history of Greenwood and finished the year 13-1. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Ronnie Peacock, who has been coaching for more than 30 years at the high school and college levels, is the head football coach and athletic director at Rogers High School in Rogers, Arkansas. He formerly coached at Greenwood (Arkansas) High School, where he was state AAAA runner-up in football in 1996.*



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