

Retreat Report: Rogers, Arkansas

His teams may win on the field, but Coach Ronnie Peacock's annual father-son retreat is where the real victories happen.

By Graham Thomas



“Eyes.” The word has a special meaning here. When the Rogers Mountaineers hear it, it's as if an automatic instinct kicks in.

“Eyes!” they echo back while in a crouched stance ready for the next command, their eyes staring right into their coach's. But for 30 senior Mountaineer football players on this night—a warm, muggy, crystal-clear evening in the dog-days of August in the middle of Central Arkansas' mountainous wilderness—there's no need for the command. That's because Ronnie Peacock, the head coach at Rogers High School, already has their full attention.

Eyes? They're all locked in to their coach, and Peacock's own eyes—blue and piercing—begin to water as he tells them his story.

Ronnie Peacock has been coaching for 35 years. This year

fathers.

It's a weekend full of bonding activities for the pairs: swimming, fishing, eating, talking, “trust walks” and teamwork activities.

Peacock started the retreat in his last season at Greenwood High School (Ark.) and brought it to Rogers when he was hired as head coach in December 2000. This August was the seventh season for the retreat at Rogers.

“Personally, I've never experienced anything like it before,” says Gary Hahn, a former Rogers parent who went on the initial retreat in 2001 with his son Kyle. “It's not about football, and it's everything about fathers and sons.”

The retreat has had such an impact on Hahn that this year's retreat was his seventh straight. The second year, he served as

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— FCA's Bill Burnett

is his seventh as the Mounties' head football coach. He's won two high school state championships and coached in the championship game three more times, including last November when Rogers advanced to the Class 7A State Championship in Arkansas. He's coached on the collegiate level, too. He was the defensive coordinator at Arkansas Tech and Harding University (Ark.) and was the head coach at Abilene Christian University in Texas. A former player himself, Peacock was a standout, record-setting wide receiver at Harding before receiving a brief tryout with the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1972.

The football program at Rogers has been featured all across the country with help from ESPN's *Outside the Lines* and *ESPN The Magazine*. His influence in coaching spreads across the state. But when you ask Peacock the highlight of his coaching career, without hesitation he'll tell you that his annual father-son retreat is the greatest thing he's ever done as a coach.

Each August, during the middle of two-a-days, Rogers senior football players and their dads converge on Camp Tahkodah near Batesville, Ark., for a retreat designed just for them.

For three days, it's fathers and their sons. Sons and their

a fill-in dad for one of the players whose dad was not able to go. He then attended with his son Kurtis in 2003 and has made the trip every year since as one of the retreat's volunteers.

The weekend offers challenging activities for fathers and sons, including a blind-folded trust walk up and down a mountain with one leading the other. It's about breaking down emotional barriers.

“Everything that happens that weekend is designed to bring father and son together in a meaningful relationship,” said Dr. Bill Burnett, a former Arkansas football player and now the director of the Northwest Arkansas FCA. Burnett attended the retreat in 2005 and was significantly moved. “That's a neat thing to watch.”

At the end of the camp, the fathers and sons sit down together with a list of questions to be asked face-to-face. Questions like,

“Dad (Son), if I were to die today, this is what I would want you and mom to know.”

“Son (Dad), the time in my life when I was most proud of you was when...”

"Dad (Son), If I could change three things in my life, this is what I would change."

"It's life-changing," Hahn says. "It's an experience where you could be the best dad that's out there and you think you have it all until you have to sit down and look your son in the eye and ask him those questions and have him ask you those questions. For some fathers and sons, that may be the only opportunity they ever have to sit and talk like that."

Deep faith in Christ plays a vital role in what Peacock does at Rogers and in his retreat. It is the vanguard of Peacock's identity, and it filters into his football program. The vast majority of his players attend the weekly FCA meetings, and the coaches at Rogers set Christian examples for their players.

"It flows from the top, first of all," Burnett says. "That's so very, very important. Where we have our strongest (FCA Huddles), we have strong support from the head football coach."

Peacock himself was awarded the 2006-2007 FCA Coach of the Year in the state of Arkansas.

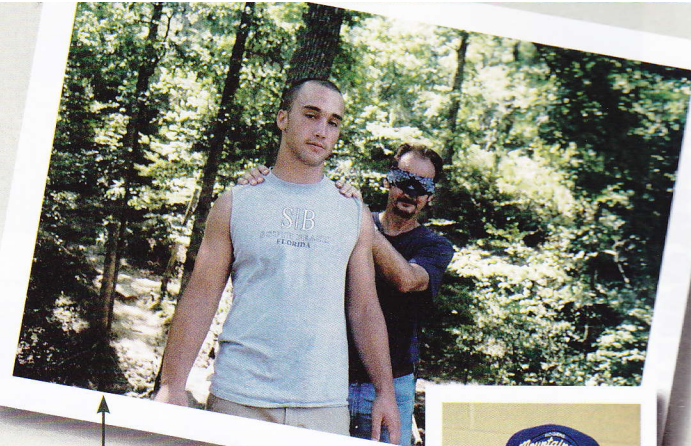
"The biggest thing you can do in public education is to be a Christian example," Peacock says. "Let them see God in you and how you handle things."

According to former Rogers quarterback Cody Kirby, now a freshman at Missouri State, it doesn't take a person long to know what Peacock is all about.

"It's the way he lives," Kirby says. "He witnesses to people in the way he lives. He's not a normal guy. There's something different about him, and that's Jesus Christ working through him. People see that. I know they do. If you sit down and talk with Coach Peacock, within 10 minutes, you'll know where he stands. He exemplifies God in all that he does, which is so great and what I love about him."

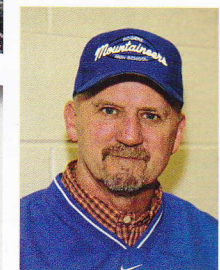
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The book of 3 John says in verse 4, "I have no greater joy than this: to hear that my children are walking in the truth." To



The retreat is full of activities such as trust walks, which are designed to bring fathers and sons closer together.

For more on Coach Ronnie Peacock, visit sharingthevictory.com.



Peacock, that passage provides the backdrop for his ministry and the father-son retreat.

While the camp is not specifically meant to be Christian in nature, there are definite undertones throughout. The food is blessed at each meal, and on Sunday, there is a devotional.

"Everything [in some way] is related to God and my ministry of teaching kids more than the game of football and about being good men and good husbands and good fathers—all of that has a good Christian base to it," says Peacock. "It's not that we go down there and try to baptize kids, but it is about seeing how God is working in the lives of dads and sons."

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RETREAT REACTIONS: Comments from fathers and sons who have experienced the impact of the retreat.

"The initial reaction is, 'Wow.' It made me realize how good my relationship with my father has been, and it made it stronger. The weekend was just awesome. It helped our relationship—me and my dad—get stronger."

- **Jake Byrne, 6-5, 240 lb. wide receiver committed to the University of Wisconsin**

"I think the biggest thing for me was how eye-opening it was. I've got an outstanding relationship with my father and my son, but you take a lot of things for granted sometimes, so you realize how blessed you really are with the relationship you have. Others are not so fortunate."

- **Jeff Byrne, father of Jake**

"It was very special. It brought me and my father closer together and did a lot of good for us. And we got to do that before he [was deployed], which made it that much more special."

- **Ben Murphy, senior defensive lineman**

"You can't put a price on something like that. I wish I could have done it 10 years ago, or five years ago. It was tough, but it was a weekend I would do every weekend if I could. You got to know your son."

- **Pat Murphy, father of Ben and also active duty military (He was deployed shortly after this year's retreat.)**

"I'm fortunate that I don't come from a family that's divorced. My dad and I have had a real good relationship. I felt fortunate to go and already feel close to my dad on the trip. But the trust walk, all the activities, the letter I had to write to him, those made the bond a lot stronger."

- **Kolby Keller, quarterback**

"The whole idea behind the father-son retreat helps fathers and sons sit down and face some issues that you probably wouldn't talk about on a normal day-to-day basis. With the time that I have and the time that he has, there's not a whole lot of time that we get to spend together like I'd like. This got us together where we were one-on-one."

- **Ray Keller, father of Kolby and football coach at Rogers Oakdale Junior High**