

By Bill Guertin

The 800-Pound Gorilla

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Whose Team Do You Want To Be On?

Our family truly enjoys sports. With three athletic boys in the house between 8 and 16, much of our fun and social lives revolve around our children's local participation in baseball, football or basketball.

Lately, however, it's been a struggle. Our boys' recent experiences with their teams' coaches have been a disappointment. Ego-driven decisions and belittling comments from coaches to their players continue to be allowed unbridled in many athletic circles.

Fortunately, I've found a coach whose team I'd like to be on myself.

Joe Lightfoot came through Kankakee Community College's basketball program under then-coach Denny Lehnus in the late '80's. More than just a coach, Lehnus helped Lightfoot learn important lessons in the game of life.

After 12 years as an assistant coach at KCC, Lightfoot is now the head basketball coach of his alma mater, and is now determined to pass along those life lessons to the young men on his team.

He introduced six of his players during a short speech he gave at a recent youth basketball camp. "I want these young men to work hard," he said to the group, "and I'd like for them to win. But that's not the most important thing to me. For the next two years, I hope to take these young men and help them grow into the men they're capable of becoming."

In a counter-culture situation rarely seen at the collegiate level, Lightfoot see his job as less of a coach and more of a ministry.

"High risk kids won't make it through my program," he said in a recent interview. "The scouts all know what my moral and ethical standards are, and so they won't even send me a young man that's borderline."

His program is not driven by wins and losses. In fact, he may pass on a more talented athlete in favor of the "right" athlete.

"When I go out to recruit, I certainly look for talent first," he said. "But I also watch how a young man interacts with his coach and his peers on the bench. I talk to the people in the crowd, his teachers, and even the cafeteria workers and school janitors. I want to know the quality of his relationship with others, and the depth of his character when he's not on the court."

Coach Lightfoot also believes that successful businesses could use a similar system.

"Your business is only as good as your people. Successful businesses value their people, and treat them with respect. When you select the right people and give them positive reinforcement, they develop good self-esteem, and that's how passion starts. I believe that the passion that happens in others comes from a personal investment that leaders make in their people."

Does that mean you shouldn't be tough or demanding? Not at all, says Coach Lightfoot.

“When I'm on the court, I'm a tyrant,” he said. “Off the floor, I'm a mentor, father figure and advisor, as well as a social and academic counselor to my players. I benched a player this week for not attending a class. I have a strong discipline program, but I'm fair in my application of that discipline.”

The team is also involved in the community, with programs like CART (Cavaliers Are Readers Too), where players travel to grade schools in the Kankakee County area to read to young children. “The grade school kids really look up to these athletes, and it's important that they understand their place as role models.”

In my customer service training, the five attributes of great leaders that I teach are: respectful, accountable, encouraging, stretching, and firm but fair. Joe Lightfoot passes with flying colors.

Great coaches, in business and in life, are difficult to find and impossible to measure in terms of their value in the lives of others. Coach Lightfoot is creating much more than wins and losses in a scorebook. He's passing along a legacy of excellence.

Whose team do you want to be on?

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