

*Champions are those people
who have a desire deep within
to dream,
to achieve,
to succeed.*

- Mohammad Ali

A COACH I CAN'T FORGET

Larry L. King

The football boys of Midland High School were anxious and uncertain on that day in 1945 when we met our new coach. Rumors flew that he was half-Comanche Indian. Texas boys knew the Comanches to be the fiercest of the warring desert tribes.

Aubra Nooncaster was a fearsome-looking fellow if judged on size alone; his 6-foot, 5-inch frame held 250 pounds so well distributed he appeared almost lean. At 32, he gave the impression he would not do to trifle with. Linebacker Barry Boone took one look and whispered, "I bet he works our blankety-blank fannies off."

All we knew of the coach was that he was freshly out of the U. S. Army Air Corps and World War II. I had no way of knowing that this dark, brooding man who often seemed preoccupied by concerns not visible to the rest of us, would become one of the most important people to touch my life.

Our football squad had drilled for about a week when Coach Nooncaster said, "We don't have as much material as Odessa, Abilene, and some others on our schedule. We must work harder than they do to attain results." I was stunned at hearing the truth so boldly spoken; my prior coaches had attempted to persuade our thin squad that we could easily run through oak doors, Notre Dame, and the schoolboy opposition.

After we lost our opening game in 1945 by three touchdowns, Coach Noon, as I came to call him, was quick to praise those who had played well and to thank us all for not having quit. That is when I first began to like and appreciate the man. We were accustomed to coaches who raged in losing locker rooms and walked away with dead men's stares. They had not helped my youthful opinion of myself when I was already tired, bruised, beaten, and unsure of my worth.

But it was in the classroom, rather than on the gridiron or basketball court, that Coach Noon gave me, and my teammates, our biggest surprise. And it was there he would shape me more than I knew.

Learning that he would teach a class in English literature, the football squad stampeded to enroll as if he might be handing out free beer and barbecue. It was assumed that Coach Noon would go easy on us in class to keep us scholastically eligible for service on what Gen. Douglas MacArthur had called "the field of friendly strife." The coddling of schoolboy athletes was a fairly general practice; I had once been credited in New Mexico with passing a course I had never enrolled in or attended.

A COACH I CAN'T FORGET - Page 2

We soon learned that Coach Noon regarded Shakespeare and Shelley at least as seriously as we took the Odessa Broncos or the San Angelo Bobcats. I was secretly pleased. Though I was a dismal scholar in the mathematical and physical sciences, I privately cherished literature and history. From childhood I had secretly thirsted to become a writer, but precious few knew of my unmanly ambition. Certainly there was little reason for Coach Noon even to suspect it.

One afternoon in class, Coach Noon played a record of himself reciting Kipling's biting Tommy Atkins, a lament on civilian indifference to soldiers except in time of war. We wiggled as he listened to the poem with his eyes closed. At the record's conclusion, Coach Noon looked up. "Smith, what did that poem mean to you?"

The big tackle in faded blue jeans shuffled in place, "Ah hail, Coach, it don't make much sense to me."

"Green?"

"It don't mean nothin' to me, Coach."

"Brown"

"Me neither, Coach. I think it's silly."

Around the room it went until Coach Noon called my name. "Me neither, Coach."

Our teacher dropped his head, closed his eyes, and said nothing for what seemed five minutes. Then, quietly, "At the conclusion of this year, I hope never again to darken the door of a schoolhouse. Class dismissed."

We deserted the classroom in an enthusiastic clatter. I was somewhere in the pack when Coach Noon's voice stopped me: "Not you, King!"

I flopped back in my seat, wondering about my special crime. Coach Noon approached, shaking a huge finger in my face. His voice trembling, he said, "Smith can sit on his butt in ignorance if he chooses, because he'll inherit a big ranch. Green is the son of a rich oilman who'll take care of him. Brown's family owns this, that, and the other thing." I sat, astonished, not understanding the drill. "But your father," he said, momentarily grabbing my shirt front, "is a working man just like mine. If you expect to amount to anything, you'll have to do it on your own."

"Yessir," I mumbled.

A COACH I CAN'T FORGET - Page 3

"You're not using your brains or your talents," he rumbled in a rising voice. "You're better than you show, and that's what makes me so damned mad!"

"Yessir," I quaked, and escaped as soon as permitted.

That afternoon in study hall, I went to my books rather than indulging in the usual horseplay or attempting to sneak off to the boys' room for a forbidden smoke.

I had been having trouble with my father since age 14, staging a noisy rebellion against what I considered his tight leash and restrictive codes. He was a stubborn man who refused to exchange his values for mine.

Shortly after I came under Coach Noon's influence, my father and I had an ugly fight from which no winner emerged. (In later years, as I matured and he mellowed, we grew close and loving. In 1945, however, that seemed a dim prospect.)

Following our fight, my father decreed that I could no longer live in his home unless I agreed to his terms. I proudly refused. (What type behavior!) For several days, I stayed the nights at friends' houses, cadging meals where I could. But as word got around of my home troubles, my friends' parents withdrew their hospitalities.

One day after basketball practice, I hid in a small room used to store athletic gear and passed the night in the high school gym. The next day, I smuggled in a few toilet articles and clothes, using the locker-room facilities for my morning shower. It was lonely and wretched, but had the virtue of not lasting long--school authorities learned of my unauthorized nest and ordered me out. Coach Noon took me to the Minute Inn, on the edge of the campus. Over a cheeseburger and milkshake he bought me, he indirectly persuaded me to return home with remarks about respect and responsibility.

The feud with my father continued, however. I sought out the Navy recruiter, lied about my age and attempted to enlist. I learned that, although I claimed to be 17, I would need my father's signature. While I brooded over how to get around that requirement, Coach Noon approached me.

He was manning a push broom, sweating, as he instructed me to walk along with him in the gym. "What's this nonsense I hear that you're trying to join the Navy?"

"Well, yes, I had given it some thought."

He snorted and shook his head in exasperation, "No you haven't! You don't know enough to have thought it out!" While I reeled from that assault, he said, "You think

A COACH I CAN'T FORGET - Page 4

war is glamorous. It isn't. Good friends of mine--boys I coached, some only a little older than you---are in their graves now." Suddenly, I knew what he'd been brooding about that I hadn't been able to see. "We haven't seen our last war," he said. "Don't risk it. The military will promise you anything, but once they get you, they own you. They'll do with you as they like." He placed a big hand on my shoulder--I don't know which of us he felt the need to steady. Softly he said, "Stay in school. Learn. Equip yourself. Don't throw your future away."

And then I was looking at his broad back, moving away, bent over the push broom. He moved rapidly, swiping at the floor as if intending to erase something.

For the remainder of the school year, it seems in retrospect, Coach Noon took me on as a personal project. Color-blind, he placed me at his side in the station wagon we used for basketball trips--ostensibly to tell him whether traffic lights were red or green, though now I suspect deeper motives. Once I asked who had written a poem he quoted. He grinned and said, "I fear that's the doggerel according to Nooncaster." That's when I realized I was in the presence of my first flesh-and-blood poet.

Coach seemed to find a lesson or moral in all things. After our star basketballer had fouled out of a close, tense, one-point game, then casually trotted to the locker room to change, I could see Coach Noon doing a slow burn. Later, he said to me privately, "That boy will have trouble in life. He didn't care enough about the outcome of the game or his teammates to stick around. He didn't even show normal curiosity!"

My schoolwork improved; good habits carried over into the spring of 1946. But in the summer, I clashed again with my father. He sighed, surrendered, and signed papers permitting me to join the Army--it seemed the only way we might reach an armistice in our private war. Teachers, coaches, and members of the Bulldog Boosters gave me a bad time about it. Coach Noon had disappeared for the summer and didn't know.

Soon homesick, I wrote him from a lonely barracks in New Jersey to tell him I wished I had taken his advice. But the letter came off whiny, so I ripped it up. When I returned home on my first furlough and rushed to Midland High School, one coach glared and said, "If you and Bert Stringer hadn't joined the army, we might have won two more games." Coach Noon failed to censure me. As our brief visit ended, he said simply, "I hope you won't stop reading."

I next saw him in 1954, when I was a sportswriter and getting ready to go East to seek my fortune. He was taping ankles for Pampa High, where he had moved as coach in 1947. When he learned my vocation, he grinned and said, "I should have been nicer to you. You never know who'll wind up passing judgment on you."

A COACH I CAN'T FORGET - Page 5

I got lost in my career and didn't contact him again for 20 years. Then, on impulse (I think it was because I was trying to teach writing at Princeton and came to a fresh appreciation of how well Nooncaster had taught) I mailed him a copy of my latest book. He retaliated by sending me one of his three published volumes of poetry. We began to exchange long discourses, by letter and telephone, full of midnight philosophies, book talk, and those memories aging men cling to.

My vanity was a bit bruised when I learned Coach Noon didn't recall half as much of our association as I did--understandable, as he had taught thousands. Still, I wanted to feel more special because he had been so special to me. I also learned he was not Indian at all, but Dutch-English-Scotch-Irish, and that we had grown up only 16 years apart in Eastland County, the sons of fathers who were poor dirt-farmers and oil-field workers. And I learned that his poetry was very fine indeed, that it haunted me with its rhythm and imagery of weather, attrition, hard-scrabble farming, and general melancholy.

On several occasions, I arranged to visit Coach Noon, but something--airline trouble, illness--seemed to conspire to prevent it. A few months ago, as he approached 70 and I passed my 54th birthday, the old warriors got together. I felt guilty smoking around him and could no more have called him by his first name than I might address the British Queen as "Lizzie" to her face.

I wanted to tell Coach Noon what a beacon he had been when I was a young lost ship, how much of a sturdy anchor he had provided when I desperately needed a port in the storm. But I turned 16 again, tongue-tied and uncertain, and could not deliver the utterance. Somehow, I fancied it might embarrass him. As we parted on his lawn, however, I scrounged up my courage and swallowed the last vestiges of that time when to show honest emotion was thought by my contemporaries to be unmanly. "Coach," I said, "I love you."

He gripped my hand, hard, and said, "And I love you too."

Driving away, I looked back on a man who though now a bit stooped and not quite as quick of eye or limb as formerly, will always stand young and tall in my eyes. Perhaps by the measurements of the age--money, power, prestige--this retired small-town teacher, poet and good family man would not be considered exceptional. But, I thought, there stands a man who did not waste his life nor permit me to entirely waste mine. I meant it as a living accolade, of course, but we might all die satisfied we should deserve it as an epitaph.

Name _____ Period _____ Date _____

A COACH I CAN'T FORGET

1. Identify five qualities that the coach possessed that would make him successful.
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
2. Why do you think the coach was so upset at the students' reaction when they listened to the recording of "Tommy Atkins?"

3. What advice did Coach Noon give to Larry when he wanted to join the Navy?

4. How can you tell that Coach Noon had a positive impact on Larry?

5. Was Larry successful in life? _____
Do you think Coach Noon influenced Larry's success? _____
Why? or Why not?

6. Have you had (or do you have) a coach, teacher, or other adult who has been a positive influence in your life? _____
How has he/she done that? _____

