

# Bethel Football Beliefs

**Steve Johnson, Head Coach, Bethel University**

Coach Johnson has led the Bethel University football program for over 20 seasons. Under Johnson's leadership, the Royals have had a winning record in 18 straight seasons. Johnson has recorded the most wins of any Bethel football coach. He was selected MIAC Coach of the Year five times; after the 1989, 1996, 2000, 2006, and 2007 seasons and West region Coach of the Year following the 1996, 2007, and 2010 seasons. In addition, Coach Johnson was selected by the Minnesota Football Coaches Association as the 2011 Man of the Year, in recognition of his passion and ability to lead and mentor student athletes.

I'm honored to submit this article for the MFCA Summer Manual. It's a privilege to write to a group that is close to my heart, so the stuff that I will give will be authentic and from my heart.

When I think about the game of football I think about two things that make it fantastic. First, is that it's really hard. It's something that demands everything, all of you! Not just physically as far as training and pounding and potential for injury and the fear that can be there, but the heart and the giving of ourselves to one another. It physically hurts. There is a mental toughness that needs to be evident and character that is stretched and revealed constantly. It's a lot like life where as you're going to take some pounding but you're also going to have some great triumphs.

Secondly, in football, we need each other desperately. Together we learn to fight, laugh and love. Mixing the toughness and togetherness is potent. High expectations mixed with high affection produces great growth. This growth is evidenced by an increase in trust and love for one another. Over days, weeks, months and years you collectively build a culture that wins.

We believe that there are marks that define us.

## **Be marked by Gratefulness**

At its foundation, Bethel University is a place where the spiritual aspect of our life is important. We believe that God sent His Son Jesus, to come to Earth to be beaten and spit on and then nailed to a cross so that we could have fellowship with a God that can't stand sin. So all of a sudden we are put into a place where if we believe in and accept that, it's pretty hard to not come up grateful. That gratefulness is hopefully evidenced in the lives that we lead. This grateful heart needs to become a way of life. We seek to be grateful for all things including adversity because working through adversity can be turned into a toughness or perseverance that is needed for football and life. Being grateful also brings great joy. I have never met anybody who was truly grateful and not happy. I believe that a heart of gratitude produces a happy heart, and that happy heart evidenced within a team is going to cause great growth and it is contagious. The same is true for grumbling and complaining.

It is contagious and produces an atmosphere that is soft, wimpy and blaming. Proverbs says a happy heart is good, like medicine – we want to be marked by gratefulness – a way of life.

## **Be marked by Toughness**

The second important piece of our culture is toughness. This is difficult to measure. We believe that toughness is doing the right thing over and over, a lot like discipline.

So, we talk about toughness. You are always going to have adversity whether it's a football game, school work, or relationships, you are going to have adversity. You just need to expect it. Most people make excuses or hide. Instead, we want to 'lean into it'!

When you encounter adversity – lean into it. If you lean into it you're going to get stretched. It's difficult, but when you make it through the fight, you have gained understanding and confidence. Then, you lean into it again and again, you get stretched again and again and you gain more confidence. Soon you start to change your attitude because this becomes a daily way of life; 'leaning into it'. This confidence turns into courage. Courage becomes a toughness that allows you to punch adversity right in the face. The toughness that we're talking about is not a puffing out of the chest or an entitlement of any sort. It's more of a calm discipline that produces trust in my teammates and my family and my friends that I am going to walk in such a way that it's going to be obvious that I have some toughness about me. We want to be marked by toughness – a way of life.

## **Let Loyalty and Devotion to us be your Mark**

The third piece that binds these together comes from verses in Romans 12:9-11. The Apostle Paul is talking to the Roman Church and he is telling them to be authentic in your love for one another; don't be "fake nice" or be a creep. Then, he says be devoted to one another like brothers. When I think about this I picture my two brothers who I think are the greatest guys ever and I'm really proud of them. I high five them and I hug'em but I've also punched both of them in the face. Sometimes we grapple and that's what brothers do, but it's only because we love each other and hold one another accountable while having unbelievably high expectations. So, our football team has 105 guys that love each like crazy and have high expectations for one another. With this, we can't help but get better. It's something that we want to produce through a devotion to one another that is authentic and an every day deal. This devotion is a process of giving your heart to us, our team and our cause. This builds both love and trust. They are the greatest motivators. It's amazing what can be accomplished if nobody cares who gets the credit. Let your devotion and loyalty be your mark – your

way of life.

What marks us as a football team is our culture; grateful hearts and a toughness and a devotion to one another. Within the framework of our football we take these same principles and apply them to all areas. We emphasize defense. I don't think that is a secret in our league. We want to be marked by obedient, fast and physical play. If you're not obedient it doesn't matter how fast you are, and if you're not fast you're not going to be near the ball carrier anyway so physical doesn't matter very much. We believe that obedience is the foundation. When we talk about obedience it's not just knowing your assignment. It's that discipline that it takes to line up right every dang time and to take your correct steps every dang time. We want teams to hate to play us because we are physical and disciplined.

On offense we seek to have a great running game. We like that our defense has to face this running game in practice. We want our "D" to get a feel for the best running game they are going to see all year. It's going to come from our own team on a Tuesday or Wednesday in practice! It helps in a physical sense and it helps as far as controlling the clock. We'd like to have time of possession and it's easier to do that if you're a running football team as opposed to passing. Third, we need an explosive passing game. Play action is used more than drop back but we need to stretch the field with both. We don't ever want to be in a place where we are unbalanced, where we can only run or only pass. We need to have some games where we win by running for 300 yards and others where we win by

passing for 300 yards. Our signature is the running game. We know that a lot of the good stuff our receivers can do and our quarterback can do through the air, comes from a good solid running game that our opponents fear.

Special teams are critical to gain field position, or at least not give it up. We want to be unorthodox enough to have our opponents have to work on some things they might think we'll do. However, sometimes we are limited by personnel as far as the skill of a kicker or punter and we want to make those amends but within the framework of the team. We want all players to be available to special teams.

So, that's our football philosophy. We want the things we talk about to become a way of life. It takes practice. You go back to obedient, fast and physical. We can't talk about that and then just show up on Saturday and hope it gets done. We need to be that way in practice. We need to hold one another accountable in practice every single day. We gotta be totally in the whole thing all the time.

Lastly, we attempt to never treat as ordinary that which is consecrated to you. We believe that practice is an important and critical time, so we want our players and coaches to know this time is set apart and precious. Otherwise, if you're just showin' up you're treating it as ordinary. It's taking for granted that which is important to you.

We want to produce character (grateful, tough, devoted) in our daily lives. This character demonstrated within the culture of our team not only produces joy and growth, but winning. ■

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