

Building a Football Family



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I am a graduate of Jefferson High School and Bethel University. I completed a Masters in Educational Leadership from Minnesota State-Mankato. My wife Kelly and I have been married for 22 years and have two boys, Joe who is a sophomore at Bethel and John who is a junior at Jefferson. We currently reside in Bloomington.

When asked to put an article together on our program and how it is organized, I really didn't know where to start. Having graduated from Bloomington Jefferson myself, I have a true passion and love for the school and the Jefferson community here in Bloomington. So I started as Head Coach the only way I knew how and that was to totally throw myself into not only building a football program, but completely changing the culture around football Jefferson High School and in Bloomington. My first order of business was to steal ideas from other coaches. Why reinvent the wheel, right? I talked to many coaches in the South Suburban Conference as well as the Lake Conference - top to bottom the two best conferences in the state of Minnesota. I took ideas from other coaches who I respect and then applied them in ways that would help change the culture here at Jefferson. We wanted to go from a fine program to an excellent program, somethings just needed to be done in a different way to elevate our success. In this article I will take a look at the football aspect of our program, our strength training program, our youth program, and some of the "outside" activities we do as a football family.

One of the first things I had to do when I took over as Head Coach was to put together a coaching staff. Everyone on the old staff was given the opportunity to stay on, but I did need to fill some vacancies. I learned from other coaches a long time ago that you need to surround yourself with good people and then let them do their thing. Due to the lack of job opportunities in

schools nowadays, it is hard to find teacher/coaches, so I have had to hire many coaches outside the school which makes it a constant battle with scheduling to hang on to those coaches. I have a variety of personalities on my current staff which makes them fun to coach with, but more importantly they are quality men who care about each player in our program and their personalities connect and build harmony within our team.

At our first staff meeting I welcomed the opportunity to give unfiltered feedback on our offensive and defensive schemes. Everyone had a say and a lot of ideas were bounced back and forth. Most of us were on the same page which in the end made my decision very easy on what schemes to implement on offense and defense. We put in systems which fit the kids in our community for the long term, year in and year out. We also looked at having schemes that could easily be run at our younger levels, reaching all the way down to 7th grade. Maybe most importantly, we implemented systems where our players could have fun. They now enjoy what we do on both sides of the ball and understand what we are trying to accomplish. It was not easy however. In my first year as Head Coach, it was our senior class' third offense in three years. There were some growing pains, but we are now starting to see the fruits of our labor as the players coming from middle schools are now familiar with what we do offensively and defensively. The key was their "buy in". Coaches needed to buy into what we wanted to do and then the players would feed off of that and they would buy in.

Another aspect that needed to be changed within our program was our strength training program. We went from coaches developing a strength program and supervising the weight room to a school wide program we now call Jag Power. The year before I became Head Coach, we would have 6-7 kids

working out on a consistent basis in the off season. Now we average between 30-40. These are good, not great, numbers for us considering the large number of our athletes who are multi sport athletes. Changing the training expectations wasn't easy. That first year I tried to be at all the doors at the end of school to drag kids down to the weight room. We are now also doing things to help develop the Team atmosphere in the weight room, as well. My first couple of years we would have seniors draft teams of players not involved in another sport during the winter season. They would give their teams a name and the team with the greatest average attendance would get a free pizza dinner at a local restaurant. We then did the same thing for the spring season. We only use players not involved in school sports during the season because we want to emphasize to our athletes that we want them playing other sports. We now put the players into smaller "Accountability" groups based on size of player, position, grade, etc. The groups have 3-4 people because we feel it is easier for players to hold each other accountable, to be there and working hard. We will be adding a Weight Club board in the weight room to track players accomplishment's, we show the players videos of college football workouts to encourage enthusiasm amongst team mates, as well as other incentives like providing treats, beverages, and t shirts. Though we are not where we want to be in the weight room quite yet, we have made great strides at getting kids to believe in the program and participate.

Another priority of mine when I became Head Coach, was to reach out to our youth programs. We have a unique situation here in Bloomington in that we have our youth association, the Bloomington Athletic Association (BAA), which has football from grades 3 - 7. Then the kids play one year of 8th grade football at middle school. What makes it unique is BAA feeds both Kennedy and Jefferson, two very different programs. We have 3 middle schools which comprise two football teams. One of the first things I did was help BAA get flag football started in Bloomington for first and second graders. They have never had it before so we didn't really know what to expect. The first year we had around 60 kids and then in year two we jumped to around 80 kids. It has been a positive experience, providing excitement around football. We adjusted how BAA split the teams in 7th grade so we could have a Jefferson team and a Kennedy team. I talked with the coaches whose middle schools feed our Jefferson program and they are currently running our offense and defense. We now have more kids playing football in Bloomington and a smoother transition set up for kids to learn the "Jefferson Way" of doing things. We also have

player mentors who hook up with some of the youth teams to work with them at practices and cheer them on at games throughout the fall to help build network of family. Youth teams are invited to practice at Jefferson once a fall when a varsity coach will run their practice and they get to use some of our "toys". We have added to youth camps to go along with our typical week long youth camp in the summer. We added a Father/Son camp on a Saturday morning in the spring. It is only an hour and a half and is free, but it is a great time for kids to do football activities with their dads, uncles or grandfathers. We also added a one day quarterback camp in the summer. Our players go to the elementary and middle schools at lunch during Homecoming week to help build that Jefferson spirit. We also put on a coaching clinic for the youth coaches every summer. The main thing is to be visible to players and parents at the younger level. I go to all tryouts and evaluations, not to evaluate, but just to talk with the kids and parents. I go out to as many games as I can squeeze in during the fall just to go watch and be seen. A big part of the job is public relations, especially when you are building a program. You can't be seen enough! I really appreciated the help and leadership of all who I have worked with at BAA and the middle schools. They have been a great help at building our program back up to where we want it to be. Coaches and administrators have been asking "Tim, what can we do to help?" That has made my life much easier.

There are also several non-football activities we do that help build our football family. This is quite a long list, so I will do my best to keep things short. To build community spirit we have "Jaguar Football Supporter" yard signs for parents, we have a mom's chalk talk one night during two- a- days where we go through our offense and defense with moms in our program. We show film, talk about football terms and answer questions for moms only. You would be amazed at what some of them thought a nose guard was. This past year we had a 30 minute local cable show called Inside Jefferson Football. It is a weekly look at the past game, a look ahead at upcoming opponents, interviews with a couple players each week as well as features on other aspects of the school/program including the marching band, cheerleaders, strength program, Booster Club, team managers, Homecoming, etc. It has been a pretty big hit here locally and a great way to promote our program. We have a Mother/Son brunch at a local Applebee's before the season. I think players and moms were a little skeptical at first, but it ended up being a day we will all remember. It was a great way for our players to express thanks to their moms who have done so much for them as they have grown up. We end the brunch

by having each player give their mom (could be an aunt or grandma as well) a letter they wrote to them during one of our meetings during two a days. Lastly, as a football family we have dedicated ourselves to community service. Having coaches and parents affected by cancer, we were happy to join in with the Coaches Association by hosting a Tackle Cancer game each fall. Our team however, had been looking for a certain cause or program we could really connect with and hopefully help out in some small way. Five years ago we made the Wounded Warrior Project that program. Each year we dedicate one home game as our "Raise Em Up!" event. Leading up to the event we have a letter writing campaign to get donations from local businesses. During the week, our players sell t shirts at school lunches. Then at the game itself we have contribution buckets at the concession stands and ticket booths. At halftime we have our freshmen players pass buckets on the visitor side while our sophomore players collect on the home side. We have had help from the National Guard, local politicians and School Board members throughout the years. After five years we have now helped raise over \$18,500 for the WWP. It is something that everyone in our program is quite proud of. All of these activities are just different ways of not only building our program, but bringing our community together.

The final aspect I want to touch on, as far as our program goes, is the way my staff approaches coaching. I tell all coaches that they must be themselves because players will see through a "phony" coach. That means one coach may be quiet, one may be a yeller, or maybe a combination, but he must be true to himself. Our coaches really emphasize a "senior first" mentality when it comes to who gets to play. Any senior who has worked hard for us, we will do our best to get him on the field. However, if they haven't given us the effort, we will look at juniors or sophomores who have given their best in and out of the season. I do not believe in the philosophy of playing younger players to help our future. If you are constantly building for the future, the future never arrives and your program will lose players. I have seen this happen not only in football, but in other sports as well. Our coaches must work well with kids. I would rather have someone who rode the bench in high school, but works great with kids as a coach over a coach who may have been all state, but relates poorly with kids or isn't a good teacher. Which leads me to my next prerequisite, which is being a good teacher. This not only includes teaching football, but also helping with school and maybe more importantly the teaching of life lessons. We must model what we expect from our players. If we ask them to be committed, we must demonstrate our commitment to them and the program. If we want them to act with integrity,

we must demonstrate it to them. If we ask them to be on time, don't swear, give their best for each other; coaches need to do the same thing. We will be fair, tough and disciplined while caring for each player in our program. Last season an article was written about our program by a Northstar Football News and it was called "Tough Love". I think those words are a great way to describe our program. Though our program is not where we want it to be quite yet, I feel we are headed in the right direction.

None of the above could have happened without the help of many, many people. The teachers and administration of Jefferson High School have been fantastic and truly have the best interests of our student/athletes at heart. I want to thank the coaches & administration from the Bloomington Athletic Association as well as Oak Grove and Olson Middle Schools who have really bought into what we are doing and have been willing to help any way they can. The parents and Booster Clubs I have had the pleasure of working with have truly been phenomenal. With the bulk of a football budget put on Booster Clubs nowadays, some parents may give push back or an unwillingness to help. My Booster Club every year just asks "What can we do to help?" They just want their son to have a great high school football experience. I have learned many lessons from coaches I have played for or worked with including Bruno Waldner, Stan Skjei, Dave Fritze, and Jon Leverenz. Not only have they been outstanding coaches, they are great people. My current staff has made my job not only easier, but a heck of a lot of fun. We truly enjoy working together which I believe shows up to the players. Last but not least, I would like to thank my family. My mom and dad still don't miss a game and continue to help and support me in all I do. My two boys Joe and John are a blessing. It's not easy having a dad as a coach or playing for your dad, but they have made me proud by their actions, effort and the leadership both of them have shown. I am a very proud dad. Finally my wife, Kelly, who has not only accepted the time I must put into the job, she helps out in every way she can from going to Booster Club meetings, helping at fundraisers and even going to the away games of our youth teams when I can't make it. She wants those kids to feel supported. I truly out kicked my coverage! ■