Loving football: Commitment and faithfulness

by L. Gregory Jones in the November 16, 2004 issue

The exchange seems bizarre to onlookers. Speaking for himself and his assistant coaches, the football coach at Gilman High School in Baltimore asks his players, “What is our job?” The players yell back, “To love us!” The coach shouts, “And what is *your* job?” “To love each other!” the boys respond.

In the book *Season of Life*, this standard exchange is as much a part of Gilman football as running or tackling. Yet author Jeffrey Marx realizes that it’s not standard conversation for coaches and players. “If a Martian had just happened on Earth and somehow found himself witnessing only that introductory talk, a perfectly logical communiqué home might have included a summary such as this: ‘Learned about some sort of group gathering called football. It teaches boys to love.’”

What is going on here? Is this a work of cheap fiction that can appeal only to the most sentimental of readers? No, it is a true story. Is it a romanticized account of some hapless “Bad News Bears” ne’er-do-wells? No, the Gilman football team is known up and down the East Coast as a powerhouse. And defensive coach Joe Ehrmann is the former Baltimore Colts defensive lineman, who had a stellar 13-year career in pro football.

What is going on is the inspirational lives of Ehrmann and close friend (and head coach) Biff Poggi, who are committed to making a difference in the lives of young men. Football just happens to be a part of their strategy.

When Ehrmann lost his younger brother Billy, who died of cancer at age 18 in 1978, Ehrmann experienced a personal turnaround, eventually becoming a Christian and then an ordained minister. His loss and suffering mobilized Ehrmann to minister to other sufferers, and to find means to prevent unnecessary suffering.

Ehrmann has done so. He helped start the first Ronald McDonald House in Baltimore. He has developed programs for racial reconciliation, and moved his family into the

city of Baltimore in order to be present with the poor with whom he was in ministry. He has developed a broader program of “Building Men for Others” to focus on healthier ways for boys to become men.

Ehrmann’s life is a powerful antidote to the true story of the brutally cruel basketball coach in Pat Conroy’s *My Losing Season*, and to other coaches and parents whose competitive obsessions lead to destructive conceptions of a well-lived life. Ehrmann embodies the wisdom of ministry in his life but, in his coaching, uses a light touch and a sense of humor that doesn’t become “preachy” to his players. He combines these with an unambiguous love and affirmation of his players as people.

Three brief vignettes of Ehrmann and Poggi provide a poignant glimpse into their wisdom and insight. Shortly before a first game, one football player’s mother asked Poggi how successful he thought the boys would be. He responded, “I have no idea. Won’t really know for 20 years.” She’d been asking about the season, of course, but Ehrmann was thinking about the long-term. He added, in a comment to Marx, “[After 20 years] I’ll be able to see what kind of husbands they are. I’ll be able to see what kind of fathers they are. I’ll see what they’re doing in the community.”

On another occasion, Ehrmann was speaking at a University of Maryland football clinic. Before the speech, one of the coach participants asked whether he was going to be speaking about offense or defense, and Ehrmann responded: “Philosophy. I’ll be talking about how to help boys become men within the context of sports.” In his speech, he contrasted three components of “false masculinity”—athletic ability, sexual conquest and economic success—with “building men for others.” The components of doing so? A focus on the capacity to love and to be loved, a transcendent purpose in life, and a willingness to accept responsibility, to lead courageously, to be capable of empathy, and to seek justice on behalf of others. Or, as Poggi put it to his players, “I expect greatness out of you. And the way we measure greatness is the impact you make on other people’s lives.”

It is also significant to see the effects on the players’ lives. After a close, heartbreaking game that Gilman lost in 2001, two of the star players stood on the field, alone, tears streaming down their cheeks as they embraced. One said to the other, “I’m so proud of you, man,” and the other responded, “So proud of you, too.” A remarkable exchange shaped at least in part by their coaches. But even more remarkable is that it symbolized an extraordinary friendship that has developed against all odds—for one is an African American raised by a single mother in a

trouble-filled, working-class section of Northeast Baltimore; the other is a white kid from a well-appointed neighborhood in the suburb of Towson.

I love sports, even as I anguish about its domination of our culture, and the effects that increasingly obsessive coaches and parents have on the lives of kids. The new film *Friday Night Lights*, based on a true story of Texas high school football, poignantly reveals the troubling effects of our cultural obsession with sports. Yet Gilman has a program that does it right, and in powerful, life-giving ways. Ehrmann and Poggi display the significance of committed and faithful lives that help kids grow in maturity and wisdom. Maybe that Martian communiqué wouldn’t be so farfetched after all. Why can’t team sports better communicate the importance of relationships, of living for others, of the capacity and power of love?