

# Take a Knee...

by Dan Schlafer

I

first met him on March 18, 1984, when I was introduced as the new head football coach at Knoxville Catholic High School. A 16-year-old sophomore at the time, it took me all of 10 seconds to realize Mike was a special young man.

Having taught and coached since the Fall of 1974, I had crossed paths with thousands of high school students during my daily journeys inside Tennessee public schools—two private, parochial schools and a state special school at Tennessee School for the Deaf, the amazing place I left for this new challenge. Suffice it to say, this wasn't my first rodeo.

After being introduced by the KCHS Principal and Athletics Director at my press conference remarks in the school's gymnasium, Mike was the first to approach me as I stepped down from the podium. He looked me in the eye. He smiled. He reached out his hand to shake mine. He welcomed me. He said, "Let's get to work. TODAY!"

Work, he did! Always the first to arrive and the last to leave, he was relentless in his pursuit of excellence. He never missed the unprompted opportunity to say, "Yes, sir!" or "No, sir!" His constant question was, "What else do I need to do to get better?" Mike was a genuine friend to everyone, athlete or not. His caring compassion for others was marveled by his peers and faculty members alike. An outstanding student, he was articulate, intelligent, witty and an astonishing listener. His curiosity to understand every concept was insatiable. Yes, he was special, clearly ahead of the curve, and he gave everything he had to everything he did.

Intensely competitive, he was asked to give the pregame prayer prior to our home game with our bitter rival. After the customary, "thank you for this opportunity, keep everyone safe from injury" standard invocation, he concluded with, "and Lord, help us to kick their butt!" Needless to say, the priest who also doubled as our principal, was not at all amused. This proved

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to be the only chink in his otherwise flawless armor and served to prove he was after all, human!

During his final season, proudly wearing the green and gold, he helped lead us to an 11-2 record, the most wins in school history at that time and a first ever state quarterfinal berth. A perfect tailback, linebacker combination, Mike also played on special teams. He never left the game unless we were comfortably ahead. He finished the season as the fifth leading scorer in Tennessee in all classifications, helped us to nine shutout victories and was named first team All-State by all media outlets. Yes, he was special.

During the time I was privileged to coach him, I was only aware of one time when he was visibly upset with me. Ahead 69-0 in the fourth quarter, I emptied the bench to ensure every team member shared in it on the field of battle. As fate dictated, the opposing team scored. The blocked extra point made the final score 69-6, ruining what would have been our tenth shutout. Mike was angry when opponents made first downs, but touchdowns were totally unacceptable! He glared at me as the second and third teamers came off the field. I simply put my arm around him and said, "Mike, it's not the end of the world. Not only was it the *right* thing to do, it was the *only* thing to do, and it's going to be OK."

But, this isn't the end of the story. Far from it. After a stellar college career, Mike went on to medical school to become an orthopedic surgeon. After a residency in Texas, he returned to Knoxville to become a leading knee and shoulder surgeon in the area. Known for his caring, compassionate demeanor and phenomenal hand-eye coordi-



nation, he has helped a plethora of patients, young and old, and athletes from all levels. Without question, his most unique moment came when he heeded the call from the Knoxville Zoo to repair an ailing gorilla's gimpy knee!

After decades of an anything but sedentary lifestyle as an athlete and a coach, in 2013, I knew it was time to have my right knee replaced, or I'd be in the "o-limp-ics" for the rest of my life. The surgeon choice was easy, a no brainer. X-rays and evaluation completed, my diagnosis was confirmed by Dr.

Michael T. Casey of Tennessee Orthopedic Clinic. With the date set, I looked at him and asked, "Mike, when you get me on the table, are you going to remember all those pushups, sit ups, up downs and wind sprints I made you do?"

He looked at me incredulously and said, "Coach, of course I am...that kind of discipline helped make me what I am today!"

I've referred scores of athletes, friends and family members to Dr. Casey, including my wife. Not only is it the *right* thing to do, it's the *only* thing to do. After all, he's special.



**Dan Schlafer** has been an educator, coach and administrator. During his coaching career, Dan earned Coach of the Year honors thirteen times, and while at Tennessee School for the Deaf, he coached two deaf national champion runner-up teams. As a high school principal, Dan was named Principal of the Year in (2002-2003) by The Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association, and he has recently been enshrined in the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association Hall of Fame.



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