



## My coach

BY BOB NUNNALLY

During a job interview, someone asked about the biggest influence in my life. I quickly answered “my parents” and described how proud I was of them. Then, I added, “There is another person, my high school coach, Jack Cunningham.”

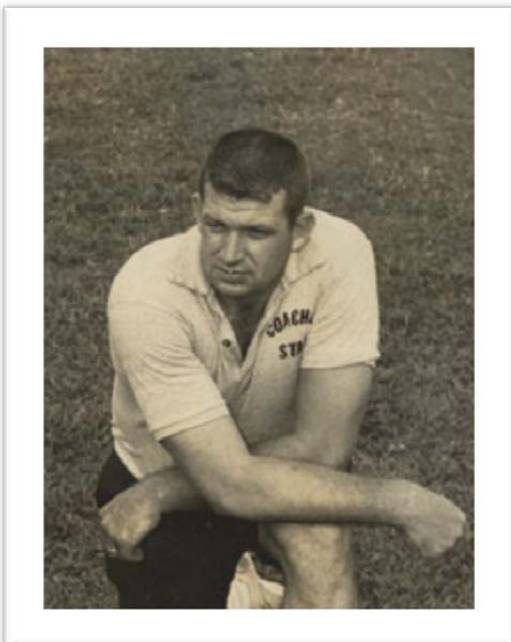
I first met the man in ninth grade at College Park High. I was a puny kid yearning to play football. He was a tough-looking guy who, when he spoke, his baritone resonance shook you. He chewed tobacco and could care less if the juice clung to him or splattered all over you.

He held court before and after practice on the tailgate of his old pickup. A bevy of seniors, assistant coaches and dads hung on his words. Sometimes, a thunderous crash of laughter punctuated the air. I usually eased by on my way to practice, hoping to one day work my way into that audience.

On the field, he was part calm warrior, part raving lunatic. He coached in a straightforward manner: Do it his way.

Other than use an expletive to express disappointment in your performance, he would let fly a “Crap son!” with unabated contempt. The tobacco shower poured like a monsoon. He emphasized his outburst with his right hand forming an OK sign and quickly turning outwards, like he was flicking dirt from his fingers. You had no idea what it meant; you just knew you didn’t want him flicking your way.

Sometimes he said things you questioned. For instance, no matter how parched you were, you couldn’t drink the water he used to irrigate the football field, because he said he piped it in from the sewer.



I left his tailgate court far too soon. When home from the University of Georgia, I often dropped by to see him. His smile welcomed me, his advice focused me, his tobacco still stained me.

He eventually retired to his farm, and I allowed life’s demands to consume me. Yet, his lessons still guided me: conviction in the face of doubt, courage



in the face of fear and compassion in the face of despair.

Recently, I began my 15th season as a football coach and youth volunteer. The late-summer air shimmers as it rises from the freshly cut grass, and its smells paint an alluring canvas rich with memories, expectations and dreams.

As the kids move out for warm-ups, I see my son. I wonder who will be his light and draw him and these other young people to the complex lessons they must learn. Then a sly smile crosses my lips. "Crap son," I whisper to myself, my right hand gently flicking an OK sign.

"Hey, hold up! You guys, come here; I need to talk to you about a few things. And quit drinking that water; it comes from the sewer."

*—Bob Nunnally is a freelance writer from Savannah.*