

Thankful for the Season of My Life

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – November 18, 2012

Thursday we give thanks. But, we needn't reserve gratitude for one day, nor cast thanks only to the heavens. Last week, I wrote about expressing appreciation to someone while he was still alive. This week, I share another story.

The chance to say thanks was recent, but my gratitude goes back 36 years. The place was Peachtree High School in DeKalb County, and I was a rising senior – an undersized, not terribly athletic, but determined kid on a football squad going nowhere.

The Peachtree Patriots of 1975 stumbled through a 2-7-1 campaign that continued a losing tradition gripping the program. I watched that junior season mostly from the bench. My primary duty as 3rd string tight end was to suffer as a tackling dummy in practice for our All-American safety who later played for Navy.

Our head coach was fired after the season, and a new sheriff rode into town the following spring. Thomas ("T") McFerrin brought an impressive resume, meticulous organization, and dedicated assistants in Ray Allen, Dave Hunter, and my new line coach, Don Braswell. They arrived ready to make a difference, but could never have dreamed how soon.

They gave me a new position as an undersized 170-lb offensive guard. They measured our size, speed, and strength, and gave us goals for the summer. I had my work cut out for me.

We drilled hard in summer two-a-days. We went to Lake Lanier for a preseason camping retreat to try and turn a group of individuals into a team. In brutally direct, adult conversations we accepted personal accountability, confronted and learned to love each other, and found out what it meant to be men. Just days before the season, I was named starting strong-side guard.

Our opener against Tucker was a surprising, but not earthshaking 14-14 tie. But, a spark was lit. The next week, we blew out Cross Keys 51-0, followed by wins of 37-8 and 35-14. At 3-0-1, we faced a team we'd never beaten -- the storied Vikings of Lakeside High. People said our feel-good story was about to meet reality.

Our coaches had other plans. On Monday, we put masking tape across the front of our helmets and wrote the words "Never Say Never." All week, between wind sprints, scrimmage, and contact drills, we talked about the opportunity before us. We discussed the difficult moments we would face and the importance of believing in ourselves and the outcome. When something bad happens, they told us, believe "something good is going to happen."

Lakeside throttled our high-powered veer offense, but we scratched out a 6-0 lead entering the fourth quarter. Our defense was rock-solid, but a late turnover gave the Vikings a final chance to punch in a score and steal the win.

As they pushed close to our goal line, my offensive teammates and I stood helpless on the sideline. Or, so we thought, until we remembered our coaching, joined hands, and began chanting softly and then more loudly: "Something good is going to happen... Something good is going to happen!"

Lakeside fumbled; Peachtree recovered. We ran out the clock for a 6-0 victory. We never said never again.

Good things happened at pivotal moments all the way to a 9-0-1 record, top 10 ranking, and sub-region championship that put us into the state playoffs. It was supposed to end there, but our best performance of the season destroyed heavily favored Clark Central 42-7 in the first round. Our journey ended a week later in a post-Thanksgiving deluge that made Griffin's field a muddy slop. The Bears outgunned us 34-14 with a lightning quick sophomore running back named Willie Gault who later gained fame with the Tennessee Volunteers and another group of Bears in the NFL.

My football days were done. But, the life lessons of that season shaped me and led me to where I stand today.

Last Friday, in John's Creek, I attended the funeral for Coach Braswell's wife Margaret. The other coaches were there, along with a handful of teammates from that season. Even on a sad occasion, we rejoiced and relived every moment.

Finishing his 40th and final season, Coach McFerrin has the ninth most wins in Georgia high school history. He's taking his 9-1 Jefferson squad into this weekend's AA playoffs. But, as I told him and the other coaches last Friday, those wins are a distant second to the number of young men they've put on the right path in life.

I thanked them for that.