

There's more to a football coach than meets the eye, a side that doesn't require tackling dummies or X's and O's. After getting to know the football coaches in Shawnee County, it is my honor to tell the stories of the men behind the playbook, the men under the lights.



UNDER THE LIGHTS

By Nicole Stejskal



BLAKE PIERCE



Tradition comes in many forms and can take shape in all areas of life. What makes a tradition rare is its ability to transcend generations and impact a community in ways that everyday occurrences simply can't do.

For Seaman's football program, the tradition of excellence bears a name: Pierce. The high school's football field pays tribute to the legacy of one Pierce while playing host to another.

TRADITION

And for Blake Pierce, it's been an honor to follow in his father's footsteps.

"The most proud moment in my coaching career was telling my dad that I was coaching at Seaman," said Pierce. "After he passed away last year, that pride only increased."

With his father's name on the field where he coaches, a wealth of expectations have poured in from patrons in the North Topeka

community. However, Pierce has lived up to those expectations, relying on advice from his father.

"My dad always told me to trust people around you, and they will be consistent and fair in how they treat you," said Pierce. "The North Topeka community has a small town feel, and while the expectations are high, everyone is considerate and respectful at the same time."

With family and football also comes a tradition of community, one that all people involved with Seaman High School can be proud of.

"We've developed a tradition that is more significant than wins and losses," said Pierce. "That's what I want people to remember about Seaman football."

STATS

Number of Years Coaching at Seaman High School: 7
Win-Loss Record at Seaman High School: 38-34

High School Attended: Seaman High School
Sports Played: Football & Basketball

College Attended: Emporia State University
Sports Played: Football

HAYDEN WILDCATS

BILL ARNOLD

The influence a high school football coach can have on a group of young men is often more powerful than one may expect.

After coaching the Hayden Wildcats to a state title in 2008, Bill Arnold felt a sense of gratification in winning, but it wasn't for himself. Rather, Arnold believed that taking home the trophy was his way of honoring his own high school football coach, who passed away from a heart attack

INFLUENCE

at a very young age.

"I go back in my mind and think, 'He deserved a state championship,'" said Arnold. "He was a great coach, and what he did with kids was phenomenal. He's the one who got me into this gig to begin with through his influence."

The impression Arnold's coach left on him is now motiva-

tion for Arnold to influence his players through philosophies he's adopted from his main inspiration.

"Coaching football needs to be based around a family-style atmosphere, one where the players and coaches each do their part to make the team successful," said Arnold. "The mentality a coach brings to his team is what he wants the team to stand for – hard work, dedication, toughness, and above all, a sense of family."

With the tight-knit, faith-based environment at Hayden, Arnold believes he can create that kind of atmosphere and leave a lasting impression on his football players.

"I want to teach the game to the kids," said Arnold. "I want to take them beyond levels they think they're capable of getting to."



STATS

Number of Years Coaching at Hayden High School: 4
Win-Loss Record at Hayden High School: 42-10

High School Attended: Holton High School
Sports Played: Football, Basketball & Track

College Attended: Benedictine College
Sports Played: Football



SILVER LAKE EAGLES

C.J. HAMILTON

There's no denying C.J. Hamilton's success on the football field. With 35 years of coaching to his name and no sign of stopping soon, Hamilton has placed himself in the running to go down as one of the 50 winningest high school coaches in the nation's history.

With that kind of success, one has to wonder what Hamilton does differently to set himself apart from other coaches. For Hamilton, it's not about

knowing which defensive formation to use or choosing to run the ball versus passing it. It's about learning how to relate to the players.

"After all these years, I still feel like I can reach kids," said Hamilton. "I've adapted to changes to handle different generations, and it's motivated me to continue coaching."

However, success hasn't come

Hamilton's way without its share of challenges. Over the years, Hamilton has been approached with offers to take his coaching to the next level, an opportunity that could challenge any coach's desire to stay. And even when heart bypass surgery threatened to take him out of the game, Hamilton's passion for coaching high school football never wavered.

"During my downtime, I realized that it wasn't the right time to retire," said Hamilton. "I had to get back to coaching. And coaching has given me a comfortable life. I have no desire to do anything different."

Now, in the midst of his success, the only challenge Hamilton faces with coaching is deciding when to blow the final whistle.

SUCCESS

STATS

Number of Years Coaching at Silver Lake High School: 35
Win-Loss Record at Silver Lake High School: 332-80

High School Attended: Silver Lake High School
Sports Played: Football, Basketball & Baseball

College Attended: Washburn University
Sports Played: Football & Baseball

ROSSVILLE BULLDOGS

STEVE BUHLER

The intensity brought to the gridiron on game day comes from the right combination of two factors: team attitude and community support. Without a balance between the two, game day often feels like just another Friday.

Despite coaching for a large high school in Denver, Steve Buhler never really witnessed that intense atmosphere. Buhler came to Rossville High School 13 years ago expecting a similar environment, underestimating the pride of a small community.

"When I walked out of the locker room and saw the game day atmosphere, I got excited about coaching here," said Buhler. "People here approach football in a special way, and football along Highway 24 has a great tradition of success."

With the community behind Rossville football, it was Buhler's

job to match that intensity within the team's dynamic. Two years into coaching the Bulldogs, Buhler came off a loss to Northern Heights feeling as though something was missing.

"We didn't seem to be doing as well as I thought we could," said Buhler. "My wife's first question to me was, 'Are you having fun doing what you're doing?' and at that point, I realized we needed to switch gears."

Through the help of a few talented players, Buhler changed up the team's offense to something more fun for the players to run – a strategy that took the Bulldogs to the second round of the playoffs and gave them the intensity they were missing.

"We want to have fun with what we do," said Buhler. "If we're having a good time, the kids will work harder, and success will follow."

INTENSITY



STATS

Number of Years Coaching at Rossville High School: 13
Win-Loss Record at Rossville High School: 100-50

High School Attended: Regis Jesuit High School (Denver, Co.)
Sports Played: Football, Basketball & Baseball

College Attended: Benedictine College
Sports Played: Football & Baseball

DERICK HAMMES



Moments that define a coach's career don't always involve hoisting a trophy in the air or marking down a W in the win column. Sometimes it's the losses that shape a coach's character and change his approach to the game.

For Derick Hammes, it wasn't the loss of a game at Center High School, but rather the loss of a football player, that gave him the greatest perspective on coaching. After a freshman athlete went down during a game and passed away from a heart attack, it made Hammes reflect on what is truly important in life.

"It was a tough experience, but it made me appreciate things differently," said Hammes. "After that, I became more of a player's coach."

That mentality has helped Hammes shape the Washburn Rural football program into the suc-

cess it is today. He focuses on creating a sense of commitment in the players to not only become better athletes, but better people as well.

"We want to develop characteristics that will help the guys in day-to-day life," Hammes said. "If they demonstrate attributes of commitment on the field, it will help them become good employees, good husbands and good fathers."

COMMITMENT

No one demonstrates that kind of commitment better than Hammes. When it comes to accomplishing milestones in his career, his dedication to the program and the players goes above all else.

"Personally, I don't need to achieve anything," Hammes said. "I want the players to experience the accomplishments."

STATS

Number of Years Coaching at Washburn Rural High School: 5
Win-Loss Record at Washburn Rural High School: 17-28

High School Attended: [Nemaha Valley High School](#)
Sports Played: [Football](#), [Basketball](#) & [Track](#)

College Attended: [Emporia State University](#)
Sports Played: [Football](#)

SHAWNEE HEIGHTS THUNDERBIRDS

JASON SWIFT

Choosing a career path at a young age is not always an easy decision. Finding a career that will reward you with a sense of pride and satisfaction can be even more difficult.

For Jason Swift, the choice to pursue a career in education after college was made easier through the presence of role models whom he admired and appreciated – his teachers and coaches.

Swift's desire to follow in those people's footsteps came from the ways in which they shaped him into a man.

"They've always been people that I've looked up to and I've had a great deal of respect for them, so I thought it would be an honor to be in the profession," said Swift.

While developing a winning football tradition at Shawnee Heights is important, nothing brings Swift more pride than having athletes come back

and share their positive experiences playing Shawnee Heights football. Swift believes that making an impression on athletes like his coaches made on him will ultimately leave more of a mark than any win-loss record.

"Every day we want to win, but you also have to understand that coaches are in a position where they can make an impact to help kids, and that's what is important," said Swift.

As Swift develops his athletes into young men with leadership and character, his greatest moments come from the connections he creates with his players.

"The opportunity to be around such great kids and develop relationships and see them grow – that's a defining moment for me," said Swift.

PRIDE



STATS

Number of Years Coaching at Shawnee Heights High School: 8
Win-Loss Record at Shawnee Heights High School: 38-38

High School Attended: [Blue Valley High School](#)
Sports Played: [Football](#), [Basketball](#) & [Baseball](#)

College Attended: [Emporia State University](#)
Sports Played: [Football](#) & [Basketball](#)

TOPEKA WEST CHARGERS

TOM BRIAN



The challenges that come with pursuing a career in education are often unmatched by other professions. In order to succeed, one must have the passion and desire necessary to take on the responsibility of teaching and coaching our youth.

Despite playing sports throughout school, Tom Brian didn't see himself in a teaching and coaching career when he started college.

"Originally, I was going to be an engineer or an architect," said Brian. "Then I got to college and realized I missed it so much that I really wanted to make that my career choice."

The passion Brian has brought to his career since then is evident in his personal coaching philosophy – coach them hard, love them hard.

"I want to be tough on them, but I think the kids that play for me

know that I care about them, and I love them," said Brian. "I make sure to tell the kids that I'm here for them, and I'm committed to them."

To be passionate about coaching, it often takes more than just teaching the kids how to snag a reception or block a tackle. It takes a desire to build young men into mature men. Through Brian's four-part

PASSION

football program at Topeka West, the coaches emphasize strong work ethic, personal responsibility, courageous leadership and living for something greater than yourself.

"I believe that if we focus on those things, our kids are going to be successful on the field and off the field," said Brian.

STATS

Number of Years Coaching at Topeka West High School: 1
Win-Loss Record at Topeka West High School: 0-9

High School Attended: Crosbyton High School (Crosbyton, Texas)
Sports Played: Football, Basketball, Track & Golf

College Attended: Baylor University
Sports Played: N/A

TOPEKA HIGH TROJANS

WALT ALEXANDER

From time to time, every high school football program struggles with success. The challenge that often comes with these encounters is finding someone with the strength to build a program back up again.

Luckily for Topeka High, Walt Alexander has been in the business of turning football programs around. After the school's football team went 33 years without a winning season, Alexander came to Topeka High and helped the program to back-to-back winning seasons in his first two years.

In his time at Topeka High, Alexander has focused on implementing a powerful strength program within the school's athletic department, a factor he attributes to the football team's success.

"Hard work breeds success, and with a strength program at the core of what we do, it creates results that

transfer to the field," said Alexander.

The strength of Topeka High's coaching staff has also added an element of success to the football program. With the coaches' long history in football and little staff turnover, the group has created a sense of family that is making Topeka High football competitive again.

"With the kids, it's all about getting them to buy into the program again, which takes time," said Alexander.

"We've got a great coaching staff that loves the kids, and we're focusing on coaching them at every level."

Despite having turned the program around at Topeka High, Alexander doesn't plan on leaving the capital city any time soon.

"There's not a better league in the state to coach in," said Alexander. "I plan to stay here until I'm finished."

STRENGTH



STATS

Number of Years Coaching at Topeka High School: 5
Win-Loss Record at Topeka High School: 21-26

High School Attended: Beloit High School
Sports Played: Football, Basketball & Track

College Attended: Kansas State University
Sports Played: Football

NICK CUMMINGS



No matter how experienced a coach may be, entering a new school to take over the football program can be a daunting task. Add to that the challenge of finding support for one of the school's less dominant sports, and one can be certain that a tough road lies ahead.

However, for Nick Cummings, it's all about channeling his motivation to the right place. As the new head football coach at Highland Park, Cummings understands the importance of getting kids to buy into the football program.

"If you motivate the kids to work hard and show them that sports can be a stepping stone for college, then they can ultimately get what they deserve," said Cummings.

Getting kids to step outside of the one-sport mentality is also moti-

vation for Cummings to find support for football. By showing them the value of competing on multiple levels, Cummings hopes to prove that playing football is not a waste of time.

"When you look at All-American athletes, they don't just play one sport," said Cummings. "They stay active all-year round and then have the opportunity to choose which sport they'll play in college."

MOTIVATION

Aside from everything else, Cummings' personal motivation comes from the moment when past players return to share their accomplishments after high school.

"I want the kids to be successful, and I want to make them into better people," said Cummings. "I want them to see that if they want something, all it takes is the motivation to go after it."

STATS

Number of Years Coaching at Highland Park High School: 0
Win-Loss Record at Highland Park High School: 0-0

High School Attended: **Hayden High School**
Sports Played: **Football, Basketball, Wrestling & Track**

College Attended: **Washburn University**
Sports Played: **Football**

THE WILL TO WIN IS IMPORTANT, BUT THE WILL TO PREPARE IS VITAL.

- JOE PATERNO, PENN STATE UNIVERSITY



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