

A Teacher and a Coach

Alumni Connection

Reflections by an NFL Coach on the occasion of his NFL coach's impending retirement

Terri Branson never wanted me to write this article. In fact, my former speech coach and English teacher tried several times to convince me that the life of a high school teacher and speech coach wasn't for me. It wasn't enough.

In 1983, I was a member of Mrs. Branson's middle school speech team in Middlesboro, Kentucky. I really liked Mrs. Branson, and no one was more pleased than I was to discover that she was moving up to Middlesboro High with my class – in fact, she would be my 9th grade English teacher. I stayed on her speech team, becoming one of the most active members. Although I didn't win any trophies in 9th grade, I did earn my NFL membership. I also fell completely in love with high school speech (and still am). Terri went through a rough divorce during my first two years in high school, and we kids on the speech team were her family and her escape. I've often thought that her loss was our gain as she gave us so much attention in part to help take her mind off her own troubles. And we did have an awful lot of fun.

At the end of 10th grade, my family moved three hours away to Bowling Green, and while my new school had a speech team, they didn't do a lot. There was no NFL chapter there, so my high school connection with NFL was over. Terri stayed in my life, though, helping me become the first state winner of a new speech contest by listening to audio cassettes I'd make of my speech and then mail to her for critique. She always replied, and she always helped. Even if it wasn't official, she was still my coach. She gave me her time and her talents. I was able to do my best because she gave me her best.

Terri moved to a new school when I was in 12th grade, and when I went to college nearby, I became her assistant coach. Here the die was cast, for there was nothing I loved more than working with those kids on their competition pieces. When I told her I planned to teach high school English and coach a speech team, she sat me down and told me not to – that I had too much potential to “just teach” – that I wouldn't be doing enough with my talents and my life.

I ignored her, got my first teaching job, and over the years I ended up starting two different teams at schools that didn't have them and establishing two different NFL chapters. In the sixteen years I've taught, Terri and I have attended over a hundred speech tournaments together. At first we were rival coaches

traveling together with our own teams, but now she works for me (for free) one day a week – reminding me that her name is the first on the judge list for NFL Nationals. I must confess that the two or three times I've been there without her, it's not been nearly as fun. We have had some grand adventures over the years, from sitting together on a church pew in Atlanta for seven hours (afraid to lose our seats before our first finalist ever began to compete) to Olympic bobsledding (I rode it; she cheered) to Broadway shows and a million self-esteem speeches and Abridged duos in between.



Steve Meadows

As we've traveled, she's never stopped coaching me, helping me temper my too-direct nature and be kinder in my comments to kids. Coach Terri makes me a better Coach Steve because she listens to the kids and makes them feel special, and she tells me when I need to do more of that too. I feel like I learn as much as the kids do from her guidance.

In the novel *The Prince of Tides*, narrator Tom Wingo reflects on his life: “I am a teacher and a coach. That is all and it is enough.” I've been reflective about my former coach this year, for this summer Terri Branson is retiring from both teaching and coaching. I will miss her greatly as part of my speech team life. Yet like Tom Wingo, I've come to a realization. I can point to many kids I've had a lot of fun working with over the years, but if I want to justify my hours after school and on buses and in rounds, I can point to many kids whose lives are greatly different because I did spend those hours with them – kids who learned to be their best selves and to communicate clearly. I didn't listen to what Terri told me, but I do instead what she showed me. I try to give my best, my time and my talents, to always reply and always help. She showed me a fine way to live life. And it is enough.

(Steve Meadows is a two diamond coach at Danville High in Kentucky and has served ten terms as Kentucky District Chair.)