

# BU

# BETHEL

# FOOTBALL

MIAC CHAMPIONSHIPS: 2000, 2001, 2006, 2007, 2013 | NCAA REGION CHAMPIONSHIPS: 2007, 2010

## Coach Steve Johnson 'Serving' Life Lessons for Bethel Royals

Robert Pannier, *MinorLeagueSportsReport.com*

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This Saturday afternoon two of the most successful football teams in the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (MIAC) will take to the field in a contest that is sure to have massive implications, not only on the conference title race, but also on the Division-III football playoff picture as a whole. On that day the 5-1 St. Thomas Tommies will take a short 17-minute drive north to Bethel University to face the Royals, who are also 5-1. This is a game that will have major implications that stretch across the country, but for one man it is a contest more of the heart than about anything else.

Steve Johnson is in his 26th season as coach of the Royals. His team has already won five games this season, assuring him of his 22nd straight winning season. The Royals are undefeated in conference play so far this year, and he has a good shot at his team winning their sixth MIAC title. He has 190 career victories, a .700 winning percentage, and has been in the Division-III playoffs eight times in the last 12 years.



These are numbers that prove what an impressive job Coach Johnson has done at Bethel, but in the 29 minutes I sat and talked with the Royals Coach, I learned that Coach Johnson is a lot more than a bunch of numbers. His character goes a lot deeper than wins, longevity or rankings. This is a man who sees himself not so much as a coach in charge of running a team, but more as a servant looking to help steer young men to a life of integrity and love.

Love and football? Sounds odd to many, but clearly not to Coach Johnson. Johnson is a deeply devout man who takes his faith to the field every day in the way that he coaches and serves his players. He takes his philosophy about his faith and uses it to motivate, teach and influence his players to play at a high level, and to respect and trust each other on the field.

"We have a team that really trusts and loves each other," he explains, "and because of that they really help to motivate each other and us as coaches. We set a bar, and they take it higher, so we have to raise our bar for ourselves, which then causes them to raise theirs. There is a lot of love and trust there that says we want to be better for each other and we want to count on each other."

Clearly this is a sentiment that Coach Johnson has made as a mantra for his team. While many coaches provide slogans for their teams such as "Play like a champion," "Never let good enough be enough," or "Fourth and inches, do you have what it takes," the Royals Coach takes an entirely different focus for the slogan of his team: "Obedient, fast and physical."

Obedient? Many hear this in marriage vows, but most don't often hear it as a key principle of a football team, especially when Coach Johnson explains his definition. "Obedience means being true to the base. Not only the base of who we are as a team, but the base of who you are as a person; to the foundation of you as a person. It requires you to trust that your teammates are going to do what they are supposed to and show them the love that you can trust them."

Ah, there is that word again. Love. One can only imagine George Halas or Vince Lombardi rolling over in their graves to hear a football coach say his players needed to love one another, but it is easy to understand it when you listen to the Bethel Coach talk. "We want to help build men that want to be great for each other. We want them to have love for one another, not an emotional love, but a brotherly love. One where one man can rely on another on the field, in the classroom, on campus, or wherever. That is the love we want them to have for each other."

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In a day and age where so many players are finding themselves in trouble, both in the professional and the college ranks, Coach Johnson has taken upon himself to provide an atmosphere where players police each other, not out of a desire to keep people eligible to play or to avoid a bad name falling upon the school and its reputation, but instead out of genuine love and concern for each other.

“Football is a lot like life and we try to teach two things related to football that demonstrate what life is about. First is that football is hard, just like life is hard. Secondly, is that we need each other desperately. Life is incredibly tough, like football, and you have to fight and battle for everything, and the only way you can do that is by relying on others to help you. That is what I want my players to know; they need each other if they are going to succeed, just as we need each other in life if we are going to make it.”

In listening to Coach Johnson talk about the need for each other his passion swells within him. This maker of rugged, tough football players battles to hold back tears as he describes the desire he has to help make his players good men, good husbands, good fathers. It is refreshing to see a coach who has so much passion and love for his players that his emotion overflows when he speaks about his hope for them. It becomes easy to see what his chief motivator to continue coaching is – his players.

As we spoke Coach Johnson created a new motto: “High passion, low emotion.” He strives to create players that are enthusiastic about life, excited about football, fervent about God and zealous for each other. This is the kind of passion he has, and these principles are the foundation upon which he has taught them to succeed, not out of emotion or feelings, but out of passion. A passion that goes way beyond simple emotion and becomes the core, the base of who they are as people.

The Coach clearly recognizes that he is a role model for his team, and the standards he sets for himself are what he expects from his players. He wants these outstanding players to be outstanding young men, and when they stray he expects them to help each other to get back on the right path. “If a guy says that this is the kind of person he wants to be, then I want him to be true to the kind of person he has said he will be. If he strays I expect the other guys to tackle him and bring him back. I want them to make integrity a part of their way of life, and if they do stray they need their brothers to restore them in love.”

Roll over George Halas and Vince Lombardi, because there it is again. Love. This is the standard of the Bethel Royals football team which is summed up in the main motto of the team: “Love the game, love the Lord, love each other.” Coach Steve Johnson clearly loves football and there is no doubt about his faith and his love for the Lord. It is also clear that he loves his players very much and feels an incredible passion for them as players, as men and as brothers.

When asked what his main motivation to continue coaching after so much success, it didn’t take long for him to put his finger on the one thing that motivates him each and every day – his players. “My main motivation is the kids,” he explains. “They give so much to me, and exceed every expectation I have for them. It makes me want to give more back to them; to match what they have given me.”

Many may see his commitment to his players as that of a father who seeks more for his son, but his love and devotion goes way beyond fatherly-love. It is the love a servant has to see the one he serves excel to a level of greatness, not out of selfish ambition but simply out of genuine love. It’s a fervent passion that drives him to give his all for his coaching staff, his players, his university, his family, and his community.

When discussing the challenges his team faces as they approach the toughest part of their schedule, the Bethel Coach turns to one of his favorite passages of the Bible as the motto for his team’s success. “Don’t treat as ordinary that which is consecrated to you,” he says. “We consider practice consecrated here, because if you expect to be at your best from 1-4 on Saturday and you haven’t given your best during the week in practice, you will not succeed. That is how life works as well. If you give your best out of class, you will get your best in class.”

Giving his best is what his players and coaches get out of him every week, because he has an attitude of service that knows that when he gives his best in the office, in the film room, in the meetings with his coaches, his players will get the best from him in games on Saturday. His bar raises because he longs to meet the standard they have set, and to surpass it. His love for them won’t allow him to give anything less.

His players and coaching staff embrace this way of living. No player of the week is named after games at Bethel. There are no captains on the Royals football squad. All seniors are expected to lead, and all others know they are to respect that leadership, and when it is their time they will be expected to lead as well. Obedience? It really fits when one thinks about it.

While there are many coaches out there who inspire and motivate their players to do great things, things that exceed those players’ wildest expectations, few coaches will ever match the passion and desire to serve that Coach Steve Johnson has for his team. This is a man who openly expresses his love and trust in his players, something that they are more than happy to give back in return. In a day and age when we see so much selfish actions and words being expressed by college and professional players alike, I am reminded of a life lesson Coach Johnson teaches to his team. “We need each other desperately.” The reality is that with a servant’s heart, an enthusiastic spirit, and a passionate love for life and for those around him, we need a lot more men like Coach Steve Johnson, and we need them desperately.