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No fear of commitment

Coach drives players, squelches own doubts

By David Murray

Special to the Tribune

2:23 PM CDT, May 9, 2010 A football coach doesn't have much time to think about his feelings.

It doesn't matter whether you're Bears coach Lovie Smith making millions or Chicago Force coach John Konecki making scratch: Preparing for the next game is an infinite job.

But Konecki has a two hour round-trip commute from Force practices in Bensenville or Melrose Park to his home in Schererville, Ind., and as he prepared his 3-0 team for last weekend's game against the Independent Women's Football League defending champion Kansas City Tribe, he found himself wondering what it all amounts to.

"Obviously, I'd have more time for my family," he said of what life would be like if he didn't devote so many days to practices and games and so many nights to breaking down game film for himself and for the players.

And with little time to make or maintain friendships, he worries that he'll become like the football coach who once told him sadly, "My only friends are coaches."

"And sleep, though I've never been much for that," said the 33-year-old father of two, an administrator and assistant football coach at Crete-Monee High School who is in his second year coaching the Force.

But what drives him is the desire to win, or more specifically, to not lose.

And that feeling gets worse every year he coaches.

"I didn't care as much before," he said. "I didn't know what I was doing."

Here's what he was doing last week to counter Kansas City's prolific passing game. He converted his own spread offense into what he calls "road-grade city," a clockeating running attack with the team's biggest women on the line and the smaller linemen, in many cases, carrying the ball.

Meanwhile, he got practice reps for lightning-fast cornerback Katie Romano at receiver and running back -- a task complicated by the fact that Romano is new to the team, only 5-foot-2 and deaf. Konecki is learning sign language on the fly.

Against Kansas City, the Force went up 7-0 in the second quarter. Konecki gathered the offense around him and yelled, "Great job! Hey! Way to answer the call! Way to answer the call!"

In the fourth quarter, running back Kat Converse turned the ball over, and Konecki confronted her: "How can you fumble the ball?"

Quarterback Sami Grisafe came off the field after throwing her second interception and Konecki lambasted her, prompting co-owner Kim Duffey to whisper in his ear, "Remember, you need her the rest of the game."

"Well, she's single-handedly killing us!" Konecki shouted, before joining Grisafe on the bench for a quiet talk.

Ultimately, it worked -- all of it. Using Konecki's ugly-but-effective game plan, the Force rolled up 213 yards on the ground and kept Kansas City's powerful offense off the field just long enough.

Romano, his pet project, picked up a first down on an end-around, stretched the Tribe defense with a fly pattern and intercepted Kansas City's attempt at a tying two-point conversion with 1 minute, 22 seconds left. After the clock ran to zero on the 14-12 win, Konecki's quarterback leaped into his arms, both of them near joyful tears.

"I love you guys so much," he wailed at the women.

During an earlier conversation about how long he'll be able to make intellectual and emotional room for coaching in his life as a teacher and father, Konecki chuckled at his own introspection: "I guess I'm a weirder person than I thought I was."

Note: After two road games against teams they are expected to beat, the Force plays at home 3 p.m. May 22 at Winnemac Stadium against the tough Pittsburgh Passion. In the next installment of this series, learn from always anxious owner Linda Bache how even a single loss could topple the team's rickety financial model.

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