

Minnesota Coach Jerry Kill is a model of leadership

It's not what takes a man down that counts; it's how he picks himself up. And here, as in his day-to-day work, the man excels.

By Melinda Bak



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PHOTO

University of Minnesota head coach Jerry Kill during the first quarter of the Gophers' football game against Western Illinois on Saturday. Kill, who has epilepsy, had a seizure during the game.

Easy to want a glistening superman for a Gopher football coach, instead of a man who lives with epilepsy.

Easy for onlookers, like our esteemed local sportswriter Jim Souhan, to call for the putting-out of Coach Jerry Kill ("In category of health, Kill falls too short to continue," Sept. 15).

Yet, is it possible that Souhan is actually a fan of Coach Kill? Is he clever enough to have baited hundreds of us into responding? See the 17 pages of online responses to Souhan's article calling Kill's battle with epilepsy a "sad" case. The column was a kind of moral low ground, a playground taunting that surely could only have been an attempt to have the public rise up and defend a good man and an excellent coach. Well done, Mr. Souhan.

Of course, as Souhan says, it's horrible to watch someone else suffer. I was nearby on Saturday, in the stands, as Kill was taken down by a seizure. But since when has there been shame in suffering? I

felt equally horrible when, on Saturday, Phillip Nelson winced from a hamstring pull. And yet no one wags their finger when a player limps off the field.

Life is dangerous. The most remarkable people I've known are those who have faced suffering and have discovered how to pick up and go on. Remarkable people aren't born that way; they're made in the transforming fires of struggle. It's not what takes a man down that counts; it's how he gets up. And the fight that's in our coach is as worthy as his name. Tenacious warrior, ferocious strategist, resolute leader — Kill.

Of course, there are people who are outdone by tragedy. But there are also those, like Coach Kill, who from the depth of disaster discover a conquering spirit. While some succumb to suffering, others construct an unshakable life and indomitable character. These are the people I want on my team, any day, in any arena — not the faint-of-heart, weak-willed armchair quarterbacks.

If we were looking for transformed, conquering, unshakable character rather than shiny-on-the-surface idols, we'd be looking for none other than Jerry Kill and the cohort that has his back.

You see, this is the other thing about great men and women. They aren't so star-struck by their own persona that they can't share power. Too often, playmakers hoard knowledge, process and command. Afraid of losing control, they resist the process of mentoring successors. But the ones who truly leave a lasting impact are the ones investing in those who walk with them, empowering others to lead, capitalizing on the hope that great successors will surpass even their own giftedness.

True leaders, like Jerry Kill, are unafraid of empowering a brilliant cohort of leaders — people who can lead at their side or in their absence. Quite the opposite of alleged weakness, the ability to share leadership is a true measure of greatness.

Some scientists even believe that the neural activity present in a seizure, while damaging a portion of the brain, can actually create a corresponding area of giftedness (see Eve LaPlante's book "Seized," or neuropsychologist Dr. Paul Spiers' writings). Among others, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Harriet Tubman and Theodore Roosevelt had various kinds of seizures. Consider, too, that Franklin Roosevelt, the only U.S. president to be elected for more than two terms, was physically bound to a wheelchair or iron braces.

Various artists and athletes also suffered from public and life-altering challenges: Stevie Wonder, Andrea Bocelli and Claude Monet were/are blind; John F. Kennedy, Calvin Coolidge and Pope John Paul II had asthma; Mia Hamm, Kristi Yamaguchi, Charles Woodson and Pat Summerall were all born with a clubfoot; Lou Gehrig had ALS; former Attorney General Janet Reno has Parkinson's disease, and Bethany Hamilton is an amputee surfer and hero to children around the world.

All of these individuals had their detractors who would point and whisper, "Really, what kind of example is a person with a disability?"

Good thing there are even more of us who can raise a fist and cheer: "Jerr-y! Jerr-y! Jerr-y!"

Any day, in any arena. A remarkable man. A profound leader. A first-string warrior.