

A look at the death penalty

He knocked on our door early one morning, out of uniform, in a suit.

"Coffee," he demanded, "I need coffee and to talk." As a long time law enforcement officer, he had seen much in his career. He had investigated murders, missing persons and numerous assaults. He had been the first on the scene of a fatal dog attack of a young boy, who happened to be the same age as his daughter and yet this morning was different. He had just returned from witnessing an execution.

I have often said I don't know for sure how I feel about the death penalty, but I oppose it for primarily one reason. I know I couldn't be the one to "flip the switch, pull the trigger or, as of late, inject the serum", thus I could not ask someone else to do what I can't. In addition, for me if one innocent person is executed we have invalidated any justification for doing executions.

Recently a young man, Troy Davis, was executed in Georgia. He maintained his innocence until the end. New evidence indicated he may have been telling the truth, however two decades have passed since his trial, memories fade, attitudes change but the verdict remained the same.

Former Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, in an interview regarding his recently released book, *Five Chiefs*, stated one of his regrets was the Court's decision to overturn the ban on executions. He views the death penalty in this way, "the death penalty represents 'the pointless and needless extinction of life with only marginal contributions to any discernible social or public purposes.'"

It appears public opinion is evolving as well. A 2006 Gallup Poll found support of the death penalty had dropped to 65%, down from the 1994 poll revealing support at 80%. But perhaps more importantly is the 2009 poll of police chiefs who ranked the death penalty as last among ways to reduce violent crime.

So why do we actually inflict the death penalty? Often we hear victims' families claim they need closure, they need it to end. Unfortunately the tragedy will never end, the loved one is forever gone and nothing will heal the pain. As much as I want to believe in the families justifications, I think it is part of human nature to want revenge, particularly when we are engulfed in pain.

Maybe I have answered my own doubts. It is naïve to believe we can rehabilitate most inmates who have been sentenced to death, but it is also naïve to believe that another's death improves us as individuals or society in general. mailto:mkwoodyard@ruraltel.net

Phase II Mary Kay Woodyard



What if teachers played by the NFL rules

Fran Tarkenton, NFL Hall of Fame quarterback, also "runs two websites devoted to small business education." On Oct. 3, he wrote a piece for the op-ed pages of the Wall Street Journal entitled, "What if the NFL Played by the Teacher's Rules?"

At first glance this seems like an interesting mental exercise. After reading the article I think we can say of Tarkenton as Lyndon Johnson said of Jerry Ford, "...a nice guy but he played too much football without his helmet on!"

You can find Tarkenton's op-ed on line.

Here I have the bully pulpit! And my argument is entitled, "What if Teachers Played by the NFL Rules?"

What if in elementary school we began identifying teacher talent? We reinforced every savvy classroom move. We organized competitions on weekends. Parents purchased, out of their own pockets, professional type equipment to enhance performance or lobbied local businessmen for financial support. What if every test was a family affair with trips out of town and treats at favorite restaurants?

What if parents lined up to mentor aspiring teachers? Boosters formed clubs, watched film every week and brought teachers in to report on progress. What if tickets were sold for test results?

What if only those who showed talent in the classroom were retained? Others were cut, teased if they couldn't read to the 90th percentile.

What if we dedicated whole weeks of events to future teachers? Decorated their lockers, had a special band show, a parade and downtown pep rally, crowned a King and Queen. Painted the windows of businesses and had a dance?

What if kids or parents who didn't have a satisfactory experience were told, "It's an administrative decision. We have the best teachers money can buy. If you don't like it don't come back. When and if the market demands we will make changes. Until then we trust our administrators. We are not going to call our teachers to the office or put them on probation because you got burnt popcorn at the concession

This Too Shall Pass Nancy Hagman



stand!" What if by junior year the most outstanding teacher candidates were being offered wads of cash from alums hoping to lure the five star prospects to their alma mater?

What if parents were willing to go into debt to buy school room supplies endorsed by superstar teachers? If they paid "advisors" to help their kid's brains workout and to get their names out to the best colleges? Summers were spent at camps and working on areas of weakness.

What if once in college, all paid by scholarship, they were taught by the highest paid staff at the University? They got to eat at the "training table." Had all expense paid trips around the country? Were surrounded by support staff to help them with everything from hangnails to parking tickets to felonies?

The guys would have no trouble getting girls. Somehow, despite a lot of rules set up by governing boards, teacher trainees would still have perks: cars, clothes, etc!

As college graduation approached, the best talent would get agents. There would be a draft. If you are good enough you could even "go out" early!

Underachieving schools would get the first selection. There would be lots of intrigue with trades and signing bonuses. It would be covered live on cable. Advertisers would clamor to get just a 30 second spot.

True, some would get more money than others, but there would be lots of money---for everyone!

As their professional careers advanced, teachers with "injuries" would be placed on reserve and rehabilitated. Some would be cut, but in general schools would have so much invested in teachers they would do everything in their power to help them succeed.

The highest performers would have streets and buildings named after them.

They would get product endorsements. More money. Upon retirement they would be considered qualified for high profile jobs like television personality or Wall Street Journal op-ed writer. Even more money.

Every school child would be in awe and spend hours emulating their teachers. They would collect memorabilia; plaster their rooms with posters of their favorites. Classroom events would be the center of their lives. Their treasured childhood memories would be about test-taking. Family time would be dedicated to improving grades.

With NFL rules who wouldn't want to be a teacher?

In America, education is a socialist institution. Everyone is equal. We have teacher tenure and we have student tenure. We don't "cut." We don't cheer the overachievers and boo the rest. Education ends up being average. It's not elitist, it's for the masses.

Teaching is not glamorous. Studying is not entertaining. Yet teachers are expected to entertain, to engage, to pamper, and somehow mold every child into an A student.

In sports there are winners and losers. You can utter all kinds of platitudes, but as Vince Lombardi said, "If winning isn't everything, why do they keep score?"

Education is about playing the game. The joyous part: every child plays.

Sadly teachers are also forced to play a game. One on a field of landmines set by parents, students, administrators, taxpayers, politicians, and Fran Tarkenton.

Tarkenton says more money won't help education. At the same time he says if you take away financial rewards there is no incentive to achieve. I suppose it's too late to put a helmet on Fran.

Schools are about progress. Not every child will cross the "goal line." But each can gain a yard or two, maybe make a first down. To them and their teachers that progress is worthy of the Heisman or a Super Bowl ring. Let teachers teach and quit crippling them with bogus analogies to sports.

Rather than reform education maybe we should quit keeping score.

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