

# ESCAMBIA GATOR FOOTBALL



**Editor's Note:** Dwight Thomas was called into the principal's office after the 1982 football season at Fort Walton Choctawhatchee High School. "Dwight", he was politely told, "You did a good job building character and you've worked real hard. However, your record of 30-12 with only one district championship and only one bowl victory isn't good enough. Dwight, we just don't feel you have the capability as a head coach to win a state championship. You're fired!"

Trembling with shock, Coach Dwight Thomas' mind raced to the prospects of next year's team. Nineteen starters coming back! 1983 was supposed to be the year. Then, reality set in and Dwight determinedly rose from his chair, veins bulging from his neck and with great conviction said, "I'm going to find a losing school, build them up and come back and beat you."

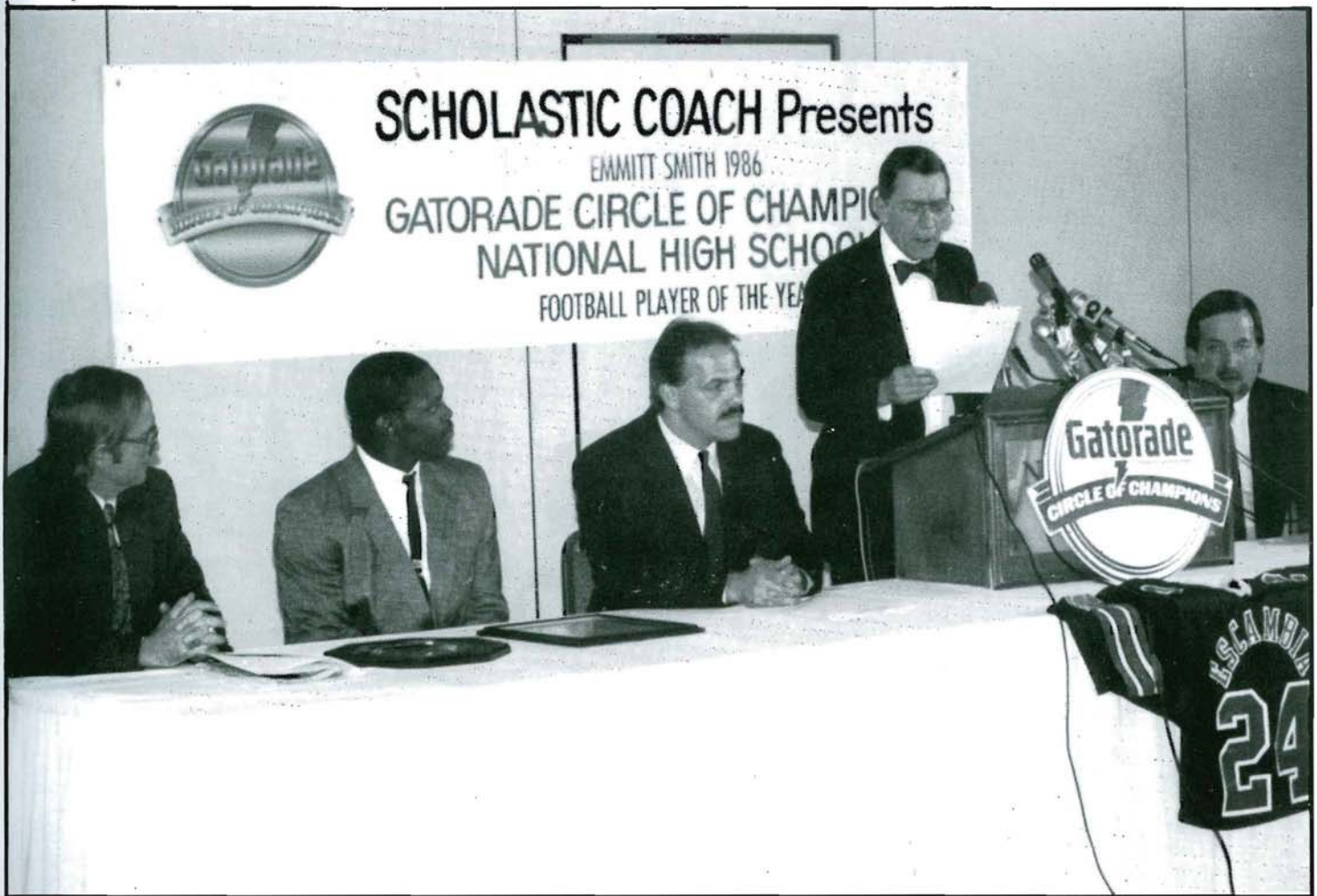
"I had my manhood questioned. I'll never forget it. I'll never forget driving home that day, almost crying," remembers Coach Thomas. "Coaches like to talk about gut checks. Boy, that was mine. I was shook. I had worked so hard."

The previous year Dwight had Greg Shepard come to Choctawhatchee for a BFS Clinic. Greg reflected back, "I sensed that something wasn't quite right. The kids were fired up and Dwight was fired up. However, it was obvious to me a lack of cohesiveness existed between the rest of the coaches. I felt that Dwight was going to have an uphill battle."

Sometimes "gut checks" are good. Sometimes a new challenge is what we need to elevate ourselves to a new and higher level. For Dwight Thomas this proved to be a catalyst for his new job at Escambia High School in Pensacola.

Escambia had drug problems, racial problems and stealing took place everyday. Escambia had enjoyed only one winning season in 23 years. In Dwight's first year, the Escambia Gators went 7-3 and went to the playoffs. The next year of 1984 was when the goal and the dream was realized. Coach Dwight Thomas led his team to AAA State Championship!! The next year Escambia won the AAAA State Championship and held the #2 position in the USA Today National poll for nine weeks! But wait folks, the story isn't over yet. This last season, for five weeks, the Gators from Escambia were ranked #1 in America and finished with a 10-1 record and a bowl victory. Superstar running back Emmitt Smith was selected as America's high school football player of the year. Emmitt rushed for 8,797 yards in four years and scored 106 touchdowns.

Now, in Coach Dwight Thomas' own words is his own personal "Quest for Greatness" story.



Coach Dwight Thomas on left with Emmitt Smith. Emmitt had his #24 jersey retired along with being the National High School Football Player of the Year.

I am proud to be called Coach. More so than being addressed as Sir, Mister or you. The coaching profession gets criticized, second guessed, and no one is completely satisfied with the way things are run. But, it is a profession which enables us to mold young people and influence them in becoming successful and productive citizens of society.

At Escambia, approximately half of my players do not have a father at home. We as coaches have the potential to be Father figures to many young athletes. They look up to us. We should be great examples and regard this obligation as a sacred trust. We should all have the primary objective of helping young athletes reach their optimum. We coaches are the pace setters at the school and our leadership determines the direction the school goes.

I had been spoiled by being involved in four quality programs where few serious problems existed. But, nothing could prepare me for what I would be faced with at Escambia. After seeing the nightmarish problems at Escambia, I went home and told my wife, Kathleen, and my children, Joshua, Caleb and Jesalee, no way would I ever, ever coach at Escambia High. But after a 9½ hour non-stop interview with Ireland Brock, my principal, I realized I would have the most important item in winning. Administrative Support! My principal was committed to winning and turning things around. Administrative support is the first essential

element you must have . . . or do not take the job. "I wish to publicly thank Principal Brock for having the insight and wisdom to hire me out of 42 applicants," concluded Thomas with a wry smile.

"Anyway", Dwight continued, "let me describe the situation at Escambia the way I perceived it." A HOUSE DIVIDED CANNOT STAND . . . no truer words were spoken to sum up the attitude at the school. Escambia was against itself. In my first conference with the players, I told them that until they stopped fighting amongst themselves and cleaned up the campus, we would not win the big one. So we went to work. First, we identified ten problem areas and then set up means to correct them. The following is a discussion of these problem areas:

1. Apathy and indifference pervaded the community and the school. There was no cohesiveness within the community, there was no one single rallying point to draw together this very diversified area. The socio-economic status of the area goes from welfare to millionaire. Zip codes from 01 to 07. They needed something they could all rally around, something to draw them all together in a spirit of pride and working together as a unit.

2. The community was more involved in the recreation department and leagues than they were in the high school.



Pride is a must for any winning program! It can begin in the weight room.

They expected the school's practices and games to be scheduled around theirs. No support in attendance or funds and there were only 8 members in the quarterback club.

3. The boys were constantly being assaulted with negative attitudes and negative remarks around the community and their peers such as "who are you going to lose to this week?" "How bad will the score be this time?" The boys were expected to lose, and that is exactly what they did. They didn't know how to win. Even the mascot looked silly and was a joke.

4. Racial strife had dominated the campus atmosphere in the 70's. There was constant fighting, grab-assing, shootings, knifings. The school was divided into cliques and the school mascot (during the racial era) had to be changed from Rebels to Gators. Some people still resent this change.

5. Graffiti and vandalism dominated. Four deans had to be installed. The graffiti writing was so bad; one was reminded of the New York subways. Kicked in doors and broken windows were the norm rather than the exception. There was no grass on the fields and litter was everywhere. The chain link fence that encircled the campus reminded someone of a revolutionary camp rather than a high school.

6. Tobacco was all over the facilities and the floors; drinking and drugs everywhere. Suspensions, skipplings and expulsions were commonplace.

7. The faculty was totally frustrated at their lack of control and inability to motivate or change the student body. There was a tremendous turnover in the coaching staff and principals which further compounded the situation. I was some players fourth head coach.

8. The locker room situation for the entire athletic department was atrocious. Weapons, girlie pictures, ads for liquor and tobacco were confiscated from lockers. Showers were dark and mildewed. T-shirts and caps advertising alcohol and tobacco were worn. Antiquated equipment rooms and a small run-down office for the coaches constituted the athletic department facilities for an entire athletic program. Stealing occurred everyday!

9. The financial situation for the athletic department was no better. It had been operating in the red for years. Escambia's opponent teams usually had more people in their bands than Escambia had in the stands. At our first game, the fans cheered more for the band than the team and left at half time.

10. At any function half of the gym was white and the other half was black.

We then came up with seven principles of "What Does It Take To Win!" These principles are what the Escambia program is based on. The Seven Principles:

Principle #1 Surround yourself with winners.

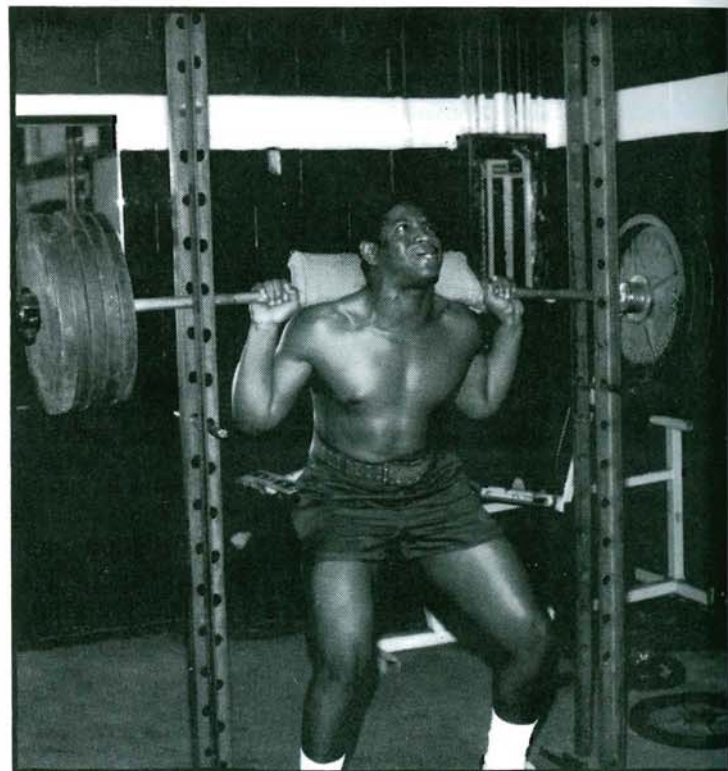
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**There is no substitute for loyalty.  
He who bites someones back  
cuts his own throat.**

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*Greg Shepard*



**STRENGTH BREEDS CONFIDENCE!**

**HARD WORK CREATES THE WILL TO WIN!**

## ESCAMBIA GATOR FOOTBALL:

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### EMMITT SMITH'S STATS

		CAREER
1986		
225	Attempts	1144
1937	Yards	8804
8.7	Ave.	7.6
28	TD's	106
1	Fumbles	6

1983 - 7-3 Tied District Champs

1984 - 17-2 AAA State Champs

1985 - 13-1 AAAA State Champs

1986 - 10-1 Florida Bowl Champions

Emmitt plays Football in the fall, Basketball and Weight Lifting in the winter, and Track in the spring.

#3 Rusher in High School Football history with 8,804 yards surpassing Billy Sims.

### WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO WIN?

**A. Loyal** - Loyalty is the most important ingredient. It goes back to the house divided saying . . . people are either for you or against you . . . you have got to have a loyal staff . . . and by loyal I don't mean someone that is a yes man, that won't disagree with you or question what you do . . . but someone who, once the decision is made, executes it without hesitation . . . and someone who will stand up for you and your program wherever they may be, with whomever they may be. And sometimes keeping silent is just as bad as speaking out against someone. I like my coaches to act as liaison people between the faculty and the athletic department . . . I don't want them to sit idle at faculty meetings, but rather I want them to set the record straight if there are any misunderstandings and let it be known what we do stand for . . .

**B. Enthusiasm** - enthusiasm is as important if not more important than knowledge . . . the best way to relay the knowledge a coach has is ENTHUSIASTICALLY. Youth needs enthusiasm . . . they relate to fired-up adults . . . Make sure you do not have any coaches that are "just going through the motions." Coaches and athletics set the tempos at the schools, and if you have sluggish coaches, you will have a sluggish school. Most of our coaches lift and run with the athletes and are examples of what we want them to be.

**C. Positive Attitude** - Surround yourself with positive thinkers. Do not tolerate anything negative to be said or done around you or your players. Coaches should not concern

themselves with what other programs have or what other programs are doing. Go with what YOU'VE got and spend your energies optimizing that which you do have. Spend your time helping your athletes to realize their maximum potential rather than mourning over that which you have no control. Find something good in everything and enhance it.

**D. Pride** - If you are going to develop pride in a program it must be earned. It will not and should not just be given. The coaches must relay this feeling of pride and they can only do this if they have it themselves, if they have pride in who they are and what they stand for, they will easily relay this pride to the players. Pride and tradition will not score touchdowns or prevent them, only players put on helmets, but pride and tradition add to that player that is putting on that helmet. Each team must arrive at its own identity. I can walk into a school or listen to the players or coaches and know if pride and tradition are present or not! You don't have to paint pride on the walls.

**E. Qualified** - Hire your coaches with the intent of letting them have input and letting them coach. When I was an assistant all I wanted was my segment and my head coach didn't have to worry about that segment. We would be ready to play and if they can't do the job, remove them. When I was first beginning, I followed my head coach everywhere. I was just like his shadow and everything he said or did I wrote down. To this day I have his notebook of football plays. A person is qualified if he knows his material AND (I stress the and) if HE KNOWS HOW TO RELAY HIS INFORMATION TO HIS PLAYERS. Find the right people and if you can't find the right people, do without.

### HARD WORK!!

**Principle #2** There is no substitute and there is no shortcut for good old fashioned hard work! To us, can't means you don't want to. We do not leave the practice field, the weight room or meeting room until I am satisfied we have accomplished the day's objectives. If you have to, start practice over. Blow the whistle, send them up to cal's and just flat start it over. It is similar to putting your money in a savings account and gaining dividends and when you need a little extra money, you're able to draw from this account. If you put in the extra effort and time to have the proper balance of rest, nutrition and workouts, then when you get in a bind, like a four time overtime situation in one game and three in another or after a 14 game season, you can draw on that extra bit of poise, that extra bit of strength and endurance that is designed to simulate the game. We have the boys go full bore for six seconds - about the length of 1 play, rest for 25 seconds and then go again. All of our athletes, boys and girls, during the off-season lift five days a week. We want our athletes to know and to believe that they have out-prepared their opponents. The bigger, faster and stronger an athlete, the more confidence he will have and the more aggressive he will be, thus sustaining fewer injuries and rehabilitating faster.

### #3 Principle is DISCIPLINE

Something I have worked on to instill in the Escambia Gators is the self-discipline to say NO: to say no to drugs, alcohol, tobacco, stealing and any peer pressure that would

## YELLOW JACKET FEVER

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August 1st rolled around and we found ourselves picked to finish second in the conference. John Lowery, an assistant coach for the past 8 years, was named as head coach. A pact was made by the team to climb to the top of the ladder and repeat as the western representative in the state finals.

There was a great commitment to the in season program and our strength gains continued. Late in the season we were in a 5-3-1 week and one of our defensive linemen benched 300 lbs. for the first time. A tremendous roar broke out when a 175 lb. linebacker matched his lift. Not to be out done five others lifted 300 lbs. All seven stopped after lifting 310 lbs. (This was the 1st 300 lb. lift for all seven). Everyone involved in our program is a believer that gains can be made during the season!

The team rolled to a 10-0 regular season record. We found ourselves in the western regional finals again in '86. The quest for another state championship ended that night with the team losing to Shelby, the eventual state champion.

The time has come again to put the off season program in full swing. Come August 1st, with BFS' help, the Yellow Jackets will be Big . . . Strong . . . and ready to play.

We at BFS thank everyone in Yellow Jacket land and wish them continued success towards their "Quest for Excellence."

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result in negative consequences.

We have three rules at Escambia: Be where you are supposed to be, doing what you are supposed to be doing, when you are supposed to be doing it. Obedience to these three rules will keep the players from having to have that private interview with me, which includes ultimatums. I tell my players the procedure one time and one time only. They are allowed to ask questions and no question, as far as I'm concerned, is too stupid to ask. Our rules are hard. Simple and few, but hard. These rules have been tried. It paid off to be firm and consistent. If I catch any of the players disobeying any of the rules, **THEY ARE OFF THE TEAM**; but they are allowed to return at semester break. I had one instance of telling the players to be at the school in a certain place at the end of the day. Well, it had been a tradition at the school for the players to cut that last day. Out of 105 players, five of them cut and were not where I told them to be when I told them to be there. Two of those five were college prospects and I cut all five of them from the team. Two went on to play at other high schools. I caught three drinking and those three were off the team. Some of the parents hired lawyers to get their son back on the team. But it was like I told the players. I did not kick him off the team. He knew the rules and HE made the decision to take himself off of the team when he disobeyed the rules. My decision was upheld. I firmly believe the morale of the team is much more important than an individual player. When you make rules, back them up and

be consistent. I make them wear a shirt and tie when we go out to eat on game day because I feel they are better behaved dressed like that. When they put on the jersey they know now is the time to hit somebody. Along with all of the discipline I preach a time and place for everything. We have plenty of times to relax and have fun. We went to the super dome to a college game. I try to expose them as much as possible to college activities so they will have a desire to set college attendance as one of their goals. We also went to the state capital and the museum of Florida history and the Senior Bowl. The players had a dance at the country club. Our football banquet this year was held at the Hilton in Pensacola and 425 people attended. This year I plan on taking my players to a college practice to show them some real intensity. Every minute of their game day is scheduled. They can't check out of school except through me. I want total control over what they do and eat on game day. I also determine the music they will listen to. I use inspirational, motivational athletic-type songs, and have made a tape of these. This prevents any discord that may occur over what their personal preferences are. Along with the songs, I play a tape the local radio station made of the play-off games.

If you practice during the week, you will have the honor of dressing out on game night. Conversely, if you do not, you will not. We truly believe that it does not matter who does the job or gets the credit as long as the job gets done. I keep any award the players get to prevent any jealousies amongst the players. I do not allow any individual players to be interviewed by the press, not do I allow mohawks, earrings or cutting of the sleeves on the uniforms. No hot dogging. Nothing to draw attention to oneself. When we score, all 11 players huddle on the three yard line and break the gator, which symbolizes the fact that it took all 11 players to arrive at that point. Now, I don't wish to give the impression that the individual is not considered or treated or encouraged to be an individual. He is, and we are interested in each one of our players as individuals, their problems, their interests, etc. But when it comes to the game or preparation for the game, we merge into one winning unit. With a total of seven overtimes in the play-off games, to say we had to draw on all of that discipline is an understatement. Some of my coaching friends were in the end zone and saw this and relayed it to me. A lot of the credit must also be given to my coaching staff for us having reached this level of discipline.

This year we had no unexcused absences, and I feel it is because of the consequences they would suffer which I term "Opportunity period." If it is an excused absence or a tardy they only have to do half of the opportunity period. An unexcused absence they will have to do the full opportunity. One gasser, one crab, one spider, one one-legged, one bellyflop, one roll, one gasser and 25 front-ups progressive each time. They get a one minute break in between each one of these, the distance is across the field and back as one. If two of our players fight, after everyone is gone, I personally handle this opportunity period. We do the complete phase of the opportunity period and I let them butt heads and fight for 15-30 seconds (they can't get hurt

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## ESCAMBIA

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because they are fully equipped and very tired), then we repeat the next phase, by the time all of this is over, they have become friends. I do not allow t-shirts or caps with ads of tobacco or alcohol on them. To emphasize that there would be no tobacco in our program, I told the players we would have no tobacco in the program. The next day one of the players came in with tobacco and I stuck him in the trash can. The players know that if they use drugs, or steal that are OUT of the program. This responsibility lies with the player.

### #4 Principle is COMMUNICATION

A good ex-football player might not always make a good coach, there might be an inability to effectively communicate his thoughts, philosophies and procedures to the youth, and to the rest of the coaching staff. We can't all be moving in different directions. We must work, act and think as one. Never assume anything. Spell everything out, no matter how trivial it may seem. And once a decision is made, back it up. Keep an open door policy, because I think it is beneficial and growth promoting to have all kinds of input. Communicate to the parents and the boosters. Make sure the parents and the boosters know that they can come to you at any time with any question. Let them know you prefer that they come to you rather than spreading negativism in the community. They might not like the answer they receive, but they will get one. When someone GETS INVOLVED with something, they have a better understanding, more pride, and a deeper appreciation of what is going on. We are calling on all of our parents in all of the sports to get involved with a fund-raising project we have going on at our civic center. Let your boosters work for you, let them do the fund raising, but be aware at all times of what is going on. Make sure you communicate to your faculty and administrators what your program is all about and let the faculty know that you are more than willing to deal with any problems your players may be causing in class. Football players are going to be the leaders in your school and it is up to you to determine which way they lead. I prefer that my players sit at the front of their classes, that they say sir and ma'm, and that they be leaders as much in the classroom as they are on the field. Teachers are constantly sending me notes about the players positive attitude and their good leadership abilities, which is a total turn around from the notes I was receiving when I first arrived at Escambia. These complimentary notes are posted on the bulletin board for everyone to see. If you have any gripes or complaints about or with your coaches, do not air them in public, talk to your coaches in private. I communicate 10 basic policies to the coaches on what they can expect from me: They are: 1) 100% loyalty and truthfulness, 2) enthusiasm, 3) 100% backing when right, 4) credit given where credit is due, 5) coaching responsibility, a chance to express your own ideas, 6) an open door, an open mind policy 7) set an example on and off the field, 8) to be organized, 9) strive to obtain highest dollar for coach, 10) no other business exploits, Escambia is my business.

### #5 Principle is SET GOALS

To have an idea about where you are going in life, you

need to set goals. I have a personal interview with and keep a folder on each of my players. We fill out a goal sheet for goals both on and off the field and from time to time this goal sheet is reviewed with the player. At the banquet their senior year I give them their folder. It is easier to work hard and make sacrifices when you've got something concrete set in your mind that you are working toward. Know what you are fighting for. Goals are put in their lockers. It is vital that they set these goals and keep them in their mind as a constant reminder for why they are doing what they are doing. I ask our players to set goals, daydream about them, and be enthusiastic about them. Our overall goal at Escambia is to be the #1 athletic department in the state. This is a goal I have set for myself and one I am still working toward. This is why you need all of your athletes to play as many sports as they desire to play and that God gave them the ability to play. It is important for the players to make these decisions rather than the coaches. Grades and conduct are also important. We had 11 F's and six U's out of 60 players the last six weeks. My goal is no F's or U's. If a player makes an F or a U, they have to write me a one page essay on why they made the F or U and how they plan to correct this and the teacher will also put her comments on what she sees as the problem and her suggestions to correct it.

### #6 Principle is ORGANIZATION

Good organization is a must. Make a file from A to Z and keep it updated for easy access. Make sure you write thank-you cards to people that make contributions to the athletic program, do it on athletic stationary. Delegate responsibilities and see that the job gets done. My coaches each have their segment responsibilities and they also have other major responsibilities such as equipment, training, locker room monitors after practice, one is in charge of opportunity period and the two coordinators meet with them in my office. They also each have one phase of the kicking game for which they are responsible. Be organized so you can be more available to your coaches, players and the public. Speak to service clubs and other organizations to develop support. Stay organized the year round.

### #7 Principle is a GOOD LOVING FEELING AND TEAM UNITY

The F.C.A. has really helped to develop this loving feeling of unity. When I first arrived at Escambia maybe 2 or 3 players were attending the FCA meetings. After ½ year with Mickey Lindsey as the head of FCA, we had more players going to the Black Mt. retreat than any other school. Plus 30 to 40 members attending the weekly FCA meetings and on game day we all attend. At the banquet we give them each a Bible with their name inscribed on it. Escambia was hungry for something to believe in, hungry for someone to lead them in more than just a physical context. Good feelings beget good feelings, and when I send the players their own birthday card on their birthday, I get back tenfold what I sent out. This feeling of camaraderie and close-knitness helped us where we are today. The unselfishness and team first concept truly made a difference. To exemplify this, we were AAA champions in the 4th most recruited state in the U.S. and we do not have a fully committed college prospect in our senior class.

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