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ECHOES FROM THE FIELD

Ernie Adams

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Close observers of successful football coaches suggest that one phrase describes Woody Hayes, Darrell Royal, Bear Bryant, and John McKay. It is a simple phrase – “commitment to fundamentals.” Their teams always seem to block with excellence, tackle with unmatched aggression and run like a scared ape trying to elude his mother-in-law.

Each of these men also makes another commitment. They set their sights on the National Collegiate Athletic Association championship every year. This commitment translates to a daily dedication. It requires an evaluation of personnel, an in depth study of their team's strengths and weaknesses, and hours of watching films of opponents to be played. Finally, decisions must be made, a course of action is developed and completed. In general, the gentlemen mentioned above are known as demanding of their players. They drive themselves hard and expect each squadman to be dedicated to success.

Their success stories seem simple enough. They *do not* chase every new fad that appears before them at coaching clinics. They *do not* desert the practice of adequately preparing for a game. They *are not* indecisive people. They *do not* make a half-hearted commitment to winning.

Close observers of successful reading teachers suggest that one phrase describes those whose pupils learn to read well year after year. It is a simple phrase – “commitment to fundamentals.” Their pupils always seem to know the unique characteristics of each letter and the sounds represented by each. Their pupils read as if they were talking and even listen to the talk as it is lifted from the printed page. Every successful reading teacher, also, makes a commitment to win the national championship. This means a daily dedication to fundamentals. It requires individual evaluation of every learner. The instructor must know his pupils' strengths and weaknesses. A plan for instruction must be adopted and completed.

These teachers are demanding of themselves and their pupils. They push themselves hard, and expect every learner to give a concentrated effort. Like successful coaches, these teachers decline opportunities to leap onto every bandwagon that comes within reach. *Daily* preparation of materials for instruction is given adequate time. These teachers, also, are not indecisive in their plan of action or their commitment to winning the battle.

This commitment to fundamentals and daily practice of skill with minor changes in procedures is a key to consistent success. And although successful coaches or teachers do not win national honors every year, they rarely experience a losing season. The professionals described above have one other trait in common. When losses and failures do occur, they do not totally abandon their previously successful procedures for *new, untried*

methods. They evaluate “echoes from the field” in terms of their previously well thought out plan of operation. Any changes in approach to their weekly tasks come only after serious study and deliberation. Unfortunately, many teachers today choose any opposite course of action jumping from one cure-all to the next. And in the final analysis blame learning failure on everything from brain damage that is both “possible” and “minimal” to a divorced mother who shoplifts plastic trash bags.

An hour cannot pass without the loud cry of unsurpassed success with a new reading program. At the recent Texas State Teachers Association Meeting in Corpus Christi, Texas, publishers displayed reading schemes that are designed to correct everything from dyslexia to the restlessness in a four month old fetus.

This echo from the field pleads for a commitment to the sound fundamentals of reading instruction that are recorded in the numerous existing programs and an abandonment of constant, radical change prompted by unresearched publications and brilliant merchandisers.