

MEDVILLE FIGHTING ROSES

As an author with a bent towards human interest stories, I find myself sitting in a well-lit school auditorium with several hundred people. Among those present are community leaders, businessmen and women, school officials—past and present, and a host of other alumni. Everyone has come to this meeting with grave concern over the growing, widespread depression of the town's citizens.

The Medville Fighting Rams have fallen to a new low. The past season saw the high school football team go winless for the tenth straight year. The class of 2000 experienced the last win. The seven years prior had produced four state champions and three runners up. No one actually has a clue on why the collapse has occurred. Some think that ineffective leadership has played a large part, but after eight different head coaches in the sad ten-year period, it's hard to put blame there. Some of the more hard-core football fans think that school officials are putting too much emphasis on academics. Bernie Jackson, a CPA and part-time statistician for a minor league baseball team, did some extensive research on the matter. He concluded that the more

athletic families have simply stopped having children. It is easy to understand how, in a region of the state that takes high school football very seriously, that those who have a strong interest in the sport might suffer undo depression.

I got up out of my seat and just milled around for a while. I heard many other theories being bandied about as people waited for the meeting to start. It certainly seemed like there was plenty of fruit ripe with thought, but without any viable seed for improvement.

As the clock neared the eight o'clock hour, I returned to my seat. The chairman of the meeting called it to order and gave a brief purpose of the meeting. He then opened the floor for discussion. Many vociferous pleas came from the crowd. When the chaos of twenty people talking at once became unbearable, the chairman called for order.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we must have only one person at a time expressing their views,” yelled the chairman.

The small, slightly built man sitting on my right adjusted his glasses and raised his hand.

“Okay, I see a hand,” said the chairman. “Please go ahead, sir.”

“Yes, I propose that we build a new stadium and change the name of the team.”

“That would be wonderful, but the school doesn’t have any money to build a new stadium,” replied the chairman.

“I will pay for the new stadium,” proclaimed the man.

The silence that resulted proved eerie and the rapt attention by the crowd was priceless.

The chairman adjusted his glasses and said, “Wait ... aren’t you Michael Samson?”

Anyone in the auditorium who had not been paying close attention before now, focused their eyes on the man.

Perhaps a brief biography of the man would be in order before I go any further:

Michael Samson owned a huge rose farm on the outskirts of Medville proper. He had gone to high school at Medville some twenty years ago. With his small, slight frame, he definitely did not play football. Academically, he hovered around average. In fact, he didn’t really stand out in any area. He was, without a doubt, the shyest kid in his class. Ironically, he didn’t win the ‘Most Shy’ senior

superlative because he was so shy that nobody knew him and thus didn't vote for him. When he graduated from high school, he immediately went to work at a plant nursery in Albertville and fell in love with roses. Prudent with his earnings, he eventually decided to start his own rose nursery at his current farm. He became exceptionally good at the business end of it, and the enterprise grew and prospered. He's never really outgrown his shyness, but he figured out how to take advantage of it. While others become distracted by the latest gadget or fad, he has gained the ability to focus. He knows how to read people and how to master the psychology of potential customers. As his profits continued to grow, he started several allied businesses that he believes will make money, too. Though I never met the man, I had some knowledge of him through a charity group that I work with. Rumor puts his net worth at well over two hundred million dollars.

When the people in the auditorium realized it was Michael making the proposal, they stopped talking and listened.

“Do you mean you would pay for it all?” asked the chairman. “As a gift?”

“Yes, completely,” answered Michael. “With one condition. The school would have to change its name to the Medville Fighting Roses.”

As you can imagine, the murmuring throughout the crowd grew steadily louder—some laughter, some dismay, some outrage.

“We are already the laughingstock of the state,” said the mayor. “A name like that would only make it worse.”

“We need a name that would give our fine school respect,” said the school principal.

“Yes, it would be hard to teach our team to be tough with roses on their uniforms,” said the football coach.

There were others, though, that knew of Michael’s ability to analyze people. They called for quiet so Michael could explain.

“The man standing next to me is from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service,” said Michael. “Mr. Chairman, if you will let Officer MacDonald have access to your monitor screen, I believe you will find what he has to show you interesting.”

“Sure, come on up, sir,” replied the chairman.

“The video you are about to see is one that I captured on one of my patrols in the mountains,” said Officer MacDonald.

As the video began, Officer MacDonald continued, “As you can see, that is a very large, powerful male mountain lion. In just a minute, he will begin chasing a rabbit down the slope. At the bottom of the slope, the rabbit just slips under some brush. The mountain lion’s momentum carries him into the brush. That brush is a very thick bramble of wild roses ... as you can see, the cat gets caught in the thorny roses. He tries with everything he’s got to get out, but he’s stuck and bleeding from all the thorns. At that point, I called headquarters to have them send out a vet. While I waited, I shot the cat with a tranquilizer dart and began pruning a path into the cat. Just as I finished clearing out a path, the vet arrived, and we pulled the cat out of the bramble. The vet treated all the wounds, and we waited till the cat woke up to make sure he was okay.

The second video is of a momma bear chasing away another bear from her young cubs. The intruder bear comes across a bramble of wild roses in the chase and quickly changes direction going parallel to the bramble.”

“Thank you, Officer MacDonald,” said Michael. “Ladies and gentlemen, those roses got the best of a large mountain lion and the bear changed direction to avoid the thorny roses—I would call that respect. Yes, it is an out-of-the-box approach. I believe we can harness such thought and use it to generate a winning spirit.”

Eerie silence came upon the hall once more.

“It’s going to be a hard sell to the school board and community in general,” said the mayor.

“I don’t have to sell it, mayor,” said Michael. “If you want to see a change, you who are gathered here tonight will have to sell it. I can provide the vehicle for change, but you will have to decide if you want to drive it.”

“I like it,” said the head football coach. “We could use that video as an inspirational tool.”

“Does anyone else have a comment or another idea?” asked the chairman. “No ... okay then I will take this to the school board and run it by them. I think we should give Mr. Samson a big round of applause for his generous offer.”

Fast forward one year and the Medville Fighting Roses play their first home game in the

new stadium. Though they lost their first two games, they didn't lose them by much. Michael Samson didn't limit his support solely to the stadium either. He had all kinds of promotional deals going on, including a free long-stemmed rose for every lady in attendance. His marketing skills made the game a hometown celebration and filled the stadium. The opposing team for the game was the number two ranked team in the state, and most sports talking heads saw fit to label it a probable massacre. When the visiting team began taunting them and making fun of their name, it made the home team players mad ... well, I guess you could say, fighting mad. They were the Medville Fighting Roses, and they hadn't had that spirit for a long time. The #2 powerhouse visiting team won the game and according to many of those prognosticators it was still a blowout with the final score 31 to 30. A movement had begun, from the lowest player on the bench to the starting team to the citizens in the stands to the guy selling concessions. Medville won four of its last seven games and people in the barber shop and the hardware store and the grocery store began talking about next year.

Michael Samson felt he still had things to do. As it happens, he built a new factory in town to

manufacture all kinds of metal and wood gardening products. Of course, he needed many new managers and workers to run the business. If he interviewed someone from out of town and they had equal qualifications with others applying for the job and if ... in the course of the interview, he discreetly asked about family and if the applicant happened to have a son who played football and if ... they would agree to live in Medville and if ... they would agree to go to Medville schools, he might give special consideration to those 'ifs'.

The following season started out with a rollicking victory over the former #2 ranked team. Scott Isaacson, son of one of Michael's plant managers, threw for five touchdown passes. Brad Tolleson, son of one of the company drivers, ran for 232 yards on the ground. The defensive line formed a thick barrier to any of the opposing team's offensive efforts. With the stadium filled to capacity with inspired and confident hometown folks, the depressive leanings of the town disappeared.

The whole town of Medville was grateful to the rose grower on the outskirts of town. They wanted to erect a statue of him at the entrance to the stadium, but he didn't want to be in the

limelight. And while Michael's generous actions greatly inspired the town, it turned out the actions of the town greatly inspired Michael. He turned that inspiration into breeding a series of roses that, contrary to most goals of rose breeding, had the fiercest thorns, the toughest, thickest growth, and yet with the flowers of the most profuse floribundas. Of course, Michael's series of roses came to be called Medville Fighting Roses, and today they line the entire outer border of the high school football stadium.