

Evolution of the REFINED Program

Over the years I have received questions asking what our REFINED program really is. Therefore, I've decided to explain the program and how it evolved. Ultimately the basis derives from my life experiences. I grew up in an upper middle-class home in Pacolet. Attended Pacolet Middle School and graduated from Broome High School. Growing up in Pacolet, everyone: white, black, mixed, male, female, haves, and haves nots practically did everything together. The school was so small, to compete everyone had to participate. The small size also allowed everyone to know most everything about everyone. There were few to no secrets whether you hung out together or not, you still knew each other's business. I believe this allowed for a great deal of empathy for each other. During this time is when I first recall formative relationships outside those of my home. The teachers, coaches, friends, and friends' families were helping influence who I would eventually become. The memories and moments are too vast to list and many of the friends are still dear. Some of the friends who played a role in this time were (and forgive those I fail to mention) Lynn, Lil Danny, Goose, Pless, Roundhead, Duck, Jermaine, Coon, Tony, Ty, Tiffany, Stephanie, Dena, Mandy, Karla, Jessica. Parents: my own, Danny and Cathy, Steve and Teresa, Bill and Judy, Don and Judy... Coaches: Burnett, Greene, Caldwell, Few. Teachers: Lake, Bryant, Prater, Mr. A, Vanderford, Hodge, Stevens, and more.

These formative relationships continued to grow and expand at Broome. Added to these relationships was Tater and his family, Lee and his family, Mike, Rock, Spencer, Jaime, Christine, Dez, Micah, Greg, Peahuff, Crocker, April, Lynn, Ronald, Rodney, Chad, Shannon, and many more. While at Broome I was in the AP program and played football, baseball, and freshman basketball. Looking back, I didn't realize at the time, but I was learning that not everyone is best for everyone, but God always provides the one needed in the moment. This is exactly what happened for me at Broome. Whether it be friends, teachers, coaches, friends' parents, community members, etc. In true times of need someone always showed up.

My junior year my parents split up and eventually divorced. Oddly, I do not recall them fighting or not getting along. This was a shock and obviously altered life as I knew it. I did not respond well and failed at processing it, navigating my emotions, talking, or healing. Ultimately, this led to a state of depression, personality change, and life ending thoughts. I became more aggressive and became quick to react. I unfairly placed my happiness in relationships with friends and girlfriends. To this day I regret some of the things I did to those I truly cared about as I was unfairly seeking affirmation through them. I ultimately sought the professional help I needed to heal through counseling, medication, and faith. Therefore, I truly understand the need to have appropriate mental health systems for high school students. I also must mention that I have wonderful relationships with my parents.

Until I received the professional help needed, the previously mentioned people unknowingly provided the support I needed. Also, my coaches largely filled in the gaps. Whether it be Gary Robinette's ability to calm any situation and expose life at truly meaningful level while promoting a continued desire for personal growth. Harold Gentry's direct but caring expectations and mandates as he required greatness, offered tutoring sessions in his home, and even a place to stay the night when needed. Jimmy Anderson's ability to make you laugh, motivate work, but recognize pain in the eyes of kids and then really care. Chris Miller's ability to exhaust himself for the care and concern for others. Hank Rogers ability to keep you on your toes, make you laugh, and fearlessly share real life experiences. Fred Burnett making you feel like you belong. Mike Pickett conversating with you like an adult. Wally Mathis's real conversations while driving Clay Thrift and I around in drivers ed. Skip Frye's infectious attitude of positivity. Billy Gossett including me as a family member and always keeping things in perspective. Not only did God place these great coaches, but also their amazing spouses in our lives: Mrs. Betty, Mrs. Judy, Mrs. Gena, Mrs. Lisa, Mrs. Bonnie, Mrs. Treasure, Mrs. Terry, Mrs. Chris. I now realize that not every coach was perfect for me or my experiences, but there was a perfect coach for each moment, for each of us, and for our own specific needs. Through these families God was providing surrogate moms, dads, brothers and sisters.

After graduation I was scheduled to attend Clemson and room with Spencer Dawkins. However, I let PC convince me to come play football there. Due to some personal struggles and altering events, I ended up playing

baseball instead. Looking back, I let being recruited and being “wanted” to influence me to go where I wasn’t supposed to be. It was also my first time without the previously mentioned support groups. During this time, I came face to face with my open emotional wounds and I could not outrun the thoughts of loneliness. I ultimately dropped out of college and worked some odd jobs. During this time I did many of the self-destructive things we currently advise our own children and players to avoid. Through the help and people mentioned previously these wounds began to heal. I will never forget the day or location when the sky became blue, grass green and clouds white. I did not realize before this moment that I literally had been living life in black and white. This was the last day that I had to take medicine for a chemical imbalance. Those wounds are now scars that I am not ashamed to share them or those experiences, as this is part of my testimony. It also allows me to honestly tell my children and players I understand.

I enrolled at USCS (Now Upstate) with every intent to later enroll in Clemson. Reuniting with some of my family and friends, advice and support from my high school coaches, and P28 Legion baseball with Coach Bubba Dorman and Geno Campbell, I found myself playing baseball at USCS. It was also during this time I changed my major from chemical engineering to math education. It was at this time I genuinely felt the calling to teach and coach.

Upon graduating I was blessed to get a job teaching math at Pacolet Middle School and coaching baseball and football at Broome. During these early years I was able to learn from a lot of great coaches and teachers. I figured out quickly that I knew little about both. Being a player and being a student is far different from being a coach and teacher. You really don’t know what you don’t know and there is a lot beginning educators and coaches don’t know.

Math was always easy to me. It made visual sense, and the processes were naturally logical. I scored a 5 on the AP Calculus test and eventually majored in it. As a teacher, I quickly learned this is not the case for most. It took years to truly develop teaching methods that would address the visual student like me, the systematic step by step student, the student in the middle and the student that struggled with all. The students who struggled the most are the ones who taught me the most. Efforts to understand these struggles revealed learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, support structure deficiencies, economic deficiencies, desire deficiencies, broken hearts, and homes. Each struggle possessed their own reasoning, and each required a developmental plan personalized to them. I wish the appropriate plan for every child is derived, supported and executed. Apologetically, sadly, and unfortunately this is not always the case. Much of my career in the math classroom I taught various honors level courses, yet I always taught lower-level mathematics due to the heart I developed for those that struggled. My strategies were often out of the box, I did make mistakes, I was not everyone’s favorite, and success wasn’t always 100%. However, my intentions were always to help find a way for my students to be successful. And most were.

I coached baseball for roughly 12 years. My goal originally was to become a head baseball coach. I was a head colt league coach, head middle school coach, varsity assistant coach, and travel league coach in 3 different Spartanburg communities. I was very blessed with the opportunities and relationships the baseball world provided. I was coached by Billy Gossett, Larry Phillips, Hank Rogers, Doug Kovash, and Bubba Dorman. I was able to coach alongside and under Terry Floyd, Kevin Atkins and Steven Fusaro. All of which ran elite high school programs in SC. I was able to learn from Wayne Tolleson, Rick Adair, Todd Interdonato, Bubba Dorman, Tim Wallace, Micah Stancil, local HS coaches Dean Jones, Kevin Carr, Tom Myers, Jeff Lipscomb, Brian Simpson, Ben Waddell, Jason Settle, Stanley Moss, and more. Many of whom I still meet with today. While at Broome we were blessed to have some of the elite teams and players in the state – too many to name for fear I may leave someone out and not properly recognize all of them. We won multiple district and region championships and fell just short of a state championship appearance. While at Chapman, Ray Tanner’s strength staff and Eric Cressey helped us design workouts specific for our pitchers and catchers which I oversaw. My experiences and relationships developed on the diamond as a player, coach, and parent of two baseball players and a softball player have been invaluable to the development of today’s program.

Obviously, football has been a powerful force in my life. It started with little league with men like Pud Yeargin and continued through middle school and high school. As mentioned before, I did not know what I did not know when I started coaching. Fortunately, I was able to work for some phenomenal coaches: Joe Wingard, Bill Owens, Doc Davis and Freddie Brown. Each one possessed their own beliefs, pedagogy and experiences and I owe a great deal to each. Some phenomenal assistant coaches also served as mentors as well: Jimmy Anderson, John Cann, John Sorrells, Shane Williamson and Louis Story to name a few. I also learned a lot from the coaches and administrators I worked alongside of in football and in athletics: Steve Linder, Ray Wilson, Jerome Rice, Ray Wilson, Jason Farmer, Bennie Gibson, Demond Logan, Robert Gray, Hal McManus, Glover Smiley, Todd Staley, Gerard Gauthier, Jeff Stevens, Ron Garner, Andrew McMillan, Amy Walker, Michael Lancaster, Shay Rice, Anthony Holland, Michael Delaney, Chris Glover, Wes Brown, John Craig, any others. Each of these were also influenced by great people and experiences in their lives. I am currently blessed to work with and learn from the current head coaches, assistant coaches, and administrators at Spartanburg. Spartanburg is blessed to have the likes of Coach Rich, Eaton, Dyer, Boyd, Freestone, Karban and others.

The positive experiences of football are too vast to list. I've been fortunate to coach so many awesome young men and women. Too many to try and name without leaving out many dear to my family and myself. With every success, failure and mistake I always grow for the better. What I hate is not being able to go back and coach previous players as a better version of myself. I've coached at Broome, Spartanburg, Carolina, and Chapman High Schools. At each place I learned new things and experienced unique blessings and trials. One thing I have come to learn is emotions feel the same to all regardless of the reason. Fear is fear, love is love, happiness is happiness, sorrow is sorrow, joy is joy, etc. Regardless of sex, race, economic status, experience, etc these emotions we all have in common.

I've been involved in 4 state championship games, winning 3. 7 upper state championship games. Roughly 80 players received opportunities to play college football with approximately half playing D1. 5 NFL players with 3 playing super bowls. Local, state and national accolades. Great relationship with college coaches from all levels and professional coaches. Former players became doctors, lawyers, teachers, military leaders, business leaders, coaches, and more. I've experienced administrative, teacher, parent and community support unparalleled elsewhere. I've been blessed to witness the game change lives, beliefs, and offer opportunities of so many student athletes and coaches for the better.

I have also experienced heartbreaking losses on and off the field. Program decisions I regret. Game decisions and play calls I wish I had back. Reactions or responses I wish I never verbalized. Broken relationships I wish never ended. Players and colleagues who have passed away – one player in my arms. Program members who have made tragic decisions resulting in incarceration, loss of life, dismissal from the program or school. Injuries ending careers. Players and coaches overlooked for well-deserved opportunities. Players who didn't adequately prepare academically for future opportunities. Addictions. Negative voices and lies handicapping the self-esteem and motivation of children and adults. So many don't know who they are, much less where they are going. Staff insubordination. Administrative, teacher, parent and community members pulling against us. And more. As powerful as this game is for positive change and relationships, it also reflects life, and the heartbreaks are not exempt.

Lastly, and most importantly is my family and faith, as they go hand in hand. God has allowed me to see that he exists and given me multiple glimpses into His ways that otherwise could not be logically explained. The best part of me is my wife Dana. Dana was born in poverty to teenage parents, ultimately living in a single parent home. Her mother fought for their survival and future successes working during the day and going to school at night. Thankfully her mother didn't give up and ultimately graduated and met her stepfather. This resulted in a better living environment in her middle school and high school years. Dana will admit today the absence of a loving protective man for so long in her life led to her making some poor relational decisions – resulting in an early life divorce. We met in a time of our lives when we were both healing from events of our past. Through God's timing, graces and mercies we soon realized the culmination of our past moments brought us together. I have no doubt we were meant for each other, and she becomes better for me, more beautiful, more wonderful every day.

Together we have 3 children. Two biological sons Caleb – 21 and Joshua - 17, and our adopted daughter Ruthie - 10. Ruthie’s story is a miracle itself and can be read in the book I wrote: Illogical Wisdom. All our children are different. They excel academically in different areas. They struggle academically in different areas. Gifted in some areas, diagnosed learning disabilities in others. AP, Dual Credit, and Honors classes in some subjects, below grade level in others. Celebrations for academic successes have been plentiful, as well have tears, frustrations, arguments, and redirections as well. As such I am not a fan at all of HW at the elementary level – but that is another topic... They have had many great teachers and professors, and some not so much. Caleb and Joshua have both graduated high school and Caleb has attended both Clemson University and Wofford College. Joshua will begin his collegiate education at Wofford in February.

I have always mandated our children participate in two different extracurricular activities per school year. This is because of my experiences as a student athlete and educator. I understand that each sport provides their own experiences, own friend and teammate groups, own support structures, and own adults to care for and direct them. Also, it allows the body and mind an opportunity to heal, grow, and develop in varying ways. This is why our program is designed to allow for and encourage multisport athletes. I understand there may be situations that lean toward kids being a single sport athlete and we support these as well.

Our children have played youth and travel baseball, football, basketball, and softball. We have traveled to multiple states – including New York for youth sports. They played high school football, tennis, baseball, basketball, and wrestled. Caleb plays college football and Joshua will soon. We have personally experienced the frustrations of recruiting and trying to figure out which college, what major, how to pay for it, etc. During their careers they have started, came off the bench, and not played in games at all – that I coached, made plays, failed to execute, been injured, had surgery, etc. They have had phenomenal coaches, and some not so much. I have been the parent I greatly appreciate as a coach; I have also been the parent I don’t appreciate as much. The boys have also had to experience being the “coach’s kid,” which was often very unfair to them. Especially when I held them to an unfair standard or placed their needs behind the needs of someone else’s child.

So, what is our REFINED program. It is a program developed and continually evolving to first help all members of the program realize who they really are. “You must know thyself” – Wayne Tolleson. Secondly, the program is designed to provide as many support structures, systems, and opportunities as possible for the development of our own children and those we teach and coach. This life is hard, especially for teenagers. Whether it be an upper class AP student like myself and my children, or a poverty based child like my wife, and all in between - all need help and to be loved. All my life experiences, those of my wife, and of our children, along with our staff members are incorporated within this program. As are all our educational, athletic and relational experiences. I began intently studying player development programs as they pertain to the heart, mind and soul of the athlete in 2014. I spent time studying Coach Swinney’s Paw Journey, Urban Myer’s player development program at Ohio State, and many other collegiate and NFL programs. The initial curriculum implemented at Chapman was the SOLID Player Development Program. It evolved into the REFINED Player Development Program at Spartanburg. The program is designed for all extracurricular students, as I made sure to develop it to serve my daughter whether she be involved in athletics, fine arts, etc. It serves all academic levels from AP to remedial, all races, all economics, all family structures, all hearts, minds and souls, all children, all adults.

Academically we educate our players and parents on high school and collegiate eligibility standards including NCAA 48hs and initial eligibility. We monitor grades and have minimum academic standard for weekly participation. We reach out to teachers and parents when struggles present themselves. We encourage honors, AP, and dual credit participation and help teach which option is best. Through this program grades have improved, enrollment in higher level programs have increased, and those moving on to post-secondary programs have increased. We have also discovered and addressed previously missed learning disabilities, misplaced students, undiagnosed dyslexia, emotional disabilities, and wounded broken hearts.

We teach social and psychological units to promote leadership in life and family. Some of these include Tim Kites Focus 3 program which addresses emotional agility and how to recognize truth while making logical based decisions. Dr. David Cook's book GREATNESS presents 4 commonalities the most successful people in the world possess. Leadership development books from John C Maxwell and others. Multiple books by Jon Gordan.

We partner with local businesses to provide micro internships and part-time jobs for our athletes.

We have a good news program that invites teachers and community members to brag about the accomplishments of our kids. These are recognized in front of the team and helmet stickers are awarded. (We can only recognize these when the teachers participate.)

We require and provide opportunities for our players to participate in civic engagement. This includes serving The Carolina Miracle League, Habitat for Humanity, events at our middle and elementary schools, church functions, city sponsored events, and more.

We provide mental health counseling opportunities for our program members.

We educate and expose the program to speakers on life topics. FBI agents have presented on cyber stalking and social media dos and don'ts. Police officers presented on routine traffic stops and community relations. Other presentations topics include dangers of drug use and fentanyl, sports nutrition, injury recovery, goal setting, paternal rights in SC, economic planning, motivation, next step opportunities - Armed Forces – college – workforce, networking and social capital, and much more.

We expose our kids to the arts and humanities and encourage the support of fellow programs and classmates.

As I hire coaches, they must care about children, add football value, and add value to the REFINED program. Please remember that I not only hire coaches to coach the children of Spartanburg, but I hired them to coach my own children. Not every coach may be perfect for your child, but someone is. The men in our program will help fill in the gap for single mother families and the women help fill the gaps for single father families. For broken situations, we try to provide any help needed. For healthy situations we simply partner with development.

This program is designed to help each person develop and qualify themselves for the next step in life while giving positive and truthful experiences along the way. I also understand that we are not in heaven yet and all of us are human. Therefore, we will all make mistakes and chaos in this life is a given. I dare say that regardless of what the current life situation our players or program members are experiencing, someone in the program possesses experience in a similar situation or can point them to someone who has. Speaking as the head coach and as a father, I cannot thank our staff - Coaches McAbee, Love, Rose, Farid, Gentry, Connolly, Harris, Smith, Bridges, Lear, Traynham, Razzano, James, Jaggers, Woodall, Bailey, Mariable, Peake, Gramling, Taylor, Rossi, Roberts, Greene, Moore, Foster, Caldwell, Payne - enough for how they love children and the scarifies they make to do so.

All current and former players, please know you are loved. I purposely did not mention any names because there are to many to mention, and the last thing I wanted to do is leave someone off.

In the month of February, we will be working to further our community partnerships and opportunities for our kids. Please reach out if interested in joining us.

God Bless and Go Vikings!

Coach Mark Hodge
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