

**GUEST COLUMN: A DAN REEVES APPRECIATION**

## **Coach demonstrates winning character**

By CLAY OWEN

Winners never quit. Quitters never win. It's a slogan drilled into the psyche of aspiring athletes from a young age. This week, Dan Reeves was dismissed as head coach of the Atlanta Falcons.

But despite the Falcons' 3 and 10 record this year, Reeves will always be seen as a winner by my family -- and it has nothing to do with football. It has to do with life.

This summer, when the Falcons had visions of playoffs and possibly the Super Bowl dancing in their heads, my family was facing the agony of losing one of our 9-year-old twins to leukemia. Killian had gone through three years of harsh chemotherapy and the tortuous procedure of a bone marrow transplant. But neither could rid his body of the leukemia. The doctors told us there was nothing else they could do.

In a last-ditch attempt to save Killian's life, we traveled to the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md., for an experimental treatment. And that's when Dan Reeves -- or "Coach," as we came to know him -- came into our lives. A friend who works part time for the Falcons asked Coach to call Killian. He rang my cellphone one cold, damp day in May while we were at the NIH.



Family photo

Near the end of his life, Killian Owen got support from Atlanta Falcons coach Dan Reeves and superstar Michael Vick. The 9-year-old paid a visit to the Falcons' throwing camp in Flowery Branch.

The deep Southern drawl was unmistakable. "Clay?" he asked. "Dan Reeves. I hear you have a young man who's sick."

We chatted for a while, and I handed the phone to Killian. The coach and the kid talked about football, about being sick and about getting better. As I took the phone back to say goodbye, Coach ended the conversation by saying: "Miracles still happen. We're praying for you."

During one of Killian's many stays at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta at Scottish Rite in Atlanta, my cellphone rang again, displaying yet another unfamiliar Atlanta number. "Clay," the voice said. "This is Michael Vick. Coach tells me your son is sick." The superstar quarterback then spent 10 minutes chatting with Killian.

But on the medical front, the news was less than inspiring -- the latest treatment was not working.

Still, every week to 10 days, Coach would call to check on Killian's condition. He invited us to the Falcons' throwing camp in Flowery Branch. Killian was in a wheelchair.

Coach and Michael, as well as linebacker Keith Brooking and running back Warrick Dunn came over to say hello and to let us take pictures. Afterward, we were given a tour of the practice facility. We said goodbye, and Coach once again reminded us: "Miracles still happen."

I'd love to give this story a happy Hollywood ending. But we didn't get our miracle. Killian died July 27.

The night of the wake, my friend who works for the Falcons arrived at the funeral home with a framed letter from Coach: "Being with Killian showed us all that courage and character would and could overcome any physical limitation we might have. Thanks Killian, your visit helped us all! We'll see you one day in heaven."

But that's not the end of the story. Inspired by Killian, another coach -- one who coached in a church league -- asked his team to donate the money they collected for his end-of-season gift to the AFLAC Cancer Center at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta.

And a new fund-raising charity, "Coaching for the Cure," was born. Under the administration of Children's Healthcare it named Reeves 2003 Coach of the Year. AFLAC donated \$1,000 in his name. Coach immediately matched the gift with his own money.

Some may think it ironic that Reeves was named 2003 Coach of the Year for anything. But wins and losses on a football field are but a fleeting memory. The strength of character is the true sign of success.

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