

Best of men even in worst of times

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PEORIA — If asked to accept credit for a victory, Don Patterson and Denver Johnson would not be able to deflect credit to their players fast enough .

Both also would be the first to fall on the grenade of blame after a defeat.

For Western Illinois and Illinois State the 2008 season will be remembered for the men who ran their programs.

Patterson's story is well documented.

On the cusp of the season, the 10th-year head coach was diagnosed with tonsillar cancer. The treatment kept him away from the sidelines through fall camp and the first seven games of the season.

His return on Nov. 1 paled a disappointing 6-5 record for a team that started 5-2 and had hopes of contending for a Missouri Valley Conference championship. Those hopes will start anew next season.

Johnson's story goes back to the start of his tenure, nine seasons ago. He had the misfortune of, as they say, 'being the guy who followed the guy.'

Todd Berry restored hope to the Redbirds faithful, guiding ISU to back-to-back playoff appearances. But six days after losing to Georgia Southern in the 1999 semifinals, Berry marched off to Army.

Enter Johnson, who never quite fulfilled the seemingly manifest destiny given to him.

Johnson once talked about the three pillars upon which he tried to build his program — academic integrity, social responsibility and competitive excellence.

The first two pillars were built in solid concrete.

The third wobbled, held up with just a single playoff appearance, in 2006. It ultimately collapsed two years later with Johnson's resignation.

A record of 7-15 since proved to be too much, the wolves were at the door, two remaining contract years be damned.

If Johnson wanted, he could have dragged into the offseason the review process promised by athletics director Sheahon Zenger and perhaps delayed the inevitable.

He cared too much about the program to do that.

Instead he met with Zenger before Saturday's overtime loss to Southern Illinois, fell on that grenade and waited for it to go off after the game.

Johnson was never one to keep his emotions bottled up after games. One week before, with red eyes, he met the media after an overtime loss at Western Illinois.

After another agonizingly close loss — the final play came up chain-links short of a first down — Johnson fought his emotions. Two games like that does rub nerves raw.

But there was more to it than a disappointing loss to close a frustrating season. It also was the end and, at that point, only a handful of people knew.

When Johnson read from a prepared statement announcing his resignation, he was not sure he would get all the way through.

He did make it to the end, his voice belying the emotions churning within, but still displaying the class and dignity he brought the program for nine years.

Maybe it was their southwestern upbringings, with Johnson from Oklahoma and Patterson from Texas, instilling those traits.

Some people, when faced with the battle such as Patterson's, would have used it as a crutch or an excuse. Not Patterson, and not his Leathernecks.

While he was being treated, and then recovering, Patterson stayed away, letting assistant head coach Mark Hendrickson run the team in his absence.

When he returned, Patterson answered every question posed to him about his ordeal. It was not an effort to draw attention to himself, but more to be a comfort and inspiration to others going through similar battles.

In the weeks before his diagnosis Patterson and WIU athletics director Tim Van Alstine began to discuss an extension to his now-expired contract. There is no reason for that to have changed.

Johnson, too, will land on his feet, as an offensive line coach or maybe even as a head coach. Regardless of what happens in 2009, the just-completed season showed the best of both men.

And that is what will be remembered, more than anything on the field.

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