



# Football and Flight Instructing

How do we leave a lasting legacy?

**Memphis, Tennessee. Home of the blues and B.B. King.  
Birthplace of Rock 'n' Roll and Elvis's Graceland.  
The site of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.**

**N**eedless to say, I am proud of my hometown. But there are also some things that we Memphians do not like to talk about, like our frighteningly high crime rate, or the numerous impoverished areas, or the racial tension that plagues our city.

Lying in one of the area's most affected by those problems is Manassas High School in North Memphis. The Manassas varsity football team boasts some dubious records of its own. Over a period of 10 years, it had four wins and 95 losses. Statistically, those who played on the team were three times more likely to be convicted felons than college graduates. All that changed in 2004, when Coach Bill Courtney took over the program and the team started consistently winning games. In fact, by his last year coaching at Manassas in 2009, the team finished with a 9-2 record and went to the playoffs for the first time in school history. What's even more impressive, however, is that out of the 19 seniors who graduated that year, 19 went on to college. That season at Manassas became the subject of the Academy Award winning documentary *Undefeated* and also the book *Against*

*the Grain*, detailing Courtney's methods for helping his players to be successful, both on and off the field.

I had the privilege of hearing Coach Courtney speak at my church several weeks ago. To my surprise, he didn't talk much about football. Instead, he talked about turkey...or rather *turkey people*. If you have never heard the term before, you're not alone. Courtney went on to explain that when he first started volunteering at Manassas, he operated on the principle that "winning the football game is not the point. It never is." He hoped to be a positive force for change in the players' personal lives by teaching them the value of hard work, character, and perseverance. If they could embody those qualities, then winning football games would be easy. His plan really seemed to work. About half the team stopped getting into trouble at school and their grades began to improve. The other half of the team, however, wouldn't buy in to Courtney's program and were still involved in the same troublesome and often illegal behavior as before.

Coach finally had a heart-to-heart with one of his players who told him, "Coach, they think you're a turkey person. They think you're just like the people who come to their neighborhood



By Natalie Bingham Hoover

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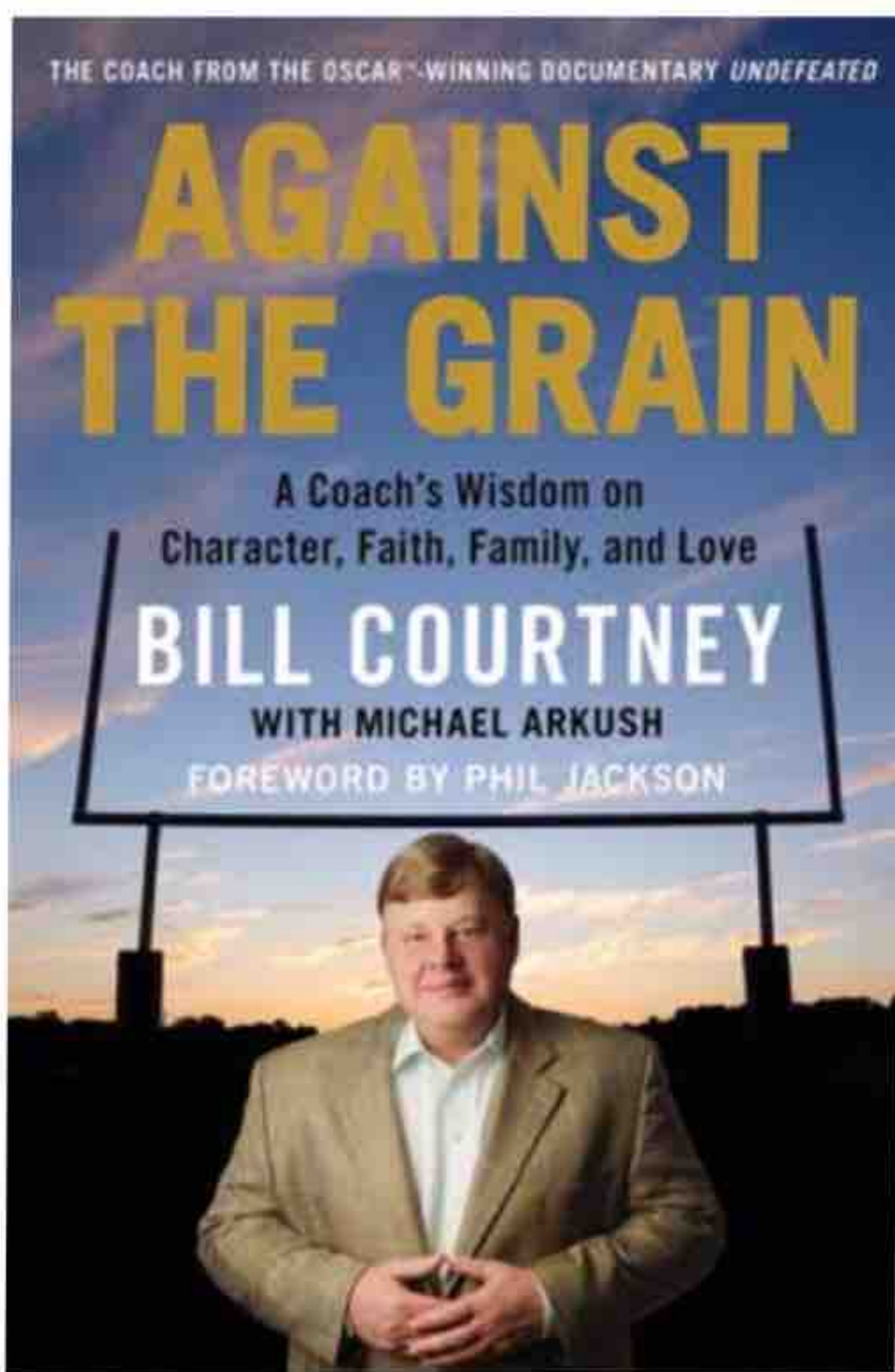


around the holidays and bring a turkey to make themselves feel good. As soon as they drop their turkey off, they high-tail it out of the neighborhood. They don't stick around to really get to know the people, to really see how they could help improve life in North Memphis." Courtney realized that he was guilty as charged; he didn't even know his players' names. He just saw them as a number in a jersey.

After that, Courtney started really getting to know his players on a personal level, finding out about their hardships and their hopes. Once the players saw that he was genuine, the team began to turn around. Their record was better than ever, and the players started to have real success, on and off the field. Courtney ended his talk at our church by discussing strategies for leaving a legacy that matters, not a legacy of stuff acquired by a life of pinching pennies, but a legacy that will change the hearts of people for generations to come. The way to do that, he said, is by showing someone you truly care what they're about on a personal level before you try to teach them anything about football or anything else.

As flight instructors, I think we have a tendency to be turkey people. We look at a pilot and watch how he flies. We assess strengths and weaknesses and give tips for how to bring stick and rudder skills within the standards necessary to pass a checkride. We treat that pilot more like a pair of hands and feet in the left seat than like an actual person, a person with hang-ups and dreams and a life outside of the airplane. That approach would be fine...if we were training monkeys how to fly. But we're not. We are teaching the next generation of pilots, many of whom will go on to have their own students. They will teach the way

they were taught. So if you treat your flight-instructing profession as a time-building steppingstone upon which to move on to bigger and better things, the students you train will pass on that attitude when they instruct their own students. And every generation will lose a little bit of the wonder and the magic that is aviation, until one day, there will be none left. Flying an airplane will be like any other job out there, just another way to earn a paycheck.



To the NAFI members reading this magazine, I would venture to say that you truly care about the flight-instructing profession and the future of aviation. But that's not always easy to convey when you teach several lessons a day and move rapidly from student to student. It's not that you don't care, but you just don't think you have the time to give each one personal attention outside of the flight

hour. That may be true, but there are many simple ways to show you truly care about your students, ways that do not take up much time. For starters, treat your students the way you want to be treated. This is not a revolutionary concept. We learned it in kindergarten as the Golden Rule. If you make an appointment with a student, show up on time. If you are running late (I admit I am the world's worst), at least try to let her know via

text or voice mail. When you finally see the student, apologize for wasting her time. Remember, kindness and courtesy can cover a multitude of mistakes. Also, if you think you will cancel a lesson due to weather or maintenance, try to get in contact with your student before he makes the trek out to the airport. By doing so, you will convey the message that his time is important to you, and that you value the fact that he chose to spend that time with you during flight lessons.

Another simple thing you should always do when you take on new students is to find out why they want to fly in the first place. Most people love talking about their reasons for becoming a pilot, because all too often, it means they get to tell you about someone who is dear to them, a father or uncle or friend who is a pilot and who has served as their mentor. Knowing what their aviation goals are should in turn shape the way you instruct that particular student. For example, if you know your student wants to have a career in the airlines, teach her some crew resource management skills that will make her transition easier as she progresses. She should be announcing checklist completions out loud, explaining why she is making certain decisions so other crew members can understand, and so on. However, if your student is going to be a pleasure or personal flier only, then

single pilot resource management is of the utmost importance.

When I get out of the plane after a lesson, I always help with the tie-down process. This never ceases to surprise my students. They simply haven't had an instructor help them with that task before. But my instructor did it for me, and so I pass that kindness on to my own students. Maybe they will continue to pay it forward. Again, they will teach how they were taught. Another simple move that has turned out to be rewarding for both me and my students are the days when we get away from the airport. If the weather is bad, I sometimes ask my students to meet me at the local coffee shop for our ground lesson instead of the classroom at the airport. The change of locations has

always caused my students to open up personally, more than they ever would at the airport. It's during these coffee shop lessons that I learn just as much from my students as they do from me.

During flight lessons, try to offer encouragement along with instruction or criticism. Remember, when you encourage a student to try that maneuver again until he or she gets it perfect, you are helping them develop more than flying skills. You are teaching them about the satisfaction that comes from hard work and self-improvement. Even if your paycheck doesn't reflect it, do not ever forget that what you do matters, and not just in the airplane.

Taking the little opportunities to show your students that you truly care has the added bonus of helping lessons

to be more productive. It's much easier to learn from a person you respect and feel you can connect with than just another flight instructor calling out corrections from the right seat. What's more, you will be passing on an attitude of kindness and professionalism to future generations of pilots and flight instructors. Remember, it's not really about winning the football game or flying the plane. It's about leaving a legacy that matters. 🇺🇸

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*Natalie Bingham Hoover is an FAA-Designated Pilot Examiner and was the 2014 winner of NAFI's Laslo Excellence in Writing Award. She is an ATP/CFII/MEI and has given more than 3,000 hours of dual instruction. She owns a Cessna 172 named Lola and lives in Germantown, Tennessee.*