

To subscribe, call
1-800-TRIBUNE

Chicago Tribune

chicagotribune.com
SUNDAY, AUGUST 29, 2004

PARADE

In Baltimore, former NFL lineman Joe Ehrmann (c), a coach of the Gilman high school football team, is teaching his players what it takes to truly be a man.

GILMAN
ATHLETICS
STAFF

Why We Believe He Is The Most Important Coach In America

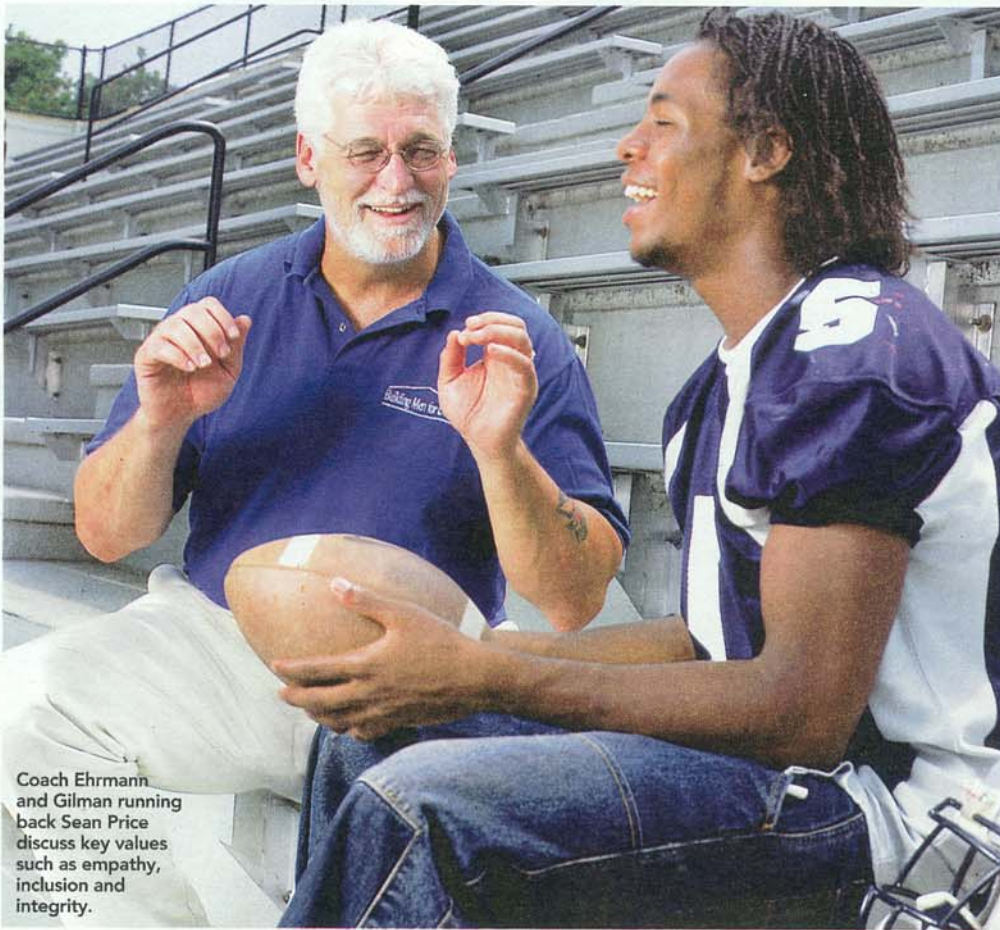
A Profile Of Joe Ehrmann By Jeffrey Marx

Plus... If Terror Strikes, Are You Ready? • Sheila Lukins Cooks With Veggies • Actor John C. Reilly

Joe Ehrmann coaches winning high school football teams—based not on a tough-guy ideal but on a different way of defining what manhood means.

He Turns Boys Into Men

By Jeffrey Marx



Coach Ehrmann and Gilman running back Sean Price discuss key values such as empathy, inclusion and integrity.

YOUNG FACES USUALLY FILLED with warmth and wonder are now taut with anticipation and purpose. Eyes are lasers. Hearts are pounding. This is nothing unusual for the final minutes before a high school football game. But a coach and his players are about to share an exchange that is downright

foreign to the tough-guy culture of football.

The coach, Joe Ehrmann, is a former NFL star, now 55 and hobbled, with white hair and gold-rimmed glasses. Still, he is a mountain of a man. Standing before the Greyhounds of Gilman School in Baltimore, Ehrmann does not need a whistle.

“What is our job as coaches?” Ehrmann asks.

“To love us!” the Gilman boys yell back in unison.

“What is *your* job?” Ehrmann shouts back. “To love each other!” the boys respond. The words are spoken with the commitment of an oath, the enthusiasm of a pep rally. This is football? It is with Ehrmann. It is when the whole purpose of being here is to totally redefine what it means to be a man.

This is lofty work for a volunteer coach on a high school football field. It is work that makes Ehrmann the most important coach in America.

“Masculinity ought to be defined in terms of relationships,” says Joe Ehrmann, “and taught in terms of the capacity to love and be loved.”

In his eighth season at Gilman, Ehrmann’s résumé is anything but ordinary for a defensive coordinator. After 13 years in professional football, most of them as a defensive lineman for the Baltimore Colts, he retired in 1985 and began tackling much more significant challenges.

As an inner-city minister and founder of a community center known as The Door, Ehrmann worked the hard streets of East Baltimore. He also co-founded a Ronald McDonald House for sick children and launched a racial-reconciliation project called Mission Baltimore. Now he’s a pastor at the 4000-member Grace Fellowship Church and president of a national organization that supports abused children.

“He’s a lot of things to a lot of people,” says Maryland Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. “He’s really an opinion leader. And what I love about Joe—it’s not just the messages. It’s the messenger. He’s a very unique man. Gentle. Principled. Committed. And effective.”

The Challenge for Men

Aside from the X’s and O’s of football, everything Ehrmann teaches at Gilman stems from his belief that our society does a horrible job of teaching boys how to be men and that virtually every problem we face can somehow be traced back to this failure. That is why he developed a program called Building Men for Others, which has become the sig-

nature philosophy of Gilman football.

The first step is to tear down what Ehrmann says are the standard criteria—athletic ability, sexual conquest and economic success—that are constantly held up in our culture as measurements of manhood.

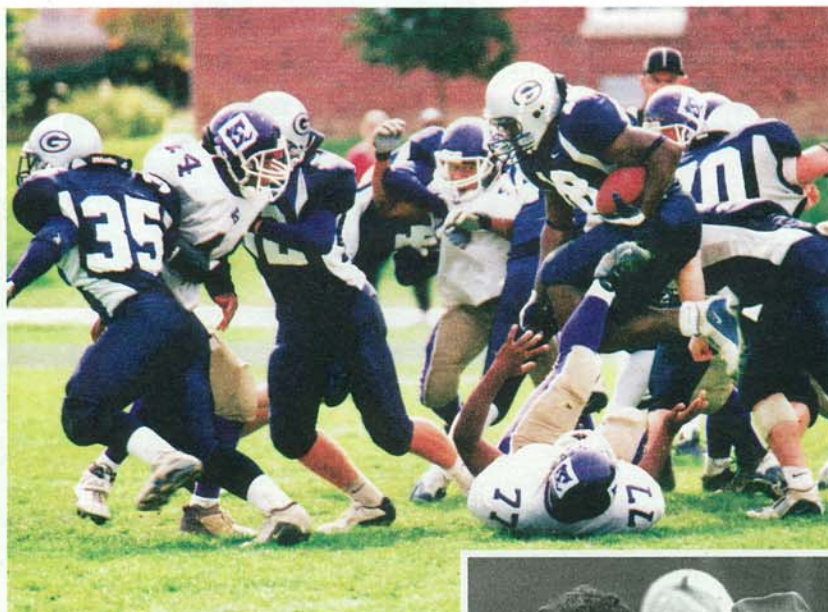
“Those are the three lies that make up what I call ‘false masculinity,’” Ehrmann says. “The problem is that it sets men up for tremendous failures in our lives. Because it gives us this concept that what we need to do as men is compare what we have and compete with others for what they have.

“As a young boy, I’m going to compare my athletic ability to yours and compete for whatever attention that brings. When I get older, I’m going to compare my girlfriend to yours and compete for whatever status I can acquire by being with the prettiest or the coolest or the best girl I can get. Ultimately, as adults, we compare bank accounts and job titles, houses and cars, and we compete for the amount of security and power that those represent.

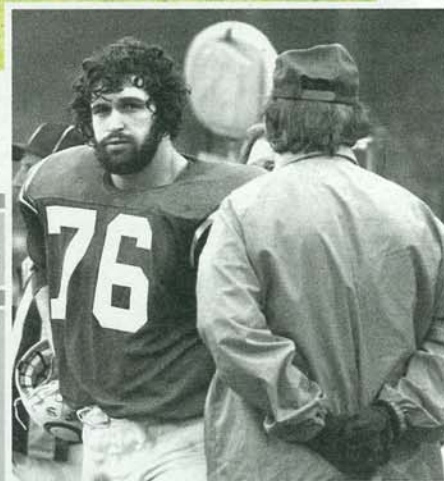
“We compare, we compete. That’s all we ever do. It leaves most men feeling isolated and alone. And it destroys any concept of community.”

The Solution

Ehrmann offers a simple but powerful solution. His own definition of what it means to be a man—he calls it “strategic masculinity”—is based



The Gilman Greyhounds of Baltimore were No. 1 in the state in 2002, but their goals reach far beyond points on the scoreboard. Right: Ehrmann (l) with the Baltimore Colts in the mid-1970s.



To Be A Better Man:

Recognize the “three lies of false masculinity.” Athletic ability, sexual conquest and economic success are not the best measurements of manhood.

Allow yourself to love and be loved. Build and value relationships.

Accept responsibility, lead courageously and enact justice on behalf of others. Practice the concepts of empathy, inclusion and integrity.

Learn the importance of serving others. Base your thoughts and actions on “What can I do for you?”

Develop a cause beyond yourself. Try to leave the world a better place because you were here.

on only two things: relationships and having a cause beyond yourself.

“Masculinity, first and foremost, ought to be defined in terms of relationships,” Ehrmann says. “It ought to be taught in terms of the capacity to *love* and to *be loved*. It comes down to this: What kind of father are you? What kind of husband are you? What kind of coach or teammate are you? What kind of son are you? What kind of friend are you? Success comes in terms of relationships.

“And then all of us ought to have some kind of cause, some kind of purpose in our lives that’s bigger than our own individual hopes, dreams, wants and desires. At the end of our life, we ought to be able to look back over it from our deathbed and know that somehow the world is a better place because we lived, we loved, we were other-centered, other-focused.”

The Way We Learn

How is all of this taught within the context of football?

From the first day of practice through the last day of the season, Ehrmann and his best friend, Head Coach Biff Poggi, bombard their players with stories and lessons about being a man built for others.

They stress that Gilman football is all about living in a community. It is about fostering relationships. It is about learning the importance of serving others. While coaches elsewhere scream endlessly about being *tough*, Ehrmann and Poggi teach concepts such as empathy, inclusion and integrity. They emphasize Ehrmann’s code of conduct for manhood: accepting responsibility, leading courageously, enacting justice on behalf of others.

“I was blown away at first,” says Sean Price, who joined the varsity as a freshman and is now a junior. “All the stuff about love and relationships—I didn’t really understand why it was part of football. After a while, though, getting to know some of the older guys on the team, it was the first time I’ve

continued

“It comes down to this,” says Ehrmann. “What kind of son are you? What kind of teammate are you? What kind of friend?”



To contact Coach Ehrmann or find out more about Building Men for Others, visit www.parade.com on the Web.

Boys Into Men | continued
ever been around friends who really cared about me.”

Helping Others

Four hours before each game, the Gilman players file into a meeting room for bagels, orange juice and Building Men for Others 101. Ehrmann and Poggi tell their players they expect greatness out of them. But the only way they will measure greatness is by the impact the boys make on other people’s lives.

Ultimately, the boys are told, they will make the greatest impact on the world—will bring the most love and grace and healing to people—by constantly basing their actions and thoughts on one simple question: What can I do for *you*? That explains the rule that no

“I was blown away at first,” says Sean Price, now a junior. “It was the first time I’ve ever been around friends who really cared about me.”

Gilman football player should ever let another student—football player or not—sit by himself in the school lunchroom. “How do you think that boy feels if he’s eating all alone?” Ehrmann asks his players. “Go get him and bring him over to your table.”

There are other rules that many coaches would consider ludicrous. No boy is cut from the Gilman team based on athletic ability. Every senior plays—and not only late in lopsided games. Coaches must always teach by building up instead of tearing down. As Ehrmann puts it in a staff notebook: “Let us be mindful never to shame a boy but to correct him in

an uplifting and loving way.”

Whenever Ehrmann speaks publicly about Building Men for Others—usually at a coaching clinic, a men’s workshop or a forum for parents—someone inevitably asks about winning and losing: “All this touchy-feely stuff sounds great, but kids still want to win, right?”


“Well, we’ve had pretty good success,” Ehrmann says. “But winning is only a byproduct of everything else we do—and it’s certainly not the way we evaluate ourselves.”

Win for Life

Unless pressed for specifics, Ehrmann does not even mention that Gilman finished three of the last six seasons undefeated and No. 1 in Baltimore. In 2002, the Greyhounds ranked No. 1 in Maryland and climbed to No. 14 in the national rankings.

Much more important to Ehrmann is the way that his team ends each season when nobody else is watching. Before the last game, each senior stands before his teammates and coaches to read an essay titled “How I Want To Be Remembered When I Die.”

Here is something linebacker David Caperna—reading from his own “obituary”—said last year: “David was a man who fought for justice and accepted the consequences of his actions. He was not a man who would allow poverty, abuse, racism or any sort of oppression to take place in his presence. David carried with him the knowledge and pride of being a man built for others.”

The most important coach in America sat back and smiled. Win or lose on the field of play, Joe Ehrmann had already scored the kind of victory that would last a lifetime. 

Pulitzer Prize-winner Jeffrey Marx is the author of “Season of Life,” a book about Joe Ehrmann, just published by Simon & Schuster.