

On How to Deal with People Like Me

Robert S. Griffin

www.robertsgriffin.com

My grade school and high school friend Ed, as I'll call him, from Saint Paul, Minnesota, now a retired dentist, has a list of people, which includes me, he regularly emails things to that strike him as worth sharing. What ties them together as far as I can see is that reflect Ed's view of what is good and proper. Secular sermons of a sort.

Ed is big on what he would call sports and I would call sports entertainment. For whatever reason, the New York Yankees are his team, go Yankees! And there's the University of Minnesota teams—the Gophers—go Gophers! You root for your team. Just that simple. A commandment to live by.

A couple days ago, I received Ed's latest missive about sports/sports entertainment in my inbox, subject heading "Gopher football—GREAT articles about the coach and his wife."

The coach and his wife are Gophers head coach P.J. Speck and his wife Heather. The two great articles were from the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* newspaper. I'll give you their titles and first few paragraphs to get across a sense of what they were like.

The first great article was "Meet Heather Fleck: The First Lady of Gophers Football."

In July 2018, Heather Fleck walked into the Men's Warehouse store in Roseville on a mission. The mother of Gophers football player Noah Hickcox had called in a favor from Illinois: the redshirt freshman needed a suit for his grandmother's funeral.

In the store, Fleck sprung into action, calling for the 6-foot-4, 295-pound defensive lineman to be measured while she picked out potential styles and color combinations that fit into Hickcox's budget. A few days later, Hickcox looked dapper in a two-piece navy suit with pink accents when he walked into St. Bridget

Catholic Church in Loves Park, Ill., to mourn his grandma, Lee Milnichuk, and support his mom, Nicole.

The second one was “As Gophers Football Finally Returns, P. J. Fleck is a Man in Motion Again.”

P.J. Fleck spent the first day of 2020 basking in the Florida sun, as his Gophers toppled Auburn in the Outback Bowl to cap an 11-2 season that was only a figment of Minnesota’s imagination when that journey started.

Now, 297 days later, Fleck and the Gophers finally have another game to play, with Michigan visiting TCF Bank Stadium on Saturday night and the crew from ESPN’s “College GameDay” already on campus to mark the occasion.

The nine-plus months in between these events have been difficult for everyone with the coronavirus pandemic. It’s been a year of adjustments across the globe, for Fleck included.

“P.J. is not really a sit-still kind of person,” said Heather Fleck, his wife. “So when someone tells him he has to sit still, it’s rough.”

I wasn’t as dazzled as Ed was with the two pieces, and sitting here retired with a bad back and time on my hands as I am, I had nothing better to do than reply to Ed with thoughts that had come up for me. I wasn’t expected him to take well to my responding—Sunday sermons are not meant to be discussion starters—particularly since I saw the articles as being closer to public relations and sophomoric hype than journalism, and not great at all, which, following along with the theme I’ve kind of fallen into here, is pretty much sacrilegious to Ed. But I figured if he could tell me what he thinks, I could tell him what I think, what the heck. So I sent him an email:

Ed--

Here are some articles you’ll never see about the Minnesota Gophers football team:

--One that mentions that of the 27 Gopher players that had anything to do with the [University of] Maryland game [the Gophers' most recent]—passing, running, receiving, tackling, kicking—exactly two were from Minnesota.

--One that mentions that ten players on the team are from the state of Georgia.

--One that mentions that on the payroll of the football team besides head coach Fleck are the offensive coordinator; the defensive coordinator; the run game coordinator/offensive line; the assistant head coach/running backs; the defensive backs, safeties, and defensive coordinator; the corner backs coordinator; the tight ends coordinator; the co-offensive coordinator/wide receivers; the special teams coordinator/rush ends; the defensive line coach; the assistant director of athletic performance—football; the general manager; the head strength and conditioning coach; two assistant strength and conditioning coaches; the director of nutrition; the assistant director of nutrition; the senior defense analyst; the offensive quality control specialist; the defensive quality control specialist; the special teams quality control specialist; the director of player development; the director of player personnel; the director of football recruiting communications; the director of campus recruiting; the assistant director of recruiting/player development; the recruiting and graphic design assistant; the director of football operations; two defensive graduate assistants; two offensive graduate assistants; the head athletic trainer; two assistant athletic trainers; the director of football equipment operations; the assistant equipment manager; the director of video; the football digital content manager; the director of sport psychology services; and the chief administration officer/parents liaison. Does anybody besides me think there is something a bit out of proportion about this much instruction and supervision being devoted to an extracurricular activity? Does the university debate team get even half this much staffing?

—One that tells you about the budget of this football team. You're left with the idea that this is a big money-maker,

but is it? I don't know. I know that last year the team had \$6M in salaries and a \$34.5M operating budget. It took in \$9.5M in ticket sales. I don't know what it gets in media rights, donations, apparel, and whatever else. Does the income add up to \$34M or \$40.5M, whichever it is (I don't know whether salaries are part of the operating budget)? Are students forced to pay fees that go to the football program? Is football subsidized by the university? I don't know. I do know that Sid Hartman and the rest of the sportswriters [recently-deceased, Hartman was a revered *Star and Tribune* columnist whom I saw as a promoter masquerading as a journalist] are never going to get off the Fleck-and-his-wife-type puffery to touch on that subject.

--One that interviews faculty on what kind of students are recruited to play on the football team. I taught big-sports athletes, including for four years at the U [I taught courses at the University of Minnesota while doing my doctoral studies]. Sid and the rest of them sure as hell wouldn't tell you about the experience of people like me. It was consistent with the information in the book *The Blind Side* that the average reading level of Mississippi State football players was the third grade.

--One that interviews a cross section of university students on what they think of the football team. I spent a career in higher education [after the University of Minnesota, 42 years on the faculty at the University of Vermont] and I am here to tell you that most students, to the degree they give any attention to them, see the pseudo-students on the so-called revenue sports teams as sad misfits in a university context and the teams themselves—who play in downtown stadiums called TCF Bank Stadium and the like--as contrary to the mission of a university.

--One that quotes scholarship athletes like the two in my sport and society class at the university who told me they were brought in to put on shows for the general public, old people who like to watch young people play with a ball.

--One that notes that when the University of Vermont was about to drop football, there were the usual dire warnings—dampened school spirit, lower donations, fewer student

applications, and all the rest. But when football was dropped, nothing happened. The football shows were add-on activities that in fact didn't add anything. Nobody ever makes the case for starting up a football team at a university that doesn't have one, at the University of Vermont, the University of Chicago, anywhere.

Robert

As I expected, Ed didn't reply to my email. Ed knows how to deal with people like me: ignore them.