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St. Petersburg
Times

Sports

- On another level
- The key is knowing who's king
- Disputed call helps Blazers tip Hawks
- Funk, sans a skirt, takes Skins title
- Dickson's fireworks help Bulls stay perfect
- Villanova cruises on a 3-point barrage
- Bowl berth by no means a sure thing for Bulls
- Coaching's downs
- Coaching's ups
- Hurricanes coach won't be choosy about bowl options
- Reeling Seminoles drop out of AP poll
- Daily fishing report
- Sabres edge weary Capitals
- U.S. shines at world gymnastics
- At last, Saints make selves at home in N.J.
- Bengals pad lead enough to withstand late flurry
- Chargers' Tomlinson is double trouble
- Down 10 with 0:30 left, Rams ride rookie to win
- Irvin: Pipe belongs to friend
- Suddenly steady Vikings scoop up Browns' errors
- Dolphins defense shows spirit, skill
- Jaguars lose QB Leftwich to a broken ankle in victory
- Philadelphia best in meeting between struggling offenses
- Roethlisberger eager for Colts as player, fan
- DB picks right day to boast
- Panthers claw way to victory
- Seattle needs just one kick

Special report

- Last mission to repair



Sports

Youth sports

On another level

When his NFL career ended, Kevin Fagan found a perfect way to spend time with his children while stoking his competitive fire.

By DAWN REISS
Published November 28, 2005

INVERNESS - The sun slowly sinks beneath the backdrop of goal posts and a half-filled Citrus High stadium. Former San Francisco 49er Kevin Fagan's well-defined, 6-foot-3 frame is silhouetted on the sideline of a Citrus Springs Middle School football game.

Every so often his deep voice bellows.

"My Grandma Betty is faster than that."

"Play hard enough today, so you're satisfied when you see yourself on film tomorrow."

"You've just got to want it. It's something you've got to eat and drink and love with your heart and soul."

So it goes throughout the contest between Citrus Springs and Inverness Middle. Fagan's young players hang on his words, flocking around him during every timeout. On this night, they win, but the result is less important than the special relationship they enjoy with their coach.

Fagan, 42, doesn't have to coach; multimillionaires usually don't. But the two-time Super Bowl champion said he feels compelled to be involved. The satisfaction has come in the form of giving back to his community while spending time with his wife, Nancy, and their six children.

"I remember my defensive line coach telling me his daughter was graduating high school and he didn't even know her," Fagan said. "I decided then that I would know my kids."

It also fills a need left by his retirement.

"I love competing," Fagan said. "When you are coaching you are competing against another coach. It fills a void because when you leave football, after competing for so long you need some level of competition."

The former defensive end won two Super Bowls and an Orange Bowl. He played for legendary coach Bill Walsh, who in a recent phone interview called Fagan "a dynamic leader," someone he is, "proud to have associated with." But here, far removed from the glitz, glamor and big money of the NFL, the University of Miami Hall of Famer has found some of his greatest rewards.

"I think I get more out of it than (the kids) do," Fagan said. "It's the most rewarding thing to me. I should be thanking them for letting me coach."

* * *

Some retired players move easily into business or broadcasting. Others find it difficult to fill their days with meaningful, enjoyable pursuits, struggling to recapture the glory and rush of competition.

"I know most people struggle with it, but other than missing my buddies and the game-day high, I don't," Fagan said. "When I retired, I was at the point where my body was beat up and the decision was easy."

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Fagan left the 49ers after eight years, retiring at the end of the 1993 season. He settled in rural Dunnellon in the mid 1990s.

"I knew I wanted to get out of South Florida," said Fagan, who grew up in Palm Beach County. "I wanted a better place, a slower pace."

An avid bass fisherman, Fagan pulled out a map and started looking at lakes and rivers.

"I saw there was a little town with a couple of rivers," Fagan said. "I felt like it was perfect, my wife did not. She was raised in West Palm Beach. I lived on a couple of acres, off a milelong dirt road with five houses on it, near dairy farms where the boys in the neighborhood and I shot off BB guns, hunted and fished."

Now he lives in a custom-built home off a tree-lined road on Blue Cove, a former phosphate mining quarry on the west bank of the Rainbow River.

The impressive house was a family project, built by his twin brother Kerry, his parents and other relatives. The gated home overlooks a spectacular view, complete with a riverside boathouse. Inside the home, an eight-point buck hangs above a stone fireplace.

Fagan's foray into coaching began unexpectedly when former Dunnellon High football coach Perry Brown asked him to help.

"The 49ers wanted me to coach after I retired," Fagan said. "But I passed on it because of the hours. I never considered coaching football until Perry Brown invited me over. It was funny, because he interviewed me and wanted to know what I knew about football, even though I had just spent eight years playing professionally."

It was a natural progression from there.

"At some point it dawned on me that I was spending so much time on coaching," said Fagan, who coached at Dunnellon from 1996-2000, "that I should spend it with my own children."

Fagan isn't sure how many teams he's been involved with, but in the last few months, he's coached Citrus Springs Middle School and Dunnellon Mighty Mite Pop Warner football teams, a Nature Coast soccer 10-and-under coed team and Dunnellon Heat, a 14-and-under travel softball team.

Fagan's gift for coaching has mesmerized hundreds, maybe thousands of youngsters. It doesn't really matter the sport: baseball, softball, soccer or football, they always flock.

"The kids idolize him," said Citrus Springs Middle athletic director Kevin Towne, who, with Fagan, coached the school's first-year football program that went 5-1. "It's not that they idolize him just because he's a football player who has won a couple of Super Bowls. It's because he's such a good person and motivator. He has a gift for coaching kids. He can ream a kid out and two minutes later the kid will come over and hug him."

To Fagan, the kids aren't first and last names, but Bubble Butt, Muffin and Crystal. The latter is his favorite choice for anyone who gets injured too easily.

"He called me Cry Baby," said Citrus Springs seventh-grader Chris Chilton, the backup quarterback. "I got hit by five people and he thought I was crying, but I wasn't. He said, 'Yeah you're going to cry next year when you're starting all the time, Mr. Star QB.' Sometimes, when we do wind sprints and I'm running too slow he calls me Piggy."

Chilton said the two are "good friends." He jokes that opposing coaches seem intimidated when Fagan steps on the field.

"It makes me feel special," Chilton said. "I still can't believe that I'm playing for a guy who played in the NFL. Hopefully, one day I might get there."

* * *

Fagan works his athletes hard in practice, no slackers here. And he works himself just as hard. He is the first to arrive, the last to leave. He picks up equipment, sets up the field, repaints the lines if necessary.

Discipline is part of his routine.

"I don't think you can have too much discipline," Fagan said. "As long as you don't talk down to them and belittle them, and treat them with respect they don't have a problem."

After a few weeks of practices, parents notice changes in their children. They stand a little straighter and take more pride in what they do.

"He has a lot of patience with the boys, discipline and composure," said Lori Ciquera, mother of eighth-grader Brent, who played football for Citrus Springs Middle. "He's devoted so much to the kids, and that takes a lot of heart and soul."

But that doesn't mean he doesn't have a sense of humor.



The players wrapped him in pink crepe paper during a pep rally this season. It wasn't something Fagan really wanted to do, but with hundreds of middle-schoolers watching, he went along.

"I don't like to be embarrassed, I don't like to be in the center of attention," said Fagan, whose six children range from age 14 to 11/2.

But he's done a few things that he didn't think he'd do, including learning to like soccer.

"Soccer is like the anti-Christ to football," Fagan joked. "We thought nerds played soccer and guys played football."

But when his daughters came along he wanted to give them something in addition to softball so he turned to the sport he dreaded most. He started watching soccer on television, took a 16-hour course and went to Gators and high school games. He bought videos and Mia Hamm's book, which led to an extensive soccer library.

Three years ago, he, his wife and two relatives helped start Nature Coast Soccer League. They did it to help parents who were driving to Citrus County, sometimes an hour one way, to practice. The league began with 250 kids, and has nearly doubled. It has grown so large that Fagan is raising money to put several multipurpose fields at Central Citrus Park.

"He's a jack of all trades," Nature Coast Soccer League president Mike Deem said. "You would never guess he played professionally except for his size, because he's just a down-home guy with six kids."

While Fagan enjoys youth soccer, his passion is football, and it bothers him more kids don't play.

"The reason is it's hard," Fagan said. "Other sports are physically hard ... But if you get beat in soccer you're not a sissy. If you get beat in football you're a sissy. It's a manhood thing that kids just don't want to face."

Instead of being embarrassed in front of their peers, Fagan said, they'd rather go four-wheeling, play video games and skateboard.

"You get a couple of kids on every team that truly care," Fagan said. "Combine that with gifts from God, you can make it. ... Not that many people have inside what it takes."

But when Fagan pours himself into his coaching, people notice.

"He's brought a level of coaching here that not many people can do," David Vince, a school resource officer at Citrus Springs, said. "I've never seen such attendance for middle school games."

Fagan even takes time to help a few current NFL players. Fagan's agent, Alan Herman, brings various players to Dunnellon and they work on pass rushing, hand placement and other fundamentals.

"It's not done today," Herman said. "These guys come out and they really aren't taught anything. ... Kevin's so sophisticated in his ability to analyze and teach."

Nancy knows her husband has a gift for coaching, and recently suggested that he apply for the vacant University of Miami defensive line position.

"I'd never coach at that level," he said. "No way, it's just too many hours.

"This may sound funny, but right now I have the perfect life," Fagan said. "I enjoy every single day. I go fishing with my dad, I coach my kids and I spend lots of time with them. I'm living the perfect life. There are no unfulfilled areas."

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