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Tony Dungy: Once a Coach, Always a Coach

By: Mark W. Merrill

718 Words

Tony Dungy has officially retired from the NFL. After 30 years in the National Football League – three as a player, 14 as an assistant coach, and 13 as a head coach – he is leaving behind a career during which he took his teams to the playoffs for ten consecutive years, had the highest-scoring team in the NFL the last six years in a row, and won the Super Bowl both as a player and a coach. But even though he’s walking away from professional football, he is not walking away from the world of coaching; in Tony Dungy’s life, once a coach, always a coach.

On the most personal “coaching” level, Tony will now be able to dedicate more time to his family, his wife, Lauren, and their five children, where his discipline, generosity and ability to lead by example will inspire the next generation of Dungys. “I need to be a role model for my children,” he says. “Showing, not just telling them, who I want them to be, and what kind of character I want them to have.”

During the years that I have been privileged to know Tony, through his work with our national non-profit organization, Family First, and our fatherhood program, All Pro Dad, I have seen a man whose own character cannot be questioned. I first met Tony in his office when he was head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. During that meeting to discuss launching All Pro Dad, Tony took a phone call and said he would have to cut our meeting short, not for pressing matters of game plans or trade talks,

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but to pick up his son from school. Right then I knew that Tony Dungy was truly an All Pro Dad.

Of course, Tony will tell you that he is far from perfect, that he must work hard to cultivate the qualities for which he is known and admired. That in itself speaks to another trait so abundant in Tony Dungy – humility. Like his father Wilbur before him, a college professor who never even told his son about his time as part of the famed World War II Tuskegee Airmen, the first African-American U.S. military pilots, Tony would rather praise others, than talk about his own accomplishments – accomplishments and accolades that include receiving the United States President’s Volunteer Service Award, being named as one of *Time Magazine*’s “100 Most Influential People In the World,” and receiving presidential appointment to the President’s Council on Service and Civic Participation.

During his tenure in the NFL, Tony Dungy mentored hundreds of young players, coaching them in life lessons, as well as football. His coaching outreach also extended to the many non-profit groups he supported with his name and his time. So now Tony Dungy will continue that part of his coaching career, which calls upon what one of his former assistant coaches described as his “teacher’s mentality” – an outlook also learned from his father. Through All Pro Dad, he will motivate fathers to love and cherish their children, teaching them how to handle the job that he has always said is the most important in his own life. He will coach and encourage men in prison, giving them a vision for what they can be when they are no longer behind prison walls.

Tony also has a coaching passion for guiding boys on the verge of manhood, a desire to let them know that the course of their life will be set by the choices they make today, and that they too can live a life of significance and integrity. “It brings joy to my heart to spend even a few moments with these young men,” he says, “encouraging them to honor their parents, go to church, work hard in school, and do the best they can in all they do.”

Just recently, after hearing of two teenage boys considering suicide, Tony took it upon himself to find mentors for them, and he continues to check on their progress. This is just one of many examples of the behind-the-scenes work of this hands-on coach who really cares.

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Yes, Tony Dungy is leaving his NFL coaching career behind. But thankfully – for those of us he has already inspired and for those he has yet to influence – once a coach, always a coach.

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Mark W. Merrill is president of Family First, an independent national non-profit organization dedicated to strengthening families. To leave a congratulatory message for Coach Dungy, visit AllProDad.com.