

## **Topic: Leading Through Adversity**

**Speaker: Jeff Friday, former NFL strength and conditioning coach**

**In this session, you will learn:**

### **Basic Elements of Leading Through Adversity**

- 1. Be Authentic**
- 2. Be Humble**
- 3. Be Courageous**

### **How a Coach can Lead through Adversity**

With a less than stellar record of 6 wins and 4 losses, the Baltimore Ravens went on the road in 2000 to play against the division leading Tennessee Titans.

The Titans were hot at home, boasting an impressive 12-game winning streak.

In the last few minutes of the game, the Ravens drove the ball down the field to get into field goal range to seal a win. With tension and excitement building on both sidelines, Baltimore's quarterback, Trent Dilfer, threw a "pick six." The interception was returned by the Titans for an 87-yard touchdown to give them the lead. Missed field goal.

Trailing 23-17 with 1:33 , the Ravens faced third-and-five, tight end Shannon Sharpe for a 35-yard connection. Standing only a few yards away from Sharpe when he caught the ball that put the wind back in our sails, I vividly remember being swept away with emotion. Wow! What a turn of events! Suddenly the improbable was within our reach. In a split second, you could feel the tension on the sideline quickly dissipate into overwhelming enthusiasm. It was nostalgic NFL football at its best! The drive ended with Dilfer throwing a two-yard touchdown pass followed by a successful extra point conversion which secured the win. With this win the Ravens became the first team to defeat the Titans in Adelphia Coliseum.

As we celebrated in the locker room, Coach Billick pulled out the *Sports Illustrated* issue released earlier that week entitled, "Remember the Titans: Eddie George & Co. have quietly become the NFL's best team." The cover featured Eddie George, alluding to the movie, *Remember the Titans*, which had been released a few months earlier.

Billick held up the magazine and said, "Here it is guys, the NFL's best team." He looked around at our players and continued.

"Well, maybe they *are*..."

Then he paused. Everyone watched him in silence, waiting.

"BUT NOT TODAY!"

That comeback victory and accompanying post-game speech were defining moments for our team. With a new rush of confidence from the players and coaching staff, we knew we weren't going to be beat again—and the prophecy came true. Relying on the formula of a dominant defense and a strong running game, we won our remaining five regular season games (by an average of three touchdowns) and four playoff games to earn the Super Bowl XXXV title in Tampa.

What got us to that point in the season was Adversity. Adversity can kill a team. Tested through a three-game losing streak in the month of October in which the offense failed to score a touchdown during five of those games. With an offense questioning itself, the team could have easily fallen into the blame game trap of “offense vs. defense.” There was a certain level of frustration, but to the credit of the players and coaches, we fought our way out of it.

Our head Coach, Brian Billick, was able to appeal to the hearts and minds of the players. He did it through the expression of a three elements.

1. Be authentic
2. Be humble
3. Be courageous

**1. Be Authentic** - Authenticity is the degree to which one is true to one's own personality, spirit, or character, despite external pressures. Authentic leaders are seen as genuine and not prone to using people or being fake or phony to get what they want. They are consistent during the good seasons and bad seasons of life.

Could add authentic – brash in his ego of shutout.

Billick – Billick made it a point for the defense to earn a shutout in every game. He knew it took an entire team effort, offense, defense, and special teams to accomplish this feat. We started the season with three shutouts during the first five games. Adding a fourth shutout later in the season put the defense in a position to tie the 1976 Steelers record of five shutouts in a season. Although the feat was not attained, it provided a great deal of motivation. Individual and team goals will sharpen the players focus. It was also recognized that the defense was on pace to break the NFL all-time scoring defense record held by the Chicago Bears.

Jeff - Earlier in my coaching career, there were times in which I was overly concerned about presenting an outward appearance to impress other coaches and athletes. Because strength coaches have a reputation for being “tough guys,” I often reverted to using foul language and tough talk to portray that image. I have since realized that being real with others was more effective in connecting with people. Also, I learned to become more comfortable in my own skin once I recognized and accepted the fact that I have certain gifts and talents, along with limitations, that are unique to me.

**2. Be Humble** – A humble person is someone who does not think they are better or more important than others. They are able to say, “Oh, wait a second, what do you think?” They don’t view themselves as having all the answers and are willing to listen. Humble leaders will do what’s best for their followers, their team, their organization, community or family, regardless of how they may be scrutinized. The antonym of humility is pride (conceit or arrogance). It takes discipline to restrain our own pride.

Billick - Billick recognized that his offense was not as explosive and dominating as the offense he coordinated with the Minnesota Vikings just a few years earlier. That offense was the highest scoring offense in the history of the National Football League. Featuring Hall of Fame wide receivers Randy Moss and Cris Carter, that production got him the head coaching job with the Ravens. For the good of the team, he had to adjust his coaching. He had a dominant defense that could shut down the other team. Ball control, field position, clock management and minimizing turnovers became his primary focus for the offense. This was a deviation for Billick, whose specialty was the passing game.

Tight end Shannon Sharpe had this to say about the offense, “We know where our bread is buttered. We’re not going to try to fool anybody, and everybody knows it. Our job is not to lose it for those guys. We’re going to play true to form. We’re going to take care of the football. And if we get an opportunity to make some plays, we’re going to make them. If not, we’re going to live to see another day and punt the ball away.”

“Guru”

Jeff - At the beginning of my career, I followed a normal progression of assistant coach to head strength coach. Backtracking from a head strength coach to an assistant mid-career, taught me a lesson in humility. Although it may seem counter intuitive, I discovered that I was more at peace when I reduced my ego and my need for self-recognition. I accomplished this by becoming less concerned about controlling others and accepting that they, just like me, have special qualities to contribute to the team. When I shifted my attention to serving others, it prevented me from focusing on myself. Having an attitude of service and gratitude suppressed my ego, as conceit and thanksgiving cannot coexist.

**3. Be Courageous** – Courageous moments occur in the course of getting the job done as a leader. It takes courage to confront someone. It takes courage to take risks on people you believe in—especially when you may be the one person who sees their potential. Courage is like a muscle; it’s strengthened by use. To be courageous, you must practice courageous actions on a regular basis.

Billick had the courage to make a quarterback switch. In mid-season, he made the switch from starter Tony Banks to back up Trent Dilfer. This switch resulted in the team averaging 27 points per game after the five-game touchdown drought had ended. We did not lose another game the remainder of the season.

Jeff - One of the things that fuels my courage is believing God wouldn’t put me in a situation I couldn’t handle. When I began my tenure as a head strength coach for the Baltimore Ravens, I

was only thirty years old. I was in a position of authority for a roster in which many of the players had accomplished careers and were older than I was. If a player missed a lifting session or stepped outside the expectations of the weight room, it took courage to confront and correct them. It would have been easy to focus on my weaknesses. Instead, I made a conscious decision to rely on God to provide courage, confidence, and ability where needed.

Remember, to be an effective leader to handle adversity, it's not about brilliance, attractiveness, eloquence or charisma; because when you boil it down, even those with the humblest endowments can be effective leaders if there are a couple of basic elements.

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2. Be humble
3. Be courageous