

Meet Coach Bill Courtney, Subject of the Film UNDEFEATED

*I recorded this on Wednesday, February 29, 2012. Note that at various points some explanatory notes are enclosed in parentheses. To see my review of The **Undeclared** scroll down the page.*

CC: Hi Ed, how are you?

Ed: Fine, fine. Do you prefer to be called "Coach," or "Mr."?

CC: Call me whatever you want.

Ed: Well, I will always think of you as Coach Courtney, so I will call you that. First of all, thanks for taking the time...it must be like a marathon for you today (*there being so many interviews*).

CC: Oh it is, it's crazy, I think I need to join a union or something down here.

Ed: I want to congratulate you for not only the film's winning an Oscar, but also for you being the Person of the Week on ABC (*this was on Friday Feb. 24*).

CC: I, I honestly had no idea that that was happening when I did that interview. I just thought it was another interview. I didn't even see it.

Ed: Oh, well I hope you can get a video of it. One of the things I was curious about as I watched the video (screener) of your film was how did you first become involved with volunteering.

CC: A fellow that works with me named Jim in Sunday School class had some men that were going out and doing some mentoring work in inner city schools, and he was doing it at Manassus. I taught school and coached football for a living before I got out into the private world, and Jim told them about me. I went over to spring practice to help out for a couple of weeks—that turned into six years.

Ed: That's great! Another question I have is "How during those

kind of lean years—what sustained you during that period?

CC: What sustained me?— It was the kids. They inspired me! I mean, they come from abject poverty. They come from an area that you're more likely to be incarcerated than go to college. They're surrounded by gangs. Most of the industry has left, which leaves people without much resource or hope for a job. And despite it, they welcomed me into their lives. And they listened, and they yearned for discipline and commitment, and they just wanted to be part of something good and exciting and successful. We started with 17 kids my first year on that football team, and ended up with 70 five years later because they were just grappling on to what we were doing—and what kept me coming back, and what sustained me was how inspirational those kids were.

Ed: That's great. Obviously you must have inspired them because I was really impressed by the way in which Chavis took your very strong criticism and all (*during practice the boy had been in a fight*), so they must have respected you a good deal.

CC: Well, I think here is this thing—if you talk about commitment and discipline and character and all that stuff, but then you kind of walk a different life, I think it just sounds like noise to them, and they don't respect you. They'll sit down and shake their heads, and say "Yes sir," because that's what you do in the practice, but it won't mean anything to them. The flip side is, you know, if you surround yourself with a bunch of other good coaches (*in the film we see a number of other volunteers assisted Coach Courtney in a number of ways*) who are like-minded men who see these kids as souls, and these kids then get surrounded by people who do talk about character and commitment and discipline, but also are consistent in their every day form, then they start getting it. And I don't really necessarily think that I was, you know, inspirational to them, I just think I was consistent. And I think I was something they could look at that was different from what their surroundings were, and it gave them a different glimpse at what life could be, if you adhere to some principles beyond what you might see in every day life.

Ed: I was impressed, too—I am a pastor as well as a film critic—with your prayer with the kids that was included (*in the film*). You didn't try to assume, or bargain to get God on

your side.

CC: No, I mean I'm not sure if God is a football fan or not. Since the Bible doesn't really tell us whether or not He likes football, I didn't think it was appropriate to invite Him to the game. I figured He'd come if He wanted to, but what I wanted the Lord to bless us with was perseverance and selflessness and, and character, and discipline. I pretty much figured that if the kids were blessed with that, the football would take care of itself.

Ed: Sure, and certainly that prayer was answered

CC: Well, yeah, I mean, you know, it is answered when you see these kids go to college. It is answered when you see them kinda tagged , you know, with what the world hits them in the mouth with, and look, I'm a failed guy, I do not, I do not even remotely expect to be thought of as a moral authority on anything. All I know is that these kids are good kids who grew up in a difficult area of the world, and we re willing to buy into some notions beyond what normally they might not have been, might not have subscribed to, and the Lord works in mysterious ways, and we found ourselves together for six years, and it was a blessing that will enrich my life forever.

Ed: And a lot of other lives, too. I do want to ask how you felt at the Oscars, but before I do that, if it's not too intrusive—my readers will be interested—do you belong to a church or whatever?

CC: I am a Presbyterian, and I belong to Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis.

Ed: I'm a Presbyterian myself.

CC: Well, there you go. You and Calvin have things in common with us.

Ed: How did you feel then—as I recall, you were a guest at the Oscars.

CC: Yeah, I was at Oscars, and I actually walked the Red Carpet.

Ed: Oh that's great! Who were you wearing?

CC: Uh, just whatever my wife told me to put on. I have no idea. You know, who you are wearing, and all of that, I think when you get into that, you take yourself too seriously. I was—I didn't care who I was wearing. I was hanging out and having a good time.

Ed: Yeah, I made a comment like that in my blog that I wrote

about the Oscar results.

CC: Yeah, you know, look—it was fun, and it's humbling, and it's an honor, but at the end of the day it's a 14 inch statue that means nothing. I still have to go back to work, and I will still be with my family, and you know, it can't define us.

Ed: Right. Were you given a replica of an Oscar, then?

CC: Oh no, no. It's a documentary. I'm not an actor. It wasn't a scripted deal. The Oscars are to celebrate *artists*. Artists are the producers and the directors of the documentary, and not the subject. So appropriately they are the ones awarded with the Oscar, and I was back in the wings and cheered them on. I was very happy for them.

Ed: *(Before I can ask a couple of other questions the publicist informs us that the allotted 8 minutes are up)*

Well, thank you, Bill, uh, Coach.

CC: That's fine. good bye.

Ed: Good bye.