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Tim Woodward: Motivational speaker gets credit for part of Broncos' success

You probably thought the media coverage of the Bronco's magical season included everyone but the Gatorade salesman. Little to nothing was said, however, about one of the most improbable figures in the Fiesta Bowl champions' success.

When he started working with the Broncos in 1998, Vincent Kituku didn't know a quarterback sack from a grocery bag.

"I'd probably watched less than one game on TV," he said. "I'd never been to a game. I'd never touched a football."

That was in 1998, the year then-BSU Coach Dirk Koetter was impressed enough with a letter Kituku wrote him that he asked him to speak to the team. The results impressed Koetter enough that he flew Kituku to Arizona State to speak to his players after Koetter became the coach there in 2000.

Koetter's successor, Dan Hawkins, credited Kituku with being "a key ingredient of our success." And in a letter signed by himself and 13 of his assistants, Coach Chris Petersen thanked Kituku for lessons that were "priceless when it comes to building a championship team."

Not bad when you consider that Kituku still doesn't know a double reverse from a Hail Mary.

How does he do it? The answer will surprise you.

Kituku grew up in Kenya. His transportation was a donkey; he didn't get his first pair of shoes until he was 17. As a scholarship student at the University of Wyoming, he discovered that Americans were fascinated by his stories of African life. Now, he uses them to make his living as a motivational speaker.

The letter to Koetter that began his relationship with the Broncos was about a water buffalo.

"The water buffalo was the most feared animal in our village," he said. "When it came, we would get around it and one person would throw a spear and take off. The water buffalo would run toward that person. Then another person would throw a spear from another place, and the water buffalo would run in that direction.

"The lesson is teamwork. You treat a problem like a water buffalo. You are not alone. Each spear, each person contributes."

Kituku's first chat with BSU players lasted about 15 minutes. The next year, he put together a two-hour presentation. He helped develop what he called "simple goals. Winning over the U of I — that's achievable. A winning season. A championship. Now they've gone to another whole level."

He's never been paid for his work with the team and is quick to give credit for its success to everyone but himself.

"It's the coaches' work, the players', (athletic director) Gene Bleymaier's — it's the whole thing," he said. "Without the skills and determination, a speech can do nothing."

But, as Petersen said in his letter to Kituku, it can help players achieve a state of mind and mental edge that makes them winners.

Though not a coach, Kituku definitely has a playbook. He asks players to hold a piece of black paper with a pinhole in front of one eye and a book or newspaper at arm's length. Those who can't read it without glasses find that they can see it perfectly by focusing through the pinhole. He tells a story about oxen in his native country, plowing a crooked line except when heading home. The difference, whether the goal is home or a Fiesta Bowl victory, is focus.

How many times did we hear players use that word this season?

He laughs when he tells of being a new immigrant reluctant to touch the AC button in his car because he thought it meant "alternating current."

"When I pushed that button, life changed," he said. "I use that story to show the players that the potential for good things is right there waiting. The question is whether they're going to use it."

Having just finished three years on the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial beat, I especially appreciated what Kituku calls "the Sacajawea factor."

"She wasn't part of the original plan, but she became so significant to the success of Lewis and Clark. I ask the players if they're going to give someone the opportunity to become Sacajawea. When I think of that now, I think about Vinny Perretta. He's not even a quarterback, but he threw a touchdown pass we'll never forget."

It wasn't until last week that I learned Kituku had worked with the highest-ranked BSU team ever, but it didn't surprise me. I've known him for years and have never known him to be anything but infectiously inspirational. He's also a deeply spiritual man. His standard response when greeted and asked how he's doing is a resounding, "I am blessed."

The same could be said of the 2006 Broncos.

To offer story ideas or comments, contact reporter Tim Woodward at twoodward@idahostatesman.com or 377-6409. Read his past columns at IdahoStatesman.com/Woodward.