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Iraq war veterans' message resonates with Texans

By RICHARD JUSTICE

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From the moment Gary Kubiak met the injured soldiers, he knew words like hero and courage and teamwork would never have the same meaning.

"These guys are so special," he said, his voice trailing off.

The Texans coach was searching for the right word, even though he knew there wasn't one.

"They're incredible men," he said. "They've taught me so much. To see what they've gone through and to hear them speak is a reminder of how lucky we are."

On this Thanksgiving Day, this column isn't about football or sports, at least not in the usual sense. Sure, it's about many of the things football coaches talk about, but it's about other things, too.

It's about sacrifice and trust and attitude. It's about the things that make teams — and countries like ours — strong. Paul Brondhaver and Rick Yarosh are a reminder that the games we care so much about aren't all that important.

These amazing men are heroes in every sense of the word. Kubiak met them last summer when they were brought to Houston by a group called Impact A Hero.

"Basically, I wanted to come up with a way for these men and women to understand how much we appreciated what they'd done for us," said Dick Lynch, the organization's founder.

Lynch has taken injured soldiers to baseball games and parades and rallies. He has allowed them to hear the cheers and see the tears of an appreciative nation. President Bush walked Brondhaver to the mound in Cincinnati. Kubiak was moved beyond words upon hearing their stories. He still can't fully comprehend the price they've paid.

"I told them I was going to have them come speak to the football team," Kubiak said. "I didn't know what our players would get out of it. I just wanted them to get a chance to meet them."

Two weeks ago, it happened. On the final practice of the team's week off, Yarosh and Brondhaver spoke to the Texans.

One part of Kubiak, the part that coaches the Texans, wanted his players to hear the lessons of teamwork and trusting one another. That's the part they just might be able to use somewhere down the line on the football field.

Another part of him, the part that considers himself lucky to live in the United States of America, simply wanted his players to meet these two amazing men.

Both suffered horrific injuries while serving in Iraq. Both lost friends. Both returned home to a world, to goals and dreams, that are changed forever. Yet they somehow grew stronger, more thankful for their country, more appreciative of their lives.

"You can overcome anything," Yarosh said. "Family is the most important thing. I was in a hospital for six months. I didn't walk for 10. I can't use my hands. I've had a bunch of surgeries and will have more. I still consider myself lucky. I'm here. There's no better thing in life than to have life."

Yarosh suffered third-degree burns over 60 percent of his body, including his face, when an improvised explosive device blew up beneath his Bradley Fighting Vehicle 18 months ago. He has undergone surgical procedures on his lips, eyes and hands. He is just 25 years old, faces years of rehabilitation, and knows he'll never come close to living the life he once envisioned for himself.

"I've found out how much people care," he said. "Someone approaches me every day and tells me they appreciate what I've done. Just this week, a soldier in San Antonio came up to me with tears in his eyes."

Brondhaver delivered mail to soldiers and transported supplies in Iraq. In his spare time, he collected shoes and socks for Iraqi children. He believed he was contributing what he could to rebuild a country.

His vehicle was hit by a grenade in 2004. He lost his right leg and suffered brain contusions, burst eardrums and a cracked pelvis. Doctors counted more than 300 shrapnel wounds, many of the pieces still in his body.

After the attack, Brondhaver continued to direct the Army's 216th Combat Engineer Battalion until being taken away for treatment. He's 39 now and reunited with his wife and three children in Cincinnati, spending his days working with inner-city kids.

On the day Brondhaver and Yarosh showed up at Reliant Stadium, a bunch of football players, many of them millionaires, were jolted into another reality.

"It was so moving," punter Matt Turk said. "I feel like it was the best thing coach Kubiak has done for this team so far. It enlightens you as to who the true heroes are in this world. What we do is just a game, and we're so blessed and so fortunate to play football."

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

Brondhaver's wife sent her husband's platoon a plaque with the words of Joshua 1:9 on it. He hung it in his barracks and read it before every mission. He reads it now as he reassembles his life. He wrote it on the trading card he autographed for players.

"Part of the message was team unity," Turk said. "They have to trust each other literally with their lives. That's a true team. That's real camaraderie and dependence on your teammates. If we could just have half of that as a team, we'll have what it takes. Their presentation was amazing, incredible."

Added tackle Eric Winston: "It redefines everything. It's courage and sacrifice. They gave up so much for us. You ask yourself, 'What can I do for them?'"

Brondhaver wondered if his message would resonate with football players.

"I had a near-death experience," he said. "What got me through it was that I had my priorities right with my family. That's where everything starts for all of us. I fell down pretty hard, but I had teammates pick me up. That's teamwork. The Texans are a team, but no player can do it alone. It takes every single one of them."

Yarosh's trip to Houston was his first time outside the hospital, the first time he had allowed the outside world to see his injuries.

"I didn't know what to expect," he said. "I was very nervous. I'd been surrounded by other injured people. They were used to seeing burns like mine. One of the reasons I speak to kids now is to help them build an awareness to the kind of injuries I have."

Yarosh doesn't want you to feel sorry for him. He would prefer you learn some of the lessons he has learned about being thankful for what you have instead of bitter for what you don't have.

Those are lessons of hope and faith and country. Those are Thanksgiving lessons for all of us.

"What are we thankful for?" Brondhaver asked. "Is it football? Is it that we have our lives? We're lucky to have our lives and to live in this country. I hope that's the message I was able to give the Texans."

The two soldiers told the Texans they would return to Iraq in a heartbeat if asked.

"Don't feel sorry for me," Brondhaver said. "Don't feel sorry for Rick. Some people drown in their tragedies. That's not what we're going to do. We live our lives in a positive way. None of us knows what tomorrow is going to bring."

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