

Leadership skills being cultivated

By **Keith A. Cerniglia**

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— He carries no tools, just a light sheaf of papers under his left arm — his blueprints — along with a will to build something lasting.

Dalton High School football coaches and boosters believe that by the time leadership educator Jim Morris is done with his three-day workshop this weekend, a structure will be created that will provide comfort for a lifetime.

Morris, who has spent a career shaping development and change in large organizations, was in Dalton on Thursday night to begin leadership training with the Catamounts.

It marks Morris' return to the school after conducting a similar seminar last year. Dalton discovered Morris through his friendship with Johnny McIntosh, a former Cats standout and the father of current middle linebacker Jake McIntosh.

Morris' luggage was lost on his flight from Colorado, but his objectives remained in clear view.

"In a nutshell, we want the kids to be successful," he said. "We want to give them the tools to be successful and to be able to make choices that will last their whole lives."

Morris noted the formative age of his Dalton audience. Only juniors and seniors were required to attend, but those ages are well within his target group.

"Between the ages of 16 and 22, people make more decisions that will affect the rest of their lives than any time else," Morris said.

Dalton head coach Ronnie McClurg said the workshop played dividends for the Cats last season. During a transition year, Dalton developed a strong nucleus of senior leaders, won Region 7-4A North and returned to the playoffs for the first time in four years.

"I feel like it really made a difference," McClurg said. "Last year, we just took the seniors through it. This year, we added the juniors and the coaching staff to the list."

On Thursday morning, Morris held a session with McClurg and his staff. Various foods and snacks were provided as players and their families gathered on Thursday night in the cafeteria for the next part of the project.

Morris' method of teaching is "experiential." He simulates a series of hands-on experiences and activities designed to make the concepts better sink in.

The "experiential learning cycle" consists of experience, reflection, generalized learning and, finally, application in real life situations.

The emphasis, Morris explains, is not only how a young person will approach tomorrow but any given day in the distant future.

"A lot of things focus on recidivism, staying out of (in-school suspensions), things that are sort of immediate," Morris said.

"I think it's important that we measure how things are going to be five or 10 years from now. How many of these guys are going to wind up making a difference for other people? That's what we're looking at."

McIntosh, who starred at Dalton in the early 1980s and went on to play guard for Ray Perkins at Alabama, is a believer in the penetration of Morris' message.

"It's intended to educate guys about how to make better choices in a culture that's taught to do so," said McIntosh.

"It's not a lecture. He's not a motivational speaker. It has nothing to do with football or winning games. This is all about what steps you need to take to become a better person."

Football and athletics provides necessary "protection" equipment, Morris says, but it doesn't always provide the mental and emotional infrastructure.

His building techniques are intended to start from within and improve how a person will process challenges and problem situations.

Many in athletics refer to the end product as character.

"Schools will spend \$500 in gear to protect a football player," he said. "But how much will they spend to make sure kids are protected on the inside?"

Asked how he can tell his message has reached the people he works with, Morris points to McIntosh. “John went through this 13 years ago,” he said, “and that changed his life to where he is committed to bring this to other people.”

Morris, who calls himself simply “an educator,” works with over 70,000 participants annually. He founded Bristlecone Learning, his training and consulting practice, and has since given presentations to more than a dozen Fortune 1000 clients, among others.

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Photos



Leadership educator Jim Morris (left) greets Dalton High School’s Preston Keck while Will Brackett (center) and head coach Ronnie McClurg (rear) look on. Morris was in Dalton conducting a workshop for Catamounts football players. Todd Schoeneman