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B-E-L-I-E-V-E

Gill plans to build winning program at Buffalo

By WENDELL BARNHOUSE
 Star-Telegram Staff Writer

Turner Gill was still in grade school when he learned about resolve and perseverance.

Gill's father, also named Turner, was hospitalized after a one-story fall at the bank where he worked. The prognosis was grim: paralysis.

The determined words of his father, spoken from that hospital bed more than three decades ago, still ring true.

I will walk again.

"I told him not to worry about me, not to worry about what the doctors said," the elder Gill said this week. "Don't ever give up. That's what I've always told him: You just got to keep goin'."

The younger Gill, a high school star at Arlington



PAUL HOKANSON PHOTO

Turner Gill on his Buffalo challenge: "We're not going to turn this around overnight. We have raised the level of expectations."

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Heights who went on to a storied career as Nebraska's quarterback, has gone on to his first head coaching job. It's an assignment that will require the tenacity and determination passed on from his father, who did recover to walk again.

The 43-year-old Fort Worth native takes over at the University of Buffalo. The Bulls have been a Division I-A program since 1999. In those seven seasons, the school's record is 10-69. In Gill's 16 seasons as a player and assistant coach at Nebraska, the Huskers lost 33 games.

"I'm going to dislike [losing] tremendously," said Gill, a graduate assistant at SMU in 1991 when the Mustangs went 1-10. "I'm a competitor, I don't like to lose at anything I do. I'll never be OK with it; I'll never enjoy losing."

Buffalo, a member of the Mid-American Conference since moving up to I-A, is at the bottom of college football's food chain.

Sporting News ranks Buffalo 119th -- dead last in Division I-A. CBS Sportsline and Lindy's have Buffalo at 118th. Athlon is sweet on the Bulls; it has them ranked 117th.

"They had lost hope," Gill said of his players' attitudes. "When you lose hope, it's over. We're going to be realistic. We're not going to turn this around overnight. We have raised the level of expectations."

Fifth-year senior tight end Chad Upshaw, whose father Willie played 10 years of major league baseball, is beginning to see actions back up the athletic administration's words.

"In the past, there was a lot of talk , a lot of promises," he said. "But nothing ever got done. We were sharing equipment, had old equipment, that sort of thing. Now, when Coach Gill says something, the next day, it's done. When you see something getting accomplished, you start to believe it."

New athletic director Warde Manuel, who hired Gill, played defensive end at Michigan. He is busy fundraising to help improve the football facilities. According to 2004-05 figures, Buffalo's athletic budget was \$16.2 million; Nebraska's was \$55.8 million.

A recent donation led to groundbreaking on a new 6,000-square-foot training facility. The current 3,000-foot facility is so small that the entire team can't work out at the same time.

Gill and his staff began erasing the team's losing attitude during spring practice.

"Players want direction, they will follow coaches," he said. "You need to get into their hearts."

Tough-love discipline is included. Being late for class is the same as missing a class. The individual's punishment? The entire team participates in 5 a.m. conditioning.

Each player was issued a manual that tells them how to be a Buffalo Bull. The boiled-down message: Follow the rules and do the right thing.

Gill also came up with an acronym slogan based on the word "believe."

B: Believe in each other and the things not yet seen.

E: Empower people by encouragement.

L: Learn and press on toward the goals.

I: Influence by being a positive role model.

E: Expect effort all the time, on and off the field.

V: Visualize success.

E: Enjoy the college football experience.

When first presented with the new motto, some of the players wondered where all the rah-rah was coming from.

"Yeah, at first I thought it was a bit cheesy," senior linebacker Ramon Guzman said. "There had been a lot of talk before, a lot of promises made about improvements, new equipment. We're starting to see stuff now, though. When Coach Gill says something, he follows through. He's sincere, and he wants to get things done."

The seven-letter acronym will be used each day of the week, starting on the Day After and ending on Game Day. To "enjoy the college football experience," mixing in a few wins would make the Bulls' experience more gratifying.

Gill's initial recruiting class last February was ranked as the fourth-best in the MAC. He credits his assistants' ability to build relationships with adding the kind of talent that could affect the win-loss column.

Gill admitted that before being contacted about the coaching job, he had never heard of the University of Buffalo or its football program. That was never a problem with the Cornhuskers.

After the 2003 season, Nebraska dismissed head coach Frank Solich, Tom Osborne's hand-picked successor. Instead of staying inside the Huskers family, new athletic director Steve Pederson hired Bill Callahan. Gill spent one season on Callahan's staff before leaving.

"It was time for me to move on from Nebraska," said Gill, who spent last season as player development director and offensive assistant with the Green Bay Packers. "I was in a situation where I was comfortable. I was at one place for a long time. I hoped they would consider me after Coach Solich, [but] I wasn't the right person at that time."

Fundraising, construction, recruiting classes, slogans... all that is hope for a new era in Buffalo football. The Gill Era starts Aug. 31 when the Bulls face Temple, another team scuffling in I-A's basement. The unrealistic nonconference schedule includes games at Auburn, Boston College and Wisconsin.

"I understand the past, what has occurred and what hasn't occurred here in terms of wins and losses," Gill said. "I know as a coach, you're defined by wins and losses. I look on this as an opportunity. I'm excited about the challenge of trying to change things."

ONLINE: ubathletics.buffalo.edu

NO BULLS

The Buffalo football program has struggled since moving up to Division I-A in 1999:

1 0-69 Record in seven seasons in Division I-A

3 of Buffalo's 10 victories since 1999 are against nonconference opponents

7 wins in seven seasons in the Mid-American Conference (7-49 in conference games)

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