

## McCaa: An inspirational coach

### Motivational speaker a big part of Jefferson family

By Jeff Dahn

CEDAR RAPIDS — Karen McCaa stalks the sidelines during Cedar Rapids Jefferson football games, wearing a prerequisite navy blue Jefferson coaching staff collared shirt and khaki slacks.

She's prominent on the sideline and readily offers encouragement while living and dying with the J-Hawks' triumphs and travails on the field every week.

McCaa became a volunteer member of the Jefferson coaching staff last season, although not in the traditional sense.

Coach McCaa doesn't deal with X's and O's, nickel backs or spread offenses. Her responsibilities lie more on the inspirational side of a game that can be just as emotional as it is physical.

McCaa, 36, identifies herself as a "Christian motivational speaker." She's a counselor at Kirkwood Community College and works for Nike during the summer months, giving motivational presentations to elite athletes and their children that Nike gathers during camps and training seminars.

"I work with the kids on things like peak performance, talk to them about having character and really important things in life like that," she said. "This summer we had Michael Jordan's son, Juwan Howard's son, Joe Dumar's son, so we've had some real special kids there.

"But to me, there are no kids more special in the whole wide world than my Jefferson J-Hawks."

McCaa came to the Jefferson football team last year through co-worker Katie Chism, the wife of J-Hawk assistant coach Al Chism.

"We were looking for something to do at the beginning of the season, kind of a preseason kickoff," Jefferson head coach Jim Womochil said. "She runs a little leadership seminar and Coach Chism brought it to my attention and we met with her. I was very impressed with her professionalism and some of the things she's done being involved with the Nike camps and some of the athletes she's worked with."

After the initial meeting in the summer of 2006, McCaa began attending the J-Hawks' practices and games. She immediately became part of the Jefferson football family.

"She's brought a winner's mentality," Womochil said. "She encourages and says some of the same things that we do, and that's nice to hear. She's impressive because she has worked with

some elite athletes, and I think it really grabs the attention of the kids. She's brought a closeness to our kids, some unity. She helps keep things in perspective whether we win or lose.

"Our kids have really responded well. I think she's one of the favorite coaches on our staff right now."

Senior running back and defensive back Cal Faul, who has missed Jefferson's first two games with a torn quadriceps muscle but is expected to be back for Thursday, has found inspiration from McCaa's words and actions.

"She helps me push through things, like mental stuff just to go through," Faul said. "She helps a lot. She brings a kind of new look at coaching. It's not really like hard-nosed yelling, yelling, yelling, she gets us pumped up in a different way."

McCaa makes it to as many practices as possible, attends every game — home and away and also has been at



Inspirational speaker, life coach and counselor Karen McCaa runs onto the field last Friday with players and coaches of the Cedar Rapids Jefferson football team before the team's game at Cedar Rapids Prairie.

junior varsity games. She addresses the team before each game and sometimes during the post-game as well. She also, at the players' request, leads them in pre-game prayer.

"That's something that I think has been really special that our boys have embraced this year and that's to sustain an attitude of faith," McCaa said. "I grew up the daughter of a football coach in southern Indiana just like right out of the movie 'Remember the Titans,' and I remember growing up I lived for God, my family and Friday nights under the lights. So this has really brought me back to my roots."

Her father, Bill McCaa, coached at Columbus (Ind.) North High School.

McCaa said she came to Iowa six years ago on "a leap of faith."

"I came out with a handful of friends and a heart full of hope and a whole lot of faith," she said. "God has blessed my life and one of the greatest things he has brought into my life is this football team."

McCaa has a bachelor's degree in English from Eastern Illinois University and a master's degree in counseling from the University of Tennessee. She's single, and with her immediate family still living in Indiana, she's made the Jefferson football team her new adoptive family. She attempts not to preach, but to teach. Her message to the players is simple and sincere.

"Whether you're a musician, an actor, an athlete — things worth getting in life are going to cost you something. But that's what makes them so special," McCaa said. "And we want to help these kids to understand, too, that life is a lot like football. It may knock you down, but then you get on your knees and then you get on your feet and you come back, you bounce back. "The players have just been wonderful and the coaching staff has welcomed me with open arms and has been so kind to me and given me the opportunity to work with the kids," she said. "But the players, that's what it's all about."