

Being married to a football coach can be quite a ride

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Football is one tough sport to coach. So much time and effort is put into something that lasts two hours once a week. Coaches are literally consumed, watching film, running drills, planning strategies to dozens of young minds, not to mention going to bed late and getting up early. Some have to do all the above while trying to balance life as a husband and/or a father.

Geneva coach Rob Wicinski is no different than every other swamped football coach. But what about his wife, Gina, who he has been married to for 17 years? What is it like to be married to a football coach, have a job, raise children and remain happy and a football fan? I sat with Gina at Friday's football game against South Elgin at Geneva and found out.

As Gina Wicinski made her way down from section A in the bleachers at Burgess Field Friday night after the Geneva football team beat South Elgin, she received a couple of "Congratulations" from the people she walked by.

"Tell your husband he did a great job," one person tells her after the Vikings beat the Storm 29-12.

Gina is the wife of Rob Wicinski, Geneva's football coach for the past 8 seasons. Moments later, she is on the field with two of her three daughters, Jessica, 12, and Kelsey, 10. When she catches up with her girls and one of their friends, she finds Rob and greets him with a hug and kiss.

One week of watching him prepare for Week 2 of the football season is completed. Gina knows, however, the madness will be kicking up shortly to prepare for the Week 3 opponent, Yorkville.

No ordinary woman could be the wife of a football coach. It takes patience and understanding, two things Gina has with Rob.

"Oh my gosh, that's an understatement," Rob said. "She puts up with a lot of complaining and whining. I'm a victim all the time, and she brings me back down to earth and brings back what's really important. It's the little ones and her."

"I think the main thing is I know it's his passion; he loves it," Gina said. "He loves the kids, and he loves being a part of everything. It's fun for us because of the community. Having three girls, we feel very involved, so that's nice."

Gina arrives at the game around 7:15 p.m. decked out in a blue Geneva shirt. She is easy to spot at 6-foot-2 and a slender frame (Rob is also 6-foot-2).

The former volleyball player met Rob, a former football player, while they were in college together at Northern Illinois University. She's not a loud cheerer; the small cowbell she carries does all the cheering for her. She sits in a busy crowd in section A, which is where her friends and neighbors sit (all the parents of the players are in the next few sections). Jessica and Kelsey are somewhere around the stadium with their friends, while their oldest, Lauren, a 15-year-old sophomore on the Vikings volleyball team, is not at the game. She is watching a former player, Kim Nemcek, play against Lewis University.

Gina, who is an elementary school nurse, and the surrounding crowd stays social throughout the game, but as soon as the Vikings do something well, the chatter stops and the crowd cheers. One of Gina's best friends, Cindy Blaney, tells stories of all the things Blaney and her friends used to -- and still do -- to the Wicinski's. One year, they decorated their bedroom with balloons in Geneva school colors; another time, they put baskets filled with blue and white things for the girls. Last year, they were able to place a 10-foot sword on their lawn, which was a larger version of the one the team used to keep near them during games.

The community has clearly embraced the Wicinski's presence. Prior to coaching at Geneva, Rob coached in Niles while he and Gina lived in Arlington Heights, where Gina is from. The family moved to Geneva in the summer of 1997, right after

Kelsey was born. Rob spent two years as a sophomore coach before he got the head coaching job in the 1999-2000 season.

Of course, the Wicinski's family and friends have always been supportive, but there were those times early in Rob's coaching career when Geneva wasn't so great as a football team. At the moment, the Vikings are beating South Elgin, 21-0, but there were times when the Vikings were on the losing end. Gina recalled how she would sit in the stands with her young daughters, and people wouldn't know who she was. She'd hear the negative things that were being said about the team, but she always stayed positive.

"(Building the program) was part of the challenge," said Gina. "I really enjoy seeing those kids now (from the teams from Rob's early coaching career). Those years were just as much fun as they are now."

Geneva began to turn things around in the 2003 season, and hasn't looked back since.

"It's so much better, now that we are winning," Gina said.

After 10 p.m., the Vikings securely won the game and improved to 2-0 on the season. Gina is one of the last fans in the section. She receives waves and the thumbs-up from several fans as she begins to head down to the field. She knows Rob is going to be in a good mood after this win.

There are those times, however, when football does carry over at home. After Friday's game, Rob recalled a recent moment at home, and Gina and the girls came in and saved the day.

"I was feeling sorry for myself," he said. "We didn't think some offensive plays were hitting right. (Gina) came in the door and saw my long face, jaw dropped to the ground. Then, one of my daughters came in and said, 'Hey, we won a game.' It really put things in perspective. You know what, I can't get the trap right, but everyone came home happy...I lost sight of things for a moment, but Gina brought me back to the focus of the family. So I can't make the trap, big deal."

Gina greets Rob and the girls get hugs and high-fives from their dad. At last, they don't have to worry about football.

At least for another day or so.

The coaching staff will be heading to Wicinski's house Sunday night to prepare for Week 3. The girls and Gina will be right there with snacks for them.