



But the loss to Wadena-Deer Creek puts their season in peril. Three players suffer injuries that require hospital visits. Beaulieu's case is the most serious, a concussion that requires further examination at a Bemidji hospital. A knee gash sidelines Kingbird Jr.

Desjarlait has no choice but to forfeit the next game. He is concerned the Warriors might not be able to finish the rest of the schedule. He worries about his players and exposing them to injury.

But his team wants to keep playing and with 16 players available, they forge on. Losses continue. The Warriors keep vowing to show up on Monday. They keep trying to recruit friends to join them.

"They don't understand everything about it," Brown says of classmates. "All they see is the score. But it's fun. Everyone on the team is my family."

Players were son's best friends

Nicole attends as many games as possible, but sometimes she has a hard time sitting in the stands because of all the remind-

ers of her son. She finds inspiration watching her husband on the sideline, still pouring himself into these kids who need him.

"Nolan is so loyal and kind and so calm," she says. "He tells me we've got to live for today and live for now, for the girls."

And for the boys.

These young men Desjarlait coaches on the field every day, the ones he rarely stops thinking about, the ones who will not quit on him: He has known them since they were young kids.

These faces staring back at him were his son's best friends. Their bond went deeper than friendship, deeper than being classmates and teammates. They considered themselves brothers.

They were young kids when Nolan Jr. died. Their hurt has not gone away.

"Everything I do," Beaulieu says, "I just try to go extra hard to make him proud."

Kingbird Jr. plans to wear uniform No. 12 in basketball, too.

"I switched because this is his senior year," he says.

The loss of a child can send parents down different paths,

searching for new purposes. Nicole ran for a seat on the school board and won. Nolan found his purpose in coaching. He deals with his pain privately while investing in kids in the most public way he knows. Head football coach, at the front of the room, in the center of the team huddle.

"I'm being as strong as I can for my nation and my family," he says.

Senior Night requires all of Desjarlait's focus. None of his players want to miss this, the regular-season finale.

Beaulieu is back from a concussion but moves to receiver as a precaution. Senior Josh Stillday has taken over at quarterback and performs admirably. Senior Gordon Thompson Jr. plays receiver one-handed since he has a broken finger that is covered with a splint.

The scoreboard isn't working, but the final score is irrelevant. Polk County West holds a decisive edge, but the Warriors and their cheering section celebrate when Brown scores the team's only touchdown in the game's final minute.

The postgame huddle on the field has an air of finality, even though the Warriors are guaranteed one playoff game. (They will lose the following week.)

A school dance starts in an hour. Players are excited to get there. A few of them say their girlfriends want to stay until the last song. They are ready to hustle to the locker room but perform their favorite drill — Warrior Jacks — one final time.

Players gather in a circle and shout out each letter of their nickname — *W-A-R-R-I-O-R-S* — as they perform jumping jacks. They finish by yelling "Warriors" three times.

Their voices echo across the field, followed by a roar of teenagers making their way to the locker room.

Desjarlait will soon walk off the field alone. He will make a slow loop around the field in his SUV, loading water coolers and yard markers into the back. He will be the last one to leave the locker room, finishing his final chore by flicking off the new stadium lights from his phone.

Staying busy helps keep his

emotions at bay. He figures everything will hit him at home later, when he has time to be still, when he visits that sacred place in the clearing overlooking the lake.

Stillday, the senior who took over at quarterback in a pinch, lingers on the field as the other players rush off into the cool, damp night. A layer of fog settles over the lights. Fans have gone home but he isn't ready to move on yet. He sits in the end zone, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Desjarlait kneels and pulls him close. The coach is misty-eyed as he thanks Stillday for being a leader and congratulates him on making straight A's and for not missing a single football practice. "I love being on this field," Stillday says. "I wouldn't trade anything for this."

The record book will note for eternity that the Red Lake Warriors did not win this season. Their hearts tell them something different.

chip.scoggins@startribune.com
aaron.lavinsky@startribune.com



"Coaching is having fun with kids and making them feel welcomed and wanting to be here."

Red Lake coach Nolan Desjarlait, the last to leave the locker room, at top