

## When the Going Gets Tough

I played football and ran track in high school. I wasn't really quick enough to be a great defensive end, and I was too tall and heavy to be much of a runner, except in the 440. Those of you who ran that distance know that it wasn't as much about speed as it was about not quitting. The head football coach was also our track coach. Mr Pearson had a large and magical supply of criticism. Most of it was pretty graphic, and it flowed freely when I missed a tackle or botched a play; events that happened too often. In the parlance of the late '50's it might have been regarded as "constructive criticism" in the sense he was telling me how to be better than I was. But it didn't feel constructive; it just made me feel worse.

One thing I remember, though: He loved to quote Knute Rockne, the legendary Notre Dame Football coach: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going". Those words inspired me to become a credible high school runner in the 440. I ran it in under a minute, but just... For some reason, Knute Rockne's words lodged themselves in an inner place. Over my lifetime, they've been a standard, not always achieved, for how to live my life. And I've felt my deepest admiration and respect for those who took up whatever challenge was in front of them and refused to put it down.

I believe Knute Rockne's words mean character is expressed in the present. It is immediate. Its essence lies not in what we have inside of us, but in what we are willing to bring out of ourselves and into the world; what we're willing to own about ourselves.

I want to tell you about a friend of mine who has given life to Knute Rockne's words.

Bill was a big guy: 6'4 and 220lbs. In high school he was a gifted athlete: a T-formation fullback, and a basketball center with a soft but deft touch. He was fearless in the giant slalom and learned how to water ski barefoot a year before the rest of us.

If all that wasn't enough to make him seem like a teen age superman, he could play a wicked guitar.

Bill graduated from college, took a Masters in Accounting, and worked for a big 8 firm for about 10 years. Then he got sick of the rat race and moved back to the small town we'd grown up in. He opened his own office. Within a few years, he had a busy and lucrative practice.

Along the way, he didn't give up the activities that made him who he was. He kept on skiing and he kept on water skiing. He stayed in good shape, and was so good on the fiddle and the guitar he was often invited to sit in with two of the local bands.

Life was good. And then, about 10 years ago, he was diagnosed with Parkinson's. The tremors, which at first you couldn't see, grew worse. His athletic life was over. Eventually he couldn't hold a pen, and he found it almost impossible to turn the pages of a tax return or to work at his keyboard.

Bill finally retired from accounting and sold his practice. But he was just too stubborn to give up on his life. So he bought a small tavern. Each day he sits at the corner of the bar, drinking water and talking with the friends who come in to see him. He never complains. He just keeps on with the bits of his life that are still available for him and he doesn't talk about what he's lost.

For some reason, Bill can still play the fiddle. For a few short numbers, the tremors stop. And he can still sing.

The principal role of the poets in classical times was to sing the stories of heroes: their deeds, their battles and, ultimately, their end. Bill was, and still is, a hero in my eyes, but the days of the Greek poets are long passed, and there's no one to sing Bill's song.

I'm not going to sing for you, but I'd like to read you this poem I wrote about him...

### **Between the Bars**

He can't sign his name anymore;

hands shake an up-tempo rhythm  
like some damned digital drum kit  
that you can't find the switch to turn it off.  
So Peggy does it for him.  
Still, he can pick up his fiddle,  
squeeze the neck and draw the bow.  
The tremors stop  
and a high thin wire of golden sound  
uncoils in the room,  
grateful notes spilling like drops of sunset  
as they slip to freedom  
between the back beat bars  
of his affliction.  
Eyes closed, smiling that bad boy grin,  
his renegade pulse is still  
and time stops  
for a few short numbers.  
Then he opens his eyes,  
hands the fiddle to Peggy,  
and steps off the stage.  
The silent beat returns  
as she closes the fiddle case.