

# East Prairie football sees salvations

By Bill Sorrell

**EAST PRAIRIE (BP)** – Not in 50 years had Friday night lights burned so brightly for East Prairie High School. When the East Prairie Eagles defeated archrival Charleston 46-21 on Oct. 17, it was their first victory in Charleston in a half-century.

The first words East Prairie coach Jason Aycock heard were from his pastor, Jon Archie, who yelled, “This is exactly what happens when your coach gets saved.”

Aycock lifted his hands in the air and praised God for the win. The stadium grew quiet. On the field, players had dropped to their knees in prayer.

Prayer was a hallmark of the 2008 football season in this southeast Missouri farming community. In September, evangelist Rick Gage had held a campaign in which 27 of the team’s 37 players surrendered their lives to Christ. That came on the heels of a revival at Elm Street Baptist Church led by Oklahoma Evangelist Clint Sinclair in which 43 made professions of faith.

Aycock has read Gage’s book, *More Than A Game*, and agreed when Gage Event Coordinator Kerrie Stokes asked if the evangelist could speak to Aycock’s team.

“What I figured is that he would talk about character, making right choices and how to make it to the next level,” Aycock said. “I didn’t have a clue that he was going to the heart of the Gospel. I got very nervous. I almost grabbed Kerrie’s arm and said, ‘You are going to have to stop this man because of the environment we are in.’”

“But I looked throughout the room and the kids were so engaged to Rick that I felt something come over me,” Aycock added. “I decided, ‘We’ve come this far, you go for it. I hope every kid here gets saved today.’”

Then another thought struck Aycock. “Surely he is not going to ask kids to come up and kneel and pray,” Aycock said to himself. “Surely he is just telling them about the Gospel.”

But Gage did lead students to pray for salvation and when he asked how many had prayed along with him, 27 young men raised their hands.



Photo by Kellie Bone, courtesy of The East Prairie Eagle  
**EAST PRAIRIE** – Coach Jason Aycock talks to members of the East Prairie Eagles football team early in their season. In September, 27 of the team’s 37 players surrendered their lives to Christ during a campaign led by evangelist Rick Gage.

“Tears came to my eyes. I was stunned,” Aycock said. “We had a doggone revival in the football locker room.”

### A lost coach

Aycock said he was a “lost duck” up until a year ago.

“All I cared about was winning and football,” he said. “I cared about my family but God was never in the picture with me. I felt like football was my god.”

As a youth, he had been dragged to Free Will Baptist Church in East Prairie by his mother, Jane Aycock, he said. His brother, Billy, already had accepted Christ.

“He always had something I wanted ... that happiness and peace in his life,” Aycock said. “I knew it was Christ. I couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

An all-state defensive back in high school who went on to play college football, Aycock coached with a win-at-all-costs mentality. He would scream at his players and use foul language. He was not a players’ coach.

In September 2007, however, Aycock hit an all-time low.

“It was about me, me, me. I was depressed,” he said. “I was not only

making it bad on myself but making it bad on my wife, Mandy, and our kids.”

He didn’t coach in 2007 because of personal reasons.

Then, one Saturday night in his workshop at home, Aycock asked Christ to be his Savior.

“I don’t know where I am going. I need some direction,” he prayed. “I want to ask you to forgive me of my sins. Please come into my life and let me live through you.”

That night everything changed. “After I had done that, all my tears were gone. I felt like a ton of bricks had been lifted off my shoulder,” he said. “I felt an immediate happiness come over me. I didn’t care anymore what I had done wrong or what people were thinking about me. All I cared about was I’ve got Jesus now.”

In October 2007, Jon Archie baptized Aycock at Elm Street Baptist Church, where Archie has been pastor since 1999.

“When things are good, a lot of folks don’t have time for God and end up in the valley of life,” Archie said. “God gets our attention. Jason was at a low place. [Now] he is a new person, a new creature in Christ.”

### Big changes

Players making decisions for Christ brought big changes. Young men gave up bad habits, counseled others about Christ and prayed for unbelieving classmates. The use of curse words fell off. Most importantly, students took the initiative to pray before and after games.

“They would be the ones to say, ‘Let’s pray,’” Aycock said. “They would be the ones in the middle of the football field, taking a knee and praising God no matter if we won or lost. They would bow their heads and thank Him.”

After the Eagles lost the district championship game to finish the season 6-4, players waited until Aycock finished media interviews to pray with him. They told him what he had been telling them: “We praise God, no matter if we win or lose.”

“That totally floored me,” Aycock said. “I knew right then there was a change in our team, maybe not all of them but a majority of them.”

The change in the players reflected the transformation in their coach’s life.

“They definitely saw a change in me,” Aycock said. “All of a sudden, I am calm and collected. I didn’t go crazy at halftime in the locker room. I would say, ‘This is what we’ve got to do to correct this.’ They were waiting for me to explode on them. I never did.”

“Christ has won the victory when he saved my life. One of the biggest blessings was the day my wife walked down the aisle and gave her life to Christ,” Aycock adds. “Another thing this has given me is a Christian home. My two sons talk about Christ. They want to know Him. I pray every day that one day they receive Christ when they realize what it really means.”

Aycock now coaches with the philosophy of Colossians 3:23 -- working for the Lord, not for men.

“I coach for the Lord. Now when I prepare for a game, I prepare because I want to represent the Lord,” he said. “Whether we win or lose, we praise God for giving us the chance to play on Friday night. It’s bigger than Friday night lights because Christ is in it.”