

OUR VIEW: UI's Akey refreshingly candid after Afghan trip

By Doug Bauer, for the editorial board

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Football coaches often refer to the gridiron as a battlefield, to their players as soldiers, their games as wars.

Robb Akey isn't one of those coaches.

At least not anymore.

The University of Idaho coach recently returned from a trip to Afghanistan, where he met and visited with several U.S. soldiers who are fighting our country's real battles - the ones in which opponents don't shake hands after the final gun sounds, and the losers don't get a chance to redeem themselves the next weekend.

Akey and his traveling companions, West Point's Chris Smeland, Montana's Bobby Hauck, James Madison's Mickey Matthews and Rice's David Bailiff, preach teamwork, pride and dedication to groups of privileged athletes throughout the year.

In Afghanistan, they got a firsthand look at troops who epitomize those qualities but aren't celebrated every Saturday during the fall.

Akey was humbled by the sacrifices being made by members of the U.S. armed forces on a daily basis.

"We talk about pride every day," Akey said. "These guys have it. More so because we're playing a game and they are fighting for their lives. The way teamwork comes in, the way they rely on each other - they have to rely on each other or they die."

Akey is right. Football is a game. It's not war, or anything remotely close to it - despite what the Vandals' 2009 promotional posters would have you believe.

The advertising campaign for the forthcoming season has an "Akey's Army" theme, and the poster shows the coach standing in front of an Army helicopter flanked by his Vandal "troops."

The analogy probably didn't carry much meaning to Akey when it was conceived and put together, before his trip overseas.

Now he knows the difference between the sacrifices made on the practice and playing fields and those made on the battlefield.

More importantly, he brought that message back to the states and is passing it along to anyone who will listen.