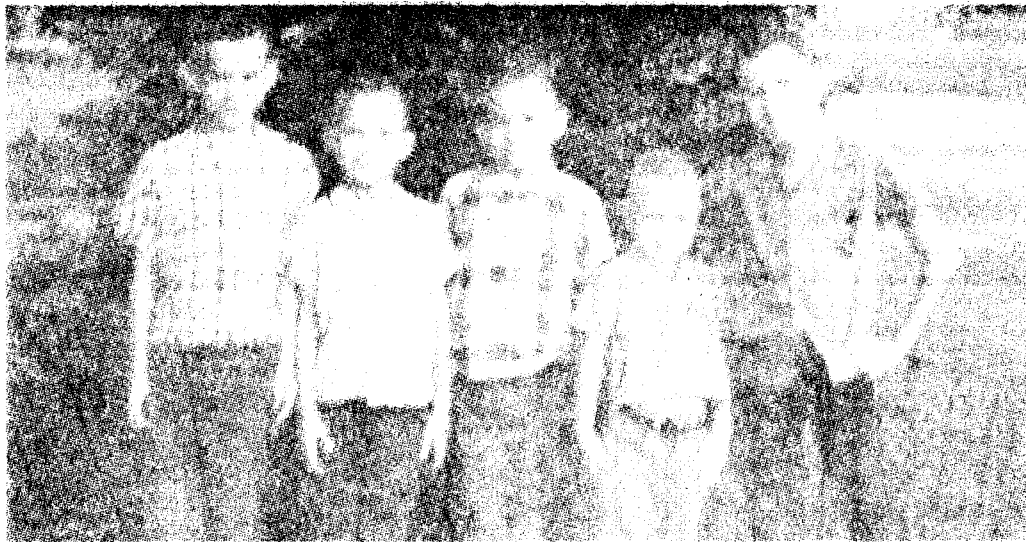


Ronnie Vinklarek accepts no excuses for himself or his brothers on his path from man of the house at age 6 to offensive line coach of the Buffalo Bills



The Brothers Vinklarek, from left, Darrel, Larry, Victor, Felix and Ronnie, take to the shade during one of those sweltering Texas summer days.

True survivor

BY BUCKY OLSON / News Sports Reporter

The tears never reached the bottom of his cheeks because Ronnie Vinklarek stopped them dead in their tracks.

His voice was cracking. His throat was swelling, his heart pounding. Behind the dark sunglasses was a 42-year-old football coach about to break down like an old pickup truck.

He took a deep breath and stared skyward as if gravity would keep his tears in place. It seemed fitting because skyward is where we perceive the heavens. And the heavens rudely held the answers to so many questions he wanted to ask over the years.

The series of events that brought him to this exact moment in his life makes for a long, twisted tale how five boys were bound by blood, determined by death, strengthened by survival. It's about a small Texas community rallying around them after their parents died, leaving the boys to make it on their own. It's about poverty and pain and prayer and perseverance.

And it's about success.

Vinklarek was near tears because



JAMES P. MCCOY/Buffalo News

Ronnie Vinklarek is 5-9 and weighs less than 200 pounds, but he's always been a successful offensive line coach.

there were so many elements to discuss, so much for outsiders to understand, that he had no simple, programmed answer to the question: "What would your parents think if they could see you today?"

It explains why Vinklarek had been dating his future wife, Marianne, for seven months but said little about his past until his brothers spilled everything. It explains why Vinklarek is reluctant to get into the details, for going over everything again would mean reliving everything when once was one too many.

The short is that Vinklarek is the new offensive line coach for the Buffalo Bills, but to describe him so bluntly would be a great injustice. He was the man of the house at age 6, a guardian overseeing five boys at age 17. He never played a snap of college football but became an assistant coach in the NFL.

He's a leader, teacher, husband and father. More than anything, he's a big brother who traveled unguided into manhood and showed the way for his siblings, Darrel, Victor, Larry and Felix. It's no wonder Ronnie

See Vinklarek Page C10

Vinklarek: B

Continued from Page C1

believes his job is the best in professional sports. Coaching the offensive line is about bringing five guys together for a common cause, precisely what he's been doing for 34 years since his father went to work on a warm May morning and never made it home.

Fatherless

Alfonse Jackson Vinklarek often left for work before the boys woke up and came home after they were tucked into bed. He was a truck driver, and he knew every bump in the road along Interstate 10 connecting Houston and San Antonio. Flatonia, Vinklarek's hometown of less than 1,000 people, is just off the highway between the two cities.

Ronnie, 6, was the oldest, making him the first to sit in the truck with his daddy during those sweltering summer days in Texas. Darrel was 5 and Victor was 4. Larry was 3. Felix was just a baby. Alfonse Vinklarek was a strong-willed, religious disciplinarian who sacrificed plenty to feed the family and pay the mortgage on the house he bought three months earlier.

"He was always working," Vinklarek said. "That's what I remember about him the most. He was always working."

May 4, 1967, was a long day on the job. Alfonse was driving late into the night less than 10 miles from home. Nobody is exactly sure what happened. A car was coming from the opposite direction. One vehicle lost control. The other had no time to react. They collided head-on. Alfonse Vinklarek was dead at the scene.

The boys were awakened in the middle of the night to hear the news. They were too young to understand their lives would never be the same. They were too young to realize their main source of strength, their main source of income, their biggest role model would never again walk through the doors with arms open wide.

"We all woke up early in the morning and walked into the kitchen," Victor said. "They said, 'Boys, your daddy's dead.' I knew it wasn't funny, and I knew it wasn't a joke. All I remember is that three weeks later I got in trouble because I asked where Daddy was. I just didn't know."

Staying together

Angela Vinklarek tried making it as a widow with young five boys. Social Security helped, but it wasn't enough. She baked cookies and bread for a restaurant in town to help take some of the pressure off the family finances.

Looking back, maybe she worked too hard. Maybe she was under too much stress until she collapsed from a brain aneurysm that left her in the hospital for a year, incapacitated and basically speechless for life. Ronnie was 12. Heaven knows he had questions, but heaven never responded.

"There really aren't any answers. There aren't," said Annie Jo Krischke, Vinklarek's aunt and Angela's sister. "We just kind of coped with what we could and -hoped for better things to happen."

Relatives and neighbors took turns helping out or sleeping over, but they couldn't be there every night. Ronnie often assumed control of the house while his mother lay in bed. The boys learned quickly about laundry and dishes and windows and floors. Neighbors created odd jobs. Ronnie cleaned everything from chicken houses to the local post office. He built fences and hauled hay and pumped gasoline. He did anything to help but the cupboards remained bare. To this day he hates the question, "What's for dinner?" because for years he didn't have an answer.

Not long after his mother left the hospital, Ronnie broke his leg in a car accident. The break was so severe that doctors considered amputating. His right leg is almost two inches shorter than his left, and he wears a lift to this day. He was in the hospital for several months, unable to visit his mother at home. His mother was home, unable to visit her son in the hospital.

Ronnie recovered, but his mother never did. He was 17 when she suffered a massive stroke in 1976. He had two jobs at the time, working in a 24-hour truck stop at night and hauling hay in the morning. Victor rode with her in the ambulance to the hospital, but he knew she was dead before they arrived.

It was Christmas Eve.

"It was a tough time," Ronnie said. "She taught us that you have to stand for something or you'll fall for anything. That was her message. It was one of the reasons I got into coaching."

Almost immediately after Angela Vinklarek died, questions arose about the boys' future. Victor lied about his age moments after hearing his mother died, keeping the authorities away until they called the county attorney, a family friend.

The boys, either in their teens or approaching them, were without supervision. Neighbors braced for trouble. The authorities' first instinct was to keep the boys together, but certainly not by themselves. What family would take all five boys?

Their aunt Annie Jo offered. Neighbors Martha and Daniel Freytag had six kids of their own, but they did the same. The courts leaned toward splitting up the boys before Ronnie convinced them to give his brothers a chance. Authorities agreed on the condition that the boys would be separated if trouble started. Ronnie called a family meeting and explained the situation.

"People said, 'You can't have five young guys living by themselves.'" Ronnie said. "But people are always going to tell you that you can't do something. Nobody can control your heart, mind and soul but you. I told my brothers we have to be like ants. Where one is, everybody's gotta be. We have to swarm. We have to rally for each other. There's nobody but us."

Years later, the boys found out that people in town were keeping their distance but watching them closely. The authorities never intervened because it wasn't necessary. Ronnie monitored their behavior and set the example. He worked and managed the money. He went to school and played sports. He completed his homework and helped his brothers with theirs. He took them to church.

"I did what I could for them, but there's a lot you can't do for teenagers," Martha Freytag said. "They grew up on their own. They knew they weren't supposed to get into trouble. Those five boys were really remarkable. They really were true survivors."

Ronnie started fighting with kids who teased him about being poor. His family had been forced to stand in line for the free government cheese back in the late 1970s. His clothes were worn. His temper was short. A coach pulled him aside and told him to start acting like a leader.

Ronnie was named Mr. Flatonia High School his senior year. He didn't have enough money to buy a suit for the ceremony, so he borrowed one. It was the proudest moment of his life, one of many events he would celebrate with his brothers but not his parents.

"If you look back, it was an accomplishment that any of us made

The one thing Ronnie never did was let us say, 'Poor me.' If you feel sorry for yourself, you're giving yourself a reason to lose. He might walk in the house and put his arm around your shoulder or he might jump your ass. It was whatever fit the situation. I can remember him doing both. And he was right."

Showing the way

Ronnie wasn't an honors student or an all-star athlete. His leg prohibited him from excelling in football, but it did nothing to defuse his passion for the game.

He attended Southwest Texas State, leaving his brothers behind during the week and driving 60 miles every weekend to help out at home. His college buddies were going to frat parties. His frat parties were back in Flatonia, working with his brothers. There were times he wanted to drop out. But if he quit school, his brothers would have the right to do the same. He stayed and graduated in 1981.

He decided to coach high school football for a year in Texas and ended up staying for seven. He landed at the University of Houston, where he coached the offensive line and met current Bills coach Gregg Williams. Years later, Williams would become the best man in Vinklarek's wedding.

Vinklarek's brothers kept working. Each passed jobs to the next.

Victor and Larry followed him to Southwest Texas State. Darrel went to Sam Houston and Felix landed at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. Each earned his college degree and eventually married. Darrel became a probation officer. Victor is a high school football coach back in Texas. Larry became an agriculture teacher. Felix, the youngest, is the vice president of a charter company in Houston. They didn't just survive. They thrived.

"I get a lot of credit for raising these guys, but it wasn't just one person," Ronnie said. "We raised each other, we nurtured each other. They did a tremendous job. The guys who had the most adversity were Larry and Felix. They had to push themselves for a longer time without parents. They lost them at a younger age. Those guys are the heroes of the bunch."

Ronnie showed them the way. A hole remained every time one of them graduated or got married or had children. Christmas went from being the best holiday to the worst because it reminded them of their mother. It has been a quarter century since she passed. Time never healed the wounds, but the pain lessened with every day the brothers' bond grew stronger.

"You would be amazed how close those guys are," Williams

Tragedies of loss of parents

said. "Usually, when you go through the toughest times, that's when the closeness of a family comes in. Tough love becomes very emotional, understanding love. That's how they are."

The consummate coach

Ronnie had been coaching his brothers about life for years, so coaching football seemed easy. He's 5-foot-9 and weighs less than 200 pounds, but he has been a successful offensive line coach at every stop. He spent six seasons at Houston before joining head coach Jack Pardee with the CFL's Birmingham Barracudas. He had a brief stint at Valdosta (Ga.) State and coached the O-line for two years at Oklahoma State.

He was considered one of the best recruiters in college, in part because he could relate to many poor families in the South. He also refused to accept excuses, which remains his approach toward coaching multimillionaires in the pros. "I don't have much sympathy when I hear about kids who came from broken homes or divorced families," he said. "It doesn't strike me very hard, obviously. You can still make the right decisions. There weren't a whole lot of people telling us anything. They said we wouldn't make it out of high school. We made it out of college."

Vinklarek and Williams were reunited last season with the Tennessee Titans. Williams was serving as defensive coordinator. Vinklarek was a defensive assistant and quality control coach. Williams hired Vinklarek shortly after he was named head coach of the Bills. Williams made it clear he will fire Vinklarek in a heartbeat if he doesn't do the job. Vinklarek expects nothing more.

"I know him inside and out," Williams said. "Understand this: He has more than earned the right to coach in this league. He's here because he's one of the best technique teachers of offensive line play that I've ever been around in 23 years. I had the opportunity to hire probably 200 offensive line coaches. I chose the No. 1 guy on my list, and that was Ronnie Vinklarek. He's been No. 1 for the last

eight years."

Looking back

It's a long way from Flatonia, Texas, to Orchard Park, but it's been a road worth traveling. Vinklarek met his wife, Marianne, in 1995 when he was an assistant in Birmingham, Ala. He told her he didn't have enough time for a wife, which sounded good because she didn't have time for a football coach. They were married a year later and have two sons now. Trevor and Trent, both of whom are too young for his tale.

The Bills haven't heard his story, either. In the hours leading into each game, he takes time to look back and acknowledge the events that carried him to this point. It's an emotional exercise. He thinks about his brothers. He thinks about his wife and children. He thinks about his parents.

"He sits back and says, 'Is this really happening to me?'" Marianne Vinklarek said. "He just can't believe that he's here. He just can't believe how fortunate he is. Every day that he's able to do what he does — even if it's gone tomorrow — he thinks he's been blessed to reach this point. He takes nothing for granted."

A few years ago, the Vinklareks appeared on "Oprah" to tell their story. Ronnie didn't attend, in part because he was coaching football. The bigger reason was he didn't want to revisit an existence once filled with more pain than promise. It would have forced him to answer the simple question. "What would your parents think if they could see you today?"

Now you know his story. Now you're ready for his answer.

"You believe that they see you, that they have been watching all along," he said. "You believe they see where you've gotten and how you got there. You hope you made the right decisions. You hope you showed them the right things. You think, 'Mom, Dad, you should see me now.' We never got into any trouble, and look what we overcame. I still think we were blessed. I think they were our guardian angels."