

CALEDONIA – The question didn't surprise Michael Kelly.

The fatigue he felt following the Caledonia High School football team's 2023 season was only part of the reason. Deep down, Kelly had to admit something wasn't right after his sixth season as CHS' head coach.

"Are you really burning all your boats?" Kelly's wife, Kelsie, asked during an offseason conversation that featured several cups of coffee and plenty of reflection.

For a self-proclaimed "perfectionist," the question forced Kelly to reassess his coaching, his values and his message. It also led to a reimagining of the Cavaliers' motto "Burn the Ships", which gained traction in 2021 when the program won a school-record 11 games and advanced to the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) Class 4A state semifinals.

"Our kids lay it on the line, but at the end of the day I let some of that blind me and I lost sight of what I was really put here to do," Kelly said. "This is a relationship business. ... I was letting one or two wins and losses interrupt that, and I was letting a lot of boats float in that water and saying, 'This is OK, this is OK and that is OK' and compromising because it is about winning. Make no excuse, winning is important. These guys need to see the fruits of their labor, but at the end of the day I finally had to look at my wife and people I trust and, I guess, borderline almost tell me I was a fake.

"I was leading this program one way, but really behind the doors it was all about winning. You can't have it both ways. At the end of the day, I think that is why I was so tired."

Kelly said he had to *hear* his wife's question because they do their ministry at CHS together and he wouldn't be where he is today and he couldn't be the program's football coach without her. He also took

words of advice from people in the community and wasn't too proud to admit he was *not* burning his ships and that he was focusing too much on wins and losses and not leading young men.

In that time of self-evaluation, Kelly said he wrote 25 pages of notes that helped establish a new path for himself and the program. The result is a 2024 "Burn the Ships" built on six pillars: love, die to self, inspire greatness, focus, warrior mentality and finish. Kelly said the pillars are based on Biblical and moral principles. The pillars appear on signs on the walls in the CHS field house to emphasize the importance of commitment, embracing things that are hard, staying in the moment, not settling for average, selflessness and teamwork.

"With all the success, sometimes you can get blinded by that," Kelly said. "We have really good kids and we have good people, and not necessarily that we were heading in a bad direction, but something was missing with 'Burn the Ships'. I didn't know if I was burning all my ships. It is hard to ask young men to do something when you're not willing to do it yourself."

Kelly said his coaches and players have embraced the idea that the six pillars apply to everything in life, not just football. A core ingredient to that thinking is the players have to love each other, love other people and love themselves second. The six pillars also highlight the importance of inspiring greatness and going above normal. Kelly believes the results will take care of themselves if the Cavaliers embrace the six pillars and they burn their ships.

"I want our young men to understand life is going to be hard when they get older, having to pay bills, taking care of children, dealing with employees and employers, but don't ever walk out," Kelly said. "If we can stick to those six pillars and you burn the boats in those areas of your life, there is no turning back, there are no regrets and they can let

things rip. We don't have to be afraid to fail. At the end of the day, I hope they realize there is nothing still floating in that water to retreat to. I hope it reflects in our kids' lives and how they perform on the field."

Last season, Caledonia (6-6) finished fourth in Class 4A, Region 3. The tests Caledonia faced in its region helped it earn victories at Ripley and at Newton County in the first two rounds of the MHSAA Class 4A playoffs before it lost to Louisville 39-0 in the third round. It marked the second-straight year Louisville ended Caledonia's season in the third round.

Louisville, the reigning Class 4A champion, enters the season as the preseason No. 1 team in that classification – No. 5 in all classifications – according to "Mississippi Gridiron". Houston, which was second in Region 3 last season and lost only to Louisville (twice), is No. 4 in the preseason top five in Class 4A.

Despite the losses to Louisville and Houston, 2023 was the third-straight season Caledonia advanced to the third round of the playoffs, putting in amongst a select few in the state. Overall, Caledonia has advanced to the playoffs in five of Kelly's first six seasons as coach.

This season, Caledonia will look to extend that run with a 66-player roster that returns five starters on defense, eight to nine starters on offense (as well as its kicker) and 12 seniors.

Consistency in a coaching staff that features Chris Harlow (defensive coordinator/secondary/wide receivers), Ray Weeks (offensive coordinator/quarterbacks), Cody Cliett (slots/defensive line), Jason Forrester (offensive line/inside linebackers), Josh Baty (fullbacks/outside linebackers), former CHS player Will Donald (inside linebackers), former CHS player Karsten Gullette (slots/secondary), former CHS player Darquez Williams (outside linebackers) and former

player Zack Gorum (wide receivers) has been a key ingredient to the Cavaliers' success. Kelly credits his assistant coaches for buying into his philosophy and for holding him accountable and the community and parents for their support in transforming the program and changing the mantra for 2024.

Senior cornerback / slot back Jaxon Shellman said community support and camaraderie in the locker room have fueled the program's transformation. He hopes he and his classmates can build on that success and live the new version of "Burn the Ships" every week.

"Originally, I think 'Burn the Ships' was more like how we're going to perform on the field," Shellman said. "Now, 'Burn the Ships' is what we're going to live by in and out of football. We take those six pillars with us everywhere. It is more a way we walk through life and the way we live our lives than how we play football.

"Being a part of that change has been a blessing because it helps transform us as young men. We can better help ourselves become adults and men and head of our households. In life, it helps us become leaders and earn job opportunities."

Senior offensive lineman Dylan Dees said "Burn the Ships" was more of a "saying" – albeit a "cool" one – in previous years, but he said it now is a "lifestyle", which fits perfectly with the intangibles that have flourished in Kelly's tenure.

"I think the way we work here is a lot different," Dees said. "It actually means something to us. We come here and we have an attitude about it every day. We take it more serious. It is now a job for us. It is not just a game we're playing every day."

Caledonia will play Holmes County Central at 6 p.m. Saturday at the Louisville High Jamboree. It will play host to Nettleton at 7 p.m. Friday, Aug. 30, in the season opener for both teams.