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# Trying to take UWM into the big leagues

Koonce working to elevate university's athletic program

The Business Journal of Milwaukee - by [Rich Kirchen](#)

George Koonce feels chronic pain from his eight years as a **Green Bay Packers** player and nine years in the NFL and he has the scars to prove it.

Koonce underwent multiple surgeries from his playing days that ended in 2000 — both shoulders, both knees and one wrist. Still, he's grateful to be better off than most NFL retirees both in terms of his physical health and his job status as athletic director at the **University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee**.

"I can still walk," Koonce said, only half-jokingly. "I can still play with my little boy, take my daughter to the father-daughter dance."

Ten months into his new job at UWM, where he's shaking things up in a deficit-plagued athletic department, Koonce's statement speaks volumes about his life to this point.

First, Koonce, 41, is defying the physical and mental health norms for NFL retirees. He cited a statistic that 60 percent of NFL retirees are divorced, unemployed or broke — or all three — within three years of retiring. Many suffer from more serious physical injuries than Koonce.

Second, Koonce's appointment in March 2009 as UWM athletic director succeeding Bud Haidet, who retired, represents Koonce's victory over another scar — one-and-a-half years of depression following his football career. Once Koonce finally accepted that no NFL team wanted him as a linebacker, he set a new career course and returned to college for his master's degree and made moves that ultimately led to the UWM post.

Finally, the challenge Koonce already faced in his new job became more daunting after the Oct. 7, 2009, death of his wife, Tunisia, of breast cancer. Tunisia, who was 38, had encouraged him in his darkest hours after his playing career.

Now Koonce is a single dad raising his two children with the help of his mother-in-law, Shirlene Abdullah. He's also completing his doctorate at **Marquette University** with a dissertation on the challenges NFL retirees face in transitioning to their post-football lives.

## Lots of work

Koonce still hurts emotionally from the loss of his wife, but he's engrossed in an ambitious plan to address UWM athletics' \$7.8 million budget deficit, needs for new facilities and fundraising. He continues to be excited about the UWM opportunity that followed a stint at Marquette's athletic department and the Packers' front office.

“I’m very fortunate,” Koonce said. “I’m very blessed.”

Koonce’s office in The Pavilion athletics and recreation facility on the northeast side of campus is noticeably devoid of Packers memorabilia. Today, he’s all about the Panthers and improving the conditions for more than 300 student-athletes in seven men’s and eight women’s sports.

He wants UWM athletics to become more connected to the local community and thousands of UWM alums. His goal is to raise the profile of UWM athletics, men’s basketball in particular, from its second-fiddle status in Milwaukee to Marquette and in Wisconsin to UW-Madison.

Koonce’s dedication and enthusiasm have won many fans among UWM supporters, who believe he’s the right man for the job.

Koonce, by virtue of his Packers celebrity, cuts a high profile, and his exploration of creating an on-campus basketball arena generated some controversy this week on local talk radio. He’s also likely to upset some constituencies as he determines how to cut costs in the athletic department.

But Koonce has his fans who support his vision of a bigger and better future for UWM athletics.

John Daniels Jr., chairman of law firm **Quarles & Brady** in Milwaukee, said Koonce has already had a huge impact and made connections with the business community.

“Business guys are talking about him,” said Daniels. “There’s a recognition he’s brought something new to UWM that it’s not seen.”

At halftime of the UWM men’s basketball game with UW-Green Bay in January, Koonce was active greeting prominent alums and financial supporters. He interrupted that for an interview with a Green Bay radio station.

Koonce has established three initiatives that he believes will take UWM athletics to a higher level.

He has won support from the UWM Foundation to launch a **UWM Athletic Foundation**. He has embarked on a 15- to 30-year athletic facilities plan. And he has received **UWM Student Association** support for increasing student fees by \$25 per semester over three years with proceeds going to his department.

“UWM is woefully short of any kind of athletic facilities,” said Milwaukee public relations executive Carl Mueller.

Mueller and David Nicholas of **Nicholas Funds** in Milwaukee are the co-chairs of the new foundation. Mueller said he expects fundraising to start this summer when the facilities study is complete.

The facilities needs include an on-campus basketball arena designed to draw more students and end a money-losing rental arrangement for the U.S. Cellular Arena downtown. Also on Koonce's list are a baseball stadium, a competition track and better soccer and tennis facilities.

Of course, UWM will need a good men's basketball team to increase attendance. Going into a game Feb. 18, the squad was tied for sixth in the 10-team Horizon League in coach Rob Jeter's fifth season. Attendance has declined since the last NCAA tournament appearance in 2006.

Koonce said he's excited to work with Jeter, who is under contract through 2013.

"Basketball is a flagship sport for us," Koonce said. "We feel as basketball goes, the athletic department goes."