

## Out of the backfield, 'Coach' scores

### Success can't spoil Craig T. Nelson

By Suzanne Gill

Success is about to find both coach Hayden Fox and his fiancée, anchorwoman Christine Armstrong. This fall on ABC's "Coach," the fictional Minnesota State Screaming Eagles football team has an unheard of 10-1 season, while Christine is offered a network job that keeps her commuting to New York. The couple, played by Craig T. Nelson and Shelley Fabares, will live together, but their win-win professional situation puts an unexpected strain on their happiness.

As the series enters its fourth season, Nelson is worried success will somehow spoil "Coach," too.

The half-hour comedy started as a mid-season replacement in the spring of 1989, but was put on the bench behind "Chicken Soup," a star vehicle for Jackie Mason. When "Soup" sank early in the 1989-90 season, ABC called Nelson and Fabares, with co-star Jerry Van Dyke, to hold the line against declining

ratings in the half-hour after "Roseanne" on Tuesday nights.

Though it began as the story of a middle-age jock at the helm of a struggling college football team, the show has developed a subtext of emotional growth spurred by the angst of its central character and his relationship with the smart, sophisticated lady in his life. Diamond-in-the-rough Hayden is nothing like the other men Christine has known, while she offers him the warmth and encouragement he's missed along the way.

"She's extraordinarily drawn to him," says Fabares, "and her good sense tells her that this is it, this guy is great." The fact that Hayden faces his own shortcomings without urging from Christine is attractive to her character, Fabares feels.

Nelson is excited by Hayden's journey of self-discovery after a lifetime of emotional blustering.

"For a man who's never examined that and is quite afraid to do so, it can be a tremendous revelation."

"We've been trying to get to that and put it in some sort of form that's funny. These are the things I

want to explore in this guy."

More than most stars, Nelson is involved in the development of his show, which will take several plot turns in the coming season: Daughter Kelly (Clare Carey) gets a divorce; the team's success turns Luther's (Van Dyke) head; and the university hires a new budget-slashing president.

Asked if he considers the show a success, Nelson shifts uneasily in his chair. "There's so much more polish to give this show, and so many more attitudes to explore."

Even Emmy nominations (Nelson has been nominated twice) for the show, which consistently ranks in Nielsen's top 20, don't satisfy him. "That's great, but we can't rest on that."

"I'm scared to death that I love this thing. I loved 'Call to Glory,' and they took it away. And it broke my heart."

"I'm not grown up enough to say, 'Just love it while it's here.'"

#### CAPTION:

Hayden Fox (Craig T. Nelson) leads the Minnesota State Screaming Eagles in a winning season on ABC's "Coach." The popular comedy returns with new shows in October.

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