Consider me thrilled that Jerry Kill is going to get his big chance, the opportunity to take over a Big Ten program and attempt to build it into a consistent winner. Lord knows the man has paid his dues.

Kill doesn't exactly look like a football coach. In fact he looks like a cross between the characters Cliff Klaben and Paul (the pudgy barfly who always wore suspenders) from the 1980's sitcom Cheers. But don't let the friendly, kind of geeky looks fool you…Kill is all business and intensity on the gridiron; and especially on the practice field.

Kill seems like a perfect fit to turn around the Golden Gophers, who just moved into their new digs, TCF Bank Stadium, an on-campus facility in 2009. His principal talent, the one that must have weighed on the University of Minnesota search committee's minds, was his history of turning beleaguered programs around.

Kill, who played collegiately at Southwestern College in Kansas, got his first head coaching position at Division II Saginaw Valley State after serving as the defensive coordinator at Pittsburg State in Kansas from 1985-87 and also from 1991-93. In his first season at Saginaw, his Cardinals went 6-4. In his final two seasons, 1997-98, they won 18 of 22 games and all of Division II in rushing. In his last year at the helm of the Cardinals they also finished second in the country in total offense (498.3 yards per game) and scoring (42.5 points per contest).

After two uneventful seasons at Emporia State, a 5-6 campaign in 1999 and a 6-5 season in 2000, Kill moved on to Southern Illinois in Carbondale. The Salukis, whose claim to fame is the

launching pad for the career of Knicks great and Cavaliers headache Clyde “the Glide” Frazier, were not known as a football power when Kill arrived on the scene despite winning a national title in 1983. In fact, his first season as head coach saw Southern Illinois post a woeful 1-10 record, followed by a pedestrian 4-8 record in 2002.

But that’s when Kill’s Salukis became the big men on campus. Five straight winning seasons, including three in which they won 10 games or more, not only put Southern Illinois into the realm of respectability, it also put them into the Division I-AA playoffs for those five seasons. In Kill’s last season in Carbondale Southern Illinois advanced to the D I (formerly Division I-AA) national semifinals before falling to eventual runner-up Delaware. The Blue Hens would go on to fall to Appalachian State to give the Mountaineers their third consecutive national championship.

If you take away his first two seasons in Southern Illinois, Kill rolled up a 50-14 record in five seasons.

For 2008 Kill moved on to DeKalb, accepting the head coaching position at FBS program Northern Illinois.

When Kill came to NIU to replace Joe Novak the Huskies were considered one of the worst teams in the nation. ESPN had the MAC school ranked No. 6 in its “Bottom 10” rankings, but it would not take Kill long to change the perception at and of Northern Illinois football. NIU finished with a 6-7 record, but probably gained more respect with one of its defeats than it did in all of its victories. On Oct. 4 the Huskies marched into Neyland Stadium in Knoxville and fought the powerful Tennessee Mountaineers tooth and nail in front of nearly 100,000 orange-clad Vols fans. Tennessee would win 13-9, but it was a huge moral victory for NIU, who ended up playing in the Independence Bowl.

In 2009 the Huskies went 7-6 and found their way into another bowl game, the International Bowl where they would lose to South Florida, 27-3. During the season the Huskies led the Mid-American Conference in rushing (195.2 yards per game), total defense (329.9 yards allowed per game) and in red zone offense (converting 93.6 percent of its red zone trips into points).

Finally, in 2010, everything came together for Kill and his Huskies in DeKalb. NIU dominated MAC West Division play, going a perfect 8-0 in the conference. Tailback Chad Spann led the league in rushing, going for 1,293 yards and was the only running back in the MAC to eclipse the 1,000-yard plateau. Quarterback Chandler Harnish led the conference in passing efficiency with a 156.1 efficiency rating, and the Huskies led the MAC in scoring (37.8), points allowed (19.1 per contest, tied with Temple) and blew the rest of the conference away in team rushing (264.8 yards per contest; Eastern Michigan, who finished second, averaged 173.3 per game).

However, a stunning loss to Miami in the Marathon MAC Championship Game in Detroit sent the Huskies back to the Humanitarian Bowl, where they will take on Fresno State. Kill, however, will not be with the team as he accepted the position at Minnesota from the Big Ten, a BCS conference, following the MAC title game.

Minnesota has been a rudderless ship in recent years. The last time the Golden Gophers won an outright Big Ten championship was in 1941 when they went 8-0 under head coach Bernie Bierman. Bierman is, by far, the most successful coach in Minnesota history. His Gophers went undefeated five times, won five national championships, won either a share or the outright Big Ten championship seven times and posted a 93-35-6 record during his 16 seasons at the helm.

Fortunately for Kill he does not have to step into those shoes. He will be replacing Tim Brewster, who was fired with five games remaining in his fourth season with the Golden Gophers. Brewster was 15-30 in his tenure and lost his only two bowl appearances – a 42-21 loss to Kansas in the 2008 Insight Bowl and a 14-13 loss to Iowa State in the 2009 Insight Bowl.

Minnesota's last 10-win season came in 2003 under Glen Mason, who left Kent State after the 1996 season to accept the position at Minnesota. Mason was 64-57 in his 10 seasons at Minnesota and went 3-4 in seven bowl games. In fact, Mason and the Gophers' 20-16 win over Alabama in the '04 Music City Bowl was the last bowl win for the program.

Kill is taking over a program that last went to the Rose Bowl in 1962 and has had just one first-team All-American, tight end Matt Spaeth, in 2006. In fact, the program Kill is leaving, Northern Illinois, defeated the Golden Gophers 34-23 on Sept. 25 of this year.

Kill is well aware Golden Gophers fans were hoping for a coach with more name recognition,

but said in his introduction press conference that this is not the first time he may not have been the first choice…something his wife Rebecca can attest to.

“I can tell you, if I can capture that lady and I did that a long time ago; I was 21 years old and she was 19, and we've been married ever since,” he said. “I want to let ya'll know now, I know there's just been a big search. I wasn't her first choice. I was second or third down that line. I had to work at it.

“So this is the first time maybe I haven't been the first choice. I can live with that. But when I want something and I want it bad enough, I'm going to get it. I told her I was going to marry her right next to her boyfriend at her momma's table, so I am aggressive.

“So with that, it's just a great, great opportunity. I am who am. I get prepped for things and talk. This is me. I'm not a guy that's ever gonna to hold a card. I'm never going to do that. I'm gonna talk from the heart. Sometimes that may be good and sometimes maybe it will be bad, but I'm just gonna tell you how I feel.”

Kill is inheriting a team that lost its starting quarterback, Adam Weber, to graduation but is returning plenty of experience to the skill positions. DeLeon Eskridge is a 5-11 senior running back that led the Gophers in rushing last season with 698 yards and a team-leading seven rushing touchdowns. Minnesota’s second-leading rusher, 5-9, 210 pound senior running back Duane Bennett, gained 529 yards on the ground last season and found the end zone three times. The Gophers return its top four receivers as well, senior wideout Da’Jon McKnight (6-3, 209), senior tight end Eric Lair (6-3, 238) as well as Bennett out of the backfield. These three combined for 120 receptions for 1,595 yards and 13 touchdowns in 2010.

But the one player returning that Gopher fans are excited about is dual threat quarterback MarQueis Gray, a 6-4, 230-pound junior with blazing speed and a powerful arm. Gray lined up at quarterback and receiver in his first two seasons in Minnesota and last season caught 42 passes for 587 yards and five touchdowns.

On defense Kill will return three of Minnesota’s top five tacklers from 2010, including 6-1, 225-pound senior linebacker Gary Tinsley, who led the Gophers with 90 stops.

Kill is thrilled with his new job, but knows he might have left some hurt feelings back in DeKalb because he left before Northern Illinois' Humanitarian Bowl game against Fresno State. However, he has nothing but fond memories of his time with the Huskies.

"This is a tremendous day in my life and I think it's very important that I have to thank the people back at Northern Illinois, President Peters and Jeff Compher our athletic director," Kill said at his first press conference in Minnesota. "Actually, the two guys that hired me, Jim Phillips, who is now the athletic director at Northwestern. He left me after about two months, and I told him I wanted to play him. He said, No, I'm not gonna play you, so now I get to play him.

"But they gave me an opportunity to coach Division I football. They took a chance, and I really appreciate that. I wouldn't be standing here today if it wasn't for those people and our players. The toughest thing I've ever had to do was leave a bunch of players that played their tail ends off for me. I would tell you they're not happy with Coach Kill. As I told my daughters, that's a good thing. If they're happy, I didn't do my job. I think it was a tough situation.

"But with that being said, this is a great day for my family. A great day. I'm so thankful for having the opportunity to be here. I appreciate both presidents and Joel for giving me this opportunity. It's an opportunity of a lifetime.

"I can remember driving up to this stadium (in September) and going to that locker room. When we drove up, I turned to one of the assistant coaches and I said, 'Wow, this place made a commitment now. This is unbelievable.' Having no idea that I would be standing here today. You know, it has so many things to offer, and for me to have this chance, I'm truly blessed. I've been blessed all my life, and it seems like things just fall into place for me. I'm just a fortunate, fortunate person."

He also had a message for his new players, something he wanted them to know about him and what he expects.

"There's a processes to win," he said. "It just doesn't happen you show up and 'Hey, we're going to turn it around and win today and we're gonna do this.' I can give you all those promises and

get you fired up, but those are false promises. I can promise you this: We'll go through the journey and work hard. And as long we're all together, you'll get the results you want."

And if you ask any of his players or the fans at Northern Illinois about Kill's message, they would certainly tell you to take it to heart. Kill might not win the Big Ten championship in his first year at the helm of the Golden Gophers, but one thing is for sure…the program is in very steady, capable and dedicated hands.