

## ***WHO ARE WE FOR?***

For the vast preponderance of sports fans, the television, remote control or radio dial controls the time period in which they are intensely involved in their particular athletic obsession. For athletes, however, sports serve as the glasses through which they choose to view the world and the identity they desire within.

Athletes think differently, act differently and feel differently than non-athletes. They are, if you will, their own race or breed which can best be effectively communicated to via competition and challenge. To others, their self-sacrificing efforts and strenuous practices seem to be wasted time and unproductive activity; however, time in the trenches is time well spent to the athlete.

Obviously, athletes have a unique mindset -- but it doesn't stop there. Beyond this elite group who calls themselves athletes, there is an assemblage of even greater men and women (although fewer in number) that are referred to as "Christian Athletes." These are the few and far between who choose not only to engage in serious physical activity, but dedicate their efforts on and off the playing field to their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. They play and pray, act and react, and are tested and testify to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords known to them personally. So, the question that came to me is: "What does this unique Christian athlete practice over and over that the rest of the Body of Christ can benefit from?" **Answer: PLENTY!**

In our program at the University of South Carolina, I focus on just a few things that God can/is currently using athletes all around the world to show His Body. If we use the lessons that are taught within athletics to help us grow in our faith, we might just see revival -- something that we should pray for daily! Here are five things that Christian athletes practice daily that I feel are noteworthy attributes:

- 1. Be Unashamed***
- 2. Live Freely***
- 3. Understand Sacrifice***
- 4. Play Hard***
- 5. It's Not About Me***

### ***BE UNASHAMED . . .***

For an athlete, the process of becoming unashamed happens through several different events, but usually all of them have a fairly rapid pace to them. For example, the ultimate way to become unashamed is embarrassment, which is something that freshmen, rookies and pledges learn a lot about early in the year. Whether it is getting tied to a goal post after practice or having your pants pulled down from behind in front of teammates you just met, you will be forced to become embarrassed early on in your time associated with an athletic team. However, as a result you become unashamed in front of them from then on, and the teasing transitions into a plethora of great relationships.

You can also be embarrassed by lack of experience, which can humble even the best athlete. This happens every year, as well when universities all over the country run out of the locker room for the first time. You can always tell the freshman because before the first game they run to the wrong sideline/basket out of excitement and ignorance, and then are mocked by their teammates for being a dumb rookie. So, no matter whether it is through a mistake of your own or through a practical joke played on you by a teammate, athletes are used to being unashamed.

After all, what great player do you know that was ashamed of his ability and/or his coach? Great athletes offer a confidence that sets the example for the rest of us, and in the same way athletes should set the example spiritually for their other Christian brothers and sisters.

In his epistle to the Roman people, the apostle Paul writes in the first chapter and the twelfth verse that we are called to be ***“unashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of salvation for everyone who believes.”*** Most Christians truly desire the power and confidence to share their faith and to live an unashamed life. However, they will not do the things God asks in order to be confident. Just like a basketball player eats, drinks and sleeps basketball, so you must also do with your relationship with God.

If practice does make perfect, then we should know why we are ashamed of our faith. It is simply because we do no practice. ***Do we help orphans like Jesus asks us to? Do we shelter widows and offer food to the homeless? Do we give a reason to our coworkers for the hope that lies within us, that is Christ Jesus the hope of glory?*** If the answer is no to any of these questions, then we have a reason to hide.

You see, you are not ready for game day unless you have put in the effort before the lights cut on. The practicing of your faith in God is what determines whether you will be granted the freedom to become unashamed of the gospel. Having Jesus as your Lord and Savior is the only escape from the fires and tortures that hell possesses. How could you be ashamed of the cure to a disease that everyone has which is sin? If you had the cure for cancer in your pocket, would you keep it to yourself? I doubt it! If you truly let Christ rule in your heart, you have a guaranteed ticket into eternity with God. That is nothing to be ashamed of! Great athletes do not let circumstances manipulate their practice. If it rains they play anyway, if it snows they shovel the snow off the court, and if it is too cold they find a gym . . . but they are always practicing. So, when the lights cut on they have put in the work and have nothing to be ashamed about. In the body of Christ we have no time to be ashamed of who we are in Christ and who we serve in God almighty! Will you learn from this and put into your faith the practice and effort that it deserves so that you too can become unashamed of the gospel?

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### ***LIVE FREELY . . .***

Secondly, the mindset of a sold-out Christian athlete can teach us to live and worship freely as Christians and not be bound by legalism and the law. What do you suppose **Christian Laetner** was thinking when he made that game-winning fade away free throw to beat Kentucky in the Final Four? Do you think he was thinking about where his hands were on the ball? Was he making sure his shoe laces were tied? Did he turn and look to see how many people were watching? NO! He jumped up, grabbed the ball, turned around and made one of the best shots in NCAA basketball history! You see, it was instinct because he has **in him** what it took to make that shot. The same should be true spiritually of the body of Christ when we act in this world.

If you have the Holy Spirit within, you should not be bound by formats and programs; rather, you should be free to live according to the Spirit that has been sealed in our heart (Ephesians 1:13). In the Bible there is a great example of living in God's will, knowing you are forgiven within the disciples that Jesus had chosen Judas, Jesus' betrayer, committed a sin that is one of the most well documented sins of all time. As his master instructed he would do, he went and went quickly to betray the Son of Man with a kiss from the upper room, and afterwards he was filled with guilt. In fact, in the gospels and in Acts, Judas' guilt was made clear that he committed suicide because he was so ashamed of what he had done.

Peter, on the other hand, reacted much differently to his also highly anticipated denial. As Jesus had told him he would do, he too betrayed Jesus three times within a day. As soon as the rooster crowed, he was stricken with the awareness of his sin that his marvelous master had predicted. However, Peter's reaction to his sin was much different than Judas'. Peter would later become the rock of the church and would write two books that we now consider a large piece of the greatest collection of writings ever, the Bible.

You see, Peter's reaction to his sin was one of Godly sorrow and repentance, which was obvious in his life after he committed this denial. On the other hand, Judas' guilt was from the whispers of the enemy and cost him his life. He let worldly sorrow consume him, and he listened to the whispers of the enemy convince him that he was a horrible man for doing such a thing and that he did not deserve to live. So, the question is . . . who are you? Are you Judas, who murdered himself because of the guilt that the world put on him? Or, are you Peter, who desperately cried for forgiveness and left his sinful ways to take up his cross and follow the savior of the world.

As Christians we should live freely knowing we have been forgiven, and are presented faultless before the throne of God (Jude 24-26). In this life there is no room for over thinking and dwelling in self-pity because of one's sinful nature. Pray it off and press on, as there is a lost world out there that needs us! In fact, that self-pity is really pride. Pride that the devil is trying to puff up Christians with all over the world so that they will feel sorry for themselves and their mistakes, rather than preaching Jesus crucified, dead and

risen. Athletes teach us when we fall to get right back up and let nothing keep us down. The same is true in our walk -- let nothing keep you from praising and testifying, even your own sin.

### ***UNDERSTAND SACRIFICE . . .***

Thirdly, athletes at any level should be extremely familiar with the concept of self-sacrifice and the denial of one's own agenda for the good of the team. In the history of sports there has never been a team that has won and been even remotely successful who did not have to sacrifice. To be the best you have to work the hardest; to work the hardest you have to work the longest; and, while you are working the longest, you need to work the smartest. All these things working together provide you a shot to do something special because you have sacrificed so much. In fact, some coaches would argue that your success depends on your sacrifice, and most of the time they are right.

We can learn from the sacrifices of athletes to practice and play sports by looking at the nature of the sacrifice – it is **voluntary**. With the exception of professional athletes, amateur athletes all over the country willingly volunteer their bodies, efforts and time to the great good of the team so that, if molded together properly, the team might benefit. In His ministry on earth, Jesus emphasized His voluntary spirit in making the ultimate sacrifice. *"The Son of man also came . . . to give his life as a ransom for many."* The sacrifice was voluntary, not compulsory. God did not force Him to lay down His life — He chose to do so (compare John 10:11). In truth, Jesus gives us no real philosophy on this or any other element of His sacrifice. He simply states over and over that He is choosing to be the lamb that was slain in order for His father in heaven to be glorified.

Paul also emphasizes the voluntary sacrifice of Christ in Galatians 2:20. You see, this isn't a role player who never gets in the game who says that he will give his life, this is the star of stars who trades in His stardom for the bench of sin. The MVPs of MVPs, the all-star of all-stars, says that He will lay his 33-year perfect career aside to pick up the filth and grime of the cross for you, one who has no ability within yourself at all. Talk about sacrifice! There is no greater sacrifice than one's life — and He offered His voluntarily, without complaining and considered it great joy (Hebrews 12:2). If there is any question about sacrifice, compare **that** to what you gave on the field today. Or better yet, anything you feel you have ever had to give up for the betterment of the team, and it will pale in comparison to the sacrifice He gave. If athletes are who they say they are, they should be able to understand sacrifice. Just knowing the sacrifice Christ made was for you ought to be enough to give you a burning desire to both live out and share your faith. So keeping in mind what a sacrifice He made, go and make disciples!

### ***PLAY HARD . . .***

Fourth, in this line of attributes for a sold-out Christian athlete is the idea of playing hard. If you have even the slightest knowledge of sports history, you might know that athletics did not begin in America like most Americans believe. In fact, in the days of Paul the apostle, it was obvious in his writings that athletics were being practiced and performed

regularly in the societies he ministered to. Although I doubt they were giving out million-dollar Adidas contracts, they were still a prominent factor in society as they are today. In fact, many historians argue that the ancient Greeks and Romans might have geared their whole calendars around athletics — something that seems like a regular occurrence in American households today.

So, if they had them then and we have them now, what can we learn? A lot! This is what God through the apostle Paul says that our walks with Him should be like: ***“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way to get the prize.”*** (1 Corinthians 9:23) From that verse the command to Christians is obvious, run to win the prize! However, the question that should follow for those truly wanting to honor God is, what does the ***“in such a way”*** part of the command mean? What does someone who is running to win do? Sure, you can be in the race and finish with the rest of the pack and nobody will ever notice, but what does that do? Well, one thing I guarantee that athletes who are training to win do . . . they prepare! Great athletes set out a schedule that if followed will prepare them to be in the best possible shape for race day. So then, the question for us spiritually is: Are we preparing appropriately? Are we setting out a schedule that, if it is followed diligently, we will be growing spiritually and prepared to face a sinful world?

Another thing athletes do who are training to win . . . they let the race consume them. Their diet, their clothing, their sleep habits, and everything they do become wrapped up in the race so that they might have a shot at victory. As Christians, often times we are not consumed by the race. Sure, we are saved and going to heaven and we love Jesus and all, but we do not let our training consume us. Who we are with (great runners run with other great runners), what we think (if we think we can win souls for Him, we can), and how we react to many tough situations will show others whether our training has consumed us. Christian athletes who are truly sold out for the cause of Christ are running in such a way that others will be drawn to the ultimate prize which is eternity with God in heaven.

### ***IT’S NOT ABOUT YOU . . .***

Finally, as the much documented book ***The Purpose Driven Life*** by Rick Warren puts it, you must understand that if you are chosen to play on Christ’s team, “it is not about you.” Teamwork is a common component amongst all of the Christian athletes not only in this country, but around the world. In our sinful nature we desire for things to be about us, which is self-glorification and self-love. This is something that we are seeing a lot, even in the church today, which is scary. However, the Bible provides us with verse after verse that falls in line with the concept of teamwork and opposes individualism. (See Luke 9:23, Matt. 5:3-11)

For an example, let’s look at the dynamics of baseball. You see, when you are on a baseball team, all of the positions on the field are highly dependent upon the other positions to be successful. The play cannot happen without the pitcher who has to throw the ball, and no play would go anywhere after that moment if there was not a catcher to receive the pitch. However, if the ball is hit on the ground to third base, all of a sudden

the pitcher and the catcher are relying on the third baseman to pick up the ball. Then, if the third baseman picks the ball up, he is then dependant on the first baseman to cover first base where the runner is headed. Meanwhile, the right fielder and the second baseman are sprinting to back up the first baseman just in case there is a bad throw. Wow. All that to make an out? Not to mention the umpire who handed the ball to the pitcher at the beginning of the game and the first base umpire who called the runner out. And what about the coach who made all the calls to make that whole play possible? The process is amazing and yet at the end of the play the scorekeeper writes 5-3. Only two people get the credit for several people's work . . . that's not right, is it?

In the body of Christ there is simply no time for worrying about credit. Athletes daily buy into the concept of teamwork and the concept of togetherness with their teammates who they may not even get along with outside of the field. So how then should the body of Christ who loves each other greater than they love themselves act toward one another? It should be completely selfless and filled with willing sacrifices which are not kept in a file for future use. It should be joy beyond the wildest stretch of the imagination that is desirable to others who look from the outside in. And most of all, it should be centered on one thing — Christ.

All teams have a unified goal, something they come together on, and something they sweat and bleed for. Ours, my friends, is Christ. Nothing else! We come together to talk, learn, praise, honor, publicize and to raise up one thing — and that is Christ. Where individuals come in is only to use the unique abilities and talents that God gave them to give Him glory. Other than that, the word “individual” should be a banned word amongst believers. We are a team, with one purpose, and we will do it well.

God through us wins souls not games, and we will continue playing hard until the “coach of all coaches” comes back to get us. Christian athletes know that before a game when they lace ‘um up, it is not about them — it is all about their Savior and giving Him glory. Is that how *you* live?