

TEAM CHAPLAIN COMBINING WITH A HIGHER POWER TO IMPACT TECH'S FOOTBALL PROGRAM

By Jimmy Robertson



Johnny Shelton, Tech's football team chaplain, delivered a prayer before the Hokies took the field in every game this past season.

Roughly 25 years ago, Frank Beamer, then a young sprit of a coach at Murray State, recruited a particularly talented defensive back in hopes of luring the young man to the bluegrass state.

The young man ended up going to Missouri briefly before transferring to Southeast Missouri State, and there, he ended up facing Beamer and the Racers on an annual basis, even occasionally tormenting the man who tried to convince him that Murray, Ky., should have been his future home.

But two decades and many fourth quarters later, Beamer got the chance to recruit this man again. And fortunately for him and for Virginia Tech's program, the outcome was different.

Last April, thanks to a little heart-tugging from the Lord and a little arm-twisting from Beamer, Johnny Shelton relocated to Blacksburg from Greensboro, N.C., to continue his work for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and also to serve as the football team's chaplain. He previously worked as an area director for the FCA in Greensboro while also doubling as Elon's team chaplain. And he also had worked as Tech's team chaplain for a couple of games in 2006 and then in 2007, driving up from Greensboro for game weekends.

But Beamer saw a need for a full-time presence – and landed his No. 1 target.

"You know, we have a great strength and conditioning program and a nutritionist and a psychiatrist," Beamer said. "I just really felt like it was important to have someone here whom the kids could talk to and someone they could talk to about their Christian beliefs.

"This had been in the works for a while. I thought it was necessary and it's all turned out better than I ever could have hoped."

"God was going to have to make it totally clear that I needed to come here," Shelton said. "In January of 2007, I went out to San Antonio for the coaches convention and the FCA held a breakfast there for all the coaches. Then I got on the plane to leave and my seat mate happened to be Coach Beamer. That was kind of clear to me at that point.

"Coach Beamer and I had a conversation on the plane. He explained to me that he was really interested in building the character of the players at this point in his career. We had a heart-to-heart talk on the plane, and it was clear that was the direction we needed to go."

While Shelton shuns any sort of publicity and attention, his impact on this team has

been nothing short of dramatic since he became the Hokies' chaplain. Call it what you want – counseling, ministering, mentoring – but the Lord appears to be working through Shelton to capture the attention of a lot of the players on the team, and the numbers continue to grow.

"Johnny's having such a positive impact," said Tyrod Taylor, one of the Hokies' more religious players. "The thing with Johnny is he's always open and available. You can trust him with your problems and he's not going to share that with anyone. You can e-mail him or call him or text him. He's always going to reply back and try to help you."

In 2007, when he served as Tech's team chaplain, Shelton started a "share" time the night before football games, a time in which he allowed the players to pick a topic – any topic – and then they discussed it. The meeting lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, and at the end, Shelton usually picked out a Biblical verse that related to the topic.

Then, on game days, he would hold a chapel service before the game. That was pretty much the extent of the ministry for the 2007 season.

But he has gradually begun to expand it. He continued the share time this past fall,

and even with the season over, he and the players still meet once a week, usually in the team meeting room in the Merryman Center. There, they discuss a wide range of topics, including girlfriends, family issues, parents divorcing, fathers having a drinking problem, anger problems, frustration over a lack of playing time, among many others.

The number of players attending the meetings continues to grow – only 12 showed up at the first meeting, but more than 50 show up now on a routine basis. It's a completely volunteer situation as well. No player is forced to come to the meetings or to speak, and interestingly, Shelton doesn't force religion upon the players. Instead, he patiently waits until God opens the door and uses him in the way He wants.

"I don't call it a Bible study because that immediately turns guys away, guys who have never been in church," Shelton said. "This is just an open dialogue to get those guys to share what is going on in their lives.

"As we sit in the meetings and a guy starts to share his heart and things that are going on and things that the guys knew nothing about, they all get closer. It's like, 'Man, I did not know you were going through that.' The ones who are stronger in their faith pray for them, and other guys may be going through something similar. It creates a bond that has nothing to do with football."

The share times aren't all doom and gloom. In fact, Shelton makes it a point to open the meetings on a positive note, encouraging the players to share something positive that occurred in their lives that week.

"We open every meeting with a praise report where they share the good things that are happening," he said. "We don't want everything to be somber. Now it's not a surprise when I get a text from a player sharing the good things that have been happening. I got a text recently where a player told me that his brother got a job. We had been praying for his brother, and he was really happy for his brother. It's not just the issues that they're sharing. Now they're sharing the good things, too."

Shelton, who played in the NFL with San Francisco and Atlanta, also meets with players individually. During the fall, the football staff cleared out an office for him in the Merryman Center to allow him to spend some one-on-one time with players who want or need to talk with him. He often exchanges text messages and phone calls during off hours and he routinely eats lunch with them.

"I meet with the players. I have lunch with them. Just all kinds of things to build relationships," Shelton said. "That's the No. 1 thing, building relationships. Everything is

not spiritual. A lot of it is being a role model and a mentor."

He also holds a share time for Tech's coaching staff, with the format being the same as the players' time. He picks a particular topic, they discuss it and then he picks out a Bible verse that relates to the topic.

"That's been good," Beamer said. "Looking back at last season, the end results were good, but we had a hard season. We had a lot of difficult times. Johnny's a guy who was able to say the right things at the right time. He's not from the outside, but he's someone who could see things from a different perspective and I thought that was good for our staff."

"The strategy is the same," Shelton said. "My main goal is to stir them [the coaches] up and make them think about the direction of where they're going. We talk about their relationships with their wives and with the players. I'm challenging them to go beyond the wins and the losses and get to know the players on a personal level. That's going to make the players want to play harder for them. That's what I'm getting from the players. My share time with the coaches is based on what I'm getting from the players and vice versa."

In addition to holding meetings with the players and the coaches – both one-on-one and in groups – Shelton takes players out into the community as part of an outreach program. Recently, a person called into the football office looking for former quarterback Bryan Randall to speak to a group at a church in Roanoke on Super Bowl Sunday. Randall wasn't accessible, but Shelton suggested Kenny Lewis Jr., and he and Lewis ended up taking a group of Tech players, who, by all accounts, enjoyed the occasion.

Groups of players have also visited other churches in Roanoke and the New River Valley, and a group recently traversed to Roanoke to meet with some at-risk youth. Shelton wants to do one community outreach event each month.

"I tell them, 'You're not here for football,'" Shelton said. "The coaches probably don't want to hear that, but in reality, they're here for more than that because of the influence they have. They're starting to believe that.

"We're hitting the community and doing little things here and there and trying to uplift younger kids. More and more guys are doing that. They're using their influence to encourage other people."

Ultimately, there are no limitations to how large and successful God's work among the football team and the athletics department can be.

"I can see this going to other teams because the other teams need it," Shelton said.


"The women's basketball team, they need a woman chaplain. I've done some things with the women's team, but there's only so much I can do as a male. So I can see things going that way where it'd be nice for all the teams to have that chaplain there.

"I don't know what's going to happen, but it'll be exciting to see. We won't know until years from now. I tell them [the football players] all the time that I'm interested in seeing them become husbands and fathers. That's when we're going to know."

Given what has been transpiring, the answer certainly seems pretty obvious. Everyone knows that Beamer has recruited plenty of great players for success on the field over the course of more than 20 years. Now, he's recruited a blue chipper in Shelton to help mold the character of those players for success off it.

"I don't think the inner workings of our team have ever been better," Beamer said. "When you see the results and the chemistry on this team, it's been great, and a lot of that is because he relates to the kids and they relate to him. It's been good for the kids."

Not that Shelton's taking any credit, mind you.

"I let God open the door for the timing, His timing," he said. "And He does it. It's been great how it's working out." 



Johnny Shelton worked for the FCA in Greensboro before moving to Blacksburg last spring.