

Training the Coach and Coaching the Trainer

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Today I will examine the importance of the coach in modern sport, discuss ways the Church may better serve the coach, highlight some examples of how coaches can be Gospel witnesses, and discuss how coaches are influencing players and their communities for good. My goal is to provide a compelling case for the proposition that a coach can and should incorporate the Gospel message into his or her coaching approach and that by so doing he or she will increase the chances for success.

The coach stands as the visible face and very manifestation of the team and also a connective tissue between the players and the management. It is correctly stated that a coach, as coach, has never scored a goal, crossed a finish line, hit a ball, or done anything measurable to win a game. Yet, no one could imagine the sheer anarchy and chaos that would result without a coach. For anyone who has ever played sports, the term “coach” has especial resonance. It may be packed with strong positive or negative connotations based on our experiences, but nonetheless, the very thought of a former coach evokes strong emotions many years after he or she was a daily presence in our lives. As such, his or her visibility and influence is quite considerable in the sporting world.

Beyond the athletic field, the term “coach” is being increasingly applied in scholastic settings and in the corporate world. Today, even individuals employ so-called life coaches to guide them in making personal decisions. Most large corporations utilize leadership training so their brand message percolates to all of the organization and even to its consumers. They refer to this phenomenon as “the multiplier effect”. In sports, the multiplier effect of the coach is enormous as it not only percolates to the whole team but even to the general public because of the widespread interest in sports.

I am honored to have been asked to speak today on the importance of coaches and also to have been associated with the Church and Sport Section of the Council since almost the very founding of the Office by St. John Paul II in 2004. I remember the excellent introduction by His Eminence Cardinal Rylko in 2005 at our very first conference echoing John Paul II in proclaiming Sports as a Christian mission field. I remember Bishop Clemens noted how the Church's teachings on the human person would be essential to evangelize the world of sport. Pope Benedict XVI offered his insights on how Christ and the Church must enlighten every aspect of humanity including sports. Over the years, these conferences have provided the important testimony of noted theologians, philosophers, and scholars on the role of the mission of the Church in sports. Further, athletes, coaches, and other sports participants have provided real and genuine insights from the field of play.

We hope and pray today's gathering will bring us further down the road of integrating the essential teachings of the Church into the world of sports. Towards this end, we should turn to one of our greatest weapons against evil – the virtue of humility – and re-examine how we may improve our evangelization efforts in the world of sports. As such, I humbly suggest we have much to learn from the secular world about its methodology for influencing sports. Nike understands athletes as persons and therefore has crafted an appealing and accepted message that captures the sporting world's imagination.

Nike founder Phil Knight refers to anyone with a body as an athlete. An interesting, provocative, and enlightening description we should take to heart. It is not a coincidence that St. John Paul II developed a rich and beautiful theology of the body and also founded the Vatican office of Church and Sport. He had a passion for enlightening the world of sports with the divine plan for harmonizing body, mind and soul as athletes for Christ. Since Nike's foundational principle also starts with the body, it is not terribly surprising Nike adopts, if not expropriates, Christian principles and values to promote its products. For example, its well-known "Just Do It" slogan is but another way of paraphrasing St. Francis of Assisi's advice to "preach the Gospel at all times, when necessary use words." In 2007, Nike launched a "Witness" marketing campaign featured

NBA superstar LeBron James. The specific phrase used was “We are all witnesses”. Indeed we are but perhaps to even a greater presence than LeBron. Especially ironic, one of the most well-known and successful Nike slogans and campaign is simply called “Cross-Training”. It does not take a lot of imagination to see the Christocentric aspect and appeal of this term in sports. In the course of this presentation, I will interject thoughts and suggestions of ways we should reclaim these Christological references and allusions for sport ministry and evangelization.

Catholic Athletes for Christ is a Catholic sports ministry, which serves professional sporting teams in the United States by providing the sacraments of the Church through a cadre of engaged and charismatic priest chaplains. Without this ministry, most coaches and players would not have the ability to attend Sunday Mass because of the all-consuming nature of professional sports. As a practical matter, it is the coach who decides whether to have a chaplain at all and then who to select for that role. So clearly there is a symbiotic relationship; we can only serve the team to the extent we are permitted by the coach to serve.

Our ministry experience suggests there is no substitute for the presence of the priest chaplains (or even our lay evangelists) with the team. This harkens back again to St Francis’s pithy saying about preaching through actions in addition to the explicit preaching of the Gospel. The chaplain’s ministry hopefully evolves beyond providing just the sacraments to being a visible sign of Christ and the Church for all aspects of the team’s work. For example, CAC Board Member and Green Bay Packers Chaplain Father Jim Baraniak is a continuing presence in the locker room, on the practice field, and during the game in Green Bay. Father Jim’s brilliant white Norbertine habit is a very visible presence of Christ on the sidelines during the game and his garb reminds some of the Holy Father himself! Father Jim has become a close and trusted advisor to every Green Bay Packers head coach he has served in almost 20 years of sports ministry. As such, he and the other priest chaplains serve an invaluable role in assisting the coach perform his duties and carry out his responsibilities.

CAC Board Members and friends, Coach Jack Del Rio of the NFL's Oakland Raiders and his wife Linda, have not only made selection of their priest chaplain a priority but have taken numerous other explicit steps to ensure their team will be infused with a strong foundation of faith. They have done this by selecting assistant coaches of great character and virtue, encouraging these coaches to transmit a strong faith-based message to the team and engaging in numerous charitable giving events including with the Knights of Columbus and other faith based charities. As such, the Del Rios serve as a shining example for other Catholic coaches to consider in fully utilizing the bully pulpit they have been blessed to occupy. Further they are personally courageous witnesses for Christ speaking explicitly about their Catholic faith and also implementing it to address many of the problems such as use of illegal drugs and domestic spousal abuse that have plagued the NFL in the recent years.

As the Del Rios understand, a coach has an almost unequaled platform for good because of the visibility of a professional team. Coach Bill Lazor of the Miami Dolphins shared with me a story to relate to all of you today which I believe emphasizes this point. Many years ago as a young coach with a strong desire to evangelize he asked his parish priest whether he could serve Christ better by leaving the coaching profession to become a youth minister. The priest counseled him to remain in coaching with the sage advice that youth ministers all over the world would love to have the opportunity afforded him as coach to speak to a group of youngsters who are eager to hear his every word. The coach at all levels has the almost undivided attention and respect of young men and women. Hardly any other profession or walk of life can claim such an opportunity to witness to young impressionable minds. Here again we can recall the Nike "Witness" marketing campaign and see the immediate parallel: LeBron James and the coach of a team have captured an "audience through sports". In the context of my presentation and our conference, we certainly hope the coach's witness goes beyond selling athletic shoes and apparel.

Legendary collegiate basketball coach John Wooden, who won 10 national championships in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s with UCLA, saw this platform as an opportunity to mentor his players and preferred being thought of as a teacher more than as coach.

Wooden's own "mentors" were St. Teresa of Calcutta and Abraham Lincoln. He read every book about them he could find and tried to apply their lessons for life to his team and all the young men who he coached over his 29-year coaching career. Even though he was widely acclaimed as one of the most successful coaches of all time, Wooden embraced Mother Teresa's adage, "that we cannot do great things but only small things for God." From both St. Teresa and Abraham Lincoln, Wooden learned, and then taught, humility and most especially placing concern for others ahead of your own personal well-being.

At the age of 72, Jack McKeon led Major League Baseball's Florida Marlins to a World Series championship in 2003. Jack is a daily communicant and CAC member who shared with me that he always viewed success more in terms of the personal and spiritual development of his players than by his record for wins and losses. He publicly speaks about his intense devotion to St. Therese of Lisieux. McKeon tells that when he has a tough decision to make it is "The Little Flower" whom he asks for guidance.

The mentors chosen by Wooden and McKeon provide a helpful model to us as we try to serve the coaching community to assist them to serve their teams and the world of sport. The aforementioned Coach Lazor surprised a group of our priest chaplains and me one day by sharing with us that he was reading the works of St. John of the Cross and trying to apply them to his football life. (He did not offer any specifics, but we assumed his team may have been dealing with adversity.)

The important lesson for us then is philosophers, politicians, theologians, teachers, pontiffs, and, of course, saints can and should be mentors for sports even though many of these "role models" never stepped on a playing field. St. Sebastian, the patron saint for sport, did not play or coach as far as we know but he was no doubt an athlete for Christ. As an early martyr for

the faith, he was literally a witness for Christ. Again, when the platform of coach is used to witness to faith, eternal truths, and virtues, the world of sports is edified and uplifted.

The influence of the coach can be something that stays with an athlete his whole life. Darrell Miller, another CAC Board Member and former professional baseball player, speaks with love and admiration of his collegiate coach whose lessons of life impacted him his whole life. Darrell speaks movingly of how his coach preached a message of reaching out to others and always reflecting upon the fact that our actions, behaviors, and character traits will influence at least one person and probably more each day. This message took root with Darrell to such an extent that he now heads Major League Baseball's Urban Youth Academy. The mission of the academy is to reinvigorate baseball in the most impoverished sections of inner city America. Each and every day, Darrell positively influences future professional players because his coach influenced him so greatly over three decades ago.

One of the most successful American football coaches of all time – Amos Alonzo Stagg – burned with a desire to be a preacher. Unfortunately he had a severe stammering problem and lacked the most important gift of a preacher – the ability to preach. Again in the tradition of St. Francis, Stagg decided he would “preach” on the athletic field! His character, integrity, and virtue were so widely acclaimed that one day when the officials (referees) did not show up for the game, the *opposing* team asked Stagg to officiate the game. Stories of his love for his players was innumerable and when asked once if a certain one of his stellar teams was his best of all time, he replied, “Ask me again in 20 years or 30 years when we see what type of men they have become.” Stagg was named coach of the year at 81 years of age and coached athletes until his 96th birthday.

In examining this very important topic of educating coaches and their influence in sports, we must inevitably grapple with the issue of success. We have seen stories of extremely successful coaches who did not equate their value with wins and losses. Yet, at the professional level, and perhaps at the amateur, Olympic, and scholastic levels also, there is tremendous pressure to

win. As a practical matter, very few coaches can retain their jobs and platforms if they do not consistently produce victories on the field. While it is uplifting and refreshing to hear stories of great coaches who were not primarily motivated by winning, they provide little actual solace to a coach whose family's support and well-being depends on his performance on the field.

Certainly, we can offer hope to coaches who face this real dilemma by showing the example of the many historically successful coaches who were sustained by a deep and abiding faith in Christ and a commitment to personal virtue and prayer. Still, the distorting influence of money, entertainment, and power in sports can tempt us to believe these examples of the past are not relevant for today. Father Jim Baraniak offers an interesting and, I believe relevant, story of a personal exchange he recently had with current Green Bay Packers head coach Mike McCarthy. By any measure, McCarthy is quite successful having captured his sports highest prize, the Super Bowl, and almost always bringing his team to post-season competition.

Father Jim noted to McCarthy that all the players on Packers would "run though a brick wall for him." Coach McCarthy absorbed the comment for a moment and instead of dismissing it in a show of false humility, he agreed they would. He then added, "but that is only because I would run through a brick wall for them first!" In other words, Coach McCarthy is saying he loved his players first and therefore they love him.

This brief yet powerful exchange offers us an insight and a road map to addressing the vexing problem of having to win to retain your position. Precisely because the coach loves his players they not only reciprocate, but play harder to win. While most players would play hard to win even if they detested their coach, loving the coach elicits maximum effort and desire on the field. Therefore, if a coach demonstrates his love for team on a daily basis by his actions, his witness may be considered a competitive benefit although the term greatly understates the power of playing your best for another.

So what you may ask does this mean? I humbly suggest this means everything from a Christian perspective. We know from both Sacred Scripture and experience “God is Love” (1 John 4:8). While it may sound odd and contrived to believe love is an important component for sport – more precisely for winning at sport, it is our bedrock foundation of faith that we must propose as the solution to all problems including those of sports.

Undoubtedly, secular commentators will be tempted to scoff at the suggestion that love (charity) should be the operational principle for sport. However, such skepticism is an opportunity for dialogue. Let us look at the story of another Green Bay Packers head coach – the legendary Vince Lombardi – who is considered to be one of the greatest coaches of all time. Lombardi was a good man and like all of us he had flaws. His coaching style was dictatorial, gruff and demanding, and, on occasion, he was captured uttering profanities on the sideline. No doubt, love is not the first thing most people would think about when they remember Lombardi and his legacy. In fact, the first thing most people think of is a quote attributed to Lombardi on winning: “Winning is not the only thing, *winning is everything*” (emphasis added). While there is considerable evidence the quote did not originate with Lombardi, it has become accepted in popular lore as his and sadly it has been used by others as a rationalization for breaking the rules, using illegal drugs and doping, and all other types of immoral and illegal acts all in the name of winning.

Vince Lombardi detested any efforts to break the rules in the name of winning and tried to clarify that his “famous” quote on winning was simply meant to say putting forth maximum effort to win is the only thing, not the result of winning. The personal and spiritual side of this coaching legend is unfortunately not well-known. He was a devout practicing Catholic all his life. He served as an altar boy and seriously considered entering the seminary before dedicating his life to coaching. Even while head coach, he always attended daily mass and served as the Eucharistic minister at his local parish. When then Packers Chaplain Norbertine Father Dennis Burke was asked by an indignant parishioner how he could allow the profane sideline tyrant of the Packers to distributing the most Holy Eucharist, Father Burke famously

replied with a twinkle in his eye, “Can you imagine how much worse his sideline rants would be if he wasn’t going to daily Mass?”

Author David Maraniss provides an excellent description of Lombardi’s inherent Catholicism:

“The current of sports and spirituality within him converge at a deeper point than mere rhetoric. The fundamental principles that he used in coaching – repetition, discipline, clarity, faith, subsuming individual ego to a larger good – were merely an extension of the religious ethic he learned from the Jesuits. In that sense, he made no distinction between the practice of the religion and the sport of football.”

Lombardi was not a proselytizer and he did not invoke God or Sacred Scripture in his locker room talks and may never have told his players he loved them. However, in his own way, Lombardi was preaching the Gospel at all times. It is quite striking and moving to listen to the regard Lombardi’s former players have for the man who was their coach. Almost all speak with deep reverence and sincere love for him. No doubt, as with current Packers coach Mike McCarthy, they loved him because he loved them first.

Volunteer high school football coach Joe Ehrmann has been described as the most important coach in the United States. Although a former professional football player, he is an ordained minister and explicitly preaches the gospel of love to his team. His mission statement speaks of helping boys become men of integrity and empathy to change the world for good. He tells his players on a daily basis that he loves them and that they are *required* to love one another. Ehrmann describes his coaching style as “transformative” as contrasted with the vast majority of “transactional” coaches. He explicitly states and demonstrates he is more concerned with developing men of character who grow to make the world a better place than with wins and losses. His football team has been quite successful on the field also in terms of wins and losses.

In addition to teaching and preaching love, Erhmann also has introduced an expansive view of community that provides a good model for other coaches and teams. It involves an intentional recognition that the teams' actions have a large ripple effect for both good and evil in the community. We have a similar recognition with the Del Rios in Oakland and their selfless commitment to share their blessings with the less fortunate and to speak unequivocally against social wrongs and bad player behavior. In fact, this empathetic focus fully allows Christian charity to play an intentional role in sports.

CAC, in partnership with the Knights of Columbus, Special Olympics, the NFL, and many coaches and players through the United States have begun working to create a broader understanding and welcoming environment for athletes with both physical and intellectual disabilities to be included in the world of sport. It is through this truly Catholic principle of inclusion rather than exclusion that light of Christ will serve as a beacon for sports.

A sports story from the Special Olympics recounted by Coach Erhmann in his book *Inside Out Coaching* demonstrates how success in sports can be defined in new and uplifting ways. Nine athletes with mental disabilities lined up for a 100-meter race as their "huggers" waited at the finish line encouraging them onward. One of racers fell during the race and started to cry. The other eight racers stopped running and went back to comfort to their fallen colleague. A girl with Down Syndrome hugged the fallen racer and asked if he was feeling better. All nine competitors held hands and skipped together to the finish line as the crowd cheered loudly. Certainly the definition of "winning" was expanded and refined on the track that day.

Pope Francis has preached often on the Christian obligation to adopt an expansive view of community and of family and he has told us that the family is the "privileged place for the transmission of the faith." In a very real sense our parents are our first "coaches". If our families are properly modeled on the Holy Family of Nazareth, they will provide us with a means for salvation. To a great degree even at the professional level in sports, there is much to be gained by reintroducing a familial view of the coach and the players.

Coaches often say their teams and player are like family to them. The 1979 Pittsburgh Pirates won the World Championship of baseball buoyed by the rallying theme “We are Family,” that captured the hearts and the imagination of a city. A little later today we will see the movie “When the Game Stands Tall” and learn the story of legendary De La Salle High School football coach Bob Ladouceur and his team’s incomparable 151-game winning streak. The compelling story of his record winning streak and championships pales in comparison to his insistence players place love for teammates above individual records and accomplishments. As coach Lad states in the film, “Family isn’t just blood relatives.” Indeed, we should see all of our teams as family, as Holy Families guided by the love of the Holy Trinity – the first family of love.

Please pay special attention as you view the film to the scene when Coach Ladouceur takes the whole team to a veteran’s hospital. Much like the story from the Special Olympics race, it captures the essence of community and family better than words can describe. A struggling team filled with big egos and selfish goals and desires becomes transformed as they awaken to the realization that the real heroes in life are those who freely give of themselves to help others. This visit allowed the team to come together in love on the field because they began to grasp the essence of love in the hospital that day.

In sum, we should raise our collective voice to propose a Christian view of coaching and also a Christian perspective on winning and losing. We must proclaim our Christian perspective on sports with great charity but also great confidence because “Cross-Training”, properly understood, provides the most valuable lesson in love. Namely, God so loved us he sent his “athlete” Jesus Christ to win our battle with evil and join him in eternity. In doing this, we must rebut the perception that adhering to Christian values and virtues and the full Gospel message is an impediment to success. We do not win despite our faith but because of it! Loving others is the essence of a Christ-centered life and the measure of success here and in eternity. When, and only when, we understand this truth shall we be true athletes for Christ.

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