

# On Ministry and Football (Part 3)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

In the previous installments of this series, I described how I was blessed to be part of football programs, in both high school and college, that ascended from the depths of despair to championship seasons during my final years on each of those teams.

I don't know how my experience in football would have affected me differently if I had played only on losing teams—where losses were predictable, or even excused. I can't say what I would have learned from that, or even if I would have continued making the sacrifices to play this very demanding sport—especially all the way through college.

What I do know is how profoundly the opportunities that I had in football prepared me for life and ministry—all in the providence of God. As I get older and look back with the added perspective that time brings, I see all of that so much more clearly.

In each context, I was privileged to be part of teams that endured many losses early on—but under coaches who simply would not accept losing as a habit.

You see, if we are not prepared for it, winning can teach us very little—except, perhaps, that we are ready for greater challenges. But winning too soon may leave an athlete less appreciative of victory, when compared to someone who has had to struggle through losing first. Winning too easily may tempt one to become overconfident, or to rest on past accomplishments, rather than gaining determination from the desperation that losing can bring.

I understand why we sometimes hear high-profile athletes describe the emptiness they feel after winning the biggest games of their lives. Sometimes, in fact, the best that they can sense is relief.

Surely those expressions of emptiness are inflated by the fact that the athlete has spent himself physically, mentally, emotionally—even spiritually. But he is also verbalizing his frustration with the fact that ... there are no greater challenges to meet.

Losing, on the other hand, can provide a very precious experience. And once a losing team begins to turn things around ... begins to taste victory ... to realize that the *big dogs* have started to take them seriously—that's when it really gets exciting! And that is especially when losses can become incredibly instructive.

There are few feelings in life that compare with suffering a close loss in a significant contest.

This lesson may impact us individually as well as corporately. Looking back on eight years of football, I can reminisce about making several memorable plays. I can relive the hardest hit I ever sustained—a head-to-head collision with a blitzing linebacker (in which, I'm glad to say, I held my ground). But then there are those plays that sneak into

my memory, sometimes late at night. Blown assignments ... missed blocks. When you play offensive tackle, your failures are easily noticed—and can be quite painful for your quarterback, as well as shameful for you.

And, as it is in athletics, so it is in life, and in ministry. It is in those moments when we feel the cutting edge that lies between victory and defeat ... and end up falling defeated ... that we must purpose to learn from our losses. Only when we cast away all excuses, muster the courage to face our mistakes, own them for what they are and resolve to profit from them, can we truly improve. In that instant, we actually draw energy out of our defeat. This newfound intensity allows us to plant our feet solidly on the floor, declaring, “This will never happen again!”

Two Scripture verses, especially, flood my mind at such times. The first is Micah 7:8:

Do not rejoice over me, my enemy;  
When I fall, I will arise;  
When I sit in darkness,  
The LORD *will be* a light to me.

The second is Proverbs 24:16:

For a righteous *man* may fall seven times  
And rise again,  
But the wicked shall fall by calamity.

I remember vividly the aftermath of my final game in college—an away game, but against another school (at that time, Northwestern College) in Watertown. We used our own locker rooms at Maranatha for that game.

I remember walking across the field after I left the locker room for the final time, and meeting Coach Price. All he said to me—with a smile on his face—was, “Co-champs.”

We were ... conference co-champions!

I remember driving home for the weekend, listening to college football on the radio, and thinking to myself, “Co-champs.”

I remember feeling satisfied, grateful ... and blessed.

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