

On Ministry and Football (Part 1)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

With Memorial Day now past, it's time to think about ... football! At least that's the way that I approached it when I was in college.

God gave me the wonderful opportunity to play football for eight years in two Christian schools—four at Winnebago Lutheran Academy in Fond du Lac, Wis., and four at Maranatha Baptist Bible College in Watertown, Wis.

The lessons that I learned on the football field are innumerable, such that I cannot imagine my life without them—and they continue to impact me on a daily basis.

In my summers in college, Memorial Day was the unofficial beginning of my football season. That stretch between coming home from school and Memorial Day was sort of a bonus—time to rest and relax. But once Memorial Day was over, I knew that summer would be flying by. The weeks would disappear quickly, and I needed to prepare because, soon enough, I would be back out under the hot sun in full pads.

Memorial Day still evokes those feelings for me, so I thought I would take this opportunity to share a series of articles on some of the lessons I learned playing football that apply to the Christian life in general, and to Christian ministry in particular.

I want to make it clear, right up front, that I was really never a gifted athlete. Growing up, I was usually the slowest runner in everything I attempted. In grade school, we would play a game at recess where the last person to get to the corner of the playground would start out as *it*. I never counted, because I was always last and no one thought that I could tag anyone out anyway.

When I got to freshman football, the only position available to someone with such a deficiency of speed was offensive tackle. Fortunately, I possessed the size for that role, so I learned to play the position in which I would continue for eight years.

In high school, I was blessed to be part of a football program that went from nearly complete obscurity to an undefeated season and a state championship in four years. I started on the junior varsity team as a sophomore, but I was a backup on varsity as a junior and senior. I lettered both of those years, but I missed a third of our championship senior season due to a separated shoulder. I did not play extensively, except on special teams. I did actually touch the ball in the state championship game, though—when I recovered an onside kick.

Earlier, I had dreamed of playing small college football, but by the end of that championship game, I resigned myself to the fact that my athletic career was over.

I planned to go to Moody Bible Institute in Chicago the next fall. But after attending a summer school course there, I quickly determined that the big city was not quite ready

for me—and I made a last-minute decision to attend Maranatha Baptist Bible College in Watertown, Wis., instead.

On a tour of Maranatha with my parents, I met the head football coach, Terry Price. He would ultimately become the man I would mean whenever I simply say, “Coach.”

Coach Price was the speaker in 2019 when I was ordained (something I had never yet accomplished) and commissioned to serve with The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry. I am so thankful that he was able to do that because, less than nine months later, he left us all suddenly to go to be with Christ. I was in a hotel in Cadiz, Ohio, when I heard the news, and I cried like a baby.

It’s often been said that you can tell that a coach has real interest in your development as a player if he’s yelling at you in practice. If that’s true, then Coach Price must have been seriously interested in me! He was definitely *old school*, all the way ... and I’m the better man for it today.

I’m grateful that I was able to earn letters in all four seasons of college football at Maranatha. I started at least one game each year, and as a senior—when we earned a share of the conference co-championship—I started every game. It’s not that there weren’t others around who were stronger and much faster than me who, quite frankly, could have helped any football team more than I could. But I did have one distinct advantage over all of those guys: I showed up.

You see, during a football career like this you run into some fellows who really show up *big time*—in April. They’re ready to dominate in the fall, and plan to be in the best shape of their lives. Funny thing is, many of them never make it to the point of digging their cleats into the burnt grass of August.

The one and only secret to my ability to have a college football career ... is that I stuck it out. And I can still hear Coach Price yelling, “Don’t quit!!!” And I can still hear him reading Gal. 6:9 from the New Testament that he brought to football meetings:

And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.

A person once asked me if I would play football again—knowing all that I do about it today. Lord willing, you will come to understand why I definitely would as we move through the future installments in this series.

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