

Introduction

(The Kickoff)

I will never forget the feeling of sitting down on the cold concrete floor of our weight room, getting our first talk from the head coach. I remember the smell of my helmet and watching the sun break out across the treetops early in the morning as we walked up the hill to the field for the first half of our two-a-day practices. Football cleats make a distinct sound when they clatter across concrete, and I recall how the freshly cut grass would stick to our calf muscles from the dew on the field. The metal facemask I had would occasionally make sounds, reminding me that I was at least partly protected inside my equipment. It was not long before the sounds of whistles and the coach's voice echoed out across the open field, directing us through our stretching routines. I remember one time I just stopped everything for a moment to survey my teammates and thought to myself, *what in the world am I doing out here?* It did not take long for this daydreaming to stop and the sounds of the passing train near the school seemed to disappear as the battles ensued on the practice field. Life seemed to fade away into the deepest part of my mind as the action on the field consumed more and more of my heart. I had found a place to block out the pain of real life and the scars of everything that takes place off the field. This was it; life was good. With a sudden mixture of fear and anxiety came the powerful bonds of a team and the pride of power. We had been given permission to hit each other and were learning how to do it more effectively. We were rewarded with praise when we were aggressive and executed plays well. At the end of all this, we would line up on the goal line and run sprints down the field for conditioning. Just when we were to the point of quitting, and sometimes vomiting, the coach would call us in to grab a knee and he would give us an evaluation of the practice from his point of view. After this, we would go back down the hill to the locker room much slower than we had come up the hill and return to the realm of reality. I loved every moment of this barbaric game. Much of my life soon began to revolve around putting on that jersey and stepping back out onto that hundred-yard battlefield.

I found my life to be much like most of my peers, and I was considered by many to be a nice kid. • I made good grades, kept my appearance up, and went to church regularly with my parents. Most people would have considered me a normal kid and maybe even a Christian. After all, I did walk an aisle at a local church and ask Jesus into my heart when I was about ten years old. I was also a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and a local youth group. I could tell you many things about the Bible and repeat some quotes or stories I had been taught. I went to church and heard youth speakers frequently, but I did not really seem to relate to the languages that I heard spoken to me in the church atmosphere. Religious terms like *sanctification*, *justification*, *repentance*, *born-again*, and many more, did not make much sense to me. I soon learned how to tune out all this “church talk” and tune in “sports talk.” • I do not think that Billy Graham himself could have spoken to me and made a dent in that thick helmet-like head of mine.

I just lived my life the best way I understood how to, for the time being. Consequently, I did make it through high school, but not without many life-changing mistakes and failures. I paved myself a road that still has consequences today that affect my family and me. I ran from God for years and blamed Him for my parent's divorce, my mother's death from cancer when I was nine years old, and my inability to find true joy in life. I tried to replace God with sports, physical

pleasures, and alcohol, only to find myself kicked off the team my senior year, miserable, lonely, and with a baby on the way.

Oh, how I wish I had known then what I do now. I cannot go back and change my past. However, I can help others find what I have found and put it into words that they can understand. That is the whole purpose of writing this book. I want to put what has changed my life and the lives of countless others into words that can communicate clearly to the athletes and sports fans of today. I have interviewed some of the best athletes and coaches, who have lived the life that many of us dream of, to share with you in this book. Drawing from my own experiences with football, the Bible's frequent use of athletic parallels, and the hit movie *Facing the Giants*, I felt compelled to write this book. I also think back to a local band in Camden, Arkansas, named Jacob's ladder

(www.myspace.com/jacob39sladder), who wrote and performed a song entitled "Break," which parallels life with a football game. The song starts with the line, "I find that life reminds me of a ball game," and continues with, "you find yourself on the one-yard line, with two seconds left, you know you're running out of time. It's fourth and life, there's no time for debate, sometimes you gotta take....A LEAP OF FAITH!" I remember the first time I heard the lyrics to this song, and it really made a lot of sense to me as a former football player and lover of the game. My desire for this book is for every reader to understand the choices that we all must make. I have set out to write what I believe to be the purpose of life, according to Jesus, in a way that makes good sense to those who love sports and especially football. I will explain why the Bible is different from all other books and why its message to all of us is one not to ignore. My hope is that you, the reader, will understand things that are sometimes confusing to people in church. You will meet some of the most incredible players and coaches in the world along the way and hear from them about what it means to "leave it all on the field." We will explore some of the principles and teachings of the Bible that will simplify the message of the cross and hopefully move many from the bleachers and sidelines to the action out on the game field of everyday life. This battle is very real and the Christian who wants to win a victory will need to know his playbook well, practice hard, have a close relationship with his teammates, and trust his head coach with his very life. If this sounds like something you would like to know more about, join me and the rest of the players and coaches featured in this book on a journey of faith and football. We will take a close look at life through a facemask and focus on what all athletes long for, a victory that will never be forgotten. May God bless you as you suit up and move through this book, headed for the end zone that we all hope for so much.

In Christ,

Josh Steed