

ADVANCE READER COPY



# THE BIGGEST WIN

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PRO FOOTBALL PLAYERS TACKLE FAITH

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JOSHUA COOLEY

FOREWORD BY

CARSON WENTZ • NICK FOLEY • ZACH ERTZ

TREY BURTON • JORDAN HICKS • CHRIS MARAGOS

“With icebergs, we celebrate and are amazed at what we see above the water but there is so much more below the surface. As the entire world watched Super Bowl LII, we witnessed and celebrated the amazing elements of sport that we can see. *The Biggest Win* takes you below the surface to see how much more God is at work in these players—as well as in our own lives—and how to win the biggest game of all.”

**Shane Williamson**, President/CEO, Fellowship of Christian Athletes

“Josh Cooley, a talented sports writer with unusual spiritual insight, has written a unique and engaging book. Neither fanboy nor critic, Josh shows these pro football players as what they are: authentic and imperfect brothers striving to honor Jesus. The timeless biblical principles at work in their stories carry over seamlessly to readers. Well written, true-to-reality, and spiritually uplifting, *The Biggest Win* is one of the finest sports books I’ve ever read!”

**Randy Alcorn**, Author of *Heaven*, *Seeing the Unseen*, and *Courageous*

“As the Philadelphia Eagles’ offensive coordinator during their Super Bowl LII championship season, I enjoyed a close, personal look at how real the stories are in this book. These men are true brothers in Christ whose lives have impacted me significantly. In *The Biggest Win*, Joshua Cooley not only does an incredible job helping us learn from their examples, but he also uses the platform of sports to equip and inspire us in our Christian faith.

**Frank Reich**, Head Coach of the Indianapolis Colts

“I couldn’t read this book fast enough. Throughout my baseball career, I always long for teammates who are hungry for God’s Word and bold about their love for Jesus Christ, just like the 2017 Philadelphia Eagles were during their Super Bowl season. *The Biggest Win* inspired me—and it will do the same for you—because it shows what genuine Christian faith looks like for any athlete as we compete.”

**Adrian Gonzalez**, Major League Baseball Player and Five-Time All-Star

“If you are an athlete struggling with how to balance sports and your walk with the Lord, I definitely recommend *The Biggest Win*. Joshua does a wonderful job showing how your faith can be strengthened—not compromised—while you pursue your athletic endeavors. After reading this, you’ll realize that true victory can be yours long before you even start the game.”

**Jordan Matthews**, NFL Wide Receiver

“*The Biggest Win* is far more than pro athlete testimonials. This book lays a much-needed foundation, starting with the Bible, for how athletes should view and engage in sports. Joshua has given us a great resource.”

**Mark Householder**, President of Athletes in Action

“In *The Biggest Win*, Josh, has done a wonderful job combining God’s word, real life athletic experiences, and thoughtful self-reflective questions regarding faith and how it intersects with life and sport. It’s like having a devotional and a road map to success for the Christian athlete and is a must read for any aspiring athlete or fan!”

**Bryan Clay**, Olympic Decathlon and World Champion; founder & CEO, The Bryan Clay Foundation

“Joshua Cooley, one of the premier Christian sportswriters in the country, shares fascinating stories about six NFL players who are playing for more than gridiron glory, but what I enjoyed most was how Josh shared spiritual insights and lessons that we can all take to heart.”

**Mike Yorkey**, Coauthor of the *Every Man’s Battle* series and *Picking Up My Shattered Pieces* with Gina Pastore

“As a pastor, I usually read non-fiction, theology books. But I was refreshed to read how the good news of Christ is powerfully revealed in the athletic world. I think you’ll find Joshua Cooley’s retelling the story of an unusual group of godly men who played on the 2017 Philadelphia Eagles to draw you in to the best story ever, the gospel. If you are a young athlete, an old athlete, or a non-athletic pastor, you will get both a great sports story and a glorious Jesus story in one place.”

**Jay Thomas**, Lead Pastor at Chapel Hill Bible Church, Chapel Hill, NC; author of *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*

“I thoroughly enjoyed reading *The Biggest Win*. Joshua Cooley seamlessly weaves solid biblical truth with the God-honoring testimonies of the six featured Eagles football players. Their stories bring the theological concepts Josh presents to life. *The Biggest Win* isn’t just a book for athletes; this is a book for everyone.”

**Marty Machowski**, Pastor; author of *The Ology*, *Long Story Short: Ten-Minute Devotions to Draw Your Family to God*, and *The Gospel Story Bible*

“With the question in the foreword, ‘Are you ready to glorify God?’, the author had me hooked. In *The Biggest Win* Cooley’s spiritual commitment

to the gospel is laced together with his journalistic field experience and his ability to craft a compelling narrative to produce an entertaining and encouraging read. Each chapter contains personal snapshots of well known athletes' spiritual victories and struggles woven together with God's Word to provide all of us a fresh challenge to glorify the Lord in all things."

**Ken Coley**, Senior Professor of Christian Education, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC; author of *Entrusted to the Faithful*

More to come . . .



# THE BIGGEST WIN

PRO FOOTBALL PLAYERS  
TACKLE FAITH

Joshua Cooley



[www.newgrowthpress.com](http://www.newgrowthpress.com)

New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404  
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Cover Design: Faceout Books, faceoutstudio.com  
Interior Design/Typesetting: Gretchen Logterman

ISBN 978-1-948130-02-8 (Print)  
ISBN 978-1-948130-05-9 (eBook)

Library of Congress data on file

Printed in the United States of America

25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18      1 2 3 4 5

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## FOREWORD

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**W**hen Josh Cooley asked to interview us for this book, we said “yes” for just one reason—we want our lives to count for something bigger than our performance on the football field. That might sound strange coming from a group of guys who just won the Super Bowl, but it is true. As amazing a moment as that was and as thankful as we are to have been a part of it, it’s not *the* most amazing moment we have experienced. The most amazing thing for each of us is that we are loved by God and have a whole new life that stretches into eternity.

We love football. We love what we do. But football is just a game. And one day we will retire from football. But becoming a follower of Jesus Christ means our identity doesn’t have to be in our latest performance on the field—our identity is in Christ. Following Jesus means that our purpose is larger than being the best athlete. We have a whole new life of meaning, purpose, and service that will last longer than our football careers and have more impact in the world than anything we could accomplish on the field.

We want to share all of that with you. Wherever you are in your journey as an athlete, we want you to know the joy, meaning, and purpose we have found as followers of Christ. The pinnacle of life is not winning, it’s living for God through all of the big and small moments of life. We hope that as you read this book, you too will get to know Jesus and his love

for you that stays the same through all the seasons of life. That would be the biggest win for you, and it would be our privilege to play a small part in that.

– **Trey Burton, Zach Ertz, Nick Foles, Jordan Hicks,  
Chris Maragos, and Carson Wentz**

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## INTRODUCTION

**A**ron Rodgers' experience at the 2005 National Football League draft was unforgettable. Before you could say "Curly Lambeau," the night had already achieved legendary status.

The strong-armed University of California junior was a surefire NFL prospect and possible number-one pick, held that year by the San Francisco 49ers. On draft night, however, the 49ers chose Utah quarterback Alex Smith.

No biggie. Certainly one of the next few teams would snatch up Rodgers. But then, Miami didn't pick Rodgers at number two; Cleveland, Chicago, and Tampa Bay also passed on him. Four hours later, the Green Bay Packers finally selected the shell-shocked twenty-one-year-old with the *twenty-fourth* pick.

Of course, to date Rodgers has won a Super Bowl, two MVP awards, and been named to six Pro Bowls. Most teams searching for a future Hall of Famer's heir apparent (as Green Bay was at the time for Brett Favre) can only dream of stumbling upon someone like Rodgers. Since

that fateful night, the national media has hashed and rehashed Rodgers's epic slide down the draft board. But consider the Packers' perspective: Through absolutely no effort of their own, they received a stunning, unexpected blessing.

This book was kind of like that for me.

On March 31, 2017, I received an email at 5:37 pm. It was a normal Friday night; our family was probably sitting down to dinner when it arrived. The subject line read: "Looking for a freelance writer."

*Bible Study Magazine*, a publication I had never written for before, was outsourcing a November 2017 cover story about a group of Philadelphia Eagles players who were uncommonly devoted to seeking God's Word together. Intrigued by the idea, I suppressed my natural NFC East allegiance (full disclosure: lifelong Redskins fan here) and took the gig.

The article focused on Trey Burton, Zach Ertz, Nick Foles, Jordan Hicks, Chris Maragos, Jordan Matthews (who was traded to the Buffalo Bills in August 2017 before the article ran), and Carson Wentz. These guys weren't perfect, nor did they claim to be. But I was immediately struck by their unquenchable hunger for Scripture and their commitment to genuine Christian discipleship, accountability, and obedience to Great Commission living. Rarely, if ever, have I spoken to a group of professional athletes so committed to pursuing biblical truth together.

Maragos, the oldest of the group and a veteran of multiple NFL teams, said he'd never seen anything like it during his career. Best-selling author Randy Alcorn, who mentors some of the players, told me he was "very impressed with the unusual level of biblical and theological interest in this group."

Soon, I realized there was a much larger story to tell. Since creation, God's marvelous plan of redemption has been moving toward ultimate fulfillment. And amazingly, he allows athletic competition—enjoyed by billions of humans worldwide—to be one of many catalysts for spiritual growth. This book is a humble effort to examine this fascinating topic.

What about you? Regardless of your athletic skill level, are you ready to live out your faith and glorify God? And if so, how can you achieve this worthy goal?

It's your job to answer the first question. This book, Lord willing, can help you with the second.

The divinely inspired words of 1 Corinthians 10:31—"whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"—reveal that even something as fleeting as athletic competition falls under the sovereign lordship of our heavenly King. We owe him our heart's allegiance at home, school, work, church . . . and yes, in sports. That's what this book is about: pursuing God's glory as we compete, recognizing the God-given lessons that athletics provides, and becoming more like Christ through the triumphs and challenges that sports presents.

Need more evidence that your faith and athletic life should be integrated? Consider the Bible's numerous sports metaphors. The apostle Paul wrote about athletic training (1 Corinthians 9:25, 27; 1 Timothy 4:8), receiving a victor's laurel (1 Corinthians 9:25; 2 Timothy 2:5, 4:8), boxing (1 Corinthians 9:26, 2 Timothy 4:7), and foot races (1 Corinthians 9:24, 26; Philippians 3:14; 2 Timothy 4:7). Jeremiah 12:5 and Hebrews 12:1 also feature running imagery. The point is this: You most certainly can live out your faith in sports, and you absolutely can glorify God while competing.

As we proceed, our journey will need a personal touch—a human element to understand how all this plays out. That's where the dedicated Christians on the 2017 Philadelphia Eagles team come in. As athletes who love Jesus passionately and compete at the highest level in front of millions of people, their voices are prominent in this book. Their stories, insights, triumphs, and failures provide helpful perspective along our course.

Their amazing 2017 season—culminating in a 41–33 victory over the New England Patriots in Super Bowl LII, providing the eighty-five-year-old franchise with its first-ever Super Bowl title—was a wonderful blessing from the Lord. This historic championship afforded them a much bigger platform, to do what every great Christian athlete does: deflect glory toward their Creator.

We will draw upon the experiential wisdom of these elite players, but we won't idolize them. They are remarkable athletes with outsized salaries and fame that most of us will never know. But they are no better or worse than anyone else—a fact they happily admit. They are some

of the most humble, likable professional athletes I've ever encountered (even if they *are* Redskins rivals). They are sinners saved by grace, just like all believers.

So avoid the “us vs. them” mentality. These players are no different in the heart issues that God cares about. As 1 Samuel 16:7 says, “the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” God isn't impressed by financial statements, Twitter followers, or jersey sales. He desires our hearts. He expects our worship. He demands our allegiance.

Our goal has eternity in mind: exploring how all believers—male or female, young or old—can grow in their faith by using sports to glorify the Lord. This is my prayer for you. While six NFL athletes are central characters, I hope you'll see that the book's true Protagonist is “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2), in order that “your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:5).

As God's image-bearers, we are to reflect his glory in all our endeavors. To do this well, we must constantly look to the Spirit-inspired Word of God. The loftiest human paradigms cannot replace the timeless truths found in the Bible. As Jesus said in Matthew 24:35, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

The Lord God Almighty has created all things for his glory, including you and your athletic talents. He is using hungry, committed Christians in the NFL to accomplish his purposes through sports. By his grace, he can use you, too.

The preseason has ended. It's game time. Are you ready to glorify God?

—Joshua Cooley

# CHAPTER 1

## BEING A CHRISTIAN ATHLETE

---

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

—Matthew 5:16

Carson Wentz’s life was about to change forever, and he had no control over the results. For a self-described “achiever” who often only sleeps six hours on his off days—so he has time to tackle his to-do list—this was a problem.

It was April 2016, and the annual NFL draft was approaching. The pre-draft hype machine was chugging along at full steam. Pundits were pontificating about Wentz as the potential number-one pick overall.

This kind of limelight was unfamiliar territory for the young man from Bismarck, North Dakota. Sure, he had been on the roster at North Dakota State for all five of its consecutive NCAA Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) titles from 2011 to 2015—the last two as starting quarterback. But the Bison play in the Missouri Valley Conference—an obscure frontier outpost on the college football landscape.

An NFL team was going to draft Wentz—that much was clear. But which one? And when? Some early prognostications said mid-first round. Then, thanks to a prolific pro day prior to the draft, his stock

began to climb. Would he begin his career in Cleveland, Denver, San Francisco, Jacksonville, or New York (Jets)? Each team had varying levels of unrest at the quarterback position. There was even scuttlebutt of Dallas trading up to anoint him as Tony Romo's successor. The hype machine clattered along.

The whole process wasn't easy for a guy like Wentz, who's wired to manage the final outcome of games as much as possible through careful preparation, study, training, and execution. Most quarterbacks, by nature, are control freaks to some degree. They put in an inordinate amount of hours to master one of the hardest positions in sports. Chance and randomness are anathema. Eventually, though, Wentz had to put the unknown into the hands of the One who knows all things.

"One thing I try and always avoid is to not let it be something bigger than it needs to be," Wentz says. "Going through the draft process, I don't know how many times I told people, 'Hey, it's just football. It's still just a game.'"

As the draft approached, Wentz positioned himself as well as he could. Most importantly, he humbled himself before his Heavenly Father. "God," he prayed, "*bring me where you want me, so I can grow spiritually.*"

In a small way, Wentz's humble petition resembled Solomon's prayer for divine wisdom in 1 Kings 3. As the ancient Israelite king assumed his father David's throne, he could have asked the Lord for anything—fame, riches, honor, long life, the destruction of his enemies. Instead, he asked for the ability to govern God's people. Similarly, Wentz wasn't focused on the fact that he was about to make the rare (and extremely lucrative) leap from FCS quarterback to likely first-round NFL draft pick. Like Solomon, he simply longed for God's guiding hand.

And God's hand moved. Two weeks before the draft, the Tennessee Titans traded the first overall pick to the St. Louis (now Los Angeles) Rams, in a total exchange of nine selections over two seasons. A week later, the Cleveland Browns followed suit, in a seven-pick swap with the Philadelphia Eagles—including the second overall selection.

On opening night, April 28, 2016, the Rams drafted Jared Goff first overall. At number two, the Eagles minted Wentz as their franchise quarterback.

It was a surreal moment for the six-foot-five, 237-pound redhead. When NFL commissioner Roger Goodell called his name, Wentz strode across the stage at Roosevelt University in Chicago to meet the league's chief. The two men hugged, shared a few words, and held up an Eagles jersey together as cameras flashed. Wentz had just become the highest drafted player from an FCS school since the NCAA split Division I into two classifications in 1978. The kid from far-flung Bismarck was heading 1,600 miles east.

Next stop: The City of Brotherly Love.

When Wentz got to Philly, that's exactly what he found in the Eagles' locker room: biblical *agape*. His new NFL teammates were a small but spiritually vibrant group of Christians who warmly welcomed him. "They were very open, very loving, and very caring," Wentz remembers. "When we got to know each other, it was challenging in a good way. Like Proverbs [27:17] says: Iron sharpens iron."

Eagles players have been gathering together for Bible study since at least the early 1990s, when Hall of Famer Reggie White was terrorizing quarterbacks on the field and preaching the Word off it. "The Minister of Defense," an ordained minister who died of cardiac arrhythmia in 2004, started the group during his time with the Eagles (1985–1992). In the years since, the group ebbed and flowed. During the 2004 season, when the Eagles reached Super Bowl XXXIX, Ted Winsley, team chaplain since 2002, recalls that close to thirty players regularly attended the team Bible study: "When I got there, it felt very dry, so our major focus was on not sinning. That's where we were in the beginning. When I would tell people the names of the guys who were there, they'd be like, 'He's saved?'"

The dynamic began to change significantly in 2012, when the Eagles drafted Nick Foles, a six-foot-six quarterback from the University of Arizona. Foles started twenty-four games over three seasons, before being traded to the Rams.

During his first stint with the Eagles, Foles quickly teamed with Winsley and wide receiver Jason Avant (whose final NFL season came in 2015) to reach out to other players. Attendance remained much lower than previous years, but the group was collectively stronger. They desired deeper fellowship and accountability, and hungered for rich, gospel-centered teaching. They spurred each other on to share their faith, both in the locker room and beyond.

“You saw, from the very beginning, the hunger and sincerity from Nick,” Winsley says. “Nick is a leader, period. He has a quiet demeanor, he’s approachable, but he’s not afraid to speak his mind and live what he believes.”

In 2014, Trey Burton (tight end/special teams), Chris Maragos (safety/special teams), and Jordan Matthews (wide receiver) arrived in Philadelphia and joined the Bible study. But when the Eagles traded Foles for Sam Bradford in a March 2015 quarterback swap, the small group of believers had an important choice to make.

“We either could have kept the momentum and kept the seeds and the fruit and stuff producing, or we could have just let it all fall away and gone our own different ways,” Burton recalls. “But when Foles left, we felt like there was something special being built there, so we took it like a storm and basically started hitting even harder. We kind of understood the direction and felt like we knew what God was calling to happen here in Philly.”

Linebacker Jordan Hicks, a third-round draft pick, joined the team and Bible study in 2015, and tight end Zach Ertz, a second-round draft pick in 2013, committed to the group after submitting his life to Christ at the start of the 2016 season.

In May 2017, Foles signed a two-year deal to return to the Eagles. “A big reason why I wanted to come back to Philly,” Foles says, “is because of a great group of guys who want to do great things in Jesus’s name.”

As Wentz witnessed his new teammates’ spiritual hunger, he remembered his pre-draft prayer. God had answered in a mighty way, and the rookie was left to marvel at what God had done. Unmistakably divine fingerprints covered everyone’s paths to Philadelphia. “I definitely got

that sense right away, but it took time to truly get a sense of *how much* he answered my prayer,” Wentz says. “He knocked it out of the park. God is good. I can’t say that enough.”

The group of believers on the Eagles’ 2017 roster provides a tiny window into God’s expansive kingdom. There are Caucasians and African-Americans. There are high first-round draft picks (Wentz), undrafted go-getters (Burton and Maragos), and everything in between. The players hail from all over the country—California, Colorado, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin. Their collective faith stories paint a beautiful tapestry of the Lord’s sovereign, saving grace.

The group quickly gelled, and committed to meeting often for Bible study, prayer, and strategic planning on how to affect the team for Christ—not only during the season but also the offseason and preseason. Once the season started, and players’ wives moved into the Philadelphia area, the group held a regular couples’ devotional time as well.

For Wentz and his teammates, a tightly knit group of fellowship provided a priceless spiritual oasis in the midst of a grueling season. Today’s NFL presents players with enormous spiritual challenges. There are obvious potential pitfalls, such as the instant fortune that athletes attain. The allure of celebrity, narcissism, and sinful gratification assaults these men as soon as they arrive in the league (and often before). Then, of course, there is pressure to perform from management, coaches, fans and—for many players—the guy behind them on the roster. The NFL’s popularity doesn’t have a trickle-down effect on players’ psyches—it’s more like a roaring waterfall. Every feat or foible is rehashed endlessly on TV news cycles, radio talk shows, and social media. “Everything is overblown—good and bad,” Ertz says. “If you have a good game, you’re the best player ever. If you have a terrible game, you’re the reason they lost.”

Pressure also comes from the NFL’s salary structure. Unlike other pro leagues, the NFL does not fully guarantee player contracts. Each deal is negotiated and structured differently, but because of the league’s high injury rate, large active roster, and other factors, players rarely

collect the total value of the contracts they sign. As such, many players often risk their personal health to stay on the field.

Says Winsley: “I know a player who—if I said his name, you’d know who he is—where the doctor said, ‘If you take another hit like that, you’re going to be paralyzed.’ It’s his contract year. He looked at me in the eyes, put his helmet on and said, ‘I got to go.’ And his wife said, ‘Baby, you got to go do this.’”

While the magnitude of the issues confronting NFL players might be unique, the issues themselves are not. The professional stage might amplify the fame, pressure, money, physicality, accessibility to vice, etc., but everyone who has ever thrown a pass, kicked a ball, swam a lap, or swung a bat has struggled with the same basic challenges. Who doesn’t worry? Who doesn’t struggle with pride or self-sufficiency? Whose faith hasn’t wavered in trials? Who doesn’t sometimes seek their identity in sports, work, or other things apart from Christ? As 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.”

The same sin-stained heart that beats in you also beats in the athletes featured in this book. At the heart level—where God does business (Jeremiah 17:10)—their struggles are your struggles, even as they strive to become more like their Savior.

Likewise, their spiritual victories are your spiritual victories. They rejoice when they see someone submit to Christ. They are grateful for personal spiritual growth. They thank the Father when he answers prayer.

As you read the stories in this book, think about *your* story. Who’s calling the shots—you or God? Where do you see unmistakably divine fingerprints covering *your* path? How are you seeking to grow in the Lord and glorify him?

Now, think about the sport(s) you play. How did you come to the team you’re on, or the sport you compete in? Can you trace God’s purposes for being there? What do you hope to accomplish? Is it just a pastime, or can it be something much greater—something with eternal significance?

Left to themselves, the deeds of mankind—even the greatest athletic accomplishments—are transient, a fleeting vapor. The years of our lives “are soon gone, and we fly away” (Psalm 90:10). But what we do for God’s glory will follow us into eternity.

Sometimes God brings together a team of believers to make a significant impact, like he has done in Philadelphia. Perhaps this is what he’s doing in your life, too. Or maybe you’re in a situation without many other believers around, and God’s calling you to be a strong, solitary witness. Either way, you have a job to do. Matthew 5:14–16 provides the game plan:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Being a Christian athlete is a fantastic opportunity to light the world with God’s glory. You’ll connect with people you wouldn’t otherwise reach, each one a potential life God can change. But be forewarned: Being a Christian athlete isn’t easy. The challenges you’ll experience will be significant. You’ll get pressure to conform to the world, from both inside and outside your team. You’ll deal with frustrating people, maddening situations, and spiritual lows. Satan will attack you. This is all part of sports—and life. So prepare yourself with the armor of God (Ephesians 6:10–18).

As you compete, you’ll see that sports also can be an effective means of personal spiritual maturation. You’ll witness God’s goodness and faithfulness in action, and be stretched to grow in new ways.

So don’t hide your light. Let it shine brightly. No matter where you are on your journey, God can use you to do great things—for his glory.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:**

1. What challenges does sports present to your faith?
2. How can you answer those challenges with the Bible?
3. How do you think God wants you to grow spiritually?
4. What's one way you can be a light to others through sports?

## CHAPTER 2

### MOTIVATED BY GLORY

---

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

— 1 Corinthians 10:31

**F**ollowing moments of euphoria, the cold slap of reality can hit people at different times and in different ways. For Chris Maragos, reality smacked him in the laundry room, amidst towels, socks, and underwear.

A few days earlier, on February 2, 2014, Maragos had achieved one of the high points of his career, helping the Seattle Seahawks defeat the Denver Broncos in Super Bowl XLVIII. The game had been billed as an epic duel between an unstoppable offense (Denver) and a historically stingy defense (Seattle). The Seahawks turned the affair into a 43–8 laugher—one of the most lopsided Super Bowls ever.

Maragos, a special-teams ace and occasional safety, played a key role in Seattle’s run to the championship, enjoying one of the best seasons of his career. He translated those efforts, and his Super Bowl win, into a three-year contract with the Eagles, worth up to \$5.3 million, during the offseason.

But a decade earlier, who could have said that they saw this coming for the five-foot-ten kid from Racine, Wisconsin? Sure, Maragos had always possessed a tenacious spirit and a passionate work ethic—the

intangibles that football coaches always gush about. But the words “Maragos” and “blue chipper” were never best buddies.

After winning Wisconsin’s 2004 Gatorade Player of the Year Award in high school, he received zero college scholarships. He eventually walked on as a receiver at Western Michigan University and later at the University of Wisconsin, where he transferred after two years. In 2010, he joined the San Francisco 49ers as an undrafted rookie free agent with a signing bonus of \$4,000—pocket change by NFL standards.

And now, here he was at age twenty-seven, perched atop the sporting world and celebrating Seattle’s first-ever Super Bowl, as postgame confetti and the cheers of 82,529 fans at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey washed over him. Three days later, an estimated 700,000 fans feted the Seahawks during a raucous championship parade through downtown Seattle. By worldly standards, Maragos had achieved the pinnacle every athlete craves—final victory, applause, and the resulting fame and fortune. No doubt about it: Glory felt good.

But even as he basked in the glow of success that night, he couldn’t shake a strange thought: *Now what?*

Then came the laundry room.

A few days after the championship, with his wife, Serah, near the end of her third trimester of pregnancy, the Super Bowl winner found himself at home folding clothes and linens. The amusing contrast between his experiences was not lost on Maragos.

“All right,” he told Serah, chuckling, “back to reality.”

The next day, Maragos welcomed his second son, Mason, into the world. The proud new papa would always be an NFL champion. But before you could say “two-minute warning,” diapers, 3 am feedings—and yes, lots of laundry—consumed his daily life. Less than six weeks later, he wasn’t even a Seahawk anymore, having signed to play for Philadelphia. Life surged forward, and the glory of Super Bowl XLVIII quickly faded into the rearview.

“When I look back on it, I think, ‘Man, I’m so thankful.’ That was so much hard work, and I can take pride in the work that I put in to help my team win the Super Bowl,” Maragos says. “At the same time, it’s

interesting because as great as it was, the pinnacle that it was, when we got done and we finished playing the game, it was like, ‘All right, just checking off the list.’ . . . You just reached the pinnacle and it’s not exactly what we thought it might be: ‘Where do we go from here?’ ‘This is it?’ You’re always searching for something more if you’re putting all your hope and your trust in that.”

### **DEFINING GLORY**

As we begin to consider how to live out your faith through sports, we must lay some important theological groundwork. First, let’s discuss glory.

The sports world is a glory factory. Regardless of the sport you play or the level you play it at, glory will eventually be in the mix. Anyone involved in athletics who truly wants to honor God must understand glory within a biblical framework.

“Glory” is a unique term with many definitions. It can mean “great beauty or splendor,” as in the glory of a Maui sunset or the glory of the Swiss Alps. It can also mean “something that secures praise or renown,” as in the glory of a Hall of Fame career. Another definition of “glory” is the honor given to someone who has accomplished something worthy of recognition.

God’s glory, of course, is something far above anything in the natural world. John Piper defines it this way:

The term “glory of God” in the Bible generally refers to the visible splendor or moral beauty of God’s manifold perfections. It is an attempt to put into words what cannot be contained in words—what God is like in His unveiled magnificence and excellence.<sup>1</sup>

On a human level, all of us desire glory. Even the youngest child loves the feeling of crossing the finish line first, netting the decisive goal, or scoring the winning run. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to excel

and achieve victory. Half-hearted effort—in sports or any arena of life—never honors God or blesses those around us.

The apostle Paul embraced hearty, goal-driven competition. Consider the two well-known passages below (emphasis added):

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? *So run that you may obtain it* (1 Corinthians 9:24).

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, *I press on toward the goal* for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:12–14).

Every athlete should exert maximum effort to accomplish individual and team goals. Excelling in your craft, winning championships, and celebrating success appropriately are worthy goals for any competitor.

However, there's a problem. As inherently sinful creatures (Romans 3:23; 5:12), we are often unwilling to give glory to God for our athletic achievements. We'd much rather hoard it for ourselves. But assigning any glory to our own credit—even a fraction of it—is blatant rebellion against our Creator. Any athlete who truly wants to glorify God needs to identify this and guard against it.

### **THE NOTORIOUS (ATTEMPTED) GARDEN GLORY GRAB**

Our predisposition for desiring God's glory originated in the garden of Eden—when Satan, God's age-old enemy, disguised himself as a serpent and tempted Adam and Eve to eat the only forbidden fruit in God's good creation. In Genesis 2:16–17, the Lord specifically told Adam, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of

good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” God’s command couldn’t have been clearer.

Yet look at how Satan lied and twisted God’s words:

But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4–5).

Adam and Eve didn’t eat the fruit because they were famished from a long day basking in paradise, or because the fruit was a scrumptious, caramel-dipped apple. They didn’t eat it simply because they thought they’d become wiser (“your eyes will be opened,” v. 5), although perhaps that played into their thinking. No, glory was at stake here.

Adam and Eve’s disobedience was an all-out attempted *coup d’état* against God’s sovereign rule. As God’s image-bearers (Genesis 1:26–27), they were created to reflect God’s glory and govern his creation as *his* representatives. Instead, they made a prideful and cosmically catastrophic power grab. *Divine power, wisdom, and glory are within your reach*, Satan told them. *Don’t let God keep it all for himself. It’s there for the taking. All you have to do is take a bite.*

But every promise from “the father of lies” (John 8:44) is a dead-end street—a hidden trap with ruinous consequences. The entire universe is still reeling from Adam and Eve’s fateful rebellion, and will continue to do so until the Lord returns and renews his fallen creation (Romans 8:20–23; Revelation 21:1–4).

### **SOLI DEO GLORIA**

In Isaiah 42:8, God says, “I am the Lord . . . my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.” God reserves glory for himself and no one else. As holy Creator and Ruler of the universe, he has the right to do this.

The Christian church has always upheld this vital doctrine. During the Protestant Reformation, one of the movement’s “Five Solas”—the quintet of biblical doctrines essential to true Christianity—was *Soli Deo Gloria*, a Latin phrase meaning “to the glory of God alone.” As Piper says, “God’s ultimate goal in all He does is to preserve and display His glory. . . . He is uppermost in His own affections. He prizes and delights in His own glory above all things.”<sup>2</sup>

If this sounds shocking or like misplaced vanity to you, it’s not. God’s desire to glorify himself is perfectly within his rights. God is both morally pure, sinless in nature and deed, and set apart from the rest of his creation in his transcendent power, purity, and glory. The Trinitarian God—Father, Son, and Spirit—is the only being in creation who can claim this. Therefore it is proper, and in our best interests, for God to receive—and even be jealous for—all the glory in his creation.

Don’t confuse God’s attributes with those of sinful humanity. Human jealousy is petty, arrogant, and spiteful. God’s jealousy is holy—and wholly consistent with the rest of his perfect attributes. It is perfectly right and proper because he, and he alone, is worthy of it.

### **GETTING GLORY RIGHT**

Perhaps you’re wondering why this chapter feels a little more like a seminary thesis than a sports book so far. The reason is simple: The concepts above are foundational. If we get glory wrong, the rest of the book will be in vain.

Every Christian athlete must give all glory to God. Our highest authority in life—the inerrant, inspired Word of God—speaks directly to this. First Corinthians 10:31 says, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” This certainly includes sports, and Paul, who wrote those divinely inspired words (and again, loved a good sports metaphor), would have told you so. Isaiah 43:7 also bears witness to this, as God speaks of “everyone who is called by my name, *whom I created for my glory*, whom I formed and made” (emphasis added).

Jesus himself ascribed glory to the Father, in his prayer shortly before his crucifixion: “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do” (John 17:4). Likewise, the Westminster Larger Catechism starts with this entry:

Q: What is the chief and highest end of man?

A: Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy Him forever.

As we seek to “give glory to God,” we don’t have to make that phrase more complicated than it is. It simply means offering God the worshipful praise and honor he deserves, as we live according to his Word through faith and obedience in Jesus Christ.

Before we discuss *how* to give glory to God, let’s highlight eight important considerations about the subject of glory itself:

*We can’t glorify God apart from Christ.* We are lost in our sins without God’s grace (Romans 3; Ephesians 2:1–10). In Matthew 11:27, Jesus says, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” We must repent and trust in the finished, redemptive work of Christ.

*Giving glory to God goes against our sinful nature.* Admitting this isn’t admitting defeat—it’s sizing up our opponent, just as any smart athlete would do. Christians have been “crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2:20) and have received a new nature (2 Corinthians 5:17), but the vestiges of corrupting sin still wage war in the flesh (Romans 7:15–25). “It’s a constant battle,” Maragos says.

*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble* (1 Peter 5:5). Human pride isn’t just a nuisance to God—it’s an abomination. In Proverbs 8:13, the Lord says, “Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.” Proverbs 16:18 famously states, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.” On the other hand, “the

Lord lifts up the humble” (Psalm 147:6), and deems those with childlike humility “greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4).

Perhaps you’re wondering, “If God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, why are so many prideful, self-seeking athletes doing just fine in their \$5 million South Florida mansions with a fleet of European luxury cars?” Biblical authors pondered the same thing. In Psalm 73:3, Asaph lamented, “I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” When 1 Peter 5:5 says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble,” it isn’t primarily about a removal of material blessings, but the threat of spiritual judgment. Those who live in prideful rebellion against God might prosper, but ultimately will be “doomed to destruction forever” (Psalm 92:7), banished from God’s presence and blessings. That is a terrifying thought.

*Beware: More fame often equals more temptation.* Every human needs to guard against pride, from the preschooler bragging about his T-ball skills to the Major League Baseball superstar flaunting his wealth with garish jewelry and exotic sports cars. Jordan Hicks says, “You can go on and on about how this game is idolized, the type of things it brings you—the money, the fame, the followers on Twitter, people talking about you on Twitter, on Instagram. . . . To me, that is probably and by far the most difficult part about walking with Christ in the NFL. . . . Christ keeps you grounded and keeps you humble.”

*Human glory is fleeting.* The exhilaration of a huge semifinal win might be followed by a crushing loss in the championship. The cheers, Twitter mentions, and Facebook posts that pour in after a three-touch-down game will be old news in a week . . . or less. Don’t build monuments to yourself; they crumble quickly. Seek God’s kingdom, which never ends (Matthew 6:19–21).

*There is heavenly grace and strength for the challenge.* As we fight to give all glory to God, we do not struggle alone. God loves displaying his power through human inability. Isaiah 40:29–31 says, “He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount

up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

*Mercy and forgiveness are available for the times we fail.* We will not always succeed in seeking God’s glory. At times, our pride will prevail. But praise the Lord that he is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Psalm 103:8). We can also take hope in 1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

*You can make an impact, regardless.* You don’t have to be a great athlete to glorify God. He isn’t concerned with earthly positions and titles. First- or fourth-string status matters little to God. What matters to him is the state of a person’s heart (1 Samuel 16:7), and whether that individual is willing to humbly submit to his lordship. The Bible is bursting with examples of God using unlikely candidates for his glorious purposes.

“No matter what position you are, how good you are, if you start or if you don’t start, if you play or you don’t play, if you’re the number-one jersey seller on the team, or if you don’t sell one jersey, it doesn’t matter,” Trey Burton says. “You’re really significant and you can make a major impact for the kingdom. I think, first and foremost, it’s understanding that everything we’re doing is about God and has nothing to do with us. . . . It’s making God’s name famous and bringing glory to him.”

### **REACHING FOR EXCELLENCE, GLORIFYING GOD**

*Now* we can address the question at hand: How can we strive for excellence, while directing all glory and honor to the Lord? Here are ten practical ways.

*Recognize the true Gift Giver.* We must first realize that our ability comes from God. We can’t even control our own heartbeat or any other basic body functions required to live and compete. As Job 12:10 says, “In [God’s] hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind.”

Nick Foles, a Super Bowl MVP, understands this. “Who gave us these talents? God did,” he says. “Who created everything? Who gave someone the ability to create electricity, to create all these stadiums? God did.”

Maragos has a unique perspective on this as well: His brother Troy is a college/young singles pastor at a church in Florida. “We both came from the same parents,” he says. “God has just gifted he and I completely differently, and for me to think that that’s something that I can give glory to myself for ultimately would be a really disheartening disservice to the fact that God has given us everything and it’s all his.”

*Acknowledge and embrace your calling.* God has called you to bring him glory through the gifts he has graciously given you. Whatever the specifics of that look like in the beautifully diverse body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12), embrace and pursue them humbly yet passionately. “God has called us to be football players at this time in our lives,” Zach Ertz says. “We’re able to use this platform for God’s glory. It’s not that I’m doing this. It’s not that I’m having these amazing games. It’s that I’m truly able to go out there and do what I love to do because this is what God has called me to do. I think it’s just we’re so grateful for the opportunities that we have because we love doing what we do.”

*Redirect the praise.* When you excel, you’re bound to receive praise from others. This undoubtedly feels good, but don’t make it your end goal—make a conscious effort to deflect it to the Creator. Don’t be weird or rude about it; receive the kindness of others with genuine appreciation and grace. “If we’re all just real and honest, when someone praises us, we like it,” Carson Wentz says. “I’m not going to overspiritualize it and say I hate it. We *do* like it. But in those moments, can you flip the switch and make sure all the glory goes to God? Even Jesus, when he was doing miracles—and this is Jesus who is equal and one with the Father—was saying, ‘I praise you God. This is all because of you.’ . . . If Jesus would even do that, how much more should we make sure that, when we get the praise or the glory, we’re turning it over to the Father?”

*Exalt Christ in everything.* John the Baptist’s life includes a brief but telling glimpse about his attitude toward glory. John’s ministry broke more than four hundred years of prophetic silence, and attracted the

people of “Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan” (Matthew 3:5). He even baptized Jesus. Then Jesus quickly began gathering large crowds of his own. John’s disciples seemed offended by this, but John humbly reminded them that he was not the Messiah. Deferring to Jesus, he spoke these beautiful words: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Always keep the Savior preeminent. He must increase, and you must decrease.

*Distinguish between confidence and pride.* There’s a difference between godly confidence and sinful pride. It’s a fine line, but a necessary one. Athletic pride exalts yourself and your accomplishments for your own glory’s sake. It’s inordinate belief in your abilities without acknowledging divine empowerment. Godly confidence, on the other hand, trusts in the gifts and abilities that God has given you to reflect his glory. It’s humbly acknowledging the true Gift-Giver, using those talents to honor him, and returning praise to the proper Source.

*Use your platform wisely.* Sports creates natural community and a forum for conversations. The believers on the Eagles understand this, and recognize the opportunity to affect lives for God’s kingdom. “I’ve heard so many people say, ‘Oh, I’m not a role model. I’m going to do my own thing,’” Hicks says. “I think it’s our responsibility to Christ to take advantage of it. . . . Opportunities have arisen for us to proclaim His name because we’ve been faithful, because we’ve been courageous and bold and putting ourselves out there, and it’s taking advantage of those opportunities. It’s constantly trying to proclaim the good news and proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.”

*Practice the fruits of the Spirit.* How can you bring God glory if you consistently lollygag it when your coach isn’t watching, complain about the referees, curse when you screw up, or badmouth a teammate who costs you the game? These are the “works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19) Christ died to free us from. Rather, Galatians 5:22–23 gives us the blueprint: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” Practice these traits and God will be honored.

*Serve others.* Athletes who want to honor the Lord consistently look outside themselves and serve others—both on their team and beyond. While on earth, Jesus continually exhorted his listeners to sacrifice for the good of others: “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43–45).

*Respect authority figures.* These days, it seems like people are challenging authority like never before. Sometimes protests can bring needed awareness to areas of injustice. But other times, improper resistance to authority reveals our sinful nature. Romans 13:1–2 says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” Coaches can sometimes be harsh. Refs can sometimes blow a big call. You don’t have to like every decision they make. But Scripture calls you to respect their authority because it was “instituted by God.” (The exception is when someone in authority asks you to disobey the Lord. Scripture never condones this.) Remember, all authorities are ultimately accountable to God.

*Celebrate appropriately.* Sports naturally produces reasons to celebrate, from touchdown dances to post-dunk chest thumps to birdie-on-the-eighteenth-hole roars. Yet as Christians, we are to remain humble. How do we reconcile the two? Can Christian athletes trying to glorify God also celebrate great individual plays, team achievements, or career milestones?

Yes. But discernment is needed. Maragos’s adrenaline-fueled passion leads him to throw mini-parties after big tackles. But he remains aware of the bigger spiritual picture. “I like to have fun out on the field,” he says. “. . . I think you just have to check your motives more than anything. It’s ‘Why are you doing it?’ Are you doing it because you’re having fun and you’re enjoying it and you know how hard it is to be out there to make a play and to enjoy it with your team, or are you doing it to bring

attention to yourself just to say, ‘Look at me; I’m the best out here,’ and all that kind of stuff?”

Celebrate great plays, big wins, and major accomplishments, but never in a way that brings inappropriate attention to yourself, spites the other team, or belittles another player.

### **A FINAL QUESTION**

All glory belongs to God, and we should humbly and obediently direct it to him through everything in our lives, including sports. As his image-bearers, this is our duty.

But it’s also our great honor. The Lord God Almighty, Ruler of the entire universe, has lovingly chosen to create us for his glory. Ultimately, how could he ever assign more worth to us than that?

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:**

1. Why is it OK for God to get glory, but not OK to keep any for ourselves?
2. Why do you think getting “glory” is so important to athletes?
3. How does trying to get “glory” affect the way you respond to doing well? How about if you don’t do so well?
4. How could you live for God’s glory in those moments of success and failure? How might that change the way you view success and failure?
5. What are some Bible verses you could use to remind yourself that God’s glory is the priority?



## CHAPTER 3

### IDENTITY THEFT

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I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

— *Galatians 2:20*

**N**ick Foles was not in a good place—not personally, professionally, and not even in a good place for adequate cell phone service.

It was late July 2016, when NFL training camps begin, and Foles—the greatest quarterback in University of Arizona history and an NFL starter for most of his four-year professional career to that point—was unemployed. In the prime of his career, Foles had recently negotiated his way out of a two-year contract with the St. Louis Rams. When the news broke, several teams contacted Foles’s agent to inquire about his interest in signing with them. Meanwhile, Foles’s former coach with the Eagles, Andy Reid, had sent him a personal text.

Reid was a father figure to Foles. He had drafted Foles in 2012 when Michael Vick, the incumbent starter, was thirty-one and still near the height of his skills. Vick suffered a concussion in Week 10, and Reid stuck with Foles as the starter for the remainder of the season, even after Vick had been cleared to return. When Reid was fired following that season and took the head coaching job at Kansas City, the two remained close.