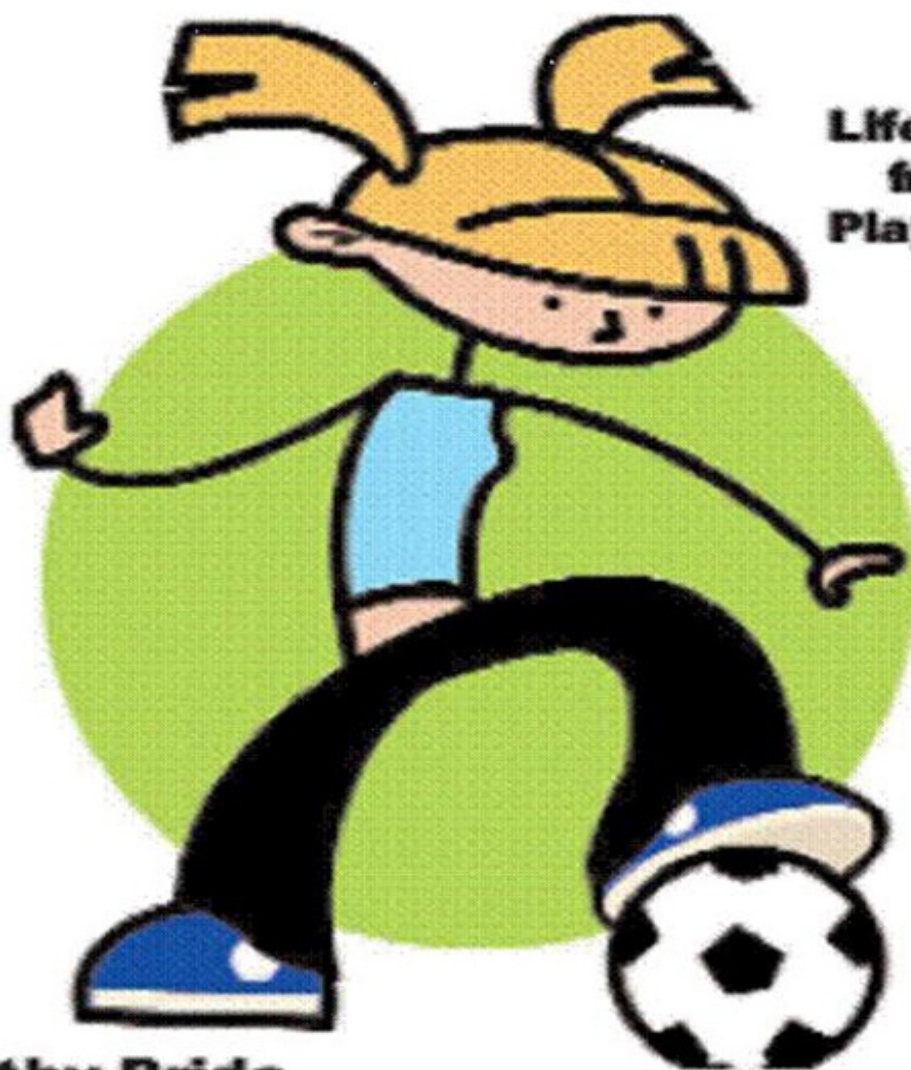


Soccer Moms' Devotions to Go



**Life Lessons
from the
Playing Field**

Kathy Pride

Moms' Devotions to Go Series

Soccer Moms' Devotions to Go

Life Lessons from the Playing Field

Kathy Pride

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Kicker or Picker

Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else.

Galatians 6:4

The morning had finally arrived when our youngest daughter, Nicole, would make her soccer debut. The warmth of the early September sun ushered in the perfect day for a game of soccer between enthusiastic five year olds.

Purple shorts, an orange jersey and hand picked soccer cleats were carefully laid out at the foot of the bed. Special “big girl” socks that would hold shin guards in place were also lined up alongside the uniform.

My husband Howie helped to coach Nicole’s team, as he had our son’s team years earlier. I was transported back in time as I watched Nicole, a clone of her older brother Matt dress for her game.

Nicole and Matt shared many characteristics including their looks. Both had round faces framed by flaming red hair and a spark in their eye that clearly communicated drive and determination. Both possessed physical stamina, dexterity and energy that made onlookers weary. I joked that it would be a contest to see whether Nicole would score a goal first, or a red card for fouling an opponent as she motored down field in pursuit of scoring opportunities, oblivious to anyone or anything in her path.

Imagine my surprise when during the game Nicole engaged in social banter with her fellow back fielders as their first game went on around them. Her conversation was only interrupted by an occasional stoop to pick a dandelion.

Where were those competitive genes that I had been so certain she possessed? Even the opposing coach remarked that he couldn't believe that was a "Pride" child on the field!

Watching her socialize and pick, instead of kick that morning reminded me of an important truth. We are all individuals, uniquely created by God and as such it is unreasonable to expect them to perform like others, even if they seem to be cut out of the same mold. I had viewed Nicole as a "mini Matt" and anticipated her to perform as he had, aggressively scoring goal after goal instead of welcoming her unique level of participation.

I admit I was totally unprepared for my daughter to be a flower picking socialite on the field. How had I ended up with a picker instead of a kicker? But it didn't matter. I still had an opportunity to share in her own unique experience of soccer and celebrate her worth as a child of God and not as a carbon copy of her brother.

Prayer: Thank You for my child, who may share characteristics with others, yet is a unique and delightful child of God. Help me to remember her attributes and celebrate her individual character and shy away from comparing her to others. Amen.

Action Step

Reflect on the unique character of your child and write five attributes he/she possesses. For each attribute then list three ways in which you see this attribute expressed uniquely in your child.

It's Go Hot!

These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other.

Zechariah 8:16

There was little relief from the blazing afternoon sun. The air was hot and thick and the only disturbance to the dusty infield was from the steps of twelve-year-olds taking batting practice in preparation for their 5:30 match up in Little League District playoffs. The heat index had to be over 100 and, instead of enthusiastic cheering, a chorus of whiny moanies could be heard from the players.

"It's too hot coach," lamented one.

"Isn't this the kind of weather you want us to stay out of?" questioned another.

"When we're not allowed to go swimming on game day isn't it because you don't want us out in this heat?" reasoned a third.

"I need more Gatorade," whined another.

"What do you mean there won't be any Gatorade till game time, there's only water?" came another indignant complaint.

Then my son Chris said, "I am too hot, coach, I can't do this. I need to rest. It's too hot. If we can't hit the ball by now, taking batting practice in the 110 degree heat isn't going to help."

And rest he did, for the first four innings of a six inning game in the shade of the dugout.

“Where’s Chris?” I wondered as the players took their positions on the field. A consistent starter at first base, he was absent from the lineup that afternoon and I could hear the buzz of speculation in the stands. I didn’t understand why he wasn’t starting until the coach came over and told us that he was too hot to play, so they had given him a cool place to sit in the dugout until the fifth inning, when they were required to play their subs.

I remember at the time I couldn’t believe Chris would jeopardize his playing position by questioning the coach’s wisdom.

But years later I wondered if the coach’s decision was really so wise after all. Is maintaining the status quo always the best way, and isn’t it OK to truthfully speak your mind as long as it is done with respect? God instructs us to “speak the truth in love.” But that day speaking the truth resulted in negative reinforcement for Chris even though he simply verbalized what the entire team was thinking.

As I look back upon this experience I have traded in the disbelief that Chris would question the coach with admiration that he had the guts to speak his mind. And anyway, he was that much closer to the Gatorade!

Prayer: Father, help us speak the truth in love and communicate what we believe is correct even when it may rock the boat. We know You know our heart and that Your opinion matters more than what people think. Amen.

Action Step

Take a moment to think about times when you hold back an opinion because you are afraid of what others' reactions are going to be. Make three copies of the above prayer and glue or tape them onto a 3x5 card. Place one in your purse, one with your Bible, and slip one in the shade visor of your car, and the next time you are tempted to hold back when you know you should speak, pull out the card, say the prayer, and share what is on your mind.

Zebras

For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

Proverbs 2:6

Zebras. That's what my daughter called them. Zebras. No, not the horsy looking animals with black and white stripes known to roam the African Sahara or chomp dry grass at the zoo, but referees at sporting events on the game field decked out in their black and white striped togs.

"What are those zebras doing on the field, mommy?" She asked.

"Well, honey, they need to make sure all the players are playing fair, and don't get into fights." I answered. "They need to know the rules and make sure the players follow those rules," I continued. And pleased with my answer I concluded, "As a matter of fact, they go to referee school, so they can do a good and fair job."

It wasn't too long after this conversation that an all out brawl worthy of NHL Hockey players erupted between my two girls in our family room. Arms flailed, hair pulled, legs kicked and voices shrieked. And I needed to think fast. Where was my rule book, whistle and zebra outfit? I needed to enroll in referee clinic myself!

Then I paused to reflect on the fact that I already had enrolled in referee clinic and did have my play book. I could always grab a black and white striped shirt for dramatic effect, but the two important pieces were already in place. Wasn't attending Sunday school and worshipping God a weekly referee update? Not just a one time clinic, but weekly updates as well! And if I need re-certification there are seminars and retreats to sharpen my skills. And I have the Bible, my rule book that provides the blueprint for everything I need to know to referee in a fair way.

So the next time your kids go at it, grab the zebra shirt and remember, you've got God's rule book.

Prayer: Father, help me to teach my children to play fair, whether it is in sports or in life. When I am in doubt about the rules, remind me to look to you for guidance. Amen.

Action Step

Grab a pen and paper and journal your thoughts and emotions the last time you needed to serve as a referee between your kids. How did you feel? In control? Out of control? Did you reflect on Scripture that could help you maintain an approach of fair play when you were afraid you were going to get sucked in to the dispute yourself?

How did you resolve or referee the last dispute? Now brainstorm a creative alternative based on Proverbs 15:18: "A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel." Imagine how surprised your kids may be if in the past you've needed to raise your voice above theirs to be heard!

Winning the Highpoint

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

Galatians 2:3

March had finally arrived, and another swim season would soon draw to a close. Afternoons since October (for some September) had been spent at the pool. The outdoor temperature during winter months could be gauged by how quickly my glasses fogged up when I stepped on the pool deck. If I closed my eyes I could imagine being in a warm place far away (without chlorine and with plenty of sunshine!)

Countless laps had been swum, turns executed and starts practiced all in preparation for the final meets of the season, including league championships, Y Districts and for the elite qualifiers Y States or even Nationals.

For our family it also included an annual pilgrimage to the St. Patrick's Day Swim Your Own Age Meet, where my boys consistently won their age group high point trophy.

I loved this meet, and I reveled in the knowledge that other coaches recognized the Pride name and lamented the fact that we had shown up, yet again.

So with heat sheet in hand I supervised my little swimming stars during warm-ups and smugly attended to them and their team mates who came to compete. I served as honorary coach to those representing the Wild Cats that weekend in March.

The problem was selfish ambition had definitely driven my decision to attend this meet year after year. I knew that the premiere team in the area (with swimmers who challenged my boys) often chose not to attend this meet, and I also knew that key competitors had aged up and out of my sons' age group, leaving the door open for the strong possibility of another high point trophy to be displayed at home in the trophy case. Vain conceit had

definitely won out over humility in annually spending the third Saturday in March at a hot, humid swimming pool so my boys (and I, by association) could be recognized. Toss the humility amass the highpoint!

God isn't interested in the highpoint trophies, but he is supremely interested in the humility of our hearts. Finally, I got it. So hang up the towel of selfish ambition and seek to honor God instead with a humble heart, which is worth more than any collection of high point trophies.

Prayer: Lord, help me remember, day by day, moment by moment, if necessary, to nurture a heart of humility and not selfish ambition, in myself and in my children. Amen.

Action Step

Pause to consider the motives behind your child's sports participation. Be honest. How much is solely for their enjoyment and development and how much is for other motivations that have to do with a competitive edge and recognition? Then, talk to your kids about how they feel, and LISTEN.

Fighting, Integrity Style

Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.

Proverbs 2:11

Modesty, integrity, perseverance, indomitable spirit and self control. These are the five tenets of Tae Kwon Do.

“Line Up!”

“Yes Sir!”

About ten children between the ages of seven and twelve zigzagged and scampered round each other and across the room, lining up front to back, right to left, according to rank.

“Left mid-section punch!” The instructor commanded. And without skipping a beat, the young charges responded by punching not at each other, but straight at an imaginary opponent lined up directly in front of them.

Likewise, when the command came to kick, the kick was carefully placed straight ahead, or sometimes at a punching bag, but never at another individual, unless they were dressed and protected specifically for sparring.

One evening, I watched my son don his sparring equipment: shin guards, arm pads, hand pads, foot pads, a soft head guard and a mouth guard to protect against the future need for orthodontics. There were more pads than flesh to cover! His opponent was protected in the same way to protect them from getting hurt. Yet it would be discretion and understanding and the tenets of TKD as much as the techniques that would offer the best protection.

Not too long after a class that had been heavy on the sparring I watched as an argument started to brew between Matt and his brother Chris. Chris approached Matt with his arms up, mimicking the striking techniques Matt had learned in class. Challenging him, Chris said, “come on, want to duke it out? You’re not afraid of me, are you? You’re the one who has all the self defense stuff.” But instead of responding by striking, he responded by walking away. Matt understood it wasn’t worth it and walked away, honoring the martial arts training he had.

I reflected upon both the tenets and the techniques as valuable tools in self defense. Too often we see combatants resort to physical means to resolve conflicts. There are times when punching or kicking may be useful as a last resort, something the art of TKD teaches. But more importantly the lesson is one which matches Scripture: Discretion and understanding will go a long way in avoiding conflict. Be modest; operate from a position of integrity; persevere; don’t allow your spirit to be crushed and exhibit self control. With those as your protection you won’t need all the pads!

Prayer: May we all learn to use discretion and understanding as tools of self defense, whether taught by Your Word, or by You using another setting, this time the martial art of TKD. Thank you Father, for Your creativity!

Action Step

Spend a few moments thinking about how it would feel to respond to conflict by incorporating discretion, understanding and the tenets of TKD and journal your thoughts.

Summer Vacation in November

For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Jeremiah 29:11

I looked at the calendar and just sighed. How could there not be a single week in an entire summer to plan a family vacation? Had amnesia set in since last year? Would baseball be my family's vacation, again? And if it did was that really so bad? It meant both my sons would once again be playing All Star Ball.

But I am a consummate planner and the uncertainty of summer vacation plans was getting under my skin.

“What about the third week in June?” I said to whoever was listening.

“Can't,” my husband replied. “I'm on call, and you know there's not anyone to switch with that time of year.”

“No, mom” piped up Chris, “we have too many make up games and they're bound to be played that week.”

“I just want to hang out with my friends” was the third vote cast by my younger son.

“August, what about August?” I questioned into thin air with a slight pitch in my voice signaling the onset of desperation.

Another chorus of negatives. A family commitment to serve at a camp for special needs kids X'd out the second week and after that it was pre-season for fall sports. The first week had to be left unscheduled so that if Matt's team qualified for the state tournament (as they consistently had) there wouldn't be any conflicts.

This summer vacation thing wasn't looking good... "What about November? Thanksgiving?" Not exactly summer, but if we went south...

"Great idea, Mom; can I bring a friend?"

Not to be outdone by his brother, Matt chimed in, "If he gets a friend, can I bring one too?"

"If I don't wait any longer, I should be able to get the time off for vacation then," added my husband.

There, it was settled, we would take our summer vacation in November. Not my plan, but one that worked. And how often is that the case: We think we've got it all figured out, all planned out, but God has something else in mind. When will I learn to simply leave the master plan in the hands of the Master planner?

Prayer: Lord, help me to experience joy and not stress in the challenges that handling the commitments and logistics of a family bring. Help me to relinquish my control over to You and learn to listen and look for Your creative solutions. Amen.

Action Step

List five logistical challenges you have facing you. Now list the conventional solution along with the stumbling blocks that accompany it. On a separate column, list three alternative “out of the box” ways to simplify or solve the issue at hand.

Mother Ump Makes a Call

Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Psalm 37:4

“I want to be home for my senior year and I want to play baseball in the spring,” Matt wrote. His letter continued, “I haven’t even really played in two years. My sophomore season was cut short and I was robbed of playing this year because of my knee. Being part of that team next year is something that I desperately want. It is my last chance to be a part of a baseball team with all of my friends that I have so many good baseball memories with.”

Memories came flooding back as I held Matt’s letter in my hands. I desperately missed my son. Struggles with substance abuse had resulted in his court ordered attendance at a therapeutic wilderness program in Utah. Late summer gave way to fall and Matt was almost 3,000 miles away from home.

The words from Matt’s letter bore down to the deepest nooks and crannies of my soul. I couldn’t come to grips with the thought that Matt wouldn’t be home for his senior year and wouldn’t play baseball again with a group that had been together since they were nine.

I struggled and grappled with what was best for Matt. Could he come home and be successful, or did he still need to be away from the people, places and things that had played a role in wreaking havoc in our lives?

I appealed to God in prayer one Sunday during Worship. Barely able to stammer, I shared the desires of my heart and, as tears slid down my cheeks in silence, I voiced my request to God, my words barely audible. But the desires of my heart were loud and clear. The words tumbled out in staccato syncopation. I was totally absorbed in how desperately I was clinging to a dream that seemed to be slipping away, a dream for Matt to be

home by spring, playing a game he loved. The request was simple but came from my heart, "Lord, I just want to see him play baseball."

God heard the anguished pleas of a mother who yearned for a sport to contribute to her son's healing: Leadership, belonging, teamwork. God knew the desire of my heart and heard my prayer.

Matt did return home for his senior year in high school. Winter gave way to spring. The boys took to the field and by June had made an unprecedented run for the State title. They made it as far as the semi finals before bowing out.

That June day, the victory in baseball did not belong to Matt's team. In the bottom of the last inning, leading by one run, the victory slipped through their hands.

The emotion I felt and the tears I shed were different from the other parents. While they were mourning a loss, I was celebrating a victory, a victory with Matt that was so much more significant than the win or loss of that day's game.

The tears I shed were of gratitude. Gratitude that Matt was home, playing a game he loved and fitting in as if he hadn't missed an inning, and gratitude that God answered the anguished plea of a hurting mom.

Prayer: God, thank You for knowing how to answer my prayers even when I don't know what to ask. Help me to remember that even in what seem like the most impossible circumstances, You hear and promise to never leave or forsake me and have a perfect plan. Amen.

Action Step

Reflect on some of your most heartfelt prayers. Write them down along with what you thought the answer would be. Also write down the answer that God actually provided. How was His answer better? Journal these thoughts and use them to help you yield your will to God's with future requests.

Determination vs. Determination

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.

Colossians 3:23

Sweat beaded up on the pitcher's forehead accentuating the fierce look of determination on his face.

He shook his head "no" signaling the catcher he wanted a different pitch.

The next option resulted in an affirmative nod, more like an abrupt acknowledgement of the catcher's selection.

Then the pitch, hurled with power and precision.

"Stee-Rike" bellowed the ump.

The pitcher wiped his brow with his forearm as he returned to the mound after the ball had been tossed back to him. We're ahead by two. I can do this. We're ahead by two runs. Just throw strikes, my defense will support me. Just throw strikes.

The pitcher surveyed the runners positioned at first and second base. They too were determined; determined to come from a two run deficit and win, determined to be victorious underdogs, determined not to be crying tears of loss that day.

One out, just two more...and the ball released from his glove but instead of another strike came a perfectly executed bunt, moving the runners to second and third. And instead of a second out all of a sudden the bases were loaded. The determination of the batter carried his legs to the bag at first base barely beating the throw.

More sweat. Not just because of the heat but because of an increasing level of anxiety. I can't let my team down... I'm still OK. It's OK. We still have two runs up on them. Just keep your head on straight...He wiped the dripping sweat off his forehead and released the next pitch.

He heard the crack of the bat as the bat made solid connection with the ball. Please catch it, please catch it... come on guys, please catch it...and the ball was caught just shy of the wall, but not before the runner at third had a chance to score. It's OK. We've got two outs, and we're still ahead by one. We only need one more out. Just one more out...

Just as he was getting ready to throw the next pitch, the opposing coach called time out. Their determination to win was just as strong.

The break in momentum was just what the opposing team had hoped for as the count now reached three balls and two strikes. The pitcher was having trouble throwing the ball over the plate.

“Ball Four!” called the ump.

And now the bases were loaded. Two outs and down by one.

This game had become a battle of the wills: Determination vs. Determination. Yet only one team would emerge victorious.

And then the pitch.

The minute the ball left his glove and zoomed towards the batter, he knew he shouldn't have thrown that pitch. Fast. Too fast. And directly over the plate.

The bat connected and the sound of bat hitting the ball resonated all the way to the highest bleachers. But this time the ball cleared the wall and instead of the third out it was a grand slam home run. The other team had come back from a deficit and won.

Determination vs. Determination. One winner. One loser. Lots of tears. Some in victory and some in defeat.

If the victory had to be gauged by determination, the game would have been a tie. But that was not the case. Yet determination and giving 110% for the victory and your team is one of the best life lessons that can be gained from sports.

The old adage, "it's not whether you win or lose but how you play the game" rings true. Whenever you go out to play, give it all you've got. Make the team proud and be blameless. But more importantly, make your head coach, God, proud.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Help me to serve You first and foremost and remember that in my day, no matter what I do, I do it as if serving You personally. Amen

Action Step

Reflect on a time when you worked at something with all your heart, and when your determination was supernatural. How did you feel? What did you learn? Write a letter to your child/ren about this experience and tuck it away and save it to share with them in the future, maybe months or years down the line.

Playing by the Rules

Similarly if anyone competes as an athlete he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules.

2 Timothy 2:5

"You're out!" bellows the ump.

The whistle blows, the shrill sound signaling a rule infraction.

The hand of the swimming official goes up the same way one would raise one's hand in a classroom and signals disqualification.

But sometimes the referees or officials miss the call. After all, they are fallible human beings, just like me and you.

The victory was sweet. League Swim Championships: The relay team had just touched out their opponent for the victory. During the regular dual meet season they had lost twice by a similar margin to this same team.

But today the victory belonged to the motley group of four swimmers with shaved heads and sleek body suits, the latest in high tech competitive swim wear. If these guys wore these suits anywhere else, they would be laughed out of town.

But today they were victorious. Or so they thought when the anchor swimmer out-touched his opponent at the finish, his left arm blasting out of the water, fist clenched signaling victory.

He hadn't seen the official make the call.

Somehow, his teammates had also missed the call. They were too absorbed in the battle of churning arms and kicking feet to notice that the officials arm had gone up, signaling a disqualification.

The victory was no longer theirs. They had broken the rules. One of the swimmers had exploded off the starting block in anticipation of his teammate's touch, his timing off by a fraction. Elation evaporated into disappointment. They had been so close...then the excuses and blame followed.

"Sure it hurts," said the coach, acknowledging the frustration his swimmers felt at being so close to knocking off a rival. "But how would you feel if they had won by an unfair advantage?" He continued, "Wouldn't have you wanted them to beat you without jumping the start?"

God feels the same way. He doesn't want us to gain victory by an unfair advantage.

"Well, I guess we'd better work on our starts before Districts" was the first concession of agreement.

"Yeah, we need to be tight and not single one of us out. I could've missed my turn..."

"Yeah, we know we can do it, and coach, you're right, we want to beat them fair and square, so we'll just go after them at Districts."

Playing by the rules still yields the sweetest victory. God knows if we are playing by the rules or not. So there is a referee there all the time, even if we forget he's watching.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for being an honest God who loves and rejoices in the truth. Thank You for always loving me even when I forget to say I am sorry. Help me to remember to apologize to You and to others when I am wrong. Amen.

Action Step

List three times you “won” by unfair advantage. How did you feel? How did you rationalize your actions? The next time you are tempted to “cheat” apply the actions of SORRY before you proceed: S=Scripture; O=Observe; R=Repent; R=Regroup; Y=Yearn (for God).

Listen Closely

So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down and, if he calls you, say, "speak O LORD, for your servant is listening."

1 Samuel 3:9

"I don't feel like going to tennis." The words weren't said in matter-of-fact fashion but with inflections and cadence all aimed at achieving the desired dramatic effect.

My daughter continued, her voice now on the verge of a whine, "Really, do I have to go?"

I braced myself for the ensuing argument, annoyed that something she had wanted to do so badly was now turning into an argument and a debatable activity.

"Well, yes, you really do have to go" was my immediate and automatic response.

"Why-eeeeee," she almost wailed. "I don't feel like going."

So now I was at a crossroads. Was I going to insist she go, or would I allow her to stay home?

Neither option was appealing. I didn't want to be dictatorial but I also didn't want her to think that with the right combination of melodrama and voice intonation she could wheedle out of commitments. At the time those were the only outcomes I considered. But then I remembered to listen to her thoughts and feelings as such, void of hidden agendas of manipulation (I have spent too many years with teenagers). I don't always do that.

So instead of dogmatically insisting she go, I sat down on the ground in front of her and said, "Why don't you want to go?" And proceeded to listen carefully and attentively.

And her answer surprised me. “Well, mommy, I just want to stay home and play with you.”

I was expecting a litany of excuses from being tired, to being hungry, to the weather being too hot. Instead I was startled by my daughter’s desire to simply spend time with me.

What a blessing I would have missed if I had autocratically insisted she go to tennis, no ifs, ands or buts, no questions asked.

I sometimes forget that my daughter is only eight, and even though she enjoys tennis, there might be days when she would just rather be home.

It is important to listen to that still small voice when it whispers to your heart. There are times when it is important to insist on following through with a commitment, or when your child is manipulating you, but there are also times they are simply being a kid. And those times the accompanying blessings are easy to miss if we don’t keep our ears open.

In the same way we often have our own agenda and fill up our days with commitments and activities and fail to hear God’s voice inviting us to just be with Him.

Be sure to listen, both to your child and to the voice of God, and anticipate with excitement the blessings that are sure to follow when God’s still small voice is what is calling the shots.

*Prayer: Thank You for Your voice and Your love, even through I don't always listen and hear. Help t o give me
Your ears. Amen*

Action Step

The next time your child wants to talk to you, fully engage in the conversation with ears willing to hear their voice. Journal the blessings and surprises that result so you may look back over them occasionally and allow them to serve as a reminder to heed the still, small voice of God.

Distance vs. Accuracy

Teach me your way, O LORD; lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors.

Psalm 27:11

“Hey, Mom, can you shag for me later on?” Chris hollered from his room.

Chris was the kicker for his high school football team and the glorious, glamorous task of shagging allows him to get more kicks into a practice session. The shagger is the ball chaser. The person who retrieves the football after it has been kicked, hopefully through the uprights.

“Sure,” I said. I enjoyed being with Chris, and the exercise didn’t hurt either. He had a strong leg and could really give the ball a boot.

So later that afternoon we got into the car and drove over to the practice field armed with three footballs.

He would kick and I would scamper after the balls, collecting and returning them to him like a squirrel bringing the bounty back to the nest.

“Too far left, you didn’t get it through,” I said.

“I’m not an idiot mom, I have eyes, I can see that,” came his curt reply.

“Great boot! That one sailed straight through, right down the middle” was my feedback after his next kick.

He was much better with compliments than with criticism.

“Yeah, that was a long one. I bet it went over 50 yards,” he said, perhaps overestimating the distance the ball had traveled.

But the kicker doesn't only aim for distance, accuracy is important also. It doesn't matter how far the ball travels if it doesn't first go through the uprights. Not to the left, not to the right, but right down the middle.

And then my mind wandered to spiritual applications of the same thought, that of accuracy and distance mattering. It can apply to our walk with God in the obedience department, in our prayer life, but also with discipline. If we lose accuracy, we become sloppy. If going the distance suffers, we fail to persevere.

Both are important; avoiding sloppiness and persevering. So the next time you ponder your walk with God, aim for the game winning 58 yard field goal hit with power and precision.

Prayer: Thank You, God, for the opportunity to learn about accuracy and persistence in my walk with You.

Help me to listen to Your guidance and obey Your commands so that I may grow closer to You. Amen.

Action Step

Take ten minutes of silence and listen and hear what God tells you about obedience, prayer and discipline in your life and put one of those revelations into practice daily for the next week.

Support from the Sideline

Therefore he is able to save completely those who came to God through him because he always intercedes to live for them.

Hebrews 7:25

Water boys. Cheerleaders. Ground crew. The unsung, behind-the-scene supporters of our kids.

I hadn't given much thought to cheerleaders or water boys and the supporting role they played until a friend recently told me about her son and how he went from a starting offensive lineman on his football team to water boy, a role someone else had always filled.

Austin loved to play football. He was an offensive player with fire under his feet and an agility that allowed him to weave in and out of the defense, consistently placing him in scoring position.

During one game, he darted in and out forging his way forward. He took a hit and fell hard. The defensive player landed solidly on top of him, pinning his left thumb in an awkward position.

Hurt, but undaunted, the thumb was splinted and wrapped. Austin was back in the game, and his team won that afternoon's contest.

But instead of practice the next afternoon, Austin found himself at the doctor's having his thumb, which was now stiff, swollen and several shades of purple, X-rayed.

"It's fractured," proclaimed the doctor. "You'll have to wear a cast and won't be able to play football for the next four weeks."

"Four weeks? Four weeks?" Austin repeated incredulously. "What am I going to do for four weeks?" he asked, speaking more to himself before his voice trailed off.

Then he thought about how he could still go to practice, be a part of the team, and be useful besides. He would assume the role of water boy, making sure his teammates were well hydrated during the warm afternoon practices.

He took to his new position with the same commitment and drive that made him such a good football player. He ran the water to the players on the field, filled the containers and made sure no one was thirsty, then casually commented to his mom, teammates and coaches, "I rock as a water boy!"

This story reminded me of a group of behind-the-scene, unsung heroes in our spiritual life. They are the intercessors, the people who pray when called to do so.

We may not be aware of it and often they don't know the outcome of their prayers, but the Bible tells us that "the prayer of the upright pleases him." (Proverbs 15:8).

So wouldn't it be great to rock as intercessors? Think of the behind-the-scenes difference you could make.

Prayer: Lord, thank You for all the people who have prayed for me throughout my life. Help me to be a faithful pray-er for others who need Your loving touch in their life. Please remind me to be a faithful intercessor. I look forward with great joy and anticipation to how You will use me. Amen.

Action Step

Ask God to bring to mind ONE person that you can be an intercessor for everyday for the next 30 days. At the end of that time, call them or write a note to them and see how they are doing. Try to determine if they have experienced any change in the areas of their life for which you have been praying.

Playing for Dad

...to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

Ephesians 3:18

Greg's mom Tina was relishing the last warm rays of the summer sun. Two days from now it would be fall but for now the calendar told her that it was still technically summer and the warmth of the afternoon sun affirmed it.

A group of diehard pool moms were soaking up the last pool day of the season, holding on to the last snippets of fun and relaxation and, for the moment, burying the reality of school routines.

Tina was enjoying a respite. For the moment, she was responsible only for her younger son who was busy enjoying the pool. He was oblivious to the fact it would be over eight months until he would have this opportunity again.

Greg, who is eight, was with his dad at his midget football game. Tina was enjoying the absence of sibling scuffles, which would restart as soon as Greg and his dad joined her at the pool after the game.

The clip clop of cleats against the pavement announced Greg's arrival.

"So how was the game?" Tina asked Greg.

Before he had a chance to answer, his dad, Scott announced in a matter of fact tone, "Well, let's just put it this way, there probably won't be any more games for HIM for the rest of the season."

Greg stood in back of his dad, his head cast down.

"He didn't hit at all, he hardly looked like he was even there," continued his dad.

Wanting to re-direct the conversation, Tina asked Greg if he wanted a snack. "Go get a snack, Greg, the snack stand is still open."

But before he barely turned on his heels, Scott's comments followed him. "No ice cream for you. You can have carrots and dip. Weigh in Monday, you know, and, if you blow weigh in, then you really won't be playing."

Tina shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "Scott....let up, he's only eight...."

Not to be dissuaded, Scott continued berating and finding fault with every aspect of the game Greg had played earlier that afternoon.

Greg's expression filled in the spaces between the lines. He longed for his dad's approval. That was why he was playing, after all. He wanted his dad to be proud of him but he was having a hard time doing something he didn't enjoy. He was doing it for his dad and it was all worth it if he could please his dad and earn his approval.

For years, I thought I had to earn my Heavenly Father's love, like I tried to earn my earthly father's love. The fact is He was just waiting to lavish His love upon me, no strings attached. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

As human beings, we so often think of love as conditional. Remember, in God's economy, love is unconditional.

Prayer: Lord, help me to love others unconditionally as You love me unconditionally. May Your love always be a model for how I love others. Thank You for the gift of Your love, help me to share it with my friends and family. Amen.

Action Step

Reflect on your relationship with your earthly father. Journal any specific times you felt his love was conditional. If you choose, you can transcribe your journal entry into a letter that you share with your dad. Conclude by affirming your worth with your Heavenly Father by writing the following Scripture on a 3x5 card and carry it with you and look at it when you begin to forget how much God loves you.

“The King is enthralled by your beauty and know that his love is unfailing.”

Psalm 45:11

Suiting Up

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the Devil's schemes.

Ephesians 6:11

Pads. A helmet. Foot gear. More pads. And more pads. All of this in preparation for taking the field; ample preparation and protection before going out in contest with the other team.

No wonder the team had to arrive right after school for a seven o'clock game!

First there were the special socks, reinforced with tape around the ankles for extra padding, support and protection.

Next were the leg pads, providing more padding and bulk. And finally the girdle and tail piece.

The next trick was to shimmy one's body into the uniform pants. They always looked like the male version of spandex to me, too small and too tight to possibly cover the required body parts. After a significant amount of jumping, pulling and stretching, the pants were on!

Next, the shoulder and chest protection, making even the puniest player appear bulky and macho.

Don't forget the head; a helmet, complete with face and mouth protection.

Now, the player was ready to step out onto the field, the full "armor" of their uniform on them for protection against the perils of the game, especially if they were on the offensive or defensive line.

That's fine if the playing field is even, you know who your opponent is, and are prepared to play by the same rules (and same protection).

But what about the spiritual contest we engage in every day? Many times I don't even remember I'm out there in the middle of an all out contest that rages around me. There I am smack in the middle of all the action.

Did I remember to suit up? When I step onto the playing field of my day, have I suited up? The Bible refers to it as the armor of God but I think of it as my daily uniform. God gives me the belt of truth, the breast plate of righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit. (Ephesians 6:11).

God has given me the uniform and it's my job to suit up as carefully as my son did every Friday and Saturday for years before his game. After all, this is the game of life!

Prayer: Lord, thank You for providing me with a uniform, Your armor, which protects and prepares me for the battles I confront in my life, both seen and unseen. Through the gift of Your word, faith and truth, I have the armor to be victorious in the battles I face every day. Thank You. Amen.

Action Step

Imagine going out skiing for a day. How would you dress and prepare? What would you make sure to bring along to protect you from the elements? Now, turn your thoughts to spending a day at the beach. How would you adequately prepare to be out in the sun, by the ocean for a full day? Now imagine if your outfits were reversed: ski garb worn for a day at the beach and a bathing suit, towel, sunglasses and sunscreen taken to the slopes? (OK, the last two items are important BOTH places!) What might happen? How might you feel?

Skill Mastery

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything.

James 1:4

The girls were eager to tell me about their latest tumbling class. So eager, in fact, that they both were talking at the same time in fast snippets.

“You get to move up when you can do all the skills.”

“Ashlynn isn’t in our class anymore.”

“I’m having trouble getting just one leg over at a time with my cartwheels.”

“I got to be line leader tonight.”

The statements were fired in overlapping, rapid succession to my fatigued mind that had trouble sorting the statements out.

Slowly the pieces came together.

Apparently one of their classmates had mastered the skill list for the tumbling class my girls were in which included back bridges, headstands, donkeys and cartwheels. While I was still mulling over how donkeys got into tumbling class, the rapid fire comments continued.

“Mom, will you help me hold my legs up so I can get them over one at a time?” said Nicole. “Mom, mom... M-a-a-a-u-h-h-h-m...can you help hold my legs?” insistently continued Nicole until I was standing next to her, lifting her legs in place.

Not to be outdone by her sister, Tianna said “I can already do three of the required skills but I have to work on the rest.”

“Look, look, you need to walk like this” piped up Nicole as a graceful example of strutting like a peacock ensued.

When they paused to come up for air before continuing their frenzied report, my brain gears continued to slowly grind. Their friend had been moved up, and of course, they wanted to move up too. They didn't want to be left in the dust. They wanted to practice so they could master all their skills and be advanced to the next level.

“Sure, I'll help you practice,” I replied.

Their enthusiasm was contagious and when we got home, we were practicing in the living room. I loved holding their legs up and praising their efforts. I delighted in their accomplishments and knew that when they mastered this skill list, like their friend, they would have the opportunity to move to the next level.

As I pondered this thought, I thought how God has a “skill list” for us. Disciplines, attitudes, things He asks us to do. He will keep us at the same level until we master the work He has given us for the moment. But with attention, practice and an enthusiastic heart when we master those tasks or skills, we are blessed by being moved up to the next level. Then we start over with a new list that challenges and stretches us anew.

That is how we grow and mature.

Prayer: Lord, help me gain mastery over the skills You want me to learn. Help me hear Your voice clearly so I can obey Your commands and receive all the blessings and gifts You want to give me. Thank You for your love and grace, and for always bringing me to new levels, closer to You. Amen.

Action Plan

When was the last time your son or daughter felt like giving up or actually did give up? What did you say? What did you do? Could you improve your reaction? List five ways you can be an encourager and find one Scripture that emphasizes the value of perseverance.

Getting the Call

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

1 Peter 2:9

You would have thought I was a love smitten teen the way I was sitting next to the phone ready to pounce on it as soon as it rang.

But no, wait! Don't pick that phone up on the first ring. Too anxious. The caller might think I was sitting right there just waiting for it to ring, and I wouldn't want them to think that even though it was true.

No, I was no lovelorn teen, but a grown woman waiting for the call to announce whether or not my son had been selected for the all-star baseball team.

Of course I thought my son should make the team. He was talented! He could hurl a ball with accuracy and power from first base as well as the outfield.

And we were dependable chauffeur service having carted and fetched responsibly for weeks on end from practice to game to practice to away game...structuring the family routine around it.

From April to June our culinary selections centered around three choices: Hot dogs, hamburgers and pizza. And complain as we may we were eager for two more months of carting and fetching and a diet guaranteed to wreak havoc with our cholesterol levels.

Ring.....ring.....The phone rang and I was frozen, unable to pick it up. What if after what if flooded my mind... What if it wasn't the call? Then I would have to start waiting all over again. What if they were calling to say he

was only selected as an alternate? What if he did make the team and practice started tomorrow? Could I scramble to pull it all together? What if the games conflicted with my work schedule and I couldn't make them all?

My mental gyrations were interrupted by my husband who asked if I was going to answer the phone.

I had been practically sitting on top of it like a mother bird guarding her nest and he assumed I would pick the receiver up. It was before caller ID, so I couldn't even cheat to see who was calling.

At a loss for words I numbly shook my head "no" and pointed to the phone, sign language for "could you answer it?"

After shooting me a quizzical and somewhat exasperated "I really don't understand you look," my husband answered the phone.

"Hi Dave." Dave, oh this is good. He's Chris's coach. Anyway I think it's good, he wouldn't call to say he didn't make the team...

"Tomorrow? Five o'clock? Sure, no problem." Five? Practice? Meeting? UH-OH...where is the birth certificate? I wanted to interrupt, but knew better. I could be asking these questions myself if I had answered the phone....

"Sure, see you tomorrow" and with that my husband hung up the phone.

"Well, did he make it? Did he make it?" I stammered wanting to know but only if the answer was "yes."

Not answering immediately my husband added a dramatic flair. "Well, what do you think?"

“Think?” “Think?” “I can’t think; just tell me!”

“Yes, he made the team. As a matter of fact, it was a unanimous vote.” Howie continued, “Practice at five tomorrow. Be sure to bring the birth certificates.”

I heaved a huge sigh of relief and realized how exhausted I was from the uncertainty of not knowing.

I’m really glad it’s not that way with making God’s team. There doesn’t have to be any uncertainty and you don’t have to wait for the phone to ring to let you know if you made it or not.

God wants us all to be on His team, and there isn’t a limit to how many he’ll take. The call that comes from God is simply an open invitation, not a selective one. Now isn’t that the kind of all star team you’d like to be on?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for placing a call on my life and having a divine purpose for me to fulfill. Thank You for wanting me to be on your team. Help me score countless grand slam homeruns for You. Amen.

Action Step

List three “teams” (jobs, committees, etc.) to which you were selected. How were you notified, and how hard was it to wait? Conversely, list the “teams” you didn’t get picked for. Were you notified? How? How did you feel?

Trophies

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.

Matthew 6:19

“Wow, look at all those trophies!” my friend exclaimed. The expression on her face confirmed that she was really impressed.

“Did your boys win all of those trophies?” she continued, her eyes sweeping over the four jam packed full shelves of trophies arranged in graduating heights back to front.

“Yes, mostly from swimming” I replied with just a bit too much pride in my voice.

“But there are also some from baseball, soccer, football and tae kwon do,” I was quick to add, wanting to make sure she realized that my boys were truly well rounded athletes.

I also pointed out that a few of them were mine, leaving little doubt as to what my genetic contribution to the collection of athletic figurines had been.

“Wow” was all she could muster, later admitting that she had felt inadequate that morning as she viewed the prominent display of our family’s athletic prowess.

Years later I look at that same trophy case and see the same trophies but have different thoughts.

I must admit I was proud of my sons’ (and my own) accomplishments...a little bit too proud...displaying them where they were certain to be noticed, craving that attention, not mindful of a couple of important truths.

We didn't need trophies to validate a successful team effort or incredible individual accomplishment. The trophies merely called attention to those accomplishments and led to feeding our egos in a way they didn't need to be fed. The trophies were only things. They have since taken up residence in shoe boxes in the garage, to be held on to as tangible reminders of games and events but not as the centerpiece of conversation. What was important was the effort, the teamwork, the training and the camaraderie that went into pursuing a victory, not the reward itself.

It made me think of all the stuff, the "adult trophies" we accumulate. Nice cars, furniture and things to make our homes a showcase. Is God interested in these things? No, and He tells us so. It is far more important in His eyes to store up treasures in heaven by directing our resources to reaching out to others around us who may have various needs.

You never know. The beautiful things you have in your home may last for a season and then end up on the shelf in the garage next to the trophies. It is far better to make a lasting, eternal impact on someone else's life and get the attention off yourself.

Prayer: God, help me to strive for the things in life that are truly of value and are not simply "things." Help me to appreciate relationships and the beauty of Your creation and help me to not covet material things. Whenever I fall into an envious or covetous mindset help me to abandon those thoughts and fill my mind instead with Your love. Amen.

Action Step

What is your most valued “trophy” or possession? If your house were to go up in flames, what would you try to save? Why is it so important to you? What does it signify to you and to others? How would you feel if it disappeared right now? Is there an intangible you could replace it with?

It's Not My Fault!

But they all alike began to make excuses...

Luke 14:18

“Are you blind?” screamed one mom.

“No, totally, totally blind!” Hollered another sarcastically at the top of her lungs.

Spurred on by the crowd, a father now chimed in, bellowing, “And you call yourself a ref?! Where was the call?”

The stands were always full of parents whose kids could do no wrong and whose team was the victim of unfair call after unfair call. It was never their kid's fault.

Soccer was especially lively, with parent commentators predictable in their sideline play by play and commentary.

One fall afternoon, the hazy Indian summer sun shining down on fierce combatants in a hotly contested league game, one of the stellar players had fouled an opponent and had to leave the game red card in hand. Fouled, injured and out of the game.

“What do you think you're doing, ref?” yelled his dad from the bleachers, leaping to his feet and bellowing at the top of his lungs.

“Didn't you see the other kid?” “Where was his foul? Are you blind?” Clearly his son, the star, was not at fault.

But the game went on and the star came out. Instead of being reprimanded for overstepping the rules, he was excused for aggressive play and told it was OK, that's how games are won.

Excuse, rationalization. Excuse, rationalization.

But we don't need to go to a soccer field to see excuses and rationalizations at work in our lives.

I need to go no farther than the refrigerator.

The Ben and Jerry's ice cream is calling my name, despite the fact that I can't fit into half my clothes?

"Oh, I walked with a friend this morning, I can have some!"

"Not order dessert? But I have a coupon, it's free!"

And I complain when the scale doesn't budge.

So before you shake your head in dismay at the overzealous sports parent, examine excuses and rationalization (playing the victim....) in your own life, you just might be surprised!

Prayer: God, help me to be transparent and honest in life, with myself and with others. Help me to not make excuses for poor choices or poor behavior. Please be with me and give me strength as I seek to rid the demon of denial from my life. Amen.

Action Step

When was the last time you excused or rationalized poor behavior? How long did you maintain this delusion? Were there any negative effects from adopting your viewpoint? Write a three point plan to combat rationalization and excuse making and pull it out the next time you feel yourself slipping into this pattern of behavior.

Ranting and Raving

*It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way-
Proverbs 19:2*

“I can’t believe they can get away with that” I ranted and raved as I stormed into the do-jang, (tae kwon do gym) commenting to anyone who would listen.

I eyed my friend Jason up and said it again, “How do they get away with it? I just don’t understand!”

Since I hadn’t yet bothered to explain myself, he of course, had no idea what I was talking about. He just knew that my big mouth was at it again.

“The high school football coach takes the team to church every Friday morning before school and they sing and pray. Well, they eat breakfast too, but they are at church! A public school team!” I paused before forcefully continuing, emphasizing my amazement that the school board hadn’t put the kybosh on it. “I mean, how can the coach get away with that, isn’t that a violation of that church school thing?”

Jason waited for me to come up for air before interjecting.

“I guess you don’t agree with the team doing that?” he questioned.

“Oh, I don’t really care, it’s just with everything else the school board makes such a big stink about, I can’t believe they haven’t latched on to this one.”

He eyed me quizzically, clearly not believing me.

“No, really, I don’t have a problem with it, I just don’t understand it.”

And before we had a chance for further discussion, it was time for class to begin.

Little did I realize the impact that that conversation would have on me.

I was not a follower of Christ yet at that time in my life, but Jason, unbeknownst to me, was. I had no clue that God was going to use that conversation as a springboard for intercessory prayer on my behalf.

It was three years later that I became a Christ follower and had the opportunity to revisit that conversation with Jason. It turns out that as a result of that conversation Jason had made a commitment to pray for me on a regular basis for God to capture my heart. I was amazed at how God used that conversation to spur someone on to pray for me. My misguided zeal opened the door for life changing prayer for me.

Prayer Lord, help me to learn when to speak and when to listen. Help me to listen more often. I am often too quick to speak and slow to listen. Help me also to speak the truth in love when I do speak, so that I can be a true representative of You. Amen.

Action Step

Identify three people or situations you commit to pray for on a daily basis for the next month. Put a photo to remind you of this commitment in a prominent place to help remind you of your promise.

Are We Speaking the Same Language?

Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.

Genesis 11:7

“Stick it!” The coach yelled.

“Come on, you heard me, stick it!” The directive was louder this time.

“Stick it”... Immediately my mind wandered to my childhood years in New York City.

“Stick it” was something you said to someone you didn’t like very much when you also didn’t like what they were doing. You let them know about it.

But today the setting and context were completely different.

I was sitting watching my daughter at her gymnastics class. A grin spread across her face from ear to ear as she made her way through the obstacle course, mimicking the actions of kangaroos, (jumping), monkeys (swinging) and Billy goats (climbing).

Every so often I would hear one of the other coaches holler “stick it, come on stick it!” They weren’t being rude; they were providing direction in gymnastics language.

In the language of gymnastics, “stick it” means to land a perfect landing, without any wobbling, extra steps or hesitation.

I started to think about the unique languages of sports and coaching. Baseball also has its own vocabulary, “dig, dig, dig” shouted at the runner rounding the bases. “Good eye, good eye” directed to the batter who judged the incoming ball accurately as outside the strike zone.

Spectators don't understand the language until after they've been around it awhile. The participants know the language but the fans need to learn.

It's the same with the church lingo, the language of “Christianese.” Do we stop to translate, or do we just assume the listener knows what we're talking about, while in fact they may be making erroneous assumptions based on their own experiences?

Don't leave the outsiders outside. Invite them into the arena; engage them. They will have a much better time, whether at the field or at church.

Prayer: Lord, help me always to be mindful of those around me that I include them in my conversation in meaningful ways. Help me to be inclusive and not exclusive in my behavior and words, using You as a model.

Amen.

Action Step

Ponder this: Have you ever been guilty of speaking an “insider” language, at sporting event, at church or your job? Are you even aware of it when you are doing it? What about a setting where you were the outsider? How do you feel when you don’t understand the jargon? Make an effort to be sensitive to this going on around you.

Playing Your Position

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same spirit.

Romans 12:4

“Where’s the lineup coach?” Matt asked. “Am I pitching or catching today?”

“We’re not sure yet, but why don’t you go warm up your arm.”

So Matt and Pat went out to lob a few, playing catch as if they were five-year-olds in a game of homerun derby, not senior leaguers out for a win in district playoffs. They had been pitching and catching each other since they had been nine.

The other players knew where to go.

Jon took his place in the infield throwing balls with precision to the first baseman. The outfielders took their positions lined up three across tossing to their counterpart who stood opposite.

Each of the players had a unique role; a position to play that contributed to the success of the team. They had their own forte, their talent in a particular position that would contribute to the team’s success. Each individual had their own role, yet their common goal was the same: to win that day’s game.

“Great pitch.”

“Good stop there, Matt.”

“Unbelievable diving catch out there, Jon, how did you hold on to the ball?” The team worked together to offer support and encouragement as they pursued the goal of the game victory.

As members of God’s team, we each have Spiritual gifts, our own unique combination of gifts and talents. We’re out there for the greater good to accomplish God’s work here on earth as His hands and feet.

One of us may be gifted in encouragement. Another may find their strength in hospitality; yet another in teaching. When we combine our talents we are able to serve in a loving and effective way, reaching to others with the love and power of God, acting on behalf of Him. Now, isn’t that the kind of winning team you want to be on?

Prayer: Father God, thank You for the many gifts You have given me. Thank You especially for the spiritual gifts You have blessed me with. Help me to use them frequently to bring honor and glory to You. Amen.

Action Step

Do you know your Spiritual Gifts? If you don't, do an assessment (your pastor may have an assessment tool, or do a Google search) and take an inventory to see what your gifts are. Then make a point of using one of your gifts at least once in the next week.

Rest for the Weary

For six days work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest; holy to the Lord.

Exodus 31:15

“Hey, quit splashing me!” Chris, also known as Toad said with a huge grin on his face.

“Nah, why should I?” Nathan retorted spitting water at him first then splashing some more, fanning water at him with his hands.

Then Aaron and Andy, the two other members of the boy’s medley relay joined in the fun, belly flopping and splashing water everywhere.

It looked more like a toddler pool party than a high school swim practice on the eve of district championships.

This was the end of the season, taper time, when all of the hard work of the previous six months would be capped off with shorter practices full of fun, rest and low but high intensity yardage.

The boys had mastered the fun part, goofing off in the spirit of team camaraderie. They were a team, after all, and seeded first at district championships. If they held their place, they would advance to states.

“How was practice?” I asked as Toad walked through the door, almost forty minutes earlier than he had for the previous five months.

“Great! We had so much fun, and I feel really good in the water, too.” He passed by the kitchen island and grabbed three chocolate chip cookies off a plate.

“I love tapering” he said, his words muffled by a mouthful of cookie. “It feels so good to rest, and the payoff is coming, I feel it. We’re gonna win tomorrow.”

Rest: An important element of any training regimen, including our spiritual one. God gave us seven days, but created one as the Sabbath, which was designed for rest. God knew that we needed to rest and renew ourselves and focus on Him.

Athletes need to incorporate rest also, or may find themselves injured from overuse or stress. In swimming, the taper, or rest, at the end of the season is a critical part of the season allowing for peak performance.

And isn't that what we hope for in our lives serving God? Peak performance? So remember to incorporate those breaks to strengthen your spiritual life.

Prayer: Lord, thank You for the gift of rest. Thank You for recognizing the importance of rest as we go about the business of our lives. Help me pace myself in my life and incorporate consistent rest periods in my day, week and year. Amen

Action Step

Commit to resting in the Lord today for five minutes (yes, you can grab five minutes). Write down and tuck away what god reveals to you, and return to it for encouragement as necessary.

God's Game Plan

I know that you can do all things, no plan of yours can be thwarted.

Job 42:2

The outfielders trotted towards the fence and assumed their defensive positions.

“Back up” hollered the coach, following up with arm motions signaling them to back up even more until they were practically up against the fence.

The opposing team’s power hitter was coming up to bat.

How could this kid be twelve? I wondered. He was at least a foot taller than any of our players and looked like his diet consisted of more than Wheaties and Gatorade.

The players saw who was up and they intuitively adjusted themselves to strategic fielding positions.

The crack of the bat signaled solid connection and the ball sailed toward the fence, but the players had anticipated correctly and the ball was snagged by the glove of the center fielder. Third out. Inning over. Lead preserved.

The coaches had tweaked their line up and strategy in other ways, as well, ensuring they were as prepared as possible against the opposing team.

Pinch runners, leftie pitching against leftie and a closer with a rested arm all contributed to the win.

The coaches and players had a strategy, a game plan that was individualized and tweaked to complement the offense of today's opponent. The game may not have turned out the same if there hadn't been a careful plan, a specific plan for a specific team.

Do you have a game plan in life? Or do you simply meet the day as it unfolds? Do you take advantage of your coach who longs to provide you with a strategy for winning each and every day? God is our coach.

God longs for us to listen to His voice and incorporate his plans. He is our coach and will guide us to a winning performance each and every day. Be sure to pay attention to this strategy

Prayer: Lord, help me know and discern the plans and purposes You have for me. I know You have a plan for me, help me to fulfill those plans in a way that brings You glory. Amen

Action Step

Do you have a “game plan” for your life? Daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly? What about three, five and ten years from now? What do you envision for your life?

Spend some time formulating goals for your life. Set three goals for today, the coming week, coming month and three goals you wish to accomplish in the next year. These goals can be in any area of your life. Write them down and refer to them often to see if you are staying on track towards achieving them.

Coach Paul

Do you not know that that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.

I Corinthians 9:24

Thanks for reminding me, coach Paul. Coach Apostle Paul, that is.

After weeks of playing ball together, the day this group of boys had been dreaming of since opening day was here: The Championship Game of the Pennsylvania State Little League Tournament.

Strains of “YMCA” played in the background as the group of sluggers took to the field for batting practice.

The sound of the metal bat striking ball after ball kept beat to the music as the coach fired shot after shot. Boys waiting for their turn up added the hand motions as the chorus sounded from the boom box in the dugout.

These boys were confident, relaxed and prepared. They had played ball since mid-April and it was now early August. The catcher and pitcher had played on the same regular season team and could practically pitch and catch to each other in their sleep.

Every nine and ten year old team in the state had dreamed of reaching this game, but yet only two teams would, and only one would receive the prize and emerge the winner.

The boys from Danville decked out in orange and purple prevailed that day and won the prize but they had practiced and prepared with the goal of winning states. They had been runners up the previous year and had set their sights on winning the crown right from the beginning of the season.

How about life? Can I say the same about how I live my life, especially in the areas of long term goals? If I hope to accomplish my goals, I must pursue the end result relentlessly and persevere with discipline, living in a way consistent with accomplishing the goal ahead of me.

Of course we are not alone, just as the ten year old sluggers were not alone, so remember: run for the prize, not second best!

Prayer: Father God, help me to develop discipline and perseverance in life, so that I follow through and don't give up and can win the prize of blessing You have for me. I yearn to see the prize You have for me. Amen.

Action Step

Spend a couple of minutes dreaming. Nothing small; I mean really big, out of the box dreams. Now think three, five and ten years down the line. Are there things you want to try? What are they? I have a black belt in tae kwon do and am writing books because of my “out of the box” thinking. Someday I hope to complete a marathon. How about you? Write down one goal for each time frame and three action steps to bring you closer to achieving it.

Boy Crazy

*But your hearts must be fully committed to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands,
as at this time.*

1 Kings 8:61

“Uh oh, here it comes, the dreaded coach-swimmer talk” I thought to myself. My coach Lenny whistled his signature whistle, loud enough alone to wake the dead, and hollered, “Ely, over here!”

“Oh well, this isn’t too bad, maybe I’ll miss the first set” I thought to myself.

As my teammates were churning through the water as efficiently as possible to earn a couple of extra seconds rest before leaving on the next repeat, I was sitting next to my coach listening to his assessment of both my talent and level of commitment.

“Ely” he started, calling me by my last name.

I was listening but preferred to look down at my toes than meet his gaze with my own eyes. I preferred to listen in uncommitted fashion.

“You’ve got talent” he continued. “Real talent.” “Are you serious?” I thought?

Lenny continued, “Yeah, you’ve got talent and most of the time you work hard. There’s only one problem.” And then came the crowning blow, “You’re a little bit too boy crazy.”

“Well, what do you expect?” I wanted to ask. I’m sixteen years old and spending my social life in a swimming pool.”

The problem was he knew it. My boyfriend was on the same team.

He continued with emphasis on my potential, "You could go to Junior Nationals, you know, if you totally focused on your swimming and gave up your boyfriend."

That's some choice...no thanks...I don't think so....

"Uh-huh" is what I said. Sure Junior Nationals would be cool, but did I want to sacrifice my social life, give up my boyfriend? I don't think so.

"Think about it" was all he said. "Now get back in the water and swim. We'll talk more."

Whether as an athlete committed to your sport, or a Christian committed to Christ, the choices are tough, and those who are successful will be single minded in their commitment. Scripture tells us, "But your hearts must be fully committed to the Lord our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands."

As a teen athlete I was not single minded in my commitment to my sport, and never did make it to Junior Nationals. I like to think I'm more dedicated to pursuing God (although there are still plenty of days I side step and slide and do it my way!) It's a blessing and a thrill to wake up in the morning and pray that God will use me in any way He sees fit and I know He longs to honor that request in creative and unusual ways.

While I may not have been a competitor at Junior Nationals, I am a fierce competitor on God's team. Better late than never!

Prayer: Lord, please be with me during my day and help me to stay on the straight path, not one that veers off course because of distractions. Help me to put You first and be single minded in my commitment to You. I know that when I put You first the rest of my day falls into place much more easily. Amen.

Action Step

How has God used you? Have you been utilized more or more creatively when you are single minded in pursuing his will? Call one friend today and ask them the same question. Enjoy the conversation and where it takes you!

Do I Match?

...The LORD does not look at the things a man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

1 Samuel 16:7

“Can we go shopping, mom, puleeeeee?” Came the plaintive wail from my daughter. Actually, it sounded more like a bleating sheep.

“HmMMMM?” I answered, only half listening as I thumbed through the day’s mail.

“Shopping, mom, shopping” she said, taking on a somewhat more urgent tone of voice probably directed more at my lack of attention than her desire to actually go try on several color coordinated outfits.

“Shopping?” I said, still only half listening, stalling for enough time to get through all the junk mail and catalogs that jammed my mailbox.

“Ma-uhhhmmmm- puleeze!” More bleating.

Not wanting to push it any further, I focused my attention on my daughter.

The bleating ceased.

“Can we go shopping for tennis outfits mom?” “You know some skorts with matching tops, and maybe a visor or two.” She came up for air and immediately continued: “Susie and Sally have matching outfits with socks and even hair ties that match. Can I have one of those too?”

Without giving me a chance to answer, she continued with her shopping list. “And they have really neat racket covers and these special ball carrier thingies. Can we get some of those too?”

The cash register in my head was ticking away and the running total was higher than my monthly grocery budget.

“Well, honey,” I suggested, “how about we go to the Salvation Army?”

“Ma-ummmmm.” She didn’t need to say anything else, the bleating was back.

She wanted Neiman Marcus, I wanted Salvation Army. We settled for Wal-Mart.

Why does she care so much, already, at eight about how she looks on the tennis court? Why does she feel like she has to “keep up” or have the same things (matching outfits down to the visor, rackets, and the hot pink ball carrier that looks like something that belongs on a picnic table to hold knives and forks?) Is this the example I set for her? I hope not... But I don’t have to, it is all around her.

I struggle with balance. I want her to “fit in” but what does that mean? And I tell her that how she looks on the inside is more important than how she looks on the outside. Since we ended up at Wal-Mart, maybe she is starting to hear me after all...

Prayer: Lord, help me focus on what’s on the inside and not on the outside. Help me cultivate a heart of inward beauty in my child and set a good example by not focusing on “stuff” or what I look like. Help me keep materialism in my life at bay. Amen.

Action Step

List five ways you have cared more about outer (than inner) appearances in your life.

You Can't Please Everyone

He who scorns instruction will pay for it, but he who respects a command is rewarded.

Proverbs 13:13

“You know you’re in a no win situation” My friend Sue said to me.

“What do you mean?” I said, cocking my head to the side, intent on what she was saying.

It seemed perfect. Both our sons were swimming, and my husband and I were coaching the team. We were all in the same place at the same time. Now how often did that happen?

“Well,” she continued, “you may think you’re doing the right thing, but you’ll ever make everyone happy, especially the parents.”

I must admit I hadn’t given much thought to the parents. It reminded me of a quip about individuals becoming pediatricians or teachers because they loved kids, and then find they burn out because they had such a hard time dealing with the parents.

“The parents will always know better, you’ll see.” And with those encouraging words she shot me a wry smile, tilted her head to the side and waved dismissively as she left.

It was only three days later when the first call came.

“Why isn’t Jake in four events?” demanded the voice on the other line. “I don’t want him in all those relays, he needs to be in individual events.”

More calls.

“Why is she swimming backstroke?”

“We don't want to go to the away meets, only the home meets” they take too much time.

“Swimming isn't all she does, you know. She can only make practice twice a week but I'm not sitting at that hot pool all day Saturday to see her only swim two events.”

I shook my head and rolled my eyes in exasperation. If they all knew better, then why didn't they coach? Thank God for the parents who just let us coach without trying to direct us.

But as I think about my relationship with God, I'm really not all that different from the high maintenance parents. I whine and plead, trying to get God to see things my way, and put me in charge, rather than heed his direction and discipline.

When will I ever learn? That's why athletes have coaches, and we have God, so someone who can see the big picture can provide the training and experience. In athletics, like in life, it is usually those who heed the instructions who ultimately come out ahead.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me not to whine and moan and always try to be in control. Help me realize and believe that You know what is best for me and trust the direction You send me in. Help me hear Your voice, Lord as I know You want what is best for me. Thank You for that. Amen.

Action Step

What happened the last time you went ahead and disregarded God's voice? Were there consequences? Journal your thoughts.

Ritual or Obedience

Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams."

1 Samuel 15:22

The routine was careful and deliberate: Sleep well the night before a meet, rise early, breakfast on oatmeal (not instant) complete with butter and lots of brown sugar. Next, a hot shower to loosen up my muscles and then the icing: slathering Ben-gay all over my body. It was a well tuned ritual that yielded results.

A silly ritual but one I stuck with nonetheless.

Ivy League Championships. It had been a long time since I had had a decent time in the 200 yard breaststroke. I swam the prelims and did OK but nothing to write home about. Still it was good enough to qualify for consolation finals.

However I felt awful. Sore, stiff and out of sorts. So I grabbed some Ben-gay and spread it all over my body like peanut butter on a sandwich. Then I grabbed some oatmeal and took a nap. We had several hours until Finals, might as well rest.

I carefully tucked my hair, what little there was of it, up under my cap. Next I adjusted my goggles. They were tight enough to cut off circulation, but they wouldn't fall off when I hit the water. Next, I took off my sweats and stripped down to my T shirt waiting for my turn to approach the blocks.

The whistle let out its shrill sound, summoning the eight competitors in my event to the blocks. Time to get rid of the T-shirt and shake out my arms and legs one more time.

“Swimmers, step up!”

I purposefully approached the blocks and waited for the starter’s command, poised at the back of the starting block.

“Swimmers take your marks” came the next command, to which the field of eight contestants stepped forward, toes curled around the front of the block waiting for the horn to signal the start.

Then the sound of the horn, to which we each exploded off the blocks, using every bit of power our legs would give us.

Eight laps. Don’t go out too fast...keep an even pace... nice long strokes...don’t chop your stroke short...keep it nice and smooth...turn it on the second half...

And about two and a half minutes later my race was done and I looked up at the electronic scoreboard, then looked to my left and right. I won the consolation finals in a time that was almost eight seconds faster than my morning qualifying swim.

I was sold on the merits of greasing my body with Ben-gay for a long, long time. I developed a ritual I followed without fail. It was the slathering of Ben-gay that had accounted for my incredible swim, not the hours and hours of hard training, great coaching and team camaraderie that were the true reasons for my success.

I reminded me of rituals of worship that exist today and existed years ago. In the Old Testament we can read about ritualistic sacrifices to earn favor; in some churches today ritual is an important part of receiving and anticipating blessings. In either case the attention was more focused on the ritual or routine to gain favor. And wasn’t that what I was doing? Expecting that by following a ritual of Ben-gay application I would guarantee myself a good performance rather than focus on the real reasons, or in the case of worship, rather than for thinking that ritual and routine can substitute for a personal relationship with God.

And the Ben-gay? When I skimmed on the hard work of training, it didn't pull me through.

Prayer: Lord, thank You for being my all in all, my strength and my joy. Thank You that because of You I don't need any substitutes or rituals in my life. Amen.

Action Step

Can you think of a time in your life when you allowed yourself to rely on superstition or ritual more than you should have? What was the situation? What would have been a more appropriate focus?

Out of Season Training

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage-with great patience and careful instruction.

2 Timothy 4:2

We got two weeks off in May and two weeks off in September. That was it. The other eleven months out of the year we splashed out countless laps. So I really wasn't too sympathetic when our kids complained that their swimming season was too long. Between their summer and winter seasons they only amassed six months and two weeks of laps; five months in the winter, a mere six weeks in the summer.

Of course, my kids weren't interested in listening to me wax eloquent about the virtues of being in good shape and staying in good shape.

My suggestion that they swim eleven months out of the year fell on deaf ears. Wouldn't it be worth it to stay shape? Hope in the water just three times a week in the off season to keep the feel of the water? Wouldn't it be worth it not to feel that miserable out of shape arm heaviness and lactose build up in their muscles? Once they get older they will listen to me, I foolishly thought...

But when I was younger I yearned for the off season and didn't give too much thought to being out of shape. However, it was amazing how lousy I felt after just two weeks out of the water. Maybe I should have gotten in for just a few laps during the off season and then I wouldn't have felt so out of shape.

Isn't that the way it is with most things, including the time we spend in God's Word? When I get lazy with my time with God and my Bible reading, I'm less prepared and less confident of the path to choose. The Bible tells me, "be prepared in season and out of season" so shouldn't I always-not six months and two weeks, not even eleven months out of the year-but 365 days a year-be prepared with God's plan?

It's always much harder to get back in shape; get back into a routine, once you have stopped, than to maintain the momentum once you have started. So be prepared in season or out of season in all of life, including sports and reading God's Word.

*Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to stay shape, physically as well as spiritually and give me the strength to do so.
When I lean on You, I have all I need. Amen.*

Action Step

List three ways you can stay in spiritual shape daily. Start with baby steps, for example, “I will read just one verse of the Bible daily” and progress to longer “workouts” building up to a chapter each day.

Goal in Mind

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:14

Even though it was early March and there were still patches of snow on the muddy ground, thoughts were focused on August, which was a long way off. Yet every day, the group of sluggers practiced and played with an August goal in mind: to be on a team representing Pennsylvania at the State Baseball championships.

Sure there were distractions; lots of them, as a matter of fact. There was a trip to an amusement park, the last day of school, a family vacation, a sleepover with a friend in a tent in the backyard and trips to the swimming hole with the cool rope swing. Yet, the goal was still States in August.

It was important for these boys to remain focused on the goal and not be derailed, regardless of how much fun or how innocent the detour appeared.

The same can be true of our Christian walk. The goal is to walk more and more in step with Christ. Yet daily life gets in the way, knocking us off track. Hopefully it doesn't derail us completely.

The responsibilities of family and home, with deadlines, laundry, homework (I am presently doing third grade homework for the fourth time in my life and it isn't getting any easier...) and multiple other responsibilities all conspire to take top billing in our day.

Remember to place God first, to spend time with God, to walk more in step with Christ each and every day. Be encouraged by these words, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." -Matthew 6:33

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me keep You first and foremost in my heart and may it translate to time spent first with You each day. When I become distracted by daily life and bombarded by all the demands flying at me, remind me to look to You for strength. Amen.

Action Step

Identify three cues, one for the morning, one for the afternoon and one for the evening which will serve as automatic reminders to draw closer to God. Make sure they are unusual enough that it will jog your memory. For example in the morning when you brush your teeth, focus on God. In the afternoon while driving to one of those multiple activities, invite God to draw close, and at night, when you collapse into bed at the end of the day, imagine collapsing into the strong, loving arms of your heavenly father who loves you.



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