

All For One (Teamwork - Chapter 9)

n/a

Ready:

"The body is not one part but many." -1 Corinthians 12:14

"They said you have to use your first best player, but I found out you win with the five that fit together best." -Red Auerbach

Set

When Tamika Catchings was in the third grade, she played on her first basketball team alongside sister Tauja. Her father, Harvey Catchings—an 11-year NBA player—was the coach of the squad that, other than his daughters, consisted of boys. The fact that Catchings and her sister were the only girls on the team is an interesting fact, but it's not nearly as telling as the principles they learned from their dad's coaching style. "We had to learn how to play as a group," Catchings recalls. "My dad always preached about how it was a team effort. We got that drilled in our head."

Maybe that's why Catchings, the All-Star forward for the WNBA's Indiana Fever, has never really struggled with the concept of teamwork. No matter how much individual success she has accrued on the basketball court, her number one goal has always been winning and doing it as a team.

Catchings was born in Stratford, New Jersey, in 1979 while her father was playing for the New Jersey Nets. He had previously played in Philadelphia. When he was traded to the Bucks, the family followed him to Milwaukee, where he played five seasons. When he played one final NBA season with the Los Angeles Clippers, the rest of the family remained in Milwaukee before moving to Italy, where he continued his career.

Tamika Catchings attended first grade at an overseas international school but moved back to the Abilene, Texas, a year later, where she attended second grade. She then moved to Chicago where she lived through her sophomore year in high school. During that time, her parents divorced, and she and her siblings stayed with their mother.

In Chicago, her athletic career started to blossom. As a sophomore in 1995, she was on Stevenson High School's Division AA State Championship team and was named Illinois Ms. Basketball. The following year, her mother moved the kids to Duncanville, Texas, where, as a senior, Catchings led Duncanville High School to a state title.

By then, the recruitment letters were steadily streaming into her mailbox. But as early as the eighth grade, Catchings had developed a strong desire to play for the University of

Tennessee, after happening to notice Lady Volunteers' head coach Pat Summitt on a nationally televised game.

That's when everything changed.

In Knoxville, Catchings was an instant star. As a freshman, she played a key role on the team that went 39-0 en route to the 1997-98 NCAA national championship. By the time her college career was over in 2001, she had become just the fourth woman to be named First Team All-American in four consecutive seasons.

But her newfound national fame within the world of women's basketball wasn't the only major change in Catchings's life. She also found herself straying from some of the good habits she had learned as a child and teenager. "We grew up in the church," Catchings says. "Everything the church offered, we did. Our parents just made sure that we were always involved in some positive activity. Even though we got older and may have fallen off as far as going to church and doing the things we had grown up doing, we always ended up going back to it."

Admittedly, though, Catchings mostly neglected her spiritual needs during her first three years in college—that is, until she tore the anterior cruciate ligament in her right knee against Mississippi State on January 15, 2001.

"After I got hurt my senior year in college, it seems like my need for a relationship with God became that much more obvious to me," Catchings says. "There was a huge chunk that was missing in my life that I was filling with basketball. Basketball was my god. Before the injury, I couldn't go to church because I had practice, or I had something else going on. I started to lose that balance that I grew up with. So after my injury, I got back to going to church; and then one thing after another, my faith continued to grow. It is who I am, and that's how I've come through adversity, knowing that I have Him to count on. It makes things that much easier."

Her renewed commitment to Christ also helped her solidify the true meaning of teamwork, which she had been taught at a very young age. "Teamwork is a group of people who come together to work for a common goal," Catchings says. "Whether it's winning a championship or whether it's getting a project done, they have a common goal, and everybody's on the same page."

As part of Tennessee's national championship team, Catchings caught her first glimpse of selfless team play. She shared the court with future WNBA stars Chamique Holdsclaw and Semeka Randall (now an assistant coach at West Virginia University), yet each of those top-tier athletes put aside their personal goals and worked to fulfill one singular vision. "All of us came together," Catchings says. "Some people had to sacrifice more than others, but we did it together as a team. It's not like one individual did it for the whole team."

Catchings says that the same was especially true of the amazing collection of athletes who made up the gold medal-winning women's basketball teams at the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens and the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. Both squads went undefeated thanks to some of the greatest female hoops stars to ever grace the basketball court, including Lisa Leslie, Diana Taurasi, Tina Thompson, Sue Bird and Kara Lawson.

"You get the best players in the U.S.A.," Catchings says. "All of us on our respective teams are the best players. You go from our teams in the WNBA to practicing for a few days and

then winning a gold medal. People had to put aside their differences and understand that it's not about them. It's not about the Indiana Fever or whatever team they play for. This is about us getting together to win the gold medal, and that's what we did."

Sadly, those displays of true teamwork are not always prevalent, and many times individualism rises up and destroys chemistry between teammates. Catchings lists pride, ego and a general inability to accept one's role as some of the primary enemies of teamwork. Ultimately, however, she believes that modern society's love affair with pop culture and fame may just be the biggest culprit.

"In this world, people put superstars on a pedestal—the rich, the famous, the sports stars," Catchings says. "So we're taught from a young age, 'That's who I need to be.' There are players who accept their roles, but there are a lot of players who want to be 'the woman' or they want to be 'the man.' That's where you struggle with teamwork, because you have players on the team who don't grasp the fact that they could win more games if everyone would just do what they're good at instead of trying to do everything."

Found on the reverse side of that coin is the dynamic created by athletes who covet more playing time, more recognition or more respect. The desire is usually internalized at first, but if it is left unchecked, resentment will eventually bubble over into the locker room and have a potentially devastating impact on the rest of the team. For those struggling with the temptation to give in to that negative dynamic, Catchings has a simple solution.

"Work harder," she suggests. "Don't sit there and blame somebody else for what they're doing. You always hear the story about people who say, 'I'm waiting for God to do something in my life' while they're sitting on the couch at home. It's hard for God to make a move if you're not putting out the effort."

Another enemy of teamwork—which often accompanies individualism and is the root cause of covetousness—is jealousy. As Catchings has witnessed firsthand at various levels of competition, the words written in James 3:16 are all too true: *"For where envy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every kind of evil."*

"Jealousy can destroy a team," Catchings says. "A lot of it comes from outside people saying, 'You can do this and you can do that' or 'The only reason you can't do it is because that other player is getting two more shots than you are.' It's funny when you think about it, but that happens, and then you start buying into it; and you start saying, 'Yeah, I should be playing more.' But whatever God has for you, you will have. Nobody can take that away."

It is Catchings's confidence in who she is and, more importantly, in who she is in Christ, which allows her to stay shielded from jealousy, self-serving individualism and prideful behavior that so predictably ravage the team concept. Her assurance can be traced back to the powerful passage found in Jeremiah 29:11: *"For I know the plans I have for you"—[this is] the LORD's declaration—"plans for [your] welfare, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."*

Even with that understanding, Catchings admits struggling with one of the more seemingly innocuous—though nonetheless deceptive—enemies of teamwork. Because of the high expectations that are placed on her as one of the WNBA's elite players, she must always stay alert to the danger of trying to do too much to help make up for what others aren't getting done.

"Sometimes when you try to cover up for other people's weaknesses, you end up doing more and more and more," Catchings says. "You look at Michael Jordan. When he started playing, he was doing everything. But once he figured out how to let his teammates help him, he won six championships. There's a fine line between trying too hard and not trying hard enough."

Like Jordan, Catchings has experienced a great deal of individual success in the professional ranks. After sitting out the Indiana Fever's 2001 season due to an injury, she returned in 2002 and won WNBA Rookie of the Year honors. In 2005, she scored her 2,000th point in the WNBA, reaching that mark faster than any other player had ever done in the league's history. Catchings also reached 1,000 rebounds, 400 assists and 300 steal faster than any other WNBA athlete. Catchings has won a pair of Defensive Player of the Year awards (2005 and 2006) and was the leading vote-getter for the 2006 WNBA All-Star Game.

Still, with all of those personal accolades and individual achievements, Catchings is most interested in team success and that elusive WNBA Championship. In order for that to happen, she understands how important it is for the team to recognize the truth found in 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, where the apostle Paul compares a physical body to the Body of Christ. In verse 12 of that passage, he explains that *"as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body—so also is Christ."* He continues in verse 14 with this nugget of divine wisdom: *"So the body is not one part but many."*

"I can't win every game by myself," Catchings says. "The more that my teammates can do, the better off this team will be. When I can help somebody else and they can get a little bit of love, I don't care who scores the most points per game. At the end of the game, if we won and you scored more points than me, that's great."

Catchings has also learned that there is a rewarding aspect of teamwork that many people tend to overlook. Romans 12:10 says, *"Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another" (NKJV).* It's that last phrase, *"giving preference to one another,"* that really stands out to Catchings who—despite her knack for scoring lots of points—truly enjoys seeing her teammates shine.

"It's all about spending that extra time after practice with players who need to work on certain things," Catchings says. "I haven't always been a great communicator, but in becoming a leader for my team, it's like, What can I do to help people? The biggest thing for me is just constantly being in my teammates' ears—telling them what we expect from them and telling them what we need from them. Knowing that, I think any player will play better."

One of Catchings's favorite examples of teamwork in the Bible can be found in the lives of the 12 men that were called to be Jesus' disciples. This diverse group quickly learned that they were no longer looking out for their own self-interests but, as it says in Philippians 2:4, *"for the interests of others."*

"That's a huge step," Catchings says. "They were so close to God, and as disciples they had power to do so many different things. But at the end of the day, to be able to carry out His will and to be able to work together as a team, that's kind of awesome to think about."

When Catchings talks about the importance of serving within the confines of the team, she isn't just giving lip service or saying what people expect her to say. She has backed up her desire to lift others up to a higher understanding of teamwork through her Catch the Stars

Foundation. The organization was birthed on the heels of a series of successful “Catch the Fever Camps” and “Catch On to Fitness Clinics.”

“Our mission is to help kids catch their dreams one star at a time,” Catchings says. “We have a mentoring program. We have a fitness program. But one of the things we always come back to is being able to work with other people. We put kids together who have never been together in their life. While they’re at the camp, they’re going to learn to work with that team and that person.

“You have to teach these things to kids at an early age,” Catchings adds. “You look at these role models these days, and a lot of the athletes are not doing the positive things they should be doing. Even if you don’t think people are watching, they’re always watching.”

Catchings believes that teamwork must eventually go well beyond the sports realm and carry over into every aspect of life—especially for those who have made the decision to accept Christ as Savior and Lord.

“There are so many people out there who challenge the Word,” Catchings says. “They challenge Christianity. They challenge whether there’s a God or not. That’s why there are so many other religions, because people are looking for something else. That’s why it’s important for us to come together and unite. We need to gather as Christians. Our main goal is to praise God and to live our lives for Him and to please Him. It’s not to please man, because like it says in the Bible, if you try to please man, you’re always going to be disappointed.”

Go

1. Have you ever been on a team on which everyone was relatively equal in their level of talent? If so, what challenges did that present to the concept of teamwork?
2. What are some messages in our society that promote selfish ambition? Read James 3:16. What are some ways jealousy and selfishness can cause disorder and evil within a team’s ranks? Have you ever dealt with a similar situation? If so, what did you do to overcome the strife caused by these negative attitudes?
3. Catchings says that she enjoys watching her teammates excel. Read Romans 12:10. How does this attitude contrast with what you usually see exhibited by today’s superstar athletes?
4. Read Philippians 2:1-4. What does the apostle Paul say are some key values necessary to keep a team focused on one goal? How should the admonition of verses 3 and 4 play out on the field or at work? How does the concept of putting others first translate to your role as a member of God’s team?
5. Read John 13:35. According to Jesus, what is the significance of godly teamwork as it relates to reaching your world? In striving to live this teaching out in your life, what characteristics of Christ will you begin to pray for?

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8701 Leeds Road | Kansas City, MO 64129 | 800.289.0909

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