

Eyes On The Prize (Teamwork - Chapter 6)

n/a

Ready:

"One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus." -Philippians 3:13-14

"Destiny is not a matter of chance; it is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for; it is a thing to be achieved." -William Jennings Bryan

Set

If you've never heard of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, don't feel too badly. Even National Basketball Association (NBA) point guard Luke Ridnour, the town's most famous product, wouldn't expect many people to know much (if anything) about his birthplace.

Even though its population is anything but tiny (as of the 2006 census, there were a little over 41,000 inhabitants), only those living in the northwestern United States tend to know much about the city that sits along the edge of the scenic Coeur d'Alene National Forest. And it was in Coeur d'Alene that Ridnour first fell in love with the game of basketball. He lived there until he was seven years old and recalls attending a Christian school where his mother was a teacher.

"When I was in kindergarten, my dad used to play basketball with me at lunchtime against the third and fourth graders," Ridnour says. "That was my first memory of playing basketball. He was a coach, so he would come in and mess around with me and play two-on-two against the other kids."

Oddly enough, Ridnour and his family went even deeper into obscurity when they moved to Blaine, Washington—a town with a population under 4,000 that sits in the state's extreme northwest corner and rests against the U.S.-Canadian border. While there, he attended Blaine High School with about 400 students and graduated with 90 seniors. The tight-knit community was extremely supportive of its athletic programs, which Ridnour led to a pair of state hoops titles. More important for him, however, was the development of his ideas about teamwork.

"Since I can remember, it was that same crew of guys playing together," he explains. "It was never about putting one guy in front of another guy. It was always about our team. We represented that community, and we weren't just playing for ourselves. That's the coolest thing I can remember—the loyalty we had toward each other. We didn't care who the star was. We just wanted to be there for each other and win."

Ridnour credits his father for providing the earliest lessons about teamwork. Rob Ridnour

coached high-school basketball (including his son's team) before taking over as the head coach of the International Basketball League's Bellingham Slam. It was the elder Ridnour who instilled in his son some of those fundamental concepts about teamwork, such as sharing the ball and looking out for one another.

"The biggest thing my dad taught me about teamwork was that everyone should stick together through thick and thin," Ridnour says. "These are the guys you're going to be with, and no matter how bad it might look at times, that's your crew that you've got to pull together with. The guys who are on the court are the ones who have to get the job done. You can't look to other people. You've all got to do it together."

While pursuing his NBA dream, Ridnour says that maintaining a relationship with Christ was rarely a priority. He grew up in church, but his focus on athletics deterred him from taking a serious look at the faith his parents embraced. Still, he knew something was missing in his life. "As much success as I'd had, I wasn't very happy," Ridnour says. "I still didn't have very much peace about who I was. But once I hit college, God really spoke to my heart. He started drawing me closer and closer to Him. I started to find peace, and I got excited about the fact that I wasn't just a basketball player, but I was friends with Jesus. That's what really changed my life."

At the University of Oregon, Ridnour found strength and accountability in a group of freshmen teammates who were all experiencing similar spiritual growth patterns. They met together for Bible studies with team chaplain Keith Jenkins—a pastor from Eugene, Oregon—and faithfully attended a local church.

Ridnour says that fellowship opened his eyes "to the power of God and how real He is." Likewise, a growing comprehension of the Bible enhanced his understanding and appreciation for the concept of teamwork.

"It's very much biblical with principles such as putting others before you," Ridnour says. "I think that's what teamwork is. A good teammate puts others before him. No one person thinks they're bigger than they really are. The Bible just reinforced the belief that I can't put myself above anybody else."

Ridnour is especially inspired by the words of the apostle Paul found in Romans 12:3: *"For by the grace given to me, I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one."* "I think that's huge for teamwork," Ridnour says. "A lot of times, you can be worried about yourself and your success. But when you put your team's success ahead of your success, good things happen."

Ridnour earned Pac-10 Player of the Year honors as a junior in 2002-03 and then made an early departure for the NBA, where he was the fourteenth overall selection of the Seattle SuperSonics. After five seasons with the Sonics (a franchise that has since moved to Oklahoma City), he was traded to Milwaukee in a three-team, six-player deal. His experiences at the highest level of competition continue to bring revelation about the biblical principles of teamwork—despite the fact that so much of playing in the NBA is about the individual athletes and their desire to earn high-dollar contracts.

"But no matter what level you're at, the most important thing is still the team," Ridnour says. "My first responsibility is to make sure all of my decisions are going to help the team win the

game. The second thing is making everybody else better. It's doing the little things like getting the ball into the right hands at the right time or even scoring at times when you have to.

As a point guard, another line item on Ridnour's checklist is taking care of the ball. And while he agrees that he needs to do everything he can to limit turnovers, he also says that he must avoid the trap of thinking too much about it. "You can't be afraid to make mistakes," Ridnour says. "If you look at some of the great point guards, they were never afraid to take a risk on a pass. For me, being a point guard also means showing your creative side and having the freedom to go out and do what God's called me to do and have fun doing it. I don't really worry about turnovers. I know it's an important part of the game, but as you play more, you get more confident and don't turn the ball over as much."

For Ridnour to be truly successful at his craft, he must have impeccable vision, or what others often refer to as court awareness. He needs to hone that innate ability to see the big picture and all of its finest details. "For me, good vision is about instinct," he says. "It's about knowing your teammates: what they can do and what they can't do. It's also about knowing the game. When I'm leading a fast break, I have a good idea of where everybody is at, and they might not even be there yet. Then you just let your instincts take over. When I try to force it, that's when turnovers happen. But when you let your instincts go and play freely, you might not see it, but it happens."

Ridnour equates his vision as a point guard to his vision as a follower of Christ. He fully understands the vital nature of having a clear picture of God's will for his life and the ultimate prize that comes with a personal relationship with Jesus. But as a young athlete, Ridnour admits that until he reached college, he didn't always have the vision necessary to see what was around him. He didn't realize what kind of impact he could have on others as a man of faith.

"When God started to open up my eyes and let me see things through His eyes, I could see that there were so many people around me who I could touch," Ridnour says. "It's a daily thing. You can influence and touch so many people just by being around them and saying the right things and being there for them. We get so caught up in day-to-day stuff, but as far as eternity is concerned, we need to keep our eyes on the big picture. So when adversity comes, it's really not that big of a deal when we look at what we have coming."

For Ridnour, this promise for the future is found in Philippians 3:20-21: *"Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humble condition into the likeness of His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subject everything to Himself."*

Having that knowledge of eternal glory along with the understanding that we can have a vibrant relationship with Jesus in this lifetime has helped Ridnour grasp the more personal aspects of teamwork—even as it relates to interactions with his peers off the court. "One of the biggest things a point guard needs to do is have relationships with his teammates," he says. "Whether they're your kind of people or not, it's important not to just get along but to have a sincere relationship with all of the players and coaches. That makes a difference on and off the court. On the court, it's our job to make everybody better and to do that they need to listen to you and respect you."

It took Ridnour a little bit longer to learn how that truth applied to his fellowship with believers.

He admits that he once had tunnel vision and would think of himself long before he would think about others. Then he came across the admonition found in Galatians 6:2, where Paul tells us to *“carry one another’s burdens; in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”*

“One of the things I used to find myself doing in prayer was only praying about my needs,” Ridnour remembers. “Lord, I need this. Lord, I need that.” But God calls us to pray for all the saints. We’re supposed to pray for our spouses, our families and our friends. We’re supposed to pray for the salvation of people around us. And once you find yourself praying for other people, you start to see your own prayers answered.”

From there, Ridnour began to get a clearer picture of what teamwork should look like within the Body of Christ. He made rich discoveries within the pages of God’s Word, including a promise given by Jesus in Matthew 18:19-20: *“Again, I assure you: If two of you on earth agree about any matter that you pray for, it will be done for you by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there among them.”*

“The Church is one body,” Ridnour says. “The Church isn’t made up of one person. It’s a body of people that goes out into the world. Two or three are so much stronger than one, even in prayer. When you have more people on the same page together, it’s much more powerful than when there’s just one.” This realization has pushed Ridnour and his wife, Kate, to get more involved in their local church and to find time for Christian fellowship. When the couple makes decisions, they ask others to help them pray beforehand. It’s been an incredibly enlightening experience and has opened their eyes to the mighty force that is unleashed when biblical teamwork is engaged.

“The Church is the place where everyone should pull together,” Ridnour expounds. “Everyone has the same common goal. Everyone has the same prize in sight. When everyone is on the same page and everyone has the same vision and can see the same things, it makes it easier to guard against all of the attacks that the devil throws at you. Working as a team, the Church can be a bigger force. It’s like we’re on a big battlefield and when we’re all together, we’re much stronger.”

The Old Testament gives us many examples of people working toward a common goal. In one such story told in 2 Chronicles 28:31, God’s people suffered through the ungodly rule of King Ahaz before his death opened the door for King Hezekiah. In order to bring the nation back to the Lord, Hezekiah began a long, arduous process that included cleansing the Temple, renewing Temple worship, celebrating Passover and removing all of the idols brought in under Ahaz’s rule.

The key to Hezekiah’s success in restoring the people to God is found in 2 Chronicles 30:12: *“The hand of God was in Judah to give them one heart to carry out the command of the king and his officials by the word of the LORD.”* In other words, the nation had to come together and work as a team with one purpose in mind.

As a lifelong athlete, Ridnour has seen what happens when that singular vision isn’t in place. “The worst that can happen in a locker room is when you have fighting going on,” he says. “It makes it real tough. When there’s no team unity, there’s a lot of bickering and people talking behind each other’s backs. That’s not fun to be around. It’s tough to win that way.”

Ridnour's assessment lines up perfectly with Proverbs 29:18, where Solomon warns, *"Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he?"* (KJV).

"When we're not together, it allows Satan to pick his way in," he adds. "If he can get one person going the wrong way, it just breaks everyone up. That's something we have to be careful about."

In that sense, Ridnour agrees that all believers at some level need to become spiritual point guards. We must all have a sense of our surroundings but never lose sight of the big picture. And that means building and nurturing friendships with the people that are pressing toward the ultimate prize—a relationship with Jesus both here on earth and forever in heaven.

"When you have people around you who are on the same page, you have that accountability that you need," Ridnour concludes. "You've got someone watching your back. It's easy to get sidetracked, and when you try to go solo, you might start doing things you shouldn't be doing. But when you have that fellowship of people and close friends who have the same vision with you, it makes it a lot easier. You know those people are there with you in the battle, and they're with you for the long run."

Go

1. Can you remember the very first team you were a part of? What was your role, and how did you contribute? What lessons did you learn in your earliest experience with teamwork?
2. Luke Ridnour talks about Oregon's success during the 2002 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament (see "In His Own Words"). Can you think of a time when your role on a team decreased so that the team's success could be increased? How did that make you feel at first? Read Romans 12:3. What can be taken from this passage to help you deal with such scenarios in the future?
3. Read Philippians 3:12-14. According to this passage, what are some qualities associated with good vision? How does knowing that you "have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus" make you feel? How does that promise impact your ability to focus on the prize?
4. How would you describe the perfect teammate, coworker or friend? What challenges have distracted you from fulfilling that role in the lives of others?
5. Read Proverbs 29:18. In what ways can you apply this verse to the teamdynamic? What are some of the ways that you could promote a like-minded vision within your team?

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Bible Reference:
Philippians 3



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