

Balancing Act (Serving - Chapter 8)

n/a

Ready:

I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

1 Corinthians 9:22-23, *NIV*

Set

When sports fans think about hockey—and in particular the NHL—there’s no telling what imagery might come to mind.

For some, hockey is all about the pinpoint passing skills. For others, it’s the forceful nature of the slap shot. Some might even reference the catlike prowess of the ever-alert goalkeepers, and their distinctive protective gear and colorful masks. Of course, most can’t talk about hockey without mentioning the bone-crushing cross-checks into the boards or those legendary (if not mandatory) nightly brawls.

But one of the game’s most overlooked fundamentals is the irreplaceable discipline of balance. Burly men in bulky pads fly around on razor-thin blades while changing directions every few seconds. The same is true for the goalies, who must remain steady in precarious crouching positions as would-be scorers approach the net.

As an elite professional hockey player, Jarome Iginla knows a little something about balance. Since debuting in the NHL during the 1996-97 season, the Calgary Flames’ right wing has appeared in four All-Star Games and been among the league’s leaders in points and goals. Iginla has used the concept of balance to employ both power and finesse in his game, depending on what the given situation might require. He is also known for having one of the most powerful slap shots in the NHL.

Still, no matter how many accolades Iginla receives, he is just as known for being one of a select few black players in the NHL and perhaps one the most-decorated black athletes to ever take the ice. In 2007-08, the league’s 30 teams only touted a total of 16 black players. Even though Willie O’Ree broke the color barrier in 1958 when he joined the Boston Bruins, diversity in the league has been a slow process.

Iginla doesn’t bemoan that harsh reality. After all, it’s something he grew up with as the biracial son of a Nigerian father and a white mother from Oregon. That made life interesting for a kid growing up in Edmonton, Alberta, who fell in love with the sport of hockey.

“When I grew up, I was the only black kid on my team,” Iginla says. “I was aware of that. I

really was. I was very fortunate. My teammates were always great. But sometimes there'd be a small incident here or there with another team or with some parents in the crowd. Some kids would say, 'Why are you trying to be in the NHL? There's no black players in the NHL.'

"I remember those questions back then and honestly, it meant so much to me to be able to say, 'Oh yeah, there are black players in the NHL.' Grant Fuhr at the time was starring in Edmonton and winning Stanley Cups, and he was an All-Star. I tried to pick out as many black players in the NHL, so I could have somebody. I watched guys like Claude Vilgrain and Tony McKegney."

Iginla used that inspiration to climb the junior hockey ranks all the way to the top. In October 2003, he made history when he was named captain of the Flames. With that honor, Iginla became just the second black captain in the NHL (Dirk Graham of the Chicago Blackhawks was the first). In 2001-02, Iginla also became the first black player to win the regular season point and goal scoring titles.

"I am proud to be a black player in the NHL," he says. "I know how much those other guys meant to me, so maybe there's kids that are having similar questions asked of them or maybe they're having some tough times. It would be an honor if I was at all a role model for black kids that want to play in the NHL."

Iginla also learned the art of balance from his unique experiences at home. His parents—Elvis Iginla and Susan Schuchard—separated when he was a baby and eventually divorced. His father was going to law school, so his mother raised him with the help of his maternal grandparents. It was their gift of serving that made a lasting impression on Iginla that still resonates today.

"My grandparents are extremely generous people," he says. "They had eight kids and they had tons of grandkids. They had already done their parenting, and still they took me to practices after school when my mom couldn't because she was working. They got me involved in as many activities as they could. I always went to their house after school, and I always felt loved. I never felt like a burden. When I look back on it, I realize that they were second parents to me, and that was very generous of them. They were huge examples in my life."

When it came to matters of faith, however, Iginla points to his father as the most important influence. Ironically, his mother was a Buddhist but never pushed her religious beliefs on her son. It certainly made for some interesting conversations growing up, but when it came time for Iginla to make his own decision about faith, his choice was ultimately spurred by a late-night conversation that took place on a trip with his junior hockey team.

Iginla was 14 at the time, and his friend started a conversation about the existence of God by asking, "What if there's no God?" Iginla, who attended Catholic school, insisted that there had to be a God. It was something he had always believed to be true, but the thought that God might not exist was troubling.

"He got me thinking, and it actually scared me for a little bit," Iginla says. "I'd never really thought about it that deep. It was just from what I'd read. I'd never thought about it personally. So that bothered me, and I tried not to think about that for a while."

About a year later, he approached his father about the subject. Elvis Iginla, who grew up a

Muslim before converting to Christianity, suggested that his son pray and ask God to take that fear away. If he felt a peace, then he would know that God existed.

“That’s probably my defining moment,” Iginla says. “It was. I’m peaceful with that now. That was probably the most bothersome question that I can ever remember asking myself. When my dad told me that, it was probably the start of my own personal relationship [with Christ].”

When Iginla turned 16, he moved to British Columbia, where he played junior hockey for three years. He was then drafted by the Dallas Stars in 1995 but traded to Calgary, where he has played his entire career. Along the way, Iginla has also enjoyed great success as a member of the Canadian national men’s team. He played in two Olympics (2002 and 2006), one World Championship (1997), one World Junior Championship (1996) and one World Cup of Hockey (2004). All told, Iginla has won four international gold medals, but none was more special than the 2002 victory in Salt Lake City.

“That’s one of the best experiences I had in hockey,” Iginla says. “I got a chance to play with Mario Lemieux and Steve Yzerman and Joe Sakic. It’s a big adjustment. You go from playing against them to seeing your jersey hanging in the same room as theirs. It was difficult not to be in awe. Then we ended up winning the tournament. I remember the first day showing up and seeing all those jerseys hanging and seeing mine over in the corner. I was one of the younger guys, and I had a makeshift area, because there weren’t enough lockers. But it was a huge thrill, and I think I probably took a picture or something.”

The 2002 gold-medal contest was against the host U.S. team and is considered by many hockey historians to be one of the most electrically charged atmospheres the international game has ever experienced. Iginla, no doubt, concurs with that analysis.

“It was probably the most exciting game I’ve been a part of,” he says. “It was so fast. The fans were so passionate. Half of them were American fans, and the other half were Canadians. They were going at it the whole game. It was such a good game. You get on the ice and go as hard as you can. You don’t have time to be nervous. You get off the ice, and you’re nervous again, because you’re watching as a fan. You want to win the gold medal so bad. It turned out the way we wanted it to turn out. It was every emotion—nervousness, excitement, adrenaline—all in one game.”

As a star NHL player and a key national team figure, Iginla has been afforded certain luxuries that come with money and notoriety. So often, athletes that come from humble beginnings struggle to balance their new lifestyle with the people they used to be—but not Iginla. Thanks to the strong foundation laid down by his family years earlier, he has resisted the temptation to be proud and demanding and instead chooses to serve others the way his grandparents served him.

“In being a Christian and serving God, I think it’s trying to be a positive influence in the lives of people you come into contact with and your friends and your family,” Iginla says. “With all the gifts that have been given to us, we should make the most of them. Some people are more outspoken, and some people glorify God in different ways. So I think everyone has been given unique gifts, and we all play a different role.”

When Iginla first joined the Flames, he admits that there weren’t many personal requests to speak or make appearances for various organizations around Calgary. But that all changed as he emerged as one of the team’s veteran leaders and one of the league’s more popular

players. Iginla says he isn't doing any less but unfortunately feels like he's saying no more often. In searching for that balance, Iginla has received some life-changing revelations.

"Just reading the Bible has helped," Iginla says. "I've learned that serving is about your family and friends and your everyday life. I don't believe serving is just about getting involved out in the community. I do think it starts at home and being a positive influence on your kids and being grateful and being thankful. It starts inward and comes out."

Iginla also cites as revelatory a television sermon he once heard that was based on the popular phrase, "What Would Jesus Do?" The preacher talked about how serving isn't always about doing more but making sure there's a qualitative measure in the serving that ultimately involves keeping one's priorities in order.

"You might have to get some rest or take some family time," Iginla says. "Serving is also about your family and making sure you're there for them and trying to be a role model for your kids and making sure their needs are taken care of and your wife's needs are taken care of. It is a balance. But I think, even in the home stuff, you're still serving. There are different ways to serve; and it's not always charities—which are great and everything—but I do believe there are a number of different ways to serve, and when it might not look like you're serving, you probably still are."

Iginla's strong commitment to wife, Kara, daughter, Jade, and son, Tij, however, does not preclude him from doing his part to serve as an ambassador of his team, of his league and, most importantly, of his faith. His first act of service is to be a positive influence, although the rigors of the job sometimes present challenges in that area.

"I know I'm not always [a positive influence]," Iginla candidly admits. "I know I have bad days and grumpy days. I try to limit those. But I try to take time to sign some extra autographs. I know that's not a big deal, but for young kids or people who are big hockey fans, it might just put a smile on their face. From the small things to the big things, that's the goal, and I think that goes back to my definition of serving. It's a lot of small things. It's not always about a big charity but having that little extra moment to ask kids how they're doing. I think Jesus would want us to do our best in the small things or in the big things. I totally believe it's not just about meeting people's physical needs. It's also about meeting their emotional needs."

On a larger scale, Iginla has certainly done his fair share of serving throughout Calgary and its surrounding areas. He supports Cure for Cancer, and he and his wife organize a nonprofit hockey school every summer, with the proceeds going to charity. In 2004, he received the NHL Foundation Award for Community Service and the King Clancy Memorial Trophy, both of which recognize outstanding humanitarian contributions.

One of Iginla's favorite serving opportunities comes through his participation in the efforts of a Calgary-based program called KidSport, which helps kids overcome financial obstacles that prevent their participation in sports. "Families can turn to it for help," he says. "It means a lot to me. I think all kids should have an opportunity to play—and not just to become a professional athlete but to enjoy themselves and make friends and learn life skills. I was very fortunate to have the support that I did, and not every kid does."

To the Bible-savvy believer, Iginla's approach to serving might seem familiar. His belief that serving should carry over into every life situation and might require flexibility and out-of-the-box thinking is very similar to the methods employed by the apostle Paul. When writing to the

church in Corinth, Paul wrote, “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22, *NIV*).

For Iginla, this means serving his family, his friends, his community, his fans and even serving his teammates by being a good friend both on and off the ice. Not only does Paul provide the inspiration for that constant attitude of serving, but Iginla also holds dear the selfless life that was modeled by his Savior.

“Jesus [showed us] many examples of helping and serving other people in small or big ways or any way He could,” Iginla says. “I think that’s a great example for us. If there’s any way we can help other people—small or big—then that’s what we should do. That’s the example for us.”

“I’m extremely blessed in so many ways,” he adds. “I want to serve Christ, and in doing that I want to give back in as many different ways and positive ways as I can. By serving my family and friends and others, I’m trying to say thank You to God. That’s what I’m trying to do every day.”

And sometimes, the never-ending life of serving can become tiresome and make even the strongest among us grow weary. That’s why Iginla leans so heavily on his favorite verse, Isaiah 40:31: “But those who trust in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint” (*NIV*).

While that Scripture isn’t usually equated with serving, it doesn’t take much to recognize the need for divine rest for those who have committed themselves to a rigorous lifestyle that includes constantly seeking to give and to help others. Iginla is also convinced that such a lifestyle should reflect the same kind of diversity that he inherently adds as a prominent black player in the NHL. Serving can and should appear in diverse guises, as evidenced in 1 Corinthians 12:27-28, which lists the different important roles believers play in the Body of Christ: apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, helpers, administrators, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.

“Some people are more evangelical, and I think there are all different types of Christians,” Iginla says. “By types, I mean we have different roles in serving God and getting His message out. Some are more outspoken and some are less outspoken. Some do it more quietly. Some do it through generosity of time or money. And when I talked to my dad growing up, that was part of me working on getting more comfortable with things and trying to know where I fit.

“I’m not as outspoken as some people and maybe more so than others,” he concludes. “But we all have a purpose in serving.”

Go

1. Jarome Iginla admits that sometimes he has “bad days and grumpy days,” but that he still does his best to consider the needs of others. What are some of life’s daily challenges that hinder you from serving? Have you been able to overcome those challenges? If so, how?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 9:22. What do you think Paul means when he says he becomes “all things to all men”? In what ways can you be more flexible in your approach to serving?
3. Throughout the Bible, people such as Moses, David and even Jesus took time to rest. Can you describe a time when you felt the need to break from your normal routine in

athletics, work or ministry? How does that time away from consistent serving help refresh and energize you?

4. Read Isaiah 40:31. What are some of the promises found in this passage? How can trusting in or waiting on the Lord impact your desire to serve others?
5. Iginla says, "We have different roles in serving God and getting His message out." Read 1 Corinthians 12:27-29. Take the ministries listed in those Scriptures and think of some opportunities to serve that best fit the gifts, talents, personality traits and interests that God has placed in you. How does knowing there are many ways to serve take away some of the pressure to conform to other people's concept of serving?

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Bible Reference:

1 Corinthians 12



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