

The Big Win (Excellence - Chapter 1)

Ready:

"Do you not know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win." — 1 Corinthians 9:24

"For when the One Great Scorer comes to write against your name, He marks — not that you won or lost — but how you played the Game." — Grantland Rice, "Alumnus Football"

Set

From the PeeWee Leagues to the professional ranks, there is one constant truth when it comes to coaching: Practice makes perfect.

No better example of this time-tested principle can be found than with Indianapolis Colts' head coach Tony Dungy. Known for practicing what he preaches (although saying the soft-spoken leader preaches would be somewhat of a stretch), Dungy has taken his disciplined methods beyond the football field and into his personal life. That's why he is such a strong proponent of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes' four core values.

"If you just practice one day a week, you're never going to be as good as if you practice every day," Dungy says. "And that's what it's all about, really. It's reading and understanding what God wants you to do and then putting it into practice. When you come up a little short and don't quite get it, don't give up. Continue to work at it. Say, 'Okay, Lord, I fell a little bit short in this area. Give me another opportunity so that I can continue to work on it.' The more you practice those values, the easier they become, and the better you get at them."

Of those four core values, Dungy has especially been equated with excellence throughout his coaching career. It's a characteristic that has shone brightly during his greatest victory (the Super Bowl XLI in 2007) and his greatest tragedy (the passing of his oldest son, James, in 2005).

Colt linebacker Tyjuan Hagler — who has played for Dungy since 2005 — is one of the many eyewitnesses to that fact. "I've learned a lot about how strong his faith is," Hagler says. "When the tragedy occurred, we went down [to Tampa] for the funeral. When we were waiting, we were seated in this room; and when he walked through the door, he had the biggest smile on his face. I was just thinking, *He's got the biggest smile on his face, and he is just hurting so bad inside.* That really touched me."

Hagler likewise experienced Super Bowl bliss with the Colts in February 2007 and can honestly attest to Dungy's even-keeled approach to excellence. "He's the same guy," says

Hagler. “When we won the championship, he praised God. He gave the honor to Christ, and he said that without Christ, none of us would be here right now. He did the same thing when he lost his son that he did when we won the Super Bowl. He put both situations in God’s hands.”

FCA president and CEO Les Steckel has likewise observed Dungy over the years and got a firsthand look at Dungy’s quest for excellence. (Steckel was the offensive coordinator for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 2000 when Dungy served as that team’s head from 1996 to 2000). “One thing that people don’t understand about coaching in the NFL is the tremendous pressures,” Steckel says. “Tony Dungy taught me a great deal about handling those. Under all the pressure, I knew that his stomach was turning, but his demeanor was awesome. That countenance that he continues to display to this day was one that we all wish we had in pressure-packed times in our lives.”

According to Kansas City Chiefs’ head coach Herman Edwards — who was an assistant coach at Tampa Bay from 1996 to 2000 — Dungy also displayed excellence by readily taking responsibility for the team’s failures. “Anytime we had a bad day on defense, people would ask him what happened, and he’d just say, ‘Well, we just have to tackle a little bit better,’ ” Edwards recalls. “He never ran down the players out there. He would just say that we needed to coach them a little better, and at the end of the day, he was right. That’s what we needed to do better.”

Tampa Bay cornerback Ronde Barber, who played for Dungy from 1996 to 2000, uncovered another aspect of the excellence Dungy strives for: patience. This component of Dungy’s character is spoken of in Proverbs 19:11, which states, “*A man’s wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.*” “Not everything is solved with haste and urgency,” Barber agrees. “You can be urgent and patient at the same time. Tony was always good at keeping everything in perspective.”

Perhaps the most astute observation of Dungy has come from running back Shaun Alexander, who clearly recognizes the role that one’s purpose in life plays in relation to excellence. “[Dungy] accepts the calling he has been given,” Alexander says. “He is called to glorify God and be a champion. He walks it, talks it, lives it. You see it in his eyes. He will compete and fight until the end, all the while smiling at his opponents.”

Dungy’s definition of excellence, on the other hand, is a bit more straightforward and, true to coaching form, textbook in nature. “Excellence is doing something at the very highest level it can be done using all your capabilities and everything God has given you,” says Dungy. “Sometimes that gets lost. We don’t always think of excellence as a Christian concept, but I think God does desire us to be excellent at what we do.”

Dungy can think of many examples of excellence in athletics, such as legendary head coach Chuck Noll, for whom he played at Pittsburgh from 1977 to 1978. But in his mind, no one can surpass the level of excellence that his parents, Wilbur and CleoMae Dungy, modeled for him growing up in Jackson, Michigan. “My parents were definitions of excellence in teaching,” Dungy says. “It was important to them to be the best that they could be — not for personal reasons, but that was their concept of serving. They wanted to serve people in the best way possible.”

“I think excellence is something we have to be cognizant of,” he adds. “Just because we’re

Christians doesn't mean we should take the approach to just move forward and let the Lord handle it. We do have a responsibility to be the very best we can be in whatever field we decide to take up."

Dungy believes that Christ-centered excellence is usually either taught incorrectly (with the emphasis being toward personal benefit as opposed to God's glory) or isn't taught at all. His first exposure to the concept came at an FCA camp where he learned about Paul's athletic reference in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. In particular, Dungy was drawn to verse 24, which says, *"Run in such a way that you may win."*

"That's the first time that it hit me biblically that we aren't supposed to be satisfied with mediocrity or think that winning is the wrong goal to have," Dungy recalls. "It says run to win, but understand what the prize is and understand that we've got to compete for spiritual things and long-lasting things. There's nothing wrong with being excellent, and that verse has always stuck out to me."

One of the dangers of achieving excellence comes in the form of pride — that is, when the individual who has achieved success because of their excellence takes the credit and in turn uses it for their own personal gain. Dungy has seen this play out in the lives of many athletes and has likewise seen the shallow results.

"If you're running to win, but you have only earthly goals in mind, it will be short lived," Dungy says. "It will be a withering type of thing. You have to have those spiritual goals in mind. Things do get in the way of being excellent. Some of those things are pride and self-centeredness, but you still have to do everything as unto the Lord. You have to try to keep those types of thoughts out."

Dungy also says our purpose behind striving for excellence must always be balanced and in tune with God's plan for our lives. Otherwise, we might become like the rich man Jesus tells about in the parable He shares in Luke 12:13-21. The landowner, blessed with a bountiful crop, decides to build bigger barns for his abundance and then says that he will *"take it easy"* (v. 19). But the rich man is in for a rude awakening: *"God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you. And the things you have prepared — whose will they be?'"* (v. 20).

"That's where you have to understand what's spiritual and what's long lasting," Dungy says. "Where is your soul? That's the thing that's going to last. We do get misguided priorities if we're just thinking only in terms of excellence. Everything has to balance out. Excellence without service or excellence without teamwork is excellence for only your purpose. It all has to come into balance."

For coaches and athletes, excellence is often defined in terms of wins and losses. Those who find themselves in the winner's circle are deemed excellent by virtue of their accomplishment, while those who struggle to win often have their excellence questioned.

Similar yardsticks are used in other areas of life. Business, entertainment, arts, science, fashion and most everything in popular culture are all judged by the world's standard of success, which creates a tricky road that must be carefully maneuvered — especially for believers and followers of Christ.

“You have to try to keep your priorities straight,” Dungy says. “You have to look at the world from a Christian point of view, which isn’t always easy to do. There are going to be times when you don’t win. There are going to be times when you get fired, and you can’t let that affect your self-esteem. You can’t let it affect your outlook, because we have to measure ourselves by a different standard than by the world’s standard.”

Dungy believes that wins and losses are one of sports’ great inspirations to excellence, but he also fully understands the danger that lies within that dynamic. For instance, too often society falls into the trap of demeaning and devaluing anyone who fails to reach a certain level of success. With that in mind, Dungy focuses on performance and effort more than the final result.

“We do have a scoreboard that measures the final tally of the game,” he says. “But we don’t all have the same opportunities. We don’t all have the same talent. So to me, more than the scoreboard, I like to focus on how our team is doing. Are we doing everything we can? Are we using all of the ability that God has given us?”

“There will be days for my football team when we win that I’m not happy because we didn’t really play excellent, we didn’t practice as well as we can, we didn’t use those talents. There are other games when we lose and I have to say, ‘You know what? We gave it everything we had. We did as much as we could do. It just wasn’t our day today, but I’m really proud of our team.’ To me, it’s more about knowing what my potential is and if I live up to that day in and day out.”

And for Dungy, it all comes back to how you define excellence. Is it defined by the number of games won or by individual performance? If the former is the case, disappointment is sure to follow. “But excellence is about how you do things and doing the very best you can,” Dungy says. “Excellence doesn’t mean you always have to win or always have to be in first place.”

To maintain that healthy perspective, Dungy says the key is staying focused on Christ. “If you’re only focused on excellence in your job or excellence on the field, you will get totally out of balance and out of whack. Yes, I need to be excellent as a coach. I need to be excellent as a Christian. I need to be excellent as a father. I need to be excellent as a person in the community and strive for that excellence everywhere and not just in one area.”

That also means never sacrificing integrity for excellence. Although an increasing number of athletes and coaches have succumbed to the temptation to cheat, Dungy can point to another of Jesus’ parables found in Matthew 7:24-27 for his inspiration to avoid such lapses in one’s character. The story talks about two men — one who builds his house on the rock and the other who builds his house on the sand. When the rains came, the house built on the rock stands firm while the house built on sand crumbles to the ground.

That vivid imagery illustrates what happens to those who heed God’s call to competitive integrity versus those who cut corners and look for a quick fix on their route to success. The latter cannot be legitimately equated with godly excellence.

“You have to look at excellence in every way,” Dungy says. “I have to be excellent in my integrity, not just excellent in winning. If I’m just trying to be excellent in winning, that can lead to some problems. We are bound by rules, and we are not going to cheat or do certain things to win, but that is still the goal — to be excellent. And there is nothing wrong with that. As

Christians, it is great to be able to show the world that, yes, we can do it the Lord's way, but we can be excellent while we do it."

And according to 1 Chronicles 4:9-10, striving for excellence can have a tangible result. Jabez, a man referred to in verse 9 as *"more honorable than his brothers,"* unabashedly made his desire known to God. In verse 10, Jabez says, *"If only You would bless me, extend my border, let Your hand be with me, and keep me from harm, so that I will not cause any pain."* That same verse concludes by telling us that *"God granted his request."*

While the end result may be different for each individual — based on God's purpose for his or her life — ultimately excellence can be wrapped up by what Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 4:7: *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"* and 1 Corinthians 9:24, the Scripture that so impressed Dungy: *"Do you not know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win."* Both passages allude to the "big win" that is yet to be awarded in heaven.

"I talk about excellence a lot, because I think from a Christian perspective, that can get lost sometimes," Dungy says. "We talk so much about how it's 'just God's will' and that we want to serve Him, but He wants us to be excellent in what we do. He's placed us in our careers. We all run to receive a prize and to win. I never want to forget that part of it. We should run to win."

Go

1. For Tony Dungy and other NFL coaches, the "big win" can be equated with a victory in the Super Bowl. What does the "big win" mean for you in your life?
2. What are some of the characteristics that Dungy's NFL peers say have contributed to his excellent results both on and off the field? How do you think your peers would describe your pursuit of excellence? What characteristics would you like to see increased in your life so that excellence would be possible?
3. Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. As a follower of Christ, what do you think it means to "win the prize"? What are some examples of "perishable" crowns? What is your concept of an "imperishable" crown?
4. Read Luke 12:13-21. What different types of people in modern society does the rich man in this parable represent? What are the dangers of resting, or taking it easy, after achieving varying degrees of success? What message about excellence do you think Jesus is trying to tell us through this parable?
5. Read 2 Timothy 4:1-8. What are some things Paul says we will have to endure? How does having the proper perspective on winning and losing while we are in the midst of pursuing excellence help us deal with such challenges?

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Bible Reference:

2 Timothy 4



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