

Checks and Balances (Teamwork - Chapter 7)

n/a

Ready:

"Watch out, brothers, so that there won't be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that departs from the living God. But encourage each other daily, while it is still called today, so that none of you is hardened by sin's deception." -Hebrews 3:12-13

"I urge all Christians not only to attend church services regularly but also to establish small groups of other Christians to whom they are accountable. I've seen this simple practice work wonders in my own life. In fact, I would never have developed real Christian maturity merely by staying home, reading religious books and attending church once a week—no more than an athlete can develop by shooting baskets alone in the driveway." -Charles W. Colson

Set

It's usually a good rule of thumb to stay away from stereotypes and cultural clichés in order to avoid potentially embarrassing confrontations with the obligatory "exception to the rule." But in Curtis Brown's case, even he admits that a predictable portion of life in Saskatchewan—his native Canadian province—can be described in two words: farming and hockey.

Born in the small rural town of Unity, Brown grew up on a farm where he instinctively fell in line with the majority of his young friends. "What Canadians do is hockey," Brown says. "I was probably about four when I started skating. I was just like the other kids. If you didn't play hockey, you were definitely an outsider."

However, while hockey was an unmistakable passion, the thought of a career in the sport was, strangely, the furthest thing from Brown's mind or that of his buddies. "Other than cheering and looking up to these sports heroes, the only thing I was thinking about as a kid was going out in the front yard or down in the basement or out on the ice to play hockey," he says. "You just went out and did it for fun. Never did you think, That's exactly what I want to do, and nobody's stopping me. It was more about a love for the game."

His love for the game, however, eventually opened the door to opportunity and at the age of 15, Brown moved away from home to pursue hockey at the Triple-A midget level. The quantum leap landed him four hours from home in Moose Jaw, one of the larger cities in Saskatchewan, where he played one season before spending a year in Major Junior Hockey.

"Either you grow up quick when you move away at 15, or you never grow up," Brown says. "If you ask me now if I would let my three boys move away at 15, it would be a tough decision, because I know what I went through. You go and live with a host family, but they usually just let you do your own thing. You have a bed there, and they feed you, but other than that you're

on your own. That's kind of a young age to be on your own. You grow up quick."

At the age of 18, Brown was drafted by the Buffalo Sabres in the second round of the NHL draft. In his only game with the Sabres that season, he scored a goal and tallied an assist. He spent the balance of the 1994-95 campaign back in Moose Jaw and the Western Hockey League (WHL). Brown was especially busy during the 1995-96 season, spending a brief time with Buffalo along with elongated stints in Moose Jaw and Prince Albert (also part of the WHL) and by helping the Rochester Americans claim the American Hockey League's Calder Cup.

After splitting time between Buffalo and Rochester during the 1996-97 campaign, Brown finally experienced a breakthrough in 1997-98 when he played 63 games for the Sabres. He remained a mainstay at the center position until he was traded to the San Jose Sharks late in the 2003-04 season.

The next year, due to the NHL lockout, Brown played for a minor league team in San Diego before spending 2005 to 2006 with the Chicago Blackhawks and the following two seasons back in San Jose. Following the Sharks' appearance in the 2008 NHL playoffs, he inked a contract to play with the Kloten Flyers in Switzerland's National League A.

While Brown's successful professional hockey career can be neatly summarized into a pair of tidy paragraphs, his spiritual journey is slightly more complicated. "I didn't grow up in a Christian home," Brown says. "It was a good home, but I can count how many times I went to Sunday School. I knew a little bit about who Jesus was and the Christian faith, but I really didn't know anything. I didn't live it. If you would have asked me if I was going to heaven or hell, I would have said heaven more out of hope than knowledge."

Brown attended a Catholic school and by default made regular visits to Mass, where he observed something quite peculiar. His peers who went to the altar for prayer were also the wildest partiers during the weekends. "It never made sense to me," Brown says. "I don't know why that stuck so vividly in my memory, but I was like, Man, there's more to Jesus and what He did and there's more power in this than what I'm seeing here."

Until then, Brown didn't have a living, breathing example of God's grace in action. That all changed when he first arrived in Buffalo, where he met veteran goaltender John Blue. Having previously played for the Boston Bruins and nearing the end of his 10-year career, Blue had an enormous impact on Brown's life—first by his actions and later with his words. "For the first time in my life, I saw a Christian guy who was different," Brown remembers. "He just didn't talk about it. He wasn't always telling me what I needed to do. It wasn't preachy. He just went out and lived it. In hockey, there's not that many Christians who are living it, and here was the first guy I could watch. I could watch his marriage and watch his family. I'll never forget it. He was different."

Blue, now retired from hockey and working in pastoral ministry, was also the first person to demonstrate the significance of the Holy Spirit working within a believer's life. Brown also finally understood the greater purpose behind the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

"We all mess up. We all screw up," Brown says. "That's why we need Jesus. But there's also a power that allows you to rise up and be stronger than giving in to every temptation and falling down every day. John Blue was the first guy I saw who demonstrated that."

Blue's quiet approach eventually gave way to a conversational style of evangelism. When

Brown opened the door of his heart, his elder teammate was ready to lead him to Christ. That's when the real challenge began.

"Right at that point, there was a crossroads—not only in my faith but in hockey," Brown says. "It was kind of scary—especially at that time. There weren't many Christians in the game, and there had been a stereotype that Christians are soft and can't play in this league. People just have a wild and weird idea about what it means to be a Christian. They never open up the Bible and read what David did to Goliath or about what Samson could do.

"I'm a better player today because I'm a Christian," Brown continues. "I'm a better teammate. I'm more responsible. I prepare better. I'm accountable to God, which is a much greater level of accountability than just trying to perform for people. But it was basically taboo to be a Christian. I had heard stories where guys were basically put in the minor leagues or not given a chance because they were Christians."

Brown openly admits he was fearful of what might happen to his career or how his teammates would respond to his open profession of faith in Christ. He was 21 years old and in just his second full NHL season. But Brown maintained a profound and steadfast understanding of the fact that his relationship with God was much bigger than hockey.

"Sure enough, the next day in the locker room, the guys were all over me like clockwork," Brown reflects. "It was basically the moment of truth when I had to stand up and just say, 'Yeah, I'm different now, and this is who I am.'"

Like many players before who had confessed Jesus as their Savior, Brown had to withstand a healthy dose of ridicule and a steady stream of skepticism. His teammates had seen it all before—the zealous new Christian busts down the locker-room door to profess his faith only to fall prey to temptation days, if not hours, later.

But Brown's determination to stay true to his commitment had an unexpected and much-welcomed effect on the other players. "They'll test you for a while," he says. "But when they realize you're the real deal, the crazy thing is people would think these guys would be your nemesis, but once you prove yourself true, they become your protectors. They knew there was something different about me."

What Brown feared might create a wedge between him and the rest of team ultimately pulled them together. It was an incredible picture of teamwork, a concept that ironically has its roots in the Bible.

"Everything we talk about, everything we experience—whether you admit it or not—the Bible is the handbook for life, and it's in there," Brown says. "You can find it in there on any topic. As far as teamwork is concerned, it starts right in the beginning of the Bible with God and the Holy Spirit and Jesus in the creation story. There's teamwork there. They were creating things together."

Few if any will argue against the importance of teamwork within the context of team success. Rarely will a group of individuals playing for selfish interests (no matter how talented they may be) find itself in a position to win championships. But according to Brown, one of the most important intangibles every good team needs is accountability—the willingness to take responsibility for individual or collective actions—which goes deeper than any superficial attempts at team building.

Accountability can also be defined as open and honest dialogue within any given relationship in which the people involved (whether they be family, friends or teammates) can discuss each other's deeds, motives and personal choices should they be perceived as negative or potentially harmful.

“The best teammates are the guys who are accountable to you and you're accountable to them,” Brown says. “Nobody's going to be perfect, but when you know you're accountable to someone and they're accountable to you, it's amazing how much more time and focus and energy you're going to put into the job that you have to do. You don't want to let that other person down.”

When accountability is discussed, terms similar to those usually reserved for a peer-to-peer relationship are used. The best example of such a relationship is a close friendship between two individuals who are keenly aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses, each other's triumphs and failures. More importantly, this type of bond will foster confrontational communication (when necessary) and brutal honesty at all times, both of which are tempered by love and mutual respect.

Brown's first introduction to accountability came through his former teammate John Blue, but he later discovered many supporting truths in the Bible. First Thessalonians 5:11-12 says, *“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing.”* Hebrews 3:13 likewise instructs us to *“encourage each other daily, while it is still called today, so that none of you is hardened by sin's deception.”* James 5:16 takes it another step further, telling believers to *“confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”* The writer of that passage clearly understood how difficult it is to maintain a poker face when all of the cards are on the table. But as Brown has experienced firsthand, those who hold tightly to their hands are usually bluffing.

“There are some guys in the league—just like in their personal lives—who don't want to be accountable to anybody,” Brown says. “Those guys are the worst teammates, because you can't trust them. Hopefully, my teammates can trust me. But there are some guys who you don't know what they're going to do or what they're thinking. I've played with those types of guys, and that makes it tougher to have teamwork.”

Another aspect of accountability is found in the relationship represented by any given hierarchy. The leader may be a coach, a pastor, a corporate president, a business owner or a team captain. The follower may be an athlete, a church member, a board member, an employee or a teammate. No matter what the position or station in life, the proper model for accountability can be found in Hebrews 13:17:

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you."

As Brown has seen parallel growth in his career, his family and his faith, accountability has been an invaluable part of the equation. But he has also come to realize that without accountability to God—first and foremost—the other areas of his life simply won't be as successful.

"Your most important team is your relationship with God," Brown says. "In marriage, for example, who is the most important? Well, it's my relationship with God because He's the one who created me. He's the one who's given me His daughter to take care of. The kids are His—He's given me the opportunity to be a steward of them. At the end of the day, He's not only the One who gives me breath every day, [but] He's also the One who can help me and guide me through the other aspects of my life. If He's number one, then I'm going to have a far better chance."

Brown's philosophy is certainly backed up by the Scriptures. In fact, some of his favorite Bible passages serve as stark reminders of the believer's need to be honest with the all-knowing Creator. Romans 14:12, for example, says, *"Each of us will give an account of himself to God."* A similar truth is revealed in Hebrews 4:13, a passage that reminds us how *"all things are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give an account."*

That understanding of God's omniscience and the eternal consequence of our actions should alone push us to true accountability with Him. Even at the most basic level, accountability improves the quality of life—that is, if you accept the wisdom found in the Proverbs. In Proverbs 12:1, Solomon writes, *"Whoever loves instruction loves knowledge, but one who hates correction is stupid."* He later adds in Proverbs 25:12 that *"a wise correction to a receptive ear is like a gold ring or an ornament of gold."*

Still, accountability is something that eludes most people. Brown has found that to be especially true in the NHL, where teams are made up of individuals representing a broad range of ages, cultures, social backgrounds and religious expressions. And when accountability is lacking—or in extreme cases nonexistent—the impact on a team can be devastating.

"It pulls the team apart," Brown says. "I think the more accountable players are to one another, the tighter the team becomes. You see that in relationships and marriages. But when you just have people going in their own direction and not falling under that umbrella of accountability, it definitely makes it difficult for everyone to be on the same page."

As far as Brown is concerned, the benefits of accountability far outweigh any perceived loss of personal freedom. On the contrary, there is great freedom in knowing that we have accountability with people who care about our well-being and that we have even greater blessings by allowing God to be involved with every aspect of our lives.

"There's a set of standards that God places on us when we make the decision to follow Him," Brown says. "God isn't just about giving you a free trip to heaven. That is part of what God has for us, but there's a whole other aspect, which is the Lordship aspect. We need to fall in line and make Him Lord and listen to what He has to say."

Go

1. Curtis Brown says that teammate John Blue was his first example of authentic Christianity. Who was the first person to model the character of Christ in your life? How did that person's example change the way you viewed spirituality and faith?
2. Who are some people who have authority over you? Do you generally agree or disagree with their leadership? How do you usually handle any disagreements with authority? Read Hebrews 13:17. Why is it important to obey and respect those in authority over you?
3. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:11-12 and Hebrews 3:13. What are some of the benefits that come with encouraging relationships? What happens when those kinds of relationships are absent from your life? What are some ways you can encourage or build up your friends, teammates, family members or coworkers?
4. Read Proverbs 12:1 and Proverbs 25:12. What is one of your most embarrassing stories about being corrected or disciplined? How do you feel when someone corrects your mistakes?
5. Read Romans 14:12 and Hebrews 4:13. What are some ways you can use brotherly and sisterly accountability here on earth to prepare you for the day on which you must give an account of your life to God?

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