

Know (And Accept) Your Role (Teamwork - Chapter 4)

n/a

Ready:

"Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it." -1 Corinthians 12:27

"I am a member of a team, and I rely on the team, I defer to it and sacrifice Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it." -Mia Hamm

Set

Cat Whitehill knows a little something about dynasties. She played for the University of North Carolina soccer program, which through 2007 has accumulated 18 of 26 NCAA titles—including championships in 2000 and 2003 (Whitehill's freshman and senior seasons at Chapel Hill).

Since 2000, Whitehill has been a mainstay on the historically dominant U.S. National Team, which over the last 17 years has claimed two World Cup titles, 3 Olympic gold medals (Whitehill played on the 2004 team, but an injury kept her from contributing to the 2008 team), 3 Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF) Championship titles and 3 CONCACAF Gold Cup championships.

Even back in her home state of Alabama, she was part of a club team that claimed five state titles, four of them with Whitehill on board. So it's not surprising that Whitehill, a self-proclaimed sports junkie, grew up being inspired by dynasties—even if they weren't always in the same sport. "You look at Michael Jordan and how incredible he was at the game of basketball," Whitehill says. "And then you look at Scottie Pippen and see that he was an incredible player too, but so many people forget about him and Dennis Rodman and Horace Grant and Steve Kerr and B. J. Armstrong. They all made the Bulls become one of the greatest dynasties of my era. None of those players cared that Michael Jordan was as great as he was because Michael Jordan cared about how his team won. That's what makes someone become the greatest."

Born in Virginia but raised in Birmingham, Alabama, Whitehill came by her love of sports honestly. Her father, Phil Reddick, played football at Virginia Tech and would toss around the pigskin with his daughters, Cat and Virginia. But that's not the only way Reddick was influential in Whitehill's life. His roles as associate pastor at Briarwood Presbyterian Church and, more importantly, as spiritual leader of the home played a significant part in her devotion to God.

"Because I come from a Christian family, it was ingrained in my head from day one," Whitehill says. "When I was five years old, I accepted Christ into my life. I remember I was sleeping on

my trundle bed one night, and my parents and I prayed together. When you're five years old, you just do what your parents do, and I had different situations where I could've chosen another path, but God just made sense. I've grown in Him, and I came from a Christian school where I received an incredible knowledge of the Bible and the history of Christ."

From the outside looking in, Whitehill admits many are likely to hold preconceived notions about her upbringing. She enjoys busting the myths that for years have accompanied those who grew up in households that were overtly churchgoing and ministry-oriented.

"When you hear that I'm a preacher's kid, you might think I'm the rebellious kind," Whitehill says. "But my family allowed me to choose, and they never forced their views on me. Both my sister and I are so grateful for that, because never once did either one of us stray from our faith. It just clicked with both of us. Obviously, there have been ups and downs in my career and ups and downs in my personal life, but having God in my life is what's kept my head above water."

Whitehill has also benefited greatly from her family's close-knit nature. One of the many lessons she learned from her father was that "you can always help your teammate be better." In fact, Whitehill has grown to love the feeling that comes from helping someone improve in his or her abilities—especially when no one else ever knows.

"Teamwork is putting your personal preferences aside and looking at the person on your right and the person on your left first," Whitehill says. "It's putting aside everything in your personal life and your athletic career and doing whatever it takes to make someone else better. In turn, if you're going to make them better, they have to decide that they want to make you better."

Whitehill admittedly gets frustrated—as an athlete and as a sports fan—when she sees high-profile athletes blatantly put their selfish desires in front of their team's goals. "People describe certain athletes as great team players, but sometimes when the spotlight is shining on you, it's easy to forget about teamwork," Whitehill says. "But it's important to remember that you can't do it alone. When you put others first, it just makes the game a lot more fun, and it makes playing the game a whole lot easier."

While Whitehill was learning the finer art of traditional teamwork at UNC, she met, fell in love with and, on December 31, 2005, married husband Robert. Their venture as a couple has opened her eyes to a whole new element of the team concept.

"I'm not just one person anymore," Whitehill says. "There's a lot more compromise that comes with marriage. I can't just make a decision and have that be the end. I have to go to Robert, and we have to talk it out. It's a great learning experience for me, because I'm a pretty stubborn person. When we come together and make a decision, that's really cool. It's the same thing when you come together as a team, and you make a decision or you win a game. I think you get so much more out of it than if you were to do it by yourself."

The same can be said for Whitehill's involvement on the U.S. National Team. She has learned a great deal about compromise and unity from her vast international experience. Whitehill played for the Under-16 National Team in 1998 as well as the Under-18 squad from 1998 to 2000. She played a key role at the 1999 Pan American Games, leading the U.S. to a gold medal with a spectacular long-distance goal in the championship match against Mexico.

With the Under-21 National Team, Whitehill was a starter and an invaluable contributor as the

U.S. squad collected four consecutive Nordic Cup titles from 2000 to 2003 (five consecutive titles, dating back to 1999).

On July 7, 2000, Whitehill made her first appearance on the women's National Team against Italy and has been a contributor as both a starter and key bench reserve ever since. At the 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Athens, she started three of the five games as the U.S. women claimed the gold medal. She also made headlines by filling in for the injured Brandi Chastain during the 2003 World Cup, where the team finished in third place.

"The standard is very high," Whitehill says. "It's high in the way that you play the game. It's high in your mental capacity. The standard is high everywhere. If you were a star in high school and you come to a team like North Carolina or if you were a star in college and you came to one of these national teams, you're going to be humbled. You're not going to be the star anymore."

And even as team oriented as the majority of the national team's athletes have been, there's always the potential for self-serving motives to be lurking around the corner. Perhaps, Whitehill suggests, that's why winning under those circumstances (with the country's elite players all gathered together) is that much more special.

"We're all a bunch of type-A females, but when we compromise and we come together as a team, then we can use our abilities to make the team so great," she says. "It's having the ability but also figuring out that we're a team, and we're not just a bunch of individuals."

Maybe it's because of the way her father ingrained certain principles into her head as she was growing up. Maybe it's because of her passion for college and professional team sports. Or maybe it's because of the personal experiences she has accrued over a lifetime of playing soccer at the highest level. Most likely, however, Whitehill's desire to put the team first in all situations is the result of a combination of all of the above.

"Teamwork has been easy for me," she says. "I just love watching sports, and I love watching the details of sports. I just want to win. I have this strong desire to win. If I need to push my teammates into the goal with the ball, I will do it. I will do whatever it takes. I know I can't do it alone. I want to win so badly that I will do whatever it takes for my teammates to get better."

Arguably, the teamwork concept has not always been emphasized within the walls of most churches. But Whitehill believes this foundational principle is clearly taught throughout both the Old and New Testaments. "You can see teamwork throughout the whole Bible," she says. "There wasn't just one disciple—there were 12. Each one had an incredible quality about them. You see the idea of people working together for a common goal all over the Bible, but sometimes you don't think of it as teamwork."

One of the more blatant representations of teamwork can be found in 1 Corinthians 12, where the apostle Paul compares the Body of Christ to the human body. In verses 27-31, he addresses the issue of different roles that Christians play in order for the Church to be successful in its mission of bringing the unsaved to salvation: *“Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it. And God has placed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, next, miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, managing, various kinds of languages. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all do miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in languages? Do all interpret? But desire the greater gifts. And I will show you an even better way.”*

Paul is letting all believers know that there is a place for everyone on God’s team; and each position, or role, is just as vital as the next. “The bench is just as important as the people on the field,” Whitehill says. “I’ve had a lesson in both. I’ve been on the bench and I’ve been on the field. God always has a plan, and whether I’m on the bench or on the field, He wants me to be in that role. For me, the role is important, because I can show Christ through that role. If I’m a bench player, I can be okay with that. It’s not where I want to be, but I can push the other defenders and make them better. If their line is off, I can tell them, because I have a much better perspective. If I’m on the field, I want someone on the bench to do the same thing for me.”

But true to form, the all-too-common human element of pride eventually works its way into the mix. Selfish motives—whether driven by insecurity or arrogance—cause people (and especially athletes) to question their station in life or on a team. King Solomon wisely pegged this wrong way of thinking in Proverbs 21:2: *“All the ways of a man seem right to him, but the LORD evaluates the motives.”*

“Everyone thinks they should be on the field,” Whitehill says. “They don’t see through the eyes of the coach or the eyes of their teammates. They see through their own eyes. You’re thinking, *I’m better than that player. Why am I not out there?* You’re at a competitive level, so you are a great player. But for some reason, there’s something that separates someone else from you on that day or maybe the coach just likes them better. There’s a lot that comes into play, but the pride issue is huge. For someone who has a lot of pride, if they don’t know their role, a lot of times they won’t stay on the team.”

Overcoming pride takes a solid understanding of who we are in Christ. Philippians 1:6 tells us that *“He who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”* In other words, anyone who is insecure about his or her ability and feels the need to achieve individual greatness in order to find security and self-worth can trust that our Creator has a plan that no amount of success in athletics or elsewhere can match.

Another great reminder can be found in Colossians 2:9-10: *“For in Him the entire fullness of God’s nature dwells bodily, and you have been filled by Him, who is the head over every ruler and authority.”*

Both of those assuring Scriptures help Whitehill stand confident in her faith, no matter what trials she may face on or off the field.

“Knowing who God is and knowing what God did for us is really important,” Whitehill says. “It’s important to love people in spite of what they may say to you, what they may do to you or who they are and what they believe. That’s who Christ was and that’s who God wants us to be. My

teammates know what I believe, and I know what they believe, and we can still be great teammates. I can still be a witness to them, because I'm not going to back down. I'm stubborn. They're not going to back down either, because they're stubborn; but in the end, it's really Christ who wins."

As important as it is for Cat Whitehill to demonstrate godly teamwork to her teammates and to the greater soccer community and sports world, her desire to exercise this irreplaceable core value is also steeped in a solid understanding of just how powerful a difference a unified, fully functioning group of believers committed to excellence can truly make.

"We're a congregation," Whitehill says. "We are Christ's Body. If we can remember that, teamwork just makes so much more sense. If we realize that we're representing Christ and the pastor is the one in the spotlight, we can just follow them and make the pastor greater, because of how we act and because of who we are as a congregation."

Whitehill says some of her friends often ask why she still plays soccer after all of these years. In response, she usually refers to her love of the team and the love of learning new things on a daily basis. Whitehill also enjoys the opportunity to be a role model for young soccer players and sports fans of all ages throughout the entire country.

"I want them to know that we're not all going to be the Michael Jordans of this world," Whitehill says. "And if you are, the greatest thing you can do for someone is to build them up to be the best that they can be."

"So many people have this perception that you have to be Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods," she concludes. "Yes, they are excelling at their sports, but as humans we can excel to the best of our ability. That's what Christ wants, and that's what's important. That's what a great team wants—to get the best out of each other."

Go

1. Cat Whitehill references Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls as one of the greatest examples of teamwork. What are some other dynasties that come to mind? What do you think are some of the key components of a sports dynasty at any level?

2. What are some of the roles you have played on a team? Have you ever felt as if your role wasn't as important as another player's role? Why do some positions in a group dynamic get more attention than others?

3. Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, in which Paul compares the Church to a body. In your sport or team dynamic, how would you compare the various positions and roles to the parts of the human body? Have you had to compete or fulfill a task with someone missing? How did that impact the group's ability to succeed?

4. In what ways have you felt called to use your talents and gifts within the Body of Christ? Have you ever felt as if your role was not important or not significant? If so, explain. Read Philippians 1:6. How does this promise from God change any uncertainties you feel about God's call on your life?

5. What does true greatness in the spiritual sense mean to you? What are some ways that you can strive to be a great “teammate” within the Body of Christ?

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Bible Reference:

Colossians 2



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