

Raising the Standard (Excellence - Chapter 6)

n/a

Ready:

"Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more." -1 Thessalonians 4:1 (NASB)

"Success will not lower its standard to us. We must raise our standard to success." -Randall R. McBride, Jr.

Set

One athlete's career-threatening injury is another athlete's blessing in disguise. At least that's been the case for Major League Soccer veteran and four-time All-Star Chris Klein, who tore his right anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in 2001 and his left ACL in 2004.

Both times, Klein made spectacular returns to the field and deservedly earned Comeback Player of the Year honors (2002 and 2005). Although each injury was potentially career ending, he leaned heavily on his relationship with God and a strong desire to show the league and its fans the true meaning of excellence. "Right after that first knee injury, I had a peace in knowing that God had a plan for me," Klein says. "That allowed me to put the work into my rehab and come back from the injury and be a better soccer player. With those two injuries, I've had more of an opportunity to speak about my faith than anything else I've done on the field in my entire career. I look back on those injuries and wouldn't trade them."

A few years earlier, Klein might not have displayed the same positive outlook. Although he grew up in a home where the Bible was taught, he says that in high school, college and the early part of his professional career, sports "became all-consuming and it was all about the performance on the field. It was about scoring the goal or winning or getting my name in the paper and doing all of those things."

At Indiana University, Klein led the Hoosiers to the NCAA semifinals, where his team lost to UCLA, the eventual champions, 1-0. It was Indiana's only loss of the season (23-1). As his college career came to an end, a new life with his wife, Angela, was about to begin. Her influence helped him understand the need for salvation through Jesus, and he began immersing himself in God's Word and engaging in the long, deliberate process of surrender.

At about the same time, Klein was selected by the Kansas City Wizards as the fourth overall pick in the 1998 MLS college draft. Despite playing at a high level for most of his athletic career, Klein was about to experience an even higher level of competitive pressure as a member of talent-rich Major League Soccer and eventually as an occasional member of the

U.S. National Team. He spent eight seasons with the Wizards and was part of the 2000 MLS championship team. He then played one-and-a-half seasons for Salt Lake Real before being traded to the Los Angeles Galaxy in 2007, where he now shares the field with international megastar David Beckham and U.S. National Team legend Landon Donovan.

“There are a lot of stresses that go along with being a professional athlete,” Klein says. “It’s a very up-and-down job. You could have the best game of your life one week, and the very next week you could have the worst game of your life. It’s that inconsistency — without faith in Jesus Christ — that would really put me way up and down. It helps to know that I’m not playing to do interviews or for the coach or for the fans. All of those things are great, but the real glory comes in playing for Christ.”

As Klein grew in his spiritual walk, his ideas about excellence were challenged. One defining moment came when he heard a sermon that extolled the concept of living life for an audience of One. “That’s true excellence to me — seeing that picture of just Jesus sitting in the stands,” Klein says. “I know that He loves us always and loves us unconditionally, but I always ask the question, ‘Is He smiling at me or is He shaking His head?’ It’s that sort of idea that helps me strive to be excellent every day, whether people are watching or whether no one is watching.”

Even before he came to that understanding, the groundwork for excellence was laid by his father, Rich Klein, who taught his son to “play fair” and “play hard.”

“I’ve also been very fortunate to have some great coaches in my career who really knew how to motivate on the field, but who really knew what character meant and how to build character through sports,” Klein says. “It started with my high-school coach, Greg Vitello, in St. Louis and then on to college with Coach [Jerry] Yeagley at Indiana. These guys knew the game of soccer, but I learned more about how to be a man through those two men than anything I learned on the field. I believe that has a lot to do with the success I’ve had at the professional level.”

Perhaps just as important in his spiritual growth was his ability to rub shoulders with Fellowship of Christian Athletes’ national leadership in Kansas City during his time with the Wizards. Klein was introduced to the ministry by his mother-in-law, Carol Messerli, who has been involved with FCA in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, for several years. “FCA piqued my interest for sure — the way they pair sports and faith, especially with what I do for a living,” Klein recalls. “To see that reflected in kids at such an impressionable time in their lives, it just sort of resonated with me.”

FCA’s influence helped solidify Klein’s renewed perspective on excellence. He had long since figured out the physical and emotional sides of the concept but now had the spiritual element firmly in its rightful place.

“When it comes to excellence, I have to look at everything through God’s eyes,” Klein says. “I look at who Jesus was as the ultimate example of excellence and service and humility and all of those values. I look at Him, and I obviously fall short of each of those in comparison to Him. God has given me a talent and an ability to play soccer and to be excellent in doing that — to strive to be like Jesus when I’m out on the field, when I’m at home with my family, when I’m walking on the street, when I’m driving my car. So my ultimate definition of excellence is striving to be like Jesus.”

At the same time, Klein is well aware of the truth found in Romans 3:23: *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*

“But that doesn’t mean we should stop striving for excellence,” he says. “I think when we give up on that, we sort of miss the whole concept that Jesus teaches us. And I think especially in sports, there comes that misconception that as Christian athletes, maybe you get too nice or you don’t want to compete. But for me, it’s about that competition. It’s about competing as hard as I can for His glory. It’s not for my glory but for where He wants to take me in life. That’s really what drives me to continue.”

For Klein, there are numerous biblical references to excellence that back up that desire. Romans 12:1 is one of his personal favorites: *“By the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship.”*

“I look at singers who praise Jesus when they sing, and that’s just the ultimate act of worship for me,” Klein says. “I don’t sing very well, but I do play soccer. So I have that idea of offering this sacrifice to Him each game I play. He gave me this talent, and for me to offer it back up to Him is my way of worshiping. I certainly love listening to music but being able to express myself and to glorify Him on the field can become my sacrifice.”

Another one of Klein’s inspirational Scriptures is Colossians 3:23-24: *“Whatever you do, do it enthusiastically, as something done for the Lord and not for men, knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord — you serve the Lord Christ.”*

“It’s that idea of striving toward excellence for Jesus and not for men,” he says. “If I’m able to strive for excellence in Jesus’ eyes, it’s going to affect men also. But my first priority has to be to give my life over to Him, and that’s going to spill over to other people.”

In order to be excellent, Klein believes that a person first must determine to raise the standard in every aspect of life. In 1 Thessalonians 4:1, Paul tells the church members in Thessalonica *“to walk and please God . . . that you excel still more”* (NASB). And for the perfect example of how to “walk and please God,” Klein suggests an obvious yet too-often overlooked model of excellence.

“When you talk about a standard of living, it comes back to Jesus for me,” Klein says. “He is the standard. Each day, we can raise the bar, but we’re never going to reach that standard. But it’s the pursuit of that standard and continually raising the bar that we have to strive for every day. When we give up on that pursuit, we’ve given up on our faith. When anyone talks about raising the bar, it’s going to that extra level to glorify Him. When your eyes are set on an eternal prize, I think that you continually raise the bar of excellence in your earthly life.”

So what does raising the standard or raising the bar of excellence look like? While there’s not likely to be a uniform answer that everyone can easily agree on, Klein has an idea of what might be the most important first step for himself.

“I need routine in my life,” he says. “So for me, my spiritual day starts out with waking up and giving my life to Him right off the bat. Sometimes I find that if I don’t sit down and have some quiet time by myself before I start my day, it’s like I’m trying to do it on my own, and I notice the difference throughout the day. So I try to get up before anyone else in the house gets up and have time in prayer and have time studying and reading God’s Word. That jump-starts me and gets my mind in the right framework so that I can go out and serve others and be more

like Him.”

Another step toward excellence takes Klein to — of all places — the kitchen. That’s where he makes sure to properly feed his physical self. “As I get older playing this sport, taking care of my body becomes that much more important to me,” Klein says. “Putting good things into my body is the fuel for what I go out and do. The most important thing for me in the morning is to energize my mind by reading God’s Word and also to energize my body by putting the right things in there so that I can perform on the field.”

As Klein ticks off his list of ways to raise the bar, however, he continues to focus on more personal matters. In fact, his next priority (like the previous two) is rooted within the home setting, where he says being an example to his wife and children (Carson and Cami) plays a vital role in the pursuit of excellence.

“You can see it in young kids,” Klein explains. “What they see you do, they mimic. Sometimes it really gives you an eye-opening experience when you hear something come out of their mouths or you see something they do that you can see in yourself and that you don’t want to see in your kids. That’s why my wife and I make our marriage our priority, and hopefully that makes us better parents.”

Klein believes that focusing on internal matters of excellence ultimately spills over into other areas of a person’s life. For him, that translates into tangible opportunities to serve as a living, breathing witness of God’s sovereignty and providence. But that can only happen if a person chooses to follow Christ’s example of humility.

“For me, it might be going into the locker room and doing things that people may not expect, like bringing someone a newspaper or bringing someone a cup of coffee,” Klein says. “At home, maybe it’s rubbing my wife’s back or giving my kids a hug or just keeping that idea of service at the forefront of my mind. It helps me to be the better husband, the better teammate and the better friend. Living my life that way is what drives me.”

In his quest for excellence, Klein admits that there are numerous forces (both external and internal) that sometimes stand between him and his goals — forces that most everyone tends to face on a daily basis.

“It feels good when people are talking about you in a positive way,” Klein says. “Sometimes you can kind of puff your chest out when you have a good game or when you see your name in the paper. Taking ownership of that is something that hinders me. Another thing is the busyness of life and not being able to just enjoy it and be appreciative of what God has given us. Worry can also be a big hindrance. Worrying about what the future holds can take you out of the mode of fully trusting in Him. For me, that becomes a big roadblock in my life.”

As a highly disciplined professional athlete, Klein says the key to maneuvering past such hurdles ultimately leads back to his first priority: a daily commitment to Bible devotion, prayer and listening for God’s voice. It’s that rock-solid foundation that brings peace, understanding and trust, no matter what uncertainties life may bring.

“Being traded from one team to another and wondering what my life is going to look like in another city is a scary thing — especially when you have a wife and two kids who you’re going to drag along with you,” Klein says. “But having that trust of being part of God’s plan and letting Him use me as a tool for His glory — thinking of my life in that context — really keeps

me going and keeps my feet moving.”

Another thing that energizes and motivates Klein to continually raise the standard is the opportunity he often has to share his faith with others — whether that is his teammates, others who work for the team, soccer fans, or kids who he speaks to in schools and in youth groups.

“Hopefully it becomes who you are,” Klein says. “Athletes are role models. High-school athletes are role models. The seniors are role models to the juniors. The juniors are role models to the sophomores. Whether we like it or not, we’re role models. So then it becomes a choice for me. Am I going to choose to be a positive role model or am I going to choose to be that guy who I don’t want to be?”

And in order to be the role model God has called him to be, Klein believes that excellence along with the other FCA core values — serving, integrity and teamwork — are required in order to make the biggest impact on his family, his friends, his teammates and his fans.

“These core values are things that last,” Klein says. “These are things that will go from one game to the next, from one season to the next, from one career to the next. If I have a good game, I have to start all over the next week because there’s another one coming. These core values transcend what you do on the field.”

Go

1. In your sport or field of interest, who are some figures that have set the highest standards? What are some of the attributes that make those individuals special? In what ways does seeing them in action motivate you to strive to give your best?
2. Read Romans 12:1. Chris Klein says his soccer career is “about competing as hard as I can for His glory.” How does his philosophy line up with the mentality of many athletes today? What do you find most challenging about the exhortation found in Romans 12:1?
3. Read Colossians 3:23-24. How does this passage reinforce Klein’s idea about playing for an audience of One? Is playing or working for God’s approval as opposed to man’s approval more stressful or less stressful? Why so?
4. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12. What are some ways the apostle Paul encourages us to raise the standard? How can living by a high standard of morality and righteousness bring excellence into all areas of life?
5. Klein says that Jesus was “the ultimate example of excellence and service and humility.” What are some other ways in which Jesus modeled excellence for us? How can striving to live like Him make us better athletes and ministers of the gospel?

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Bible Reference:

1 Thessalonians 4



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