

Strength in Numbers (Teamwork - Chapter 2)

n/a

Ready:

"And if somebody overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken." -Ecclesiastes 4:12

"In union there is strength." -Aesop

Set

Shaun Alexander has always been a winner. If you ask him the secret of his success, he will probably list more than just one—including the vital component of exemplary teamwork.

Teamwork has been a part of Alexander's competitive life as long as he's been donning pads and strapping on a helmet. It fueled his success at Boone County High School in Florence, Kentucky, and vetted his Southeastern Conference (SEC) championship run at Alabama in 1999. The same holds true for the Seattle Seahawks' 2005 National Football Conference title that led to a berth in Super Bowl XL.

But if you ask Alexander about some of his most memorable teamwork moments, he's just as likely to refer back to a much simpler—but nonetheless impressionable—time.

"You might get a bunch of friends together to play hide-and-seek," Alexander says. "You might be playing with 10 kids, but you've got three friends that you're going to work with and make sure that everybody gets back to the base. I remember one of my friends was about to get caught and the other friend jumped out of his hiding spot, knowing he was fast enough to get away. He created that distraction, and it allowed all three of us to get back safe."

When asked about his earliest model of teamwork, however, Alexander's answer is quite predictable—especially for anyone who has read the early chapters of his 2006 autobiography, *Touchdown Alexander: My Story of Faith, Football and Pursuing the Dream*.

"My mom is a servant," he reveals. "I used to see her give so much to other family members, and I knew she didn't have the money to give, but she would still give it. But she was doing it because our family had an 'all for one, one for all' attitude. That's what teamwork is all about. It's about everybody achieving the goal at hand."

Alexander eventually discovered that his mother was living out a principle that can be traced back to the Bible. In particular, he often references Ecclesiastes 4:12, which says, *"And if somebody overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken."*

“When you get three people pulling in the same direction with the same goal, then that’s teamwork,” Alexander explains.

It’s the age-old truth that asserts there is inherent strength in numbers. Teamwork is so much more effective and efficient when a band of brothers joins forces in order to achieve a uniform purpose.

The concept immediately sends Alexander back in time when he first served at Fellowship of Christian Athletes camps during his college days at Alabama. That experience was the beginning of a spiritual paradigm shift.

“When I started doing FCA camps, I got to meet some other brothers in Christ who were just like me,” Alexander says. “Some were successful college athletes just like me, and I saw them chasing after Jesus and growing in God but still discipling and mentoring other people. We were all in it together. I got stronger by just having them around me.”

Alexander was so greatly impacted by his early FCA encounters that he has continued his involvement with the organization and, in fact, utilizes its invaluable resources to work with young people today. He has found that this generation of athletes often benefits from the same spiritual community-building structure that changed his life.

“I send about 50 kids to an FCA camp every year,” Alexander says “I think about the Huddle Leaders, which were kind of the first generation of kids that I mentored and discipled. When they all get there, they get to meet other kids who I mentored from all across the country, and they get to meet people just like them from other states. That is the strongest thing for them; and when they get together, it’s powerful, because they have that same focus and drive and discipline. Now they have numbers.”

Ever since his old FCA camp days, Alexander has not only extolled but also employed the concept of strength in numbers. He has surrounded himself with trustworthy friends who will keep him on the straight and narrow path and engage in brutal honesty when necessary.

“There is more than one person who mentors me and speaks into my life,” Alexander says. “If I have an issue, I can have five mentors who call up, and they all give me different perspectives. It takes many advisers to win the war. That doesn’t mean you should ask 100 people for advice. But there’s some godly counsel that you can have around you to pour into your life, and it will keep your steps straight. That’s what happens with strength in numbers.”

Alexander’s philosophy is a paraphrase of Proverbs 24:5-6, where King Solomon uses a military analogy to wisely exhort people to seek sound guidance for every part of our lives: “*A wise warrior is better than a strong one, and a man of knowledge than one of strength; for you should wage war with sound guidance—victory comes with many counselors.*”

And although the word “accountability” may not be found in most biblical texts, the concept is certainly woven throughout its pages.

“If some issues are popping up, we can all come together in agreement and pull each other out of a bad situation,” Alexander says. “That’s a powerful thing. A lot of times, Christian men don’t get enough men around them. They might just have one. So if the problem is drinking, the one struggling might ask the other to help him out, and the next thing you know, the one that’s struggling has pulled the other one down. But if there are three brothers around, they’re

all going to pull you up.”

Accountability has other benefits as well and easily transfers to the athletic world. For Alexander, this has been especially important as a running back who is often the target of hard hits, nasty tackles and undetectable rule bending that regularly takes place at the end of a play.

“In football, the pile is probably the most dangerous thing,” he explains. “But there was a time with the Seahawks when I’d get tackled, and I’d be on the ground by myself. It’s because my five linemen never allowed people to pile on me. So I’d get tackled, and they’d be pulling guys off of me immediately. They weren’t going to let people beat me up under the pile. They had my back.”

It was that type of camaraderie that the Seahawks exhibited during the team’s 2005 run to the Super Bowl, where the team lost to the Pittsburgh Steelers. That year, Seattle won the NFC’s West Division behind Alexander’s MVP performance, which included an NFL-best 1,880 rushing yards and an NFL-record 28 touchdowns (the latter since broken by LaDainian Tomlinson).

Even going into that 2005 season, Alexander had a feeling that something special was going to happen.

“People just humbled themselves,” he recalls. “They got around each other and had authentic conversations and learned about each other’s families and kids. When you start getting around each other like that, you can’t help but become a true team and actually win, and that’s what was happening.”

According to Alexander, much of the team’s strong sense of community came from its even stronger Christian influence. For those eight seasons, from 2000 to 2007, the franchise experienced numerous highs and lows but as a whole remained faithful to a calling of godly excellence.

“Our team was full of Bible-believing, strong Christian men,” Alexander says. “Anytime you’ve got a team like that, it is easy to grab your brother and just pray—pray for you, pray for your family, pray for your teammates, pray for the guys who aren’t saved on the team. But then also, you can start holding each other accountable to love authentically. I think that’s what drew our team closer together.

“We called things what they were but all in love,” he adds. “We didn’t expect unsaved people to act like Christians. We expected Christians to act like Christians. I think that is one of the things that made it easy to play for the Seahawks—brothers who were standing strong. We were going to hold you accountable to be strong. And then the ones who weren’t [Christians], we were going to love them even harder, because we wanted them to have the goods that we had.”

Alexander doesn’t reserve the right to hold Christian brothers accountable and confront them if needed to just in the locker room. He carries it over to his personal life, where that close-knit band of friends he relies so heavily on gets involved in the big issues and the minute details—even when that means taking risks and getting caught up in the fray.

“There was a friend of mine who had done something stupid,” Alexander says. “It was definitely ungodly. It kind of shook the whole family up, and we weren’t sure what we should

do. We all loved this person, so three friends and I decided to go meet with him. We all went out to dinner and I told him, 'It doesn't matter what you do. I'm going to keep you with us. We're going to keep you in the truth. We're going to keep you in the family. We're going to find you and pull you out of the darkness.' That's the definition of having somebody's back."

Alexander's experience is reminiscent of one of the many parables that Jesus told His disciples. Alexander was prompted to share one particular story (found in Matthew 18:10-14) after they questioned the amount of time He was spending with the children: *"See that you don't look down on one of these little ones, because I tell you that in heaven their angels continually view the face of My Father in heaven. [For the Son of Man has come to save the lost.] What do you think? If a man has 100 sheep, and one of them goes astray, won't he leave the 99 on the hillside and go and search for the stray? And if he finds it, I assure you: He rejoices over that sheep more than over the 99 that did not go astray. In the same way, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones perish."*

Alexander's strong belief in this principle is precisely why he has made the conscious decision to get actively involved in the lives of young people. He initially did so through the Shaun Alexander Family Foundation, which assisted families who lacked for basic needs, granted scholarships and held toy drives and food drives. Now known simply as the "Shaun Alexander Foundation," the organization partners with national organizations to fund programs that promote athletics, education, character and leadership for youth 8 to 24 years old. Alexander has also continued to personally pay the FCA camp tuition for several young athletes.

Alexander is also developing a new program called Club 37 that will speak specifically to the issue of mentoring young men who lack a solid adult male presence in their life—something he has already been personally doing since his playing days at the University of Alabama and plans to continue long after his NFL career is over.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from Alexander's teamwork model is a dangerous mentality that many people are tempted to embrace—flying solo, or going it alone. Even within the team concept, sometimes athletes succumb to this line of thinking by refusing to conform to team rules, resisting instruction from the coaches or simply isolating themselves from the other athletes. Alexander says going it alone is a sure-fire unity killer on a team but is equally deadly when it comes to spiritual matters.

"Some people are like, 'You know what? I'm just going to love Jesus. I'm going to read the Bible. I'm going to pray. I'm going to study,' " he says. "God's first commandment is to love Him; but His second one is just as important, and that's to love others—love people. So there's no way that you can do it all by yourself."

When people resist the benefits of teamwork, Alexander suggests they are falling into a trap tailor-made by Satan. So often, followers of Christ think that avoiding the "big" sins is the most important element of the Christian life. But according to Alexander, it's often the little things—those things not always associated with sin, such as pride and selfishness—that cause us to stray from the path that leads us along God's perfect will for our lives.

“When you go it alone, you really can’t see when you’re one degree off,” Alexander says. “That’s the power of a marriage. You hopefully have two people who have the same passion for Jesus, but because they’re so different, they can always tell when things are a little off. It’s the same thing when you take a group of guys who are keeping each other accountable. They’re going to recognize when someone isn’t quite right.”

So what about those who feel as if they’re all alone in the fight and don’t think they have anyone to team up with in this spiritual battle? While Alexander understands those individuals’ plight, he also believes that it’s ultimately not a valid excuse.

“Most of the time, you’re never really alone,” he says. “You just haven’t found those people. And a lot of times people want to find another God-loving person, but they want them to look or act like them. There’s a danger in that, because that’s usually pride. That’s when the need for friends ends up being for selfish reasons, while God is saying, ‘I’d rather you have a need for friends to do my work, not so you can get friends and then push Me into the corner and never talk to Me anymore.’”

At the end of the day, however, Alexander says there’s only one thing that really matters when it comes to having strength in numbers. Anyone who is truly walking with God in this journey through life is going to have all the support he or she needs to successfully win the race. There’s logic-defying strength in understanding the nature of His sovereign power.

“The One who has set the plan for your life into motion is the One who said ‘Let there be light and there was light,’” Alexander says. “It doesn’t really matter if you have a majority or not or if the numbers make sense or not. He’s the someone that said, ‘Shaun, you go mentor young men who are going to change the world.’ I don’t need to have numbers anymore. I don’t have to be able to explain anything. As long as I know what God says, I can hang my hat on that.”

Go

1. Shaun Alexander talks about how playing hide-and-seek with his friends was one of his earliest memories of teamwork. What are some unique, non-sports related examples of teamwork in which you have participated? What other ideas come to mind?
2. Read Ecclesiastes 4:12. What does the phrase “strength in numbers” mean to you? Can you describe a time when relying on this concept made you and a team or group more successful?
3. Have you ever tried to go it alone when chasing after your goals? If so, what challenges or frustrations did you face along the way? Read Proverbs 24:5-6. What does Solomon suggest as an effective way to approach such scenarios in your life?
4. Read Matthew 18:10-14. Jesus told this parable as a way of explaining the importance of children in the kingdom of God. What biblical teamwork principles can you also pull from the story?
5. What are some dangers that teammates could protect each other from? Spiritually speaking, what are some dangers (seen or unseen) that we face as believers? How can you apply the concept of “strength in numbers” as a way to protect yourself and your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ?

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