

Lessons from Tragedy

This week the USA Sports world grieved the tragic loss of a high profile, recently retired professional football player. He was shot several times in his sleep by his mistress, 16 years his junior, who in turn killed herself. It was a horrible tragedy and a too common occurrence. The media jumped on the story and they have danced all around the issues related to the killing, but have not really dealt with the central question, “Why does this kind of thing happen?” The statistics related to divorce and bankruptcies among recently retired sports professionals are staggering. Education, brochures, presentations by former players, therapy sessions and professional consultations are having little effect on this issue.

I have pondered this a great deal this week and have had conversations with a wide range of players, coaches and friends. I believe a strongly contributing factor is what the sport world does to the highest achieving among us. The culture of sport squeezes them for all they have and force them to identify themselves solely by how they perform on the field of competition. From the time they're 8 or 10 years old they are judged, rewarded, punished, acclaimed, criticized, valued or derided for their performance in sport. Beyond that, they derive most of their values, structure, discipline and sense of purpose from those who direct their sporting life. Many times that comes from the coaching staff, the club, agent or organization for which they compete. Suddenly, at the end of the player's career, all that ceases and the player is cast adrift. Years or even decades of structure and organization, provided externally by their life in sport, is removed and many players have no internal structure or guiding values to provide discipline for even the simplest aspects of life.

Imagine you were the recently murdered football player. Since his boyhood, he lived in the highly structured world of high school, college and then professional American Football. Suddenly at age 35, that's all gone and he's adrift in an ocean of leisure time, directionless passion, adrenaline with no outlet and a lack of identity since he is no longer a football player. All of these factors are only amplified by millions of dollars, a lifetime of having been indulged and an expectation of preferential treatment.

My aim is not to minimize the tragedy, to diminish the gravity of his series of

foolish decisions, or to excuse his behavior. Rather I'm trying to understand what happened here and to discern what we should learn from such situations. How shall we as sport chaplains, sport mentors and character coaches guard those whom we serve from similar fates? How can we help them build an identity, in Christ Jesus, which respects and understands their strong identity in the sport world, but also helps them see beyond that world to who they are in relation to their families, their community, the Church, and the Kingdom of God?

The answer is surely not simply a matter of education. It will certainly take a transformed heart to deal with these issues. The process outlined in Romans 12:1-3 must be applied to our lives and in turn with the coaches and competitors we serve. Let's help them resist the temptation to be conformed to the world's way and let's challenge them to trust Christ for transformation of life which permeates their entire beings. Such life transformation will have effect on and off the field of competition. It will impact them during and after their careers in sport. It will change their relationships with teammates, coaches, friends and family. It will certainly save their lives in a spiritual sense, but may also save them from tragic consequences related to foolish decisions made by a deluded mind, driven by a poorly developed heart.

Bible Reference:

Romans 12

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