

On Ministry and Football (Part 2)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

Throughout the eight years of my high school and college football career, football was the focus for six days a week.

My high school field had no lights. But even if it had, private school football in Wisconsin back in those days was a staple of Saturday afternoons—not Friday nights. Away games could easily take up most of Saturday, and yet, come Monday afternoon—less than 48 hours after the game ended—we were back out under the sun (or rain) in full pads.

Maranatha's field, likewise, had no lights, and every game during my college career was on a Saturday afternoon, with the exception of one non-conference Monday night game.

Road trips in college were very interesting. We would often leave before the end of the school day on Friday and return in the middle of the night after the game on Saturday—just a few hours before Sunday morning church. I remember that sickening feeling you felt waking up as the bus turned onto the campus, up past the old entrance sign at MBBC, knowing that Coach Price required us to go straight to the locker room to sort out and hang up our own equipment. I think the latest I got to bed in my dorm was 4 a.m.

In high school, we opened practice in early August with two-a-days, and my two varsity seasons both ended in November. So, my senior season took up more than three months.

Our college season was actually a bit shorter, as we came to school only a week early for pre-season practice, and back then there was no opportunity for post-season play, so we usually ended in early November.

But, boy did we make use of that first week! Two-a-days didn't do it for Coach Price. He had three-a-days. We had long practices both in the morning and afternoon, and a short practice in the evening—followed by a team meeting. Football basically filled the day from roughly 9 a.m. to 10 p.m.

I remember the first day of my senior season in college, when it was extremely hot and sunny—probably in the 90-plus-degree range. Following the afternoon practice, I started having chills, and I went to the evening practice (without pads on that first day) wearing a heavy sweatshirt and saying nothing—because I wanted to be a full-time starter in my senior year. No one asked me about the sweatshirt. I made it through practice, felt better the next day and started every game that year—including one when I was sick to my stomach and another (my final game) when my chinstrap broke right before the kickoff.

Suffice it to say that I remember much more about those seasons, and some of those games, than I do about many of the classes that I was in during those years. It is not that I did not get a good education off the field—but I would argue that I also received a good education *on the field*.

I shared the biggest single lesson that I ever learned playing football—to *never quit*—in the opening installment of this series.

But I also learned a broader lesson over the course of each set of four years that the Lord gave me to play football—first in high school, and then in college. I sum it up in the words of the Apostle Paul in Phil. 4:11-13:

I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

You see, God gave me—not one, but—*two* opportunities to be part of football programs that went, to quote the old phrase, *from worst to first*. He allowed me to go on that journey two different times, with two different sets of teammates, learning lifelong lessons about the value of dedication, hard work, perseverance and teamwork each time.

If you had told the sports fans around Fond du Lac, Wis., in 1983 that three years later Winnebago Lutheran Academy was going to have an undefeated football team and win the state championship, they would have laughed in your face!

If you had told anyone with understanding of the situation around Watertown, Wis., in 1987 (I'm not sure how many even knew that we had a football program!) that three years later Maranatha's football team would be conference co-champions, they would likewise have been incredulous.

Yet, that is exactly what happened in each case—and I got to experience it both times.

And I believe that the life lessons I learned from those two football journeys helped shape me for life and ministry in ways that few other things could ever have done. Looking back, I can see that so clearly, and I realize how blessed I was to be part of both of these incredible experiences, in the providence of God.

I will explain more about exactly how these events molded me in the next installment.

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