

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to GSPN! During this series I’m going to be using sports as a platform to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ. The other messages in this series are: (1) “Fishing Tips from the Master;” (2) “Keep it in the Fairway.” Then I’ll conclude the series with a message about football entitled, (3) “It’s All About Reaching the Goal.”

Of course, GSPN is a parody of ESPN. Do you know what the letters ESPN stand for? It’s the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network. ESPN was the brainchild of Bill Rasmussen an out-of-work hockey announcer in Boston. He came up with the idea of a program to highlight local sports in New England. Cable television was just beginning and he discovered it was cheaper to buy 24 hours of cable time than two hour blocks on network television. He originally called it ESP, for Entertainment Sports Programming, but days before the first broadcast he changed it to ESPN, because he didn’t want it to be confused with a Psychic network! The first broadcast of ESPN was on September 7, 1979 with only a few thousand viewers. The first sporting event broadcast that day on ESPN was a slow pitch softball game. Twenty eight years later, ESPN is broadcast into over 100 million homes in the USA and in over 150 foreign countries through ESPN International. In March, Sports Center broadcast its 30,000th show.

For copyright reasons, we’re using the letters GSPN for this series. Want to guess what it stands for? Those four letters stand for God’s Spiritual Playmaker Network. All sports teams have performers called Playmakers. They’re the ones who really make things happen. A-Rod is a playmaker for the Yankees. Tim Duncan is a playmaker for the Spurs. David Beckham is a playmaker for the L.A. Galaxy. Sadly, the Texas Rangers don’t have any playmakers right now! As Coach Groth said, sometimes a team comes together and every player becomes a playmaker. During this series I want to show you that YOU can be one of God’s spiritual playmakers!

Today we’re going to talk about baseball, the sport that has been called America’s pastime. Of course, you know baseball is mentioned in the Bible. The Bible says in Genesis 1:1, “In the big inning God created the heavens and the earth.” God only needed six innings to create everything there is! And God is still the God of big innings!

Seriously, there are numerous verses in the New Testament that employ athletic metaphors. For instance, the Bible says, “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.” (1 Corinthians 9:25) Paul wrote to young Timothy, “If anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules.” (2 Timothy 2:5)

Speaking of playing by the rules, Barry Bonds will probably break the all-time home run record within the next few days, but his accomplishment has been marred by the fact that everyone knows he used anabolic steroids. So whatever the records say, I’m going to always admire Hammering Hank Aaron. Let’s just call Hank the “all-time drug-free home run hitter!”

I love baseball because it was the first sport I ever played. In South Alabama, we’d never heard of soccer. Soccer was just something I did to my older sister!

Baseball will always have a special place in my heart, because I can remember the day my Dad took me to the Sears and Roebuck store and bought me my first baseball glove. It was a Nellie Fox edition. He oiled it up so it would be soft and then we'd play pitch behind our house. I could hardly wait for my dad to come home so we could toss the baseball to each other.

The first time I saw the movie "Field of Dreams" and saw Kevin Costner tossing the ball to the guy who was supposed to his dad, I was surprised to find tears in my eyes as that memory of me and my dad flashed back into my mind. So let's step up to the plate and find out how you can be a part of God's Spiritual Playmaker Network! The first thing you need to do is to:

(1) GET OUT OF THE STANDS AND JOIN THE TEAM!

Since Abner Doubleday introduced the game of baseball in 1839 it has been as much a part of our culture as ice cream, hot dogs, and apple pie. The Union Army prisoners housed here at Camp Ford even played baseball to help pass the time.

Baseball is a simple game, but it can be confusing. Yogi Berra said "Baseball is 90% mental and the other half is physical." But he also said, "He swings from both sides of the plate—he's amphibious." I came across a humorous explanation of a kid trying to explain baseball to his grandmother. He said: "You have two sides, one out in the field and one in. Each player that's on the side that's in goes out and when he's out he comes in and the next man goes in until he's out. When three men are out, the side that's out comes in and the side that's been in goes out and tries to get those coming in out. When both sides have been in and out nine times, including the not outs, that's the end of the game." Those are the ins and outs of baseball!

Baseball is a great spectator sport, because you can have a relaxing time watching it. Unlike basketball and football that have clocks dictating the pace of the game, there's no clock in baseball. Several years ago a sportswriter in Kansas City took a stopwatch to find out how much action really occurred in a baseball game. He counted the time from when the ball left the pitcher's hand until it crossed home plate. On the balls that were hit, he counted the time until the batter was either safe or out. This particular game lasted 2 hours and 28 minutes but the total "action time" was 8.5 minutes!

Baseball is a great spectator sport. But sadly, many people treat their faith like attending a baseball game. They simply show up to sit in a pew and watch the action. These spectators come and sit and soak and sour. A spiritual spectator may even enjoy it, but then they leave and that's the extent of their faith until they show up to be a spectator the next Sunday, or the next Sunday that they don't have something better to do.

One truth that I want to pitch to you today is Christianity is not a spectator sport. If you're a spiritual spectator, it's time for you to get down out of the grandstands and join the team. Baseball isn't an individual event, it's a team sport, and if you want to be a part of God's Spiritual Playmaker Network, you've can't isolate yourself, you've got to join God's team. As coaches often say, "There's no 'I' in the word TEAM." My favorite acrostic for TEAM is "Together Everyone Accomplishes More." There is tremendous synergy when God's people come together to serve the Lord. A team can accomplish more than just the sum of its parts.

So what about you? Are you a Spiritual Spectator, or are you Spiritual Playmaker?

I love going to watch a baseball game because of the whole experience. I love to hear the stadium organ play. When a team is behind and needs a rally the organ plays like this (sound of organ) duh duh duh dumpdeedah! CHARGE! (By the way you CAN charge your offerings using your credit card ... but don't use it to go in debt!)

At a baseball game, one of the traditions is the seventh inning stretch when everyone stands up and sings. (Almost sounds like church, huh?) And some folks who may never sing at church stand up and belt out the words. I think we ought to have more fun at church than at a ball game, so let's stand and sing it now.

"Take me out to the ball game, Take me out with the crowd. Buy me some peanuts and cracker jacks, I don't care if I ever get back, Let me root, root, root for the home team, If they don't win it's a shame. For it's one, two, three strikes, you're out, At the old ball game." By the way that song was written by Jack Norworth in 1908 and he had never attended a baseball game in his life!

Remember, God doesn't want you to be a spectator; He wants you to get off your seat, on your feet, and into the street! I've written some new lyrics to the same tune, so let's try it again: "Take me out from my church pew, Take me out to the crowd, Give me some love and some kindness too, I don't want to just sit here and soak. Let me serve, serve, serve for my Master. If I just watch it's a shame. For it's one, two, three points, I'm bored; In the old church house!"

To be a part of God's team, you need to join a local church and get involved in some ministry. When I was a pastor in Alabama I visited a young couple in our community. As I asked them about their spiritual life, they explained that they were believers. When I asked them what church they were a member of, the guy said, "I'm not a member of any local church, I'm just a member of 'the church.'" He meant he belonged to the invisible body of Christ. I replied that was nice, but every Christian should also link up with a group of believers for mutual encouragement and growth. He said, "Not me. I love the Lord, but I don't think I have to go to church. I think it's enough to just be a member of 'the church.'" I didn't want to argue with him, so after some polite conversation, I started to leave. I noticed he had several large softball trophies on his mantle. I said, "Where did you get these?" He said, "Oh, I play on a softball team sponsored by my company." I said, "I love softball, too." He said, "What team do you play for?" I smiled and said, "Oh, I don't belong to any particular team, I just play for 'the team.'" He got it and smiled and said, "Touché!"

Don't be like that guy! Get out of the stands and join God's team! For some of you, the thing you need to do to be a part of God's Spiritual Playmaker Network is to:

(2) GET BACK IN THE GAME -EVEN IF YOU'VE BEEN HURT!

There are some of you who are listening to me who have been a part of God's team for a long time. In fact, at one time you were on the field and part of the action. But somewhere during the

course of the game, you got injured. You took a wrong step, or one of your team members hurt you. You were treated in a way that made you sad or angry. When it happened you took yourself out of the game and placed yourself on the injured reserve list. And since that time, you’ve been riding the bench. You’re still on the team, but you’re just like those spectators in the stands, you’re only watching the action. You might have been deeply wounded, and your pain was so great that it was impossible to get back on the field for a time. But if you listen to that still small voice, our Head Coach may be saying to you today is, “It’s time to get back in the game.”

If you ever watch the New York Yankees play, you’ll never see a player wearing the number 4. That jersey and number were the first ever retired in baseball. #4 was worn by one of the greatest players of all time: His name was Lou Gehrig, nicknamed “The Iron Horse.” Lou Gehrig set a major league record by starting in 2,130 consecutive games. A record that stood until it was broken by Cal Ripkin, Jr. In 1995. Lou Gehrig would have played even longer, but he was stricken by a terrible disease, ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis). Today it’s commonly known as “Lou Gehrig’s disease.” When his health deteriorated, Lou was honored at his last appearance at Yankee stadium. His hands were so weak, he couldn’t hold the gifts given to him that day. When he was introduced, the fans stood and gave him a standing ovation lasting almost ten minutes. Instead of being angry and bitter about his disease, Lou stood there with tears in his eyes and said, “Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break I got. Yet today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.”

How could he play over 2,000 straight games? Didn’t he ever get sick or hurt? Yes, but he kept on playing. After he retired, they x-rayed both his hands and discovered every finger had been broken at one time during the course of his career, but he kept on playing. That says something about his character.

God’s Spiritual Playmakers stay on field, even when they’re hurt. Two of my personal MVPs were the disciples Peter and John. Jesus taught them how to minister, and when He ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit came as His Reliever. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter and John got onto the field and started preaching about Jesus. They weren’t exactly popular with the religious crowd. In fact, the Jewish Sanhedrin booed them mercilessly. They arrested them and beat them for preaching the gospel. They didn’t just slap them on the wrist; they beat them with many stripes, and then warned them NOT to get back on the field. But the very next day, Peter and John got back on the field, with black eyes and visible bruises. And they kept on preaching Jesus. They refused to sit on the bench.

All Christians have been hurt at one time or another. To change analogies, someone said the Christian army is the only army that shoots its wounded. Maybe your heart has been broken, or your ego has been bruised. God is looking for Playmakers who’ll stay on the field and keep serving even if they’ve been hurt. I’ve got one final bit of advice if you want to be a part of God’s Spiritual Playmaker Network:

(3) DON’T STOP RUNNING UNTIL YOU MAKE IT SAFELY HOME!

When I played baseball in high school, our teams weren’t very good. We were more of a football and basketball school. In fact, we didn’t really have a real baseball coach. Our basketball coach

and a couple of the assistant football coaches worked with us. I recall one particular game when we were tied with a much better team in the top of the ninth inning. I remember this particular game because I made a bone-head play that probably cost us the game. I was on second base and there were two outs. Our guy up to bat looped a ball to right field that fell in front of the fielder. I took off for third base. But instead of looking at the third base coach who was waving me home, I turned around to look into right field to see if I thought I could make it home. That slowed me down. When I finally heard our coach hollering, “Go, go, go!” I took off for home, but because of my hesitation, I arrived too late. The throw from right field beat me to the plate, and the catcher was waiting for me. I just pretended it was a football game, and I plowed into the catcher hoping to dislodge the ball. When the dust settled, the umpire yelled, “Yeeeeeerrr out!” In the bottom of the ninth the other team scored and won.

After the game, our coach got in my face and said, “Dykes, what got into you? When you’re running for third base you only have ONE job and that’s to keep your eyes on the coach!” I never forgot that advice. Today that reminds me of Hebrews 12:2 that says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.” As we run the base paths of life, we shouldn’t let our circumstances slow us down. We should keep your eyes on our Coach Jesus. He is the only One who can assure us that we’ll make it home safely.

In my mind, one of the great baseball players in history was the legendary Ty Cobb, nicknamed “the Georgia Peach.” The first player Baseball Hall of Fame, Ty played in the early part of the 20th century and set over 90 baseball records, most of which have been broken. But he still holds two records that will probably never be broken. His lifetime batting average was a whopping .367. That’s his LIFETIME average. He batted over .400 three seasons. The last batter in the majors to have ONE season over .400 was Ted Williams in 1941. Ty Cobb stole 892 bases, a record that wasn’t broken until Ricky Henderson surpassed it in 1977.

Ty Cobb was a control hitter, not a power hitter. He held the bat with his two hands separated. His reasoning was that if you were trying to swing a ten foot long piece of wood, you’d have a lot more control doing it with your hands separated.

But while he was known as a great player, he had a reputation for being a terrifying and wicked base runner. In one game, he stole second, third, and home on three consecutive pitches. He could be seen before the game filing down his metal spikes to make them sharper. When he ran the bases, if a player got in his way, he would often intentionally injure him when he slid into the base. Players feared him. In his autobiography he even admitted, “In legend I am a sadistic, slashing, swashbuckling despot who waged war in the guise of sport.”

After he retired, he became baseball’s first millionaire—not from a huge salary, but because he had used his meager baseball salary to buy stock in General Electric and a new drink called Coca-Cola. He was as mean a business man as he was a base runner. He had few friends.

In 1961 Cobb was admitted to Emory Hospital in Atlanta. He was a sad, lonely old man dying of cancer. A few years ago, Bobby Richardson, who played second base for the Yankees, spoke here at Green Acres. He told the story of how he visited Cobb in the hospital and asked him if he was ready to meet God. Cobb replied that he wasn’t. Bobby Richardson shared the gospel with

him, and Cobb prayed to receive Christ. Only heaven knows if Cobb was sincere, but before Richardson left, Ty Cobb said, "Tell the boys that I'm sorry I waited until the bottom of the ninth inning to get right with God. I wish now that I had done it in the top of the first."

Are you ready to meet God? Are you certain that you'll arrive safely at home? The word "home" is one of the most precious words in the human language. In the "Wizard of Oz," Dorothy said, "There's no place like home...There's no place like home."

God uses that word home to describe our relationship with Him and where we'll spend eternity. The Bible says, Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our HOME with him." (John 14:23) When you put your faith in Christ, your heart becomes God's home. And once you know the Lord, you realize this world is not your home, but heaven is your real home. The Bible says, "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at HOME with the Lord." (2 Corinthians 5:8)

CONCLUSION

How do you get on base in the Christian life? You can't, but there's Someone who can get you on base. Righteousness, like baseball, sets an impossible standard. Who could ever bat 1.000? The very best players are only going to get on base about 1/3 of the time. That simply reminds me that the Bible says, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) I decided a long time ago, that when it comes to measuring up to God's perfect standard, I wasn't up to the job. We all strike out and make plenty of errors. There's only one man who ever batted 1.000 at life, and that's the God man, Jesus Christ. When it comes to righteousness, why don't you ask Jesus to be your pinch-hitter? He never strikes out. He never makes an error. He can get you on base, and then He will Coach you to make it safely home.

A few weeks ago, Arlene received a phone call from one of our television viewers who lives near Hawkins. She explained her mother was dying from cancer and she had some doubts and questions about death. She asked if I would be willing to visit and talk to her mom, since she watches our television broadcast as well. I was glad to go.

As I spoke to this delightful lady we sat on her back porch, sipping iced tea while her friendly dogs vied for my attention. I like tea, and I like dogs, and I certainly like talking to people about heaven, so it was a pleasant visit. I asked this lady if she had placed her faith in Jesus Christ, she assured me that she had done that. I could tell from the conversation that she knew the Lord, so I asked her what her concerns were. She told me she knew she was going to heaven but that she was just afraid of what death was going to be like. She was scared to die.

After praying silently for wisdom I answered her this way. "When I was a child my family would often drive to see my grandparents on the weekend. Since we drove back at night, I'd usually fall sound asleep in the car. When we got home, I'd still be asleep, so my dad would pick me up in his strong arms and carry me into my room and put me in bed. I wasn't even aware of him carrying me to bed. But when I woke up the next morning, I'd be home in bed."

Then I said to this sweet lady, "That's what I believe it's going to be like when a Christian dies. You're going to simply go to sleep here, and the next thing you'll know you'll wake up at home in heaven." She had tears in her eyes as she smiled and said, "Thank you. That's makes me feel a lot better."

And if have surrendered your life to the Lord Jesus Christ, you can smile and know that through Him and Him alone you can make it safely home!

OUTLINE

God’s Spiritual Playmaker Network

- (1) GET OUT OF THE STANDS AND JOIN THE TEAM!
- (2) GET BACK IN THE GAME—EVEN IF YOU’VE BEEN HURT!
- (3) DON’T STOP RUNNING UNTIL YOU MAKE IT SAFELY HOME!



DISCLAIMER: These messages are offered for your personal edification and enrichment. There is no legal copyright on this material. I have used many sources, and I have always attempted to cite any exact quotations. Any failure to cite a quote is simply an oversight on my part.

If you are a preacher or teacher, I encourage you to use this material to stimulate your own Spirit-driven imagination. Additional study beyond this material will benefit both you and your listeners. You have my full permission to use any of this material as long as you cite the source for any substantial amount used in your message.

If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes