

The TRUE CHAMPION'S

30 DAY

CHALLENGE

*Spiritual Preparation
for the Game of Your Life*



A.J. Ali & Vera Jones

Praise for
THE TRUE CHAMPION'S 30-DAY CHALLENGE

“The True Champion’s 30-Day Challenge will challenge and encourage the reader in their spiritual journey. Whether new in Christ or a faithful disciple for years, you will be blessed by these testimonies of God’s faithfulness. This devotional will help you be prepared for the game of your life...both here and for eternity.”

- Dan Wood

Executive Director, National Christian College Athletic Association

“AJ, I’m buying the first 100 for my ministry with the team. This is an excellent resource -- clear, applicable, well written! You and Vera have written one of the most significant and useful devotionals I’ve seen in a long time. Ravens players and coaches will love this tool for training camp! I’m excited to see it go to print and I’m honored to be a friend of one of the co-authors, a true champion indeed.”

- Pastor Rod Hairston

Team Chaplain, Baltimore Ravens

“Take action and take the Challenge! This book is the answer to your prayer.”

- Evan Money

1 Online Life Coach and author of “Take Action Now”

“This is a great book, very moving and you can feel the emotion. Having a little faith will get you far in life. Everything in life is attainable, but it takes work on our parts as well as faith, family and friends. I would highly recommend it.”

- Tammy Bowers

Co-Owner, Rolling Ads MD

“I was genuinely moved and challenged in specific areas of my life by your style of writing and the directed questions that were asked. In the latest business management book I’m reading candor is discussed as a major missing component - it’s not missing in your book - we’ve put off a lot of growth in our lives by not asking the right questions.... Thanks for “bringing the questions on home.”

- Jean F.

Ministry Worker

THE TRUE CHAMPION'S 30-DAY CHALLENGE

*Spiritual Preparation for the
Game of Your Life*

by A.J. Ali
and
Vera Jones



Malibu, CA

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

From A.J. Ali:

First, I'd like to thank my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. If not for His perfect example of what it means to be a True Champion, this book would be pointless. Although we all fall short, by striving to be like Him will make our lives better and more meaningful for ourselves and for the people in our lives. To my wife Jane, you have fought cancer and won. You have shown bravery and the heart of a True Champion by helping others through their personal battles with cancer. You have embraced God's call on your life and I'm so proud of you. I love you and I've enjoyed watching you grow from a lovely caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly. Now that you've made it through the toughest struggle of your life and you've grown wings, it's time to fly! To my beautiful daughter Sierra, I am so very proud of you. Prom queen, class treasurer, incredible work ethic, athletic, funny and you actually enjoy school! You are off to a great start in life. You are a True Champion and a great inspiration. Remember, life is about choices. Keep making good choices about relationships, money and education. Don't let anything or anyone keep you from your dreams. Pray daily. I love you! To my mother Shirley Ali, you are an amazing mother who has dedicated her entire life to serving her family, friends and God. You have always been a shining example of character and love. I know that there are angels by your side constantly and I pray that God will continue to grant you good health and well-being for many more years. You taught me how to read, write, think creatively and treat people with love and respect. I owe you everything. I love you. To my sister Inga, you are so talented and I know that your love of God and willingness to serve Him has heaven rejoicing daily. Find that which marries your desire to serve God with your desire to create and great things will happen beyond your wildest dreams. To my sister Shanti, you have come so far and I believe you will do many great things in your lifetime. You have beautiful, talented and smart children that are also going to make their mark in the world, starting with Taj who is proudly serving our country right now. May God bless you and continue to keep you safe, growing and helping others through your work and life. To my step-daughter Amy and her husband Jon, you are both great people -- kind, funny, hard-working and great parents to your beautiful daughters. Amy, I'm so proud of you. To Pastor Ralph Bessard and his wife Angela. You two are the bomb! I grow every time we are together. Your family has been a shining example of people loving and supporting each other to succeed. Without your encouragement, this book would not have been possible. To James "J.B." Brown, I have looked up to you for a few decades now and you never cease to amaze me with your dedication to God, family, excellence and preparation in your work and commitment to community. You raised the bar for me. To Mark Borum, you've always been a rock. I've always been able to count on you for truthful answers to the hard questions in life. Thank you for a lifetime of friendship. One of these days we have to take that drive to Ocean City again while listening to an 8-track tape of Richard Pryor! To Bill Conwell, my friend of great adventures and serving the Lord in the mission field, let's make the next few years count. I can't thank you enough for all you've meant to me. To Kevin Daye, all those times I had to clean your golf clubs because you'd beat me by a stroke were well worth it. Not only did that build character, but you've forced me to improve my golf game. Next time we play, bring a wet towel. To Nelson DeConti, my first true mentor outside of my family. You are a fighter and a winner and you'll win the battle of life. I still have that Seiko watch you gave me when I joined the Air Force in 1983! To Lori Gillikin, thank you so much for your encouragement and for proofing the book! Without your help it would have been a mess. It definitely takes teamwork to make the dream work! You are so talented and gifted and I'm so thankful to you for your help. Just kidding -- your help. To Pastor Rod Hairston, what can I say? You taught me to look at changing myself and not changing others. Your tough love changed my life and I am eternally grateful. Thanks for 'keeping it real' and I pray for blessings for your family here and eternally. To Rowdy Herrington and his wife Toni Semple, you two were so weird when we first met you because you didn't eat meat! Thanks for enlightening us. You weren't so weird after all. You were the ones that really introduced us to a healthier way of eating and living and looking at life. Our common interests (the girls and their horses, the guys and their golf and writing!) grew into fondness and that fondness grew into a loving friendship that knows no bounds. When my eyebrow gets what I call a "Rowdy Hair" sticking straight up, I head straight for my laptop and proceed to do my best writing! Your belief in me made this book possible. I was there with you the day the music died. But the next morning the sun rose again. You have been total inspiration to me. I'll see you at the ranch again soon. To David and Audrey Hollingsworth, what an

incredible couple! There are power couples and then there are Holy Spirit Power Couples! You two are amazing and we've only just begun to make an impact together. Let the games begin! To Marcus Johnson, the most talented man I know. I am proud to call you my dear friend and brother and I love our jam sessions in life. To my co-author Vera Jones, you are the best! We've had some ups and downs during the seven years it took to complete this book, but God was definitely at work in our lives and He has used that time to make us better people and this book a better product. He has used you to help me become a better person and I thank you for saying yes to being a part of this work. To Carlos Kotkin, dude you are the funniest man alive -- and the nicest guy in show business. I've probably given you enough material for an entire set, so I look forward to a birthday roast one day. Take good care of that plant! To Dave Krueger, you helped me when I was searching for the right path and helped me to make the right choices. Thanks for being that tower of light for so many, including me. To Tyler Lennon, Wednesday mornings just don't feel right if we aren't praying and walking together. May God bless you and the work we have before us in Malibu. A wave is coming! To Robert Lott, the coolest wise man I know. I want to be just like you when I grow up. To Carl McCrary, our meeting was definitely not by chance. It's been a pleasure seeing God work in your life and many great things are on the way! To The Little Pro, Eddie Merrins, you are a true gentleman. Your love and appreciation of all that is right about golf is rooted in your faith in God and I have learned so much from you. To Mason Merrins, thanks for your friendship for always being a great sounding board about life, business and relationships. Next time Father's Office is on me. To George and Elaine Miller, their daughter Jessica and her son Keenan, you have all been such great friends and your encouragement and support is warmly and lovingly appreciated. George, I didn't give up! To Derek Paulo, an amazing designer, cancer survivor and man of God. You made this book look awesome and I can't wait for our next project together. To my dear friend William Peach, for whom I am proud to have been co-best man at your wedding to your lovely Vanessa, you are awesome. I can't think of a more loyal friend. My brother from another mother. How you put up with me, I'll never know. You are truly a blessing, even if you can't golf. To Andre Robinson, my cousin who has taught me so much about life. My political guidepost. Let's change the world together. To June Robinson, you have always been a great inspiration to me. May God bless you. To Guy Rozier, only you would have known I pulled my hamstring! God brought us together because we can't fool each other. Thanks for the accountability, the openness and the loyalty. To Robert A. Schuller, your words about my father when we first met set me free and enabled me to let the past go, forgive and be forgiven and allow new blessings to flow. I first learned about the importance of wellness from you and that has led me to answering my true calling as a cancer wellness advocate. As a friend, you have been a great example. As a pastor, you have been faithful. I appreciate you deeply. To T-Bird Shannon, thank you so much for your support, encouragement and understanding of my cancer wellness mission. Thanks for being there when I needed you and making it possible for us to keep on fighting for people. I look forward to many book signing dinners at Outback restaurants in California! To Kathy Stabile, who literally glows with light. You have made a great impact in our lives with your joy, emotional support and steadfast friendship. I appreciate you so much and Jane and I look forward to many more sunsets with you at Malibu Seafood. To Rick Szalecki, you are a gifted and prolific writer as well as a committed child of the living God. Keep on serving Him no matter what and He will show you success with no boundaries. To Bill Townsend, my Obi-Wan Kenobi. Thank you for teaching me how to use "the force" for the past 20 years. You have always been a great teacher, friend and mentor. To Dick Traweek, your kindness is only overshadowed by your commitment to friends. I am proud to call you my friend and I could not have completed this book without you. To Pastor Lonny Wortham, don't ever change. I appreciate your unwavering commitment to God and family. You have helped to build my faith and my walk. To Jesse Harvey, who is a great teacher, friend, and accountability partner. To all my friends, family, supporters and everyone that has helped to make me a better person, thank you and may God bless you!

From Vera Jones:

"To my beloved mother, Mary K. Jones...I am in constant memory of and constantly inspired by you. Thank you to AJ Ali for making me a teammate on this project and for having the faith and perseverance to see it through. To my son Andrew....I love you, your innocence and your infectious smile. I see God in you everyday and I am truly blessed. Thanks always to all my family and friends for your support. Most importantly thank you Jesus Christ for the greatest gift ever of love and life eternal."

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my brother Abbey Ali, who went home to be with the Lord September 17, 1998 after a long battle with Hodgkins Lymphoma. He was 48. Abbey was the ultimate big brother but he was far from perfect in his early years. Mom got into the habit of writing down all the crazy things he would do, like the time he cut off my older sister Inga's ponytail. She literally has a book of stories called "My Son Abbey" about all the things he did that got him into trouble. He grew into a rambunctious teenager who would get into fist fights with my father. Most of the time, my father had been drinking and Abbey took the brunt of the abuse to protect us.

Abbey used to tell me that in his day, he was a "gang of one." He got involved in selling drugs. He hit a low of lows while living in Southeast Washington D.C. and shot himself in the abdomen. Eventually, Abbey got arrested and did some time. The police actually celebrated when they finally caught him because he was so notorious. However, no matter what he was involved with, he always made sure he kept me out of harm's way. He could have easily pointed me in any direction and I would have gone just to be with him. No matter what was going on in his life, he always took care of his family. He especially loved buying toys for my little sister and I.

There was always a goodness inside Abbey that yearned to come out. Getting arrested turned out to be a blessing for Abbey. It was while he was in prison that someone shared the bible with him and he gave his life to the Lord. He was transformed into a man with great character, strong work ethic and unshakable values. He came out of prison a changed man.

As a convicted felon with no college degree, it was tough for Abbey to find employment so he started a painting company. He dove into his work and strived for perfection. He became the best residential and commercial painter in the city. He truly loved his clients and they loved him back. When he passed away from cancer, among the hundreds in attendance were dozens of former clients.

Abbey had a heart as big as Texas. It was fitting that he loved westerns, especially anything starring Clint Eastwood. When I started dating Jane, and he found out she rode horses, he immediately liked her and began to share the bible with her. We began visiting his church and he led her to Christ not too long after that.

Abbey was always a rock of loyalty to me. We never had one argument. We would laugh endlessly, and when I spent a summer working for him I hated painting but loved to be with him.

Literally every day he would take time out to visit a sick person, deliver a toy to a child in his neighborhood, take food to someone that was hungry or encourage someone that was going through tough times. He was always passing out bible tracks (he called them his ammunition). If he saw some young man doing wrong, he wouldn't hesitate to lovingly step into that person's life and let them know they can change. I can't think of one person that knew Abbey that didn't genuinely love him.

Abbey was a True Champion. He didn't let the struggles and mistakes of his past dictate his future. He proved that you can overcome adversity if you let God guide your footsteps. Whenever I see a beautiful sunset, and there are many in Southern California, I think of Abbey working a paintbrush in the sky, praising the Lord and giving back.

~ **A.J. Ali**

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Spiritual Preparation for the Game of Your Life

by A.J. Ali and Vera Jones

www.30daychallengebook.com

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FOREWORD

Devotional writings and even Bibles designed for people who value the relevance of sport's powerful metaphor abound. I've spent the past 20 years as a chaplain and mentor to college and professional athletes and coaches. I only wish this resource had been around years earlier. A.J. Ali and Vera Jones have written a real winner! Whether you are an athlete, coach, sports enthusiast, or mere spectator, your walk with Jesus Christ will benefit from *The True Champion's 30-Day Challenge*.

A.J. and Vera have taken the real life stories of sports' heroes, heroines, and even its "villains" and communicated biblical truth with impeccable clarity. Each day's devotion is introduced by a compelling account from real life, reinforced with a passage of Scripture, and culminates with a relevant, earnest prayer. Practical and to the point, you should expect to be challenged and changed as you use this excellent devotional resource.

I urge you to utilize the journal portion as well to put in writing the mental, physical, and spiritual changes you desire to make with the grace and power of Jesus Christ working in your life. Many years from now you will have a written record of the transforming work of God in your life because of the few minutes you spent in daily meditation, prayer, and reading. As in the world of athletics, it's not what one knows, it's what one does that counts. And the better one practices, the better one performs.

The authors write not only from careful research, but also with deep conviction and an earnest desire to help readers understand and apply the life-giving message of Jesus Christ. More than simply wowing us with

fascinating stories of yester-year's sports icons, they draw our gaze to the real *Champion*, Jesus Christ. The goal is not greater knowledge of sports trivia (however fun that may be), but to remind us that God, the creator of sport, is after our hearts and desires that we follow Christ in faithful discipleship.

“For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.” (Colossians 1:16, NIV) ... including the athletic fields of our modern world. This devotional reminds us that God, for whose glory sport was created, has planted within its realm great nuggets of truth and lessons for our growth in Christ. Your next steps to becoming God's true champion are before you in this concise and practical book.

Roderick L. Hairston
Team Chaplain, The Baltimore Ravens
Pastor, Messiah Community Church

ARE YOU READY FOR A CHALLENGE?

During the seasons of your life, you will face both adversity and opportunity. Athletes are measured by how they respond to the challenges they face during their season of play. A True Champion is measured by greater standards. A True Champion is not only measured by how he wins, but also how he handles losses; how she rises when knocked down and how she helps others rise.

The great basketball coach Pat Riley said, “In order to get the prize, you have to go through the fire, and you’ve got to go through it over and over.” This book is about going through the fire – the Refiner’s Fire! It’s about challenging yourself to change and to let go of things that are holding you back. It’s about becoming a True Champion. Are you ready?

The True Champion’s 30-Day Challenge is an opportunity to overcome adversity and rise to the level of completeness God has intended for your life. Think of it as a training tool. There are daily devotionals written to inspire and challenge you with a biblical perspective and an eternal purpose. There are scripture references, power prayers and cross training tips to give you grounding, power and action steps. And finally, there is the opportunity for you to lay down those things that are holding you back, to pick up those things that will help you succeed in life and to become the complete person God intended you to be! That’s where the challenge part comes in. It’s easy to read a book, but it’s a lot more valuable to commit to putting change into action, in other words, to commit to go through the fire.

Accept the challenge:

1. Pick three things that you need to “bench” (take out of the game) for thirty days that affect you negatively in mind, body and spirit. An example of something affecting the mind might be wasting too much time watching non-educational television. An example of something affecting the body might be drinking soda (yes, that includes diet sodas!). Examples of things affecting the spirit might be using foul language, watching porn or listening to music with lyrics that show no respect for other people. If three things don’t immediately come to mind that are holding you back, pray about it

and get some feedback from a family member or a friend (but be prepared for the truth, because sometimes the truth hurts!). My three things to bench are:

2. Pick three things that you need to “start” (put into the game!) for thirty days that will be positive for you in mind, body and spirit. Positive examples might be learning the basics of another language, eating more fresh organic fruits and spending more time meditating. My three things to start are:
-
-

3. Complete the True Champion’s 30-Day Challenge by reading the book and completing the action steps every day for thirty days. At the end of the thirty days, you’ll emerge with newly formed habits and the tools and desire necessary to live as a True Champion! Since life is a “team sport,” you may even want to find a friend to join you in completing the Challenge. That way, you’ll also have an accountability partner to help you get through the Challenge successfully.

In addition to the challenging and uplifting devotionals and other tools, journal space has been included at the end of each day’s devotional. Use this space to share your thoughts, write your prayers and relate your life to the text. Take the True Champion’s Challenge and prepare to win the game of your life.

Each day for a month, we’ll address subjects that you’ll face throughout your lifetime. Many of the stories featured in this book contain glimpses into the lives of famous athletes and others in sports. At the end of each devotional are Cross Training Tips, “action steps,” designed to help you put the lesson of the day into action in your life. Take time each day to implement the Cross Training Tips and see how God will begin to work in your life as you grow in His Word! If you are a part of a team, invite your teammates to join you in exercising the Cross Training Tips and make an impact as a team leader. Your entire team can become transformed into True Champions in 30 days! Remember, a “team” can be a sports team, a group of co-workers, a ministry team, classmates or just a group of friends that want to see each other make the most out of life. The old acronym “Together Everyone Achieves More” (T.E.A.M.) can be put into action with this book. Our hope and prayer is that you will emerge from this 30-day

THE TRUE CHAMPION'S 30-DAY CHALLENGE
Spiritual Preparation For The Game Of Your Life!

training camp with a renewed sense of purpose and perspective, focused on being a True Champion for Christ! What time is it? Game time! Let's go through the fire together!

DAY 1: PERSEVERANCE

THE CATCH by Vera Jones

As recounted in Sports Illustrated's *Greatest Moments in Sports History*, Everson Walls was having an outstanding 1981 NFC Championship performance. He had intercepted two passes, recovered a fumble and made eight tackles for his Dallas Cowboys in a grueling match versus the San Francisco 49ers. In a game that traded advantages, the NFC Championship came down to one final play with 58 seconds remaining: third down, three yards to go on the Dallas six yard line, San Francisco trailing 27-21. 49ers quarterback Joe Montana rolls out to his right on a Sprint Right Option. With 6' 9" Ed "Too Tall" Jones blocking his path, Montana jumps up and lets a seemingly errant pass fly to the back of the end zone. Waiting there, however, was Montana's best friend and legendary receiver Dwight Clark who leaped into the air, as if to defy impossibility, and snagged the ball between his fingertips for the touchdown that sent the 49ers to a 28-27 win and into their first Super Bowl. Standing there looking helpless trying to defend was Everson Walls who became part of history in a play and poster shot forever known as "The Catch."

Few may remember that Walls, only a rookie, was having the game of his life, appearing to be a clear choice for MVP up until the last 58 seconds of the game, because every poster, every picture, every fan's recount of that NFC Championship game replays his biggest mistake in allowing Dwight Clark to make "The Catch." He became the "poster shot" victim rather than the hero. How did he go on after that?

Everson Walls continued to be an outstanding cornerback, finishing his career with 57 interceptions, which tied him for ninth place on the NFL all-time interception list. He went on to make the cover of Sports Illustrated again in 1990. But this time, he was a member of the 1990 Super Bowl New York Giants. While Walls could have allowed himself to live infamously with that January 10, 1982 memory, he chose instead to persevere to leave a greater memory for himself and for sports history.

As a Christian, there will be many times when we feel life is going absolutely great. Suddenly, out of nowhere, something or someone jumps into our path and leaves us with an empty, defeated feeling similar to what Everson Walls must have felt after "The Catch." Sometimes, our error is so great, it seems time will not allow us, nor anyone we may have hurt, to forget or forgive. If we choose to just give up and give in, we become a victim of Satan's Catch forever. Instead, we have to trust that God has a better plan for us in spite of our blunders, missed opportunities or setbacks. Then we must press on to follow that plan to the finish.

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Jesus made a great interception for all of us when he gave up his life at Calvary. He rose again to offer a better life for all who choose to believe and to follow him. Believe that you too can finish stronger than whatever feels like it may kill you. Knowing God has granted you another day to play means you have a shot at a comeback, redemption and victory. Everson Walls could not change what happened in “The Catch” no matter how many times he might have replayed it in his mind. He could and did change his life from that moment forward, eventually winning a Super Bowl and becoming one of the greatest NFL cornerbacks of all time. We all fall down. It’s how we get back up, keep faith in God, and how we finish that makes us winners in the end.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “...for though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again...” (*Proverbs 24:16*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, I’ve fallen and I need Your help to get back up again. Please Father, grant me peace today in knowing I am still a work in progress and that it is Your good work in me that has begun. Therefore, I will eventually win if I stay focused on You. Help me learn whatever I need to learn from this trial in my life, but to leave that which threatens to make me feel defeated and worthless behind me forever. I pray for strength, for peace and for perseverance, all of which can only truly come from You. I trust you in Jesus’ name. Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Examine your life and ask yourself if what you are doing each day is focused on God’s plan for your life. Weed out things that are not in line with righteousness. As you face challenges and fall down, not having to carry around that extra weight will help you to rise again and continue down a path of righteousness. Today is the day for you to let go of three things you have been carrying around that have been holding down your mind, body and spirit. What are those three bad habits that you’d like to bench for good?

Three things that have been holding me down:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Journal about those habits and ask the Lord to help you let them go forever. Don’t let the things of your past hold you back. Persevere in victory!

PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 1

MIND

BODY

SPIRIT

DAY 2: WINNING

UNLEASH THE WINNER WITHIN by A.J. Ali

Author Marianne Williamson said in her book, *A Return To Love*: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be – Brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn’t serve the world. There’s nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us.”

Everyone has the potential to be a champion. Everyone has the ability to excel and to rise above the circumstances of life and be victorious. The problem is, most people never unleash their true potential and never experience their own, unique “Jordanesque” capabilities. As children of the living God, we have the ability to call upon Him to lead us to victory in life. Does that mean that all of us can visit the winners’ circle at the Kentucky Derby? No. Does that mean all of us can take off from the foul line, fly through the air with our tongue wagging and slam-dunk? No. But it certainly does mean that for each and every one of us, God has given us the ability to be great at something. We just have to learn how to tap into that vast reservoir of potential He has gifted us with and use it to rise above our circumstances.

Your reservoir may be filled with the compassion potential of Mother Theresa! Your reservoir may be overflowing with the passion of racial reconciliation like that of Dr. Martin Luther King! Your reservoir may contain artistic, athletic, intellectual or social brilliance locked away in a secret compartment waiting for the key to be inserted!

It’s one thing to know that something is there, it’s another thing to find out what it is and activate it – to unleash the winner within. How does one go about reaching ones potential? How does a person go from chump to champion? Wannabe to winner?

By believing! Michael Jordan was just Mike who got cut from JV until he believed. George Foreman came back to become a champion in boxing and business because he believed. Lance Armstrong battled through cancer to win the Tour de France many times because he believed. In order to unleash the winner within, you have to believe.

The key to true winning, however, is not to believe in yourself. Huh? What? That’s right. The key to unleashing the winner within is to believe in the Lord. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart...” It’s all right

to sing “I believe I can fly” but your belief won’t get you from New York to Washington DC in one hour. You need a plane to be able to do that. You need wings. The Lord provides your wings for traveling through life. If you believe in Him, trust in Him, lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge Him – He will make your paths straight! He will provide the key to unleashing the winner within and the wings for you to soar!

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” (Proverbs 3:5-6)

POWER PRAYER: Lord, thank You for showing me how to become a winner – by believing in You. Please work in me to unleash the winner within. Please show me what Your will is for my life, and give me the strength and conviction to achieve only that which will honor You. I pray Lord for focus on those things that bring honor to Your name. I don’t seek personal glory, honor or fame. I wish to win souls for You and glory for the kingdom of heaven. In the name of Jesus I pray, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Unleash the winner within! How can you use the talents God has given you for His glory? With every victory you achieve on the field of play, take time to reflect on how that victory can be used to build into the kingdom of Heaven. Do people want to know you because you’re a winner? Use those opportunities to show them the true winner within. Show them the Christ in you. Yesterday, you were asked to let go of three things that were holding you back. Today is the day for you to start focusing on three things that you want to add to your life that will improve your mind, body and spirit.

Three things I need to add to my life to improve myself:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Journal about those three things today and meditate and act on those three things each of the remaining days you are reading this book. Unleash the winner within!

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MIND

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SPIRIT

DAY 3 – ANGER

FIGHTING ANGER by Vera Jones

The date was June 28, 1997. It was promoted as one of the most anticipated boxing re-matches of all time. Reigning heavyweight champ, Evander Holyfield would meet Mike Tyson for the WBA title. Should Mike Tyson win, he would become only the third boxer in history to claim the heavyweight title three times. Evander Holyfield had claimed this feat himself, and the legendary Muhammad Ali was the only other. Each boxer would claim a purse of more than \$30 million!

The bout was very intense, right from the beginning of round one. Holyfield won the first round unanimously. By the end of round two, Tyson was visibly frustrated. The bell rang for round three and before it was completed, history was made - not for the great boxing strategy applied by either athlete, but by a spectacle of anger and absurd aggression displayed in the ring that will not soon be forgotten. Not once, but twice, Mike Tyson bit the ear of Evander Holyfield. Mills Lane was the referee in the ring that night. After being overruled when he tried to disqualify Tyson after the first bite, and after Holyfield continued to fight with a visibly bloody ear, Mills Lane ended the fight after the second assault at the end of round three. Angered even more, and completely out of control after the disqualification, Tyson charged after Holyfield requiring the intervention and restraint of security officials. Holyfield won the match, but at the expense of losing part of his ear, which he later had to have surgically repaired.

A sellout crowd of 16,300 at the MGM Hotel/Casino in Las Vegas stared on in disbelief at the piece of Holyfield's ear that lay visibly in the ring, while others booed Tyson. Mike Tyson unfortunately has lived his life with a reputation as a great fighter in the ring, but a well-documented psychological history of being a poor fighter of his own rage. To those who knew him, his actions in the ring that night may not seem nearly as troublesome as his life outside the ring. Even now, many continue to wonder how a man could become so enraged or out of control that he would barbarically bite another man's ear in a sporting event. In all fairness, most of the things we say and do when we are angry, although they may not be deemed barbaric, are certainly not pretty.

Boxing is considered to be an aggressive and even dangerous contact sport. But there are rules and limitations to just how physical the boxers can be. There are boundaries which boxers, even in an adrenaline fit of anger from being repeatedly and painfully pounded in the ribs and the head, are not supposed to cross.

The Bible provides us with boundaries for life. Our conscience offers us guidance on how to accept these boundaries. God does not tell us

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not to become angry. He knows that we will become so, which is why He advises, “*In your anger do not sin...*” (Eph 4:26). As justified as we sometimes feel in our anger or frustration, once we sin against someone because of it, we are acting out of God’s will. God’s Spirit in you as a Christian always offers a righteous reaction or way of handling spiritually, emotionally and physically challenging situations.

When you are angered, for whatever reasons, consider that the real fight is not being angry, but how you control it. However, if you find yourself being angry very often, or very quickly, you need to pray that God may help you be at peace. Perhaps even seek professional counseling that might help you discover the root of your temper problems, so that you may more fully understand where your heart needs to begin its healing.

The same way boxers must train to endure jabs, body blows, fatigue, knockout punches and unexpected ear bites so should you train yourself daily to endure and adequately react to persecution, mistreatment, false witnesses, and any other evil schemes that should come upon you. That is why it is so important to pray, to meditate on Christ’s example, and to practice Godly behavior incessantly. In those times when you find yourself most challenged, you will already be disciplined to react to the real enemy in the ring - Satan. And you will be able to do so with a controlled temper and a pure heart. The best way to knock Satan out when you’re angry is to quickly use Christ’s guidance to discover a way to not be angry.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins.” (Proverbs 29:22)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, forgive me when I have sinned in my anger, and forgive those who may have provoked me to it. Thank you for your son Jesus Christ who provided a perfect example of how to be wise, peaceful and loving in the most trying situations. Please help me to open my heart to understand if there may be a deeper cause for my temper such as past hurts or lack of forgiveness, and please help heal this weak area of my life. I know that the true test of my Christian character will not be demonstrated in how I react to peace, but how I react to pain. I recognize my fight is with Satan, and not with my fellow man, thus please help me knock him out, and no one else. I need you, and I love you. Gratefully in the name of Jesus, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: With a group of friends, discuss times when you have been angry and done something that you regretted later. Come up with solutions that would have been better courses of action.

PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 3

MIND

BODY

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DAY 4 – TRUST

DRIVE THROUGH THE SMOKE by A.J. Ali

Imagine driving at speeds of almost 200 mph. Now imagine driving at those incredible speeds for two hours with thirty other cars doing the same thing, with some of them only mere inches away from your car. Week after week, race after race, lap after lap, race car drivers on circuits such as NASCAR and Formula One are within seconds of serious injury or even death. These fearless road warriors place their trust in their own instincts and abilities, their pit crew and mechanics, the engineers they never met who designed the tires and even in the hands of their fellow competitors.

What would your reaction be if, while driving down the highway, the car behind you began to “draft,” or in other words, tailgate? Would you trust that individual to have the skills to be able to brake properly if you should slow down abruptly? Probably not. And being a good Christian driver, you would simply pray for that person’s safety while changing lanes, and then smile as he passes by, right? I knew that’s what you were thinking. Simply put, we can’t safely trust that person who is tailgating us on the highway not to ram into us if we have to stop suddenly, so we protect ourselves by changing lanes. And those race car drivers who place a great amount of trust in their highly skilled and highly trained team members and competitors still have a chance of crashing into one another if a driver makes a mistake or a piece of equipment fails.

The bottom line is this: No matter how skilled we are, no matter how much we trust the other person, no matter how hard we try to do the right thing, there will always be a failure somewhere in the process as long as people are involved. There is no person, situation or thing on this earth that any of us can place perfect trust in except for God and His unending love.

You see, God has a perfect plan for our lives and the perfect wisdom to guide and protect our steps. At times, life may seem like we’re traveling along at 200 mph, with tailgaters and concrete walls facing us at every curve. But through those times if we put our complete trust in the Lord and his perfect plan for our lives, we will be more than conquerors.

In a professional auto race, there are times when drivers enter a turn only to find they are driving into a cloud of smoke and flying parts. Sometimes they’ll get word on their radio from the pit crew giving them instruction on how to avoid the crash up ahead. Sometimes they’ll say, “go high” and sometimes they’ll say, “go low.” One thing is for certain, the driver knows to “go” – drive through the smoke – whether they go high or

go low. They know that if they stop mid-cloud they'll get rammed from behind, so they have to trust their pit crew to guide them through the smoke one way or another.

In life, as on the race track, we have to keep going. We can't stop and excuse ourselves from life every time something bad happens. We have to trust that God has a plan for us to get us through to the other side. Even when things are breaking down all around us and we have to drive our spiritual version of a race car through a smoke-filled section of track with who knows what flying around threatening to hit us, we can trust that God will see us through safely because ultimately His good and perfect will shall be done.

SCRIPTURE VERSE: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." (*Psalms 23:4*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, I know there are times when I'm not totally in control of the situation I am in. During those times, it may feel like the world is crashing down around me and I don't know what direction to go. I place my trust in You. I ask that Your Holy Spirit would lead me through the smoke. I thank You Father for always being that calm voice in the middle of the race, telling me what to do and how to live. I pray for guidance to always listen and to seek Your will. I relinquish all control to You and trust Your perfect will be done. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Who's in your pit crew? First, start with God the Father, who is the owner of your race team. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are also part of your team to instruct, guide and help you win the race. Fill your pit crew with friends who love the Lord and who you can count on to help you through the smoke-filled times of life.

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PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 4

MIND _____

BODY _____

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DAY 5 – ENDURANCE

MARATHONER’S MENTALITY by Vera Jones

Survey almost any athlete, at virtually any skill or competitive level, and ask why they participate in sports. There is a great chance their answer will include, “for the love of competition,” “for the satisfaction of displaying my talents or skills,” and yes, of course, “for the thrill of victory.” The answers may be as varied as the athletes who participate. However one thing you almost will never hear is, “I just love enduring rigorous training in preparation to compete.” Generally speaking, training and practice are not nearly as exciting or fulfilling as the actual game or competition. However, training is by far the most critical element necessary to compete effectively.

An avid marathoner explained to me that a typical runner puts in approximately nine hundred miles of running prior to the actual marathon event. Nine hundred miles? That’s across seven states, New York to Florida! That’s exhausting mileage even for a drive. A typical marathoner’s training regimen includes runs five days a week, starting with three, then five and then eight miles. One day a week includes a “long run” of six or eight miles building up to a twenty mile run over a period of months.

There is a term in the great 26.2 mile marathon race known as “the wall.” It is believed that without replenishment, your body naturally burns up all of its carbohydrates (the body’s energy fuel) by mile twenty. Many runners hit “the wall” and their bodies’ cramp up in agonizing pain, or they succumb to complete physical exhaustion. Then there is always the mental wall every runner must break through that begins long before mile twenty. Can you imagine feeling cramped or fatigued, say around mile six, and having to listen to the internal mental drama that plays out in your psyche?

While your competitive mental voice is telling you, “Push through it, maintain time, focus,” another little voice is saying, “Yeah, right, you’ve still got twenty miles to go! You’ll never make it. Save yourself! Quit now!” Fair to say the mental training to maintain focus and stay encouraged is as valuable as, if not more than, the physical.

If you are not a marathoner, it may be all too overwhelming to imagine finishing 26.2 miles, let alone the minimum five to six months of intense training required. Only one-tenth of one-percent of all runners actually finishes a marathon! This is a discouraging statistic. So why even try? I’m told it is because there is an immeasurable joy, and a sense of self-pride and accomplishment that takes over just before you receive the crowd cheers of admiration on the other side of that finish line. It can be done, but only if you physically train to endure by mentally enduring the training.

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It was basketball coaching legend Bob Knight who once said, "The will to win isn't nearly as important as the will to prepare to win." We all say we want to go to Heaven. Are we willing to train for Heaven's sake? Living a life for Christ really is like marathon training. Sometimes we train in the radiant sunshine with a cool breeze and breath-taking scenery. We love to train on those days! Sometimes we train in the cold rain and the entire run seems uphill. A marathon mentality conditions us to appreciate the training on these days too. Some days we have to run three miles, other days we run twenty. Always, we include time to rest and be still and be replenished.

You need a marathoner's mentality to serve God. Undoubtedly, you will hit physical and mental "walls" in your life. Remember, many run the race. Few finish. But be encouraged. God's grace and your faith, trained with a marathoner's mentality, will get you through it. It's an exciting and worthy race full of rewards. Never lose sight of what, or rather who, you are training for. For what waits on the other side of that finish line of salvation is a joy and an accomplishment that not even a marathon winner can begin to imagine. And no fan's cheering sounds more sweet or victorious than that of our Father saying, "Well done!"

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: "Have nothing to do with the godless myths and old wives tales, rather train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the savior of all men, and especially of those who believe." (*1 Timothy 4: 7-10*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, help me have the marathoner's mentality to run this race for Your glory. Grant me a will to want to train and not be lax or defeated. Strengthen me physically and mentally so I might always be prepared for enduring life's challenges and training. Help me to always remember it is not the goal to train fast and burn out, but to train effectively so that I will run a complete race. Keep me focused so that in the end, I may look to You at the finish line saying, "Well done." Thank You for Your grace in allowing another day to run for You. In Christ's name I pray, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: At the beginning of your season, you begin practice knowing that in order to achieve the end goal, the championship; you have to push through "the wall" and have a marathoner's mentality. Have the same mentality in life, knowing that the end goal comes in Heaven when you hear God say, "Well done." Having a marathoner's

mentality in your spiritual life will help you keep things in perspective when you feel exhausted and you have to push through “the wall” of life.

PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 5

MIND _____

BODY _____

SPIRIT _____

DAY 6 – AUTHORITY

LIFE IS NOT A GAME by A.J. Ali

Have you ever heard this quote? “He lived as if he would never die, and he died as if he had never lived.” I pray that is not said of me, or you, when we leave this earth. Life is not a game. We’re not guaranteed tomorrow.

A dear friend of mine played professional soccer in England. He was the first black player to sign for a million pounds. He was a star. A world-class goal scorer. Having gotten to know his family very well, I was asked by his sister to travel to England to speak at a special occasion in his honor. As I gave a moving address to a packed room, my friend Justin was still. As my words about his antics brought laughter, and my words about his compassion for others brought tears to people eyes, Justin remained uncharacteristically silent. When I finished my talk and walked past him, he didn’t give me his usual loud and smiling “A.J. Ali!” and high-five. That’s because a week earlier, May 2, 1998, Justin Fashanu hanged himself in a garage in London. The special occasion was his funeral.

Just a few months earlier, Justin had finally relented to my urging to attend a men’s Bible study. In the message that day it was clear that the Lord specifically warned him to repent and turn from the sin he struggled with. We had serious conversations about that very subject afterwards, but he continued down that path and his life suddenly spiraled out of control.

The world told him “It’s okay to embrace temptation.” The Holy Spirit told him, you may be tempted, but don’t you go there. Were his temptations any different than the temptations you and I face each day? Are we killing ourselves spiritually every day we turn our back on God? The world tells us, it’s okay to fudge the numbers. Cheat on your taxes. Cheat on your wife. Do whatever feels good. Hey, it’s all part of life. No, it’s not.

Proverbs 29:1 states, “A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed – without remedy.” Life is not a game. We live under the authority and rule of the Creator of the universe. As much as we’d like to think otherwise, we don’t make the rules. God’s rules keep the universe from spinning out of control. God’s rules keep the planets in line and the seas at bay. You might say that’s just gravity. God created and rules that, too!

Life is not a game. Yet, all around us, people are treating life like a game. Like they'll never die. Like there will never be repercussions. Sin brings death. Sin brings destruction. Sin brings pain.

My friend Justin? God knew Justin's pain. God had the answers to deliver him from temptation and God loved him enough to warn him that he was playing with fire. God warned him that it was about to get so hot he couldn't handle it. But he chose another path. A path that led to destruction. And God knows whatever it is we're struggling with, too. Anger. Pornography. Drugs. Homosexuality. Gambling. Wasting our talents. He knows. And he's telling us the same thing. Don't play with fire. Don't do it.

God is warning us. He warns us in scripture. He warns us through tragedies like 9/11. He warns us through deaths of friends. Justin took his own life. But sometimes, things just happen to people and we don't understand God's plan in all of it. We ask, "God, why did you take this person?" The simple answer is this -- life is short.

In 2002, boxer Pedro Alcazar, 26 years old, was taking a shower and collapsed dead at the MGM Grand. Just 36 hours after losing a title fight. He hadn't shown any signs of being hurt. Darryl Kile, 33 year-old pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals, died of a heart attack in 2002. On the outside, he was the picture of health, but on the inside, two of three main arteries to his heart were blocked 80-90 percent. In 2001, Korey Stringer of the Minnesota Vikings died at 27 years old from multiple organ failure due to heat stroke.

I don't know why God allowed them to die. And I still can't totally reconcile why Justin, a Christian who helped countless others, yet struggled with his own sins, was in such total despair that he took his own life. But I do know this. Through their deaths, God has provided examples and warnings. Life is short. It can be taken at any moment. Get right with God today because you may not be able to get right with Him tomorrow. God is warning us. He's saying, "life is not a game."

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: "A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed – without remedy." (Proverbs 29:1)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, I acknowledge and submit to Your awesome power and authority. I realize that life is not a game. I pray that You will guide my path and instill in my heart a desire to listen, obey and follow You. I accept the rules You have prepared for my life and I gladly submit to Your authority. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, warnings from Israel's history and discuss with friends how those verses relate to your life.

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PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 6

MIND _____

BODY _____

SPIRIT _____

DAY 7 – WINNING

NIKE by Vera Jones

If you are a serious athlete, chances are you are pretty serious about your athletic footwear. Anyone who has suffered a callous, a blister, a corn, an injured ankle, or felt hampered or slowed by ill-fitted, unsupportive or uncomfortable shoes during athletic participation has wised up about the importance of a well-designed sneaker. There is a company that has capitalized on this notion, and has become a recognized leader in the athletic footwear and sportswear industry. You know that name as NIKE.

For the uninformed, Nike, adapted from the name of a Greek goddess, means “victory.” Two men started the company in 1962 as Blue Ribbon Sports with zero employees and about \$8,000 in sales. By the end of 2001, the company escalated to 22,000 employees spread over six continents including: the Americas, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa with revenues at \$9.5 billion. This is a company that truly seems to have gained financial victory and conquered the world.

Bill Bowertown was the legendary track coach at the University of Oregon from 1949-1972. He is the man who had a very simple and practical idea to develop a better running shoe. Bowerton deduced every ounce shaved off a runner’s shoe was 200 fewer pounds lifted in a race. While staring at his morning breakfast waffles, the idea hit him. He poured rubber into his wife’s breakfast iron (Imagine her surprise!). The sole of a shoe and the soul of a billion dollar athletic footwear and apparel legend were born. Once Bill Bowerton teamed up his idea with former Oregon University business student and runner, Phil Knight, considered now by many to be a marketing genius, the company has been off and running ever since.

It begs to ponder if two ordinary men can have an idea for improving running performance by developing better athletic footwear and eventually spread their good foot news throughout one hundred countries, can’t we, as ordinary men and women spread the good news on how to improve not just our feet, but our entire lives all over the world? Mark 16:15 tells us Jesus commanded we “go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” Jesus has saved us all. In our faith and belief in Him we have found the victory.

It is an amazing history behind Nike, Inc. Bill Bowerton and Phil Knight certainly had and have their struggles and trials in building the Nike Empire as we know it today, but their foundation in having a passion for improving the performance of runners and athletes everywhere has driven them to unbelievable financial success. Bowerton carried this passion to his death, six months after his retirement in 1999. He was 88. But Nike lives on.

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Jesus Christ carried His passion for us to live eternally, despite our sins and shortcomings to His death. He was 33. But through His resurrection, He lives on. He lives in us every day, as we are trusted to spread the Good News for salvation everywhere, to the ends of the earth. You know, you may be a huge Nike fan with the trademark “swoosh” on almost every item of clothing, or you may be one who doesn’t have a single pair of Nike shoes or piece of apparel in your closet. As a Christian, however, you wear Nike, “victory” in your heart everyday. So keep on running and take that to the bank!

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” (*1John 5:3-5*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, Thank You for victory! I have the victory because I believe in Your love for me through Your son Jesus Christ. Open my heart, Father that I might find those people who do not share this thrill of victory in their hearts because they do not know You. Speak to me so that I might minister to them the grace of comfort, peace and joy you offer in Christ for our salvation. Strengthen me and use me, God, to run this race for You to the end. Humbly and gratefully I pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Passion carried Nike from obscurity to colossal success. Passion turned a rubber sole made from a kitchen utensil into a multi-billion dollar global empire. Passion can be seen on the faces of dozens of Nike athletes as they win championships and break records. Carry your passion for Jesus with you throughout the entire world for the entire world to see.

PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 7

MIND

BODY

SPIRIT

X DAY 8 – SELF CONTROL

ONE DEGREE OF SEPARATION by A.J. Ali

My wife Jane and I were in beautiful Kiawah Island in South Carolina. Kiawah is an amazing place – a resort within a nature preserve. The beaches are pristine and 150 yards wide. The water is warm, clear and you can wade out 200 yards before you have to swim. If you're a golfer, Kiawah has five of the most beautiful golf courses you'll ever see. Golfers really have something to look forward to in Kiawah. A couple of days before we left for the island, my golf game totally left me. I mean it just disintegrated. I had gone from driving straight and long to erratic slices overnight. Normally, that wouldn't have bothered me that much, but this time, was different. This time, I was going to be playing in a Celebrity Players Tour celeb-am tournament with some very important business associates. I needed my "A" game and I didn't even have a game.

But, during the 10-hour drive from Maryland to Kiawah, an amazing thing happened. I listened to some CD's on business development and decided to apply what I had learned to my golf game. Yes. I would just visualize success. I would focus more. I would tap into that muscle memory that produced so many great shots in the past. Ok, a few great shots. Ok, there was one – but the point is this: I convinced myself that my game would return and I would impress all who viewed my awesome swing. Not only would I look like Tiger, but I'd play like him too! In my mind, I was convincing myself that I was on track. I figured out all that was wrong with my stance, my grip and my swing.

So we get there. We arrived late in the day and we went out to dinner with some friends. By the way, I'm convinced there are no bad restaurants anywhere near Charleston. At dinner we talked about things to do on the Island, we talked about God and family, we talked some business – we talked golf. I was ready for the upcoming challenge. After all, I was focused!

The next morning, I headed out to the practice range. I got set up, laced up, stretched out – you name it, I was ready. I grabbed my pitching wedge and hit a couple of soft shots – you know those shots that arc and land softly one after another in a tight little circle? We'll my circle wasn't so little. And they didn't land so softly either. So, I tried another club. Same result. Balls were spraying everywhere. All of a sudden I wasn't so focused. It was more like panic.

And then I heard it. The voice. Just like the voice in Star Wars saying, "Luke, use the force Luke." Only it wasn't Obi Wan, it was Truck

Robinson, the all-time great basketball player. He was saying those encouraging words all golfers want to hear in times of trouble: “You haven’t been playing golf very long, have you.” So much for focus. Right about then, the beach was looking better than ever. How embarrassing!

I thought about telling him about the great shots I hit the day before my game went down the tubes, but I decided to acknowledge my weakness and just say, “Truck, I’ve been playing for years, but I’ve been inconsistent at best because I’ve never consistently studied the game like I should. Every once in awhile, like right now, my game just vanishes.”

Truck could have just laughed at me and my misfortune, but he didn’t. He asked me if I wanted some help, and of course I said yes. He then proceeded to spend about an hour with me teaching me one thing – what happens at the point of contact. He broke it down. He worked on my stance, my alignment, my swing and my hand action all for the purpose of showing me how those things affect how the ball is struck. The most important thing he taught me, all other things being equal, was this: if the clubface is just one degree off at the moment of impact it means ten yards off course when the ball finally lands. It’s tough to see a difference of one degree. It’s not so tough seeing the end result of that one degree of difference. In golf, little things matter. That “one degree of separation” means everything. It applies to other things as well. That’s why carpenters measure in sixteenth’s of an inch. That’s why nutrients are measured in milligrams. That’s why athletic speed is measured in hundredths of a second. That’s why there’s such a thing as fourth and inches.

I’ve seen a lot of games, and I’ve never heard a referee say over the loudspeaker “they didn’t quite make it, but they’re close enough, so we’ll just give them a first down.”

The little things matter. Inches, milligrams, degrees. Has anyone ever told you “don’t sweat the small stuff” or “it’s only a little vice” or “what’s a little, ‘fill in the blank’ gonna hurt you?”

Tell that to an aids victim: What’s a little sex gonna hurt you?

Tell that to a drug addict: What’s a little weed gonna hurt you?

Tell that to an alcoholic: What’s one more drink gonna hurt you?

Tell that to yourself when that little voice inside says to do the right thing and you go ahead and do the wrong thing – just one more time. Studies have shown that someone who participates in a behavior that is mentally or physically harmful to them, even behavior that can be deadly (think drug use), is 90% likely to continue on the path of dangerous behavior even after it’s brought to their attention that the behavior is harmful! One degree of separation is all it takes for us to wind up off course.

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Our spiritual walk, like my golf swing, needs constant tweaking. We may be focused. But are we focused on the right thing. We may be driven to excellence. But are we driving in the right direction. We may have the best intentions. But if we're off by one degree, we could be off course. Out of bounds. In a hazard. In a trap.

Billy Graham said, "To underrate the skill of an opposing team is to lose the game." 1 Peter 5:8 says "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Hmm. The Devil. He spends most of his time trying to knock us off kilter by just a little bit. One degree at a time. The devil knows that subtle steps off course will lead us way off course at the end of our journey. One degree here equals ten yards there. It's the same in life as it is in golf. If I hit a ball and it goes sideways I know I've got a serious problem that needs to be corrected. But if I'm a little off here or there, I may be a little lazy in fixing it. It's the same in life as it is in golf. Satan usually doesn't knock us sideways because then we'd fix things, wouldn't we? If cheating on a test meant that we would be banned from sports for life, we probably wouldn't cheat at all. If drinking caused immediate kidney failure, no sane person would drink. No, more often than not, bad things happen over time through minute nudges off course. Just a little nudge here and a gentle push there -- one degree at a time.

Billy Graham says in the book, *The Faithful Christian*, "We can endure every fiery trial, every persecution, every temptation and every attempt of Satan to hurt us only if we stay close to the Lord Jesus Christ. You were saved by faith, simply by trusting Christ. Live the same way! Trust Him for deliverance in times of temptation. Don't wait until you sin and then turn to God for forgiveness, even though He will forgive, but turn to Him at the moment of temptation. "Lord Jesus, help me now," can mean the difference between victory and defeat in your life. It can mean the difference between joy and unhappiness, between peace and unrest."

One degree of separation can mean the difference between being out of bounds and being where God wants you to be. Stay close to Jesus at those moments of "impact" in your life and stay on target.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, please help me to recognize when I'm veering off course just a little. It's the times that I really mess up that I know right away that I'm off the proper path. Please help me to recognize

the little nudges that cause those degrees of separation from You, one degree at a time. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Grab a friend and find a safe open grassy area to participate in an exercise. In a straight line, measure distances of ten, twenty and thirty yards, placing markers at each ten-yard interval. Now, blindfold your friend and spin your friend around in a circle five times fast at the first marker. Point your friend in the direction of the ten yard marker and tell your friend to walk all the way to the third marker thirty yards away. As your friend reaches each marker, give your friend encouragement and let him know he is doing great, but don't help with directions. Place a different colored marker along the horizontal plane of each ten-yard interval to mark the path your friend is taking. With your encouragement, your friend will most likely reach the first marker fairly close to it, wind up farther away from the second marker and farther still when he reaches the third marker. This exercise will simulate what happens in our lives when we progress down a pathway that is slightly off by a degree or two. If you can imagine your friend walking ten miles in that same direction how far away he would be from the intended target if there was a marker placed ten miles away from the start in a straight line. Now, perform the exercise a second time, but this time walk alongside your friend and not only give encouragement, but also give direction so that he stays completely on course reaching each marker in succession. This is the difference when we listen to the Holy Spirit, who is there to keep us on course spiritually and avoid being separated from God one degree at a time!

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PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 8

MIND _____

BODY _____

SPIRIT _____

DAY 9 – GIVING

THE GREAT ASSIST by Vera Jones

Here are a few trivia questions for you basketball gurus. Can you name the NBA's all-time scoring leader? How about the all-time rebound leader? Last, but not least, who is the all-time assist leader in the NBA? Your answers respectively as of this book's printing, are Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (former Los Angeles Laker), Wilt Chamberlain (former Philadelphia 76-er) and John Stockton (Utah Jazz). Here's another interesting trivia note. Of these three players, all of whom were selected to the NBA's 50 Greatest Players in 1996, only one of them has never been named the league's MVP. Can you guess whom? John Stockton, the all-time greatest assist leader. Can you guess why? Well, that may be up for speculation and debate for years to come, but it makes for great discussion here.

Webster defines an assist as, "to give help or support" or sports reference, "to aid a teammate or partner in a play." The game of basketball primarily and fundamentally is about scoring more baskets than your opponents. The rebound has its merit in that offensively, a rebound represents another chance to score a basket. A defensive rebound prevents the opponent from getting another immediate scoring chance and initiates offensive scoring opportunities. It is easy to recognize the importance of these two areas of the sport, but what about the assist? Where does its importance lie?

In a basketball contest, a player with the ball has three offensive options: dribble, shoot or pass. The goal of shooting, of course, is for a solo player to score points for his/her team. By rule, dribbling generally is an action that allows a player to advance from one position on the court to another without the help of another player. So fair to say, shooting and passing are independent or self-contained actions. Passing, however, requires the participation of a teammate. Thus passing is the link from one teammate to another. Passing is giving. Keep that in mind. Passing is such a fundamentally necessary part of the sport that not only is the person who scores a basket given credit, merit and recognition, but also the person who assists the scorer.

Consider this. A team basketball game without any passing is impossible. It would merely be a chaotic one-on-one competition. Five people on each team would all be running around quite selfishly trying to either be the dribbler, since this the only way to advance to shoot the ball, or the rebounder because this is the only way to obtain or retain possession of the ball. Passing the basketball is the only unselfish offensive action in the entire sport. It is what teamwork is all about, and team basketball cannot exist without it. Yet we are quick to reward the great scorer or the great

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rebounder with most valuable recognition, but not the assist-maker. Ironic isn't it?

How much do we overlook the giver in our own lives? How often do we try to be the scorer or rebounder for the subsequent glory and accolades rather than the assist-maker so that someone else might enjoy the rewards? In life, even as Christians, we are quick to take for granted those things that are given freely to us. It might be the teacher that helped us learn; the parent or relative who fed us when we were hungry; the friend who comforted us when we were discouraged; or the brother who took the blame so that we might be saved from the punishment. We sometimes even forget to say thank you.

God has given us all of these things. His greatest assist and our MVP is His son, Jesus Christ. Where in basketball, there is no team game without passing; in life there is no unity, no comforting, no growth, and no salvation without giving. Clearly, our lives are based on relationships and we all need each other's well-timed assistance to survive. John Stockton gave up the ball to lead the NBA in assists for nine consecutive seasons, more than any other player in history. He retired and never was named MVP. That is unfortunate. Christ gave up His life so that we could be cleansed of our sins to live forever in Heaven. So many will retire having never accepted Him as their worshipped MVP. There is nothing more unfortunate than that.

Someone is ready to play the game today, but has been spending too much time trying to do it alone. Perhaps an assist, be it a word of encouragement; a listening ear; sharing of God's word; a monetary gift; or a simple Christian hug or example from you might help. Think unselfishly and decide today whom you can pass the ball to so that they might score in some way. While they get credit for the points, know that the game cannot even exist without someone like you making a pass. Know that God truly is noting your assists in His ultimate record book. Hence, give and it will be given unto you. So, go ahead, cheerfully and humbly make that pass like John Stockton and tally another assist. But most importantly, if you haven't already, graciously accept the assist already given to you in Christ, and truly win the game!

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: "Give, and it will be given unto you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (*Luke 6:38*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, Thank You for setting the ultimate example of the importance of giving through Your son Jesus Christ. Please

Speak to my heart so that I might know whom and how I might help today, especially in a way that might bring someone closer to you. Let me be a humble assist-maker in all my ways and actions, seeking not my own selfish glory, but to glorify You. In Jesus name I pray, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Is there someone in your life who could use an assist? Maybe it's someone who can use help with something they are studying, or something at their job? Take time out of your busy schedule to do something for someone else without seeking any credit from the positive outcome, then step back and watch God work wonders in their life and yours!

PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 9

MIND _____

BODY _____

SPIRIT _____

DAY 10 – FEAR

THE BIGGER THEY ARE, THE HARDER THEY FALL

by A.J. Ali

The smallest player on the football field, aside from the kicker, is usually the last line of defense – the safety. These players are usually very quick, have good instincts about where and when a play will develop, and they are relatively fearless. They know their team is depending on them to make the “big play,” and sometimes against someone who is a much bigger player than them. What would you do if you saw a 250 pound fullback running at you with one thought in mind – to run you over and get into the end zone to score the winning touchdown for his team? I know what I’d do. Chances are, I’d step aside and live to play another day. But the safety is called upon to make sure that, not only is his team protected against an aerial assault from the likes of a Kurt Warner, but that they will also keep from giving up points from a breakaway run from scrimmage. In short, the safety has to be fearless and know that the bigger they are, the harder they fall.

One of the most famous stories in the bible is the story of David and Goliath. Talk about having to be fearless! Goliath spent day after day taunting the Israelites, saying if anyone were brave enough to stop him; his army would give themselves over in defeat. Now Goliath was no ordinary man. He stood over nine feet tall and his armor alone weighed 125 pounds! The tip of his spear weighed as much as a bowling ball. He was virtually unstoppable. For 40 days, Goliath dared anyone to cross his path and no one wanted to be the “safety” for fear of dying a gruesome death. However, it was David, the smallest “player” on the field who stepped up with only his faith and a stone to take the challenge. You see, David was fearless because he knew that God was on his side. He knew that he was not going into battle alone and he was fighting not for his glory, but for the glory of the living God. David could not lose. “So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him.”

Are you called to be fearless like David? Yes. Is there a Goliath in your life? Is it your job? Is it your studies? Is it a harmful relationship -- something or someone who is stopping you from becoming all that God wants you to become? Choose this day to arm yourself with the Word of God and run fearlessly towards the line of battle! Know that the bigger your

problems are, the harder they fall when you are armed with the might of the living God.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground.” (*1Samuel 17:48-49*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, I pray for strength and conviction to boldly go into battle for you as David did. Please prepare me for spiritual warfare. I pray that whatever Goliath exists in my life, that Your perfect and powerful Word would conquer it. Please walk with me so that Your will would be done in my life. I claim victory over the Goliath in my life in the name of Your son, Jesus. Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Make a list of all of the things that are challenges in your life right now. On a scale from one to five, with five being the hardest, rate each of them. Have a friend do the same thing. Now, pray together about each of those challenges and ask God to take control of those challenges and ask that His will be done in your lives. While following the other principles learned in this book, continue to lift up those challenges to the Lord in prayer and see what happens.

List your current challenges in life:

Rating:

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PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 10

MIND _____

BODY _____

SPIRIT _____

DAY 11 – INTEGRITY

TENNIS ANYONE? by Vera Jones

Ever wonder what forms of sport took place back in Biblical times? We know running has been around since God blessed us with feet. But interestingly enough, the Greek artist Themistocles portrayed an ancient form of the sport of tennis as far back as 500 B.C. That which was known as “Real” or “Royal” tennis has an origin that is quite religiously linked in nature in that it was played in monasteries. Developed in France, from a game called *jeu de paume* or “game of the palm” and made popular during Queen Victoria’s reign, tennis evolved eventually into Lawn tennis, the basic form of the game we know today.

15,000-plus fans flock to London, England to watch the British Open at Wimbledon every summer, a tremendous growth from the 200 or so that attended the first men’s tennis championship there in July of 1877. Tennis was originally popular only in Britain, France, Australia and in the United States, all of which play host to what is known as the Grand Slam events. Today, however, more than 100 nations compete for the Davis Cup trophy throughout the year.

Seemingly an easy game where two to four opponents hit a little yellow ball with a racket back and forth over a net, it is a very disciplined game requiring hours of practice for coordination, timing, power, strategy and skill, with quite a few fundamental rules that need to be understood about the game. While rules are written quite clearly about serving the ball, volleying, boundaries and scoring, tennis is a game that relies on some unwritten rules of etiquette and fairness. The Victorian era was one that we recognize etiquette to have been most heightened. There were certain rules of being a gentleman and a lady that were just understood and expected as an absolute norm in society. Even as far back as the game of Real Tennis played in the monastery cloisters, it’s difficult to imagine a priest yelling, “What, are you out of your pea-brained mind? That ball was in!”

When a player was in disagreement, it was unheard of to argue a line call. (In recent decades, our television highlights of professional matches have included huge displays of temper tantrums and downright outrage when a player disagrees with a call, sometimes more dramatic than the match itself!) Often played for recreation without a judge, personal integrity plays a huge role for line calls in tennis. Opponents when playing without a judge have to make their own calls. Historically, cheating your opponent out of a truthful call as to whether the ball bounced in or out was far more a disgrace than to lose a contest. When a call is too tough to fairly determine, and two opponents cannot agree, they settle for what is called a “let” and they play the point again. Another etiquette aspect of the game is

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the center court handshake at the net when the match is finished -- a tradition that is still evident today.

Tennis has changed dramatically over the centuries, from the tennis rackets and equipment used to the clothing styles worn. But the basics of etiquette are still understood although they seem to be practiced a lot less. We can draw the parallel lines of tennis etiquette to the fundamental nature of Christianity. While everything from our clothing and our forms of sport and social interaction have changed since what we viewed from Biblical history; there remain very basic rules of right and wrong and fairness in our behavior. Those rules actually are written, but even if we fail to read God's word, the Holy Spirit speaks to us on fairly "making the call" on almost every line decision in our lives. What is important is that we continue to seek to be honorable in the way we relate to one another. In a disagreement, it might be far more important to just call a "let" and start over than to throw a tantrum and dishonor ourselves or our fellow man all for the sake of winning or being right rather than righteous.

So, the next time you are feel yourself enter an argument or disagreement, or you are faced with an ethical decision of fairness, think "tennis anyone?" One final thought: The tennis term for zero comes from the French word "l'oeuf" meaning egg. It was thought that the "0" looked like an egg. We pronounce the tennis term for zero, "love." Thus, tennis is actually the only sport where opponents can actually have nothing, but still have "love." What a cool sport!

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: "...for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair" (*Proverbs 1:3*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, Help me be fair today in all that I do. Help me to consider that while it is important to stand up for what is right, it is much more important to be righteous when I am at a crossroad of disagreement or displeasure with someone. Help me to control my anger and temper and to remember to seek your guidance for peace. Please also speak to the hearts of others so that they might exercise fairness with me. Gratefully, in Jesus name I pray, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Would your opponents consider you "fair." Do you have to win at all costs or is there a righteous sense of fair play to your game? Practice a sense of fair play in everything you do.

PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 11

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DAY 12 – STRENGTH

STAY IN THE POCKET AND TAKE REFUGE IN THE LORD

by A.J. Ali

Randall Cunningham is known as one of the great quarterbacks of all time. His great arm, scrambling ability and knack for the big play helped to usher in a new breed of quarterback – one who is a complete player, an athletic field general who can perform a decathlon of skills under pressure. In Randall's early days, however, he was marked with as much criticism as he was praise for his tendency to leave the pocket early and throw the entire field into chaos. Some people said he didn't stay in the pocket long enough to allow a play to develop; that he didn't trust his linemen to do their job and protect him; that he didn't trust his receivers to get open before the pocket would collapse on him.

Over time, Randall developed a level of maturity that allowed him to trust in his teammates more and leverage the strength they offered him through a secure pocket formed by his linemen. He became even more deadly because his receivers were now fully loaded weapons in his arsenal. His arm became more proficient than his legs, and his career surged forward. Although he still possessed the great skill of scrambling, Randall realized that there was a time for everything and that scrambling, as a first option, wasn't the best way to perform his duties as the team's heart and soul.

“My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.”

How is your scrambling ability? At the first sign of trouble, do you rely on your ability to scramble out of the pocket to avoid pain? Or do you place your trust in your defense? Jabez, in 1 Chronicles 4:10, asked the Lord to place a hedge about him (to form a defensive pocket) when he cried out saying, “Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.” It's not that Jabez just wanted to be shielded from pain, like a turtle encased in his protective shield. Jabez wanted to advance. He wanted to serve his master and do great things for him, but he knew that because of his very name (which literally meant pain!) that he would be facing insurmountable odds in his quest for success.

Prior to Jabez asking for a hedge of protection, Jabez asked for a blessing and for enlargement of his territory. He wanted to move that ball down the field! He wanted to score for the Lord! Yet, he knew that he could not do it alone. He knew that scrambling out of that pocket that God provided him was not the best first option. So Jabez asked that the very hand of God would be upon him to keep him from harm.

As you move whatever ball God has placed in your hands down the field of life, remember that you're not moving it alone. Your heavenly Father is ready to place a hedge of protection about you so that you can move forward with strength, not scrambling. Rely on Him. Trust in Him. Depend on Him. For His strength freed a man called Jabez from a destiny of pain. How much then, will he do for you?

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold." (*Psalm 18:2*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, I pray, like Jabez prayed that Your hand would be with me and that You would protect me from evil. As I face demons and evildoers I know that scrambling around and facing them on my own only leads to disaster. I pray that You will lead the way for me. That You will be my rock, my fortress and my salvation. I pray, Lord that through Your protection; my territory will be enlarged so that I will be able to do more for You. Thank You Father for being my strength and my fortress. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Read Psalm 18:1-19 and visualize a quarterback dropping back in the pocket with chaos erupting all around him. Yet, he stays in the pocket because he knows that's the safest place to be. Read 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 and discuss with friends how Jabez depended on God to free him from a painful destiny.

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PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 12

MIND _____

BODY _____

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DAY 13 – SPIRITUAL GIFTS

BAD CALL, REF! by Vera Jones

My friend James is a basketball referee. And he loves it! In all the world of sports, however, I cannot think of a less appreciated position than that of one who officiates. It is the one job where people regularly express their displeasure, disapproval and even disdain. Why on earth would someone subject himself to such abuse on a regular basis? I figured it's the "it's a tough job but somebody's got to do it" mentality, right? Perhaps, but James had another interesting perspective to offer on a job he is very passionate about.

Of the many fascinating stories he had to share about parents and fans being angered, and players and coaches mouthing attacks, sometimes even personal, there was one thing that stood out. It wasn't his recount of how referees handle the fans, coaches or players that impressed me, but his account of how referees should handle themselves when they know they've made a bad call.

I'm told the first thing an official has to do is accept the fact that he or she will not be right all the time. In fact, quite a few calls will be inaccurate. I've certainly seen my fair share of bad calls. That's just a fact of the game. But the worst thing an official can do is come off like he is right all the time or that his judgment is infallible. This is not to say that the official can never come across as being weak, unsure or insecure either. It's a fine line between the perception of humility and weakness just as it is between confidence and arrogant infallibility. Officials walk this line every game.

James told me a really good official will recognize when he has "blown it" (the call as well as the whistle) immediately. All the shouts, taunts or anger in the world cannot replace what the official knows himself when he has really made a bad call on a play. The key, he says, is to admit that he blew the call, make a mental note to improve should the play ever happen again, and then move on from it. To deny he was in error would mean his pride was growing bigger than his purpose in the game. Conversely, to beat himself up over a bad call would cause him to lose his focus to move on to make better calls for the rest of the game.

Interesting work. In fact, it's a lot like everyday life when you think about it. We have to make judgment calls everyday, and sometimes we make mistakes. When we err, or sin, people will sometimes voice their disapproval or disagreement. Others might actually encourage us to do wrong because our mistake will provide them a benefit. The fact is, when we are doing our best to live a Christian life, we will accept immediately that we are not perfect and that we will indeed make mistakes. When we do,

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however, it is so important to admit our sin or error, and then to confess it to God. This confession removes the burden of guilt and confusion that usually accompanies our sin, and places it with someone who truly loves us and can help us not to make the mistake again.

Many times we beat ourselves up emotionally. The closer we walk with Christ, the more deeply we feel the guilt of our sin. But to continuously beat ourselves up over it stunts our growth, and keeps us from clearly hearing from God how we might improve. We also deny ourselves the forgiveness and grace God so freely gives to us when we sincerely cry out to Him in confession. He knows our heart, and when we are troubled because we want to be more complete in His will, He will lighten our burden.

Another thing, more harmful than the sin itself, is denying the truth that we have made a mistake. Many things will make us do this: pride; fear; conceit; masked self hate; to name a few. Part of loving ourselves is recognizing we are all God's work in progress and are prone to sin. Mistakes are inevitable. We are even likely to repeat some mistakes until we fully grow mature in Christ. Knowing this, you cannot live your life afraid to "blow the whistle" for fear someone else might not like your call, or that your decision will be a bad one. The game of life needs some good Christian officials who are passionate about the game and the players in it. Know that it is not your place to judge others, but to be the best referee you can be in your own life. Just remember to confer with the Head Official, and take refuge in the knowledge that all of His calls are good!

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: "Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord" – and you forgave the guilt of my sin." (*Psalms 32:5*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, I am sincerely saddened when I make bad calls in life. Sometimes I feel guilty and ashamed. But I am so comforted by Your grace and compassion allowing me to confess my sins to You for forgiveness. Help me to realize when I am allowing fear or pride to blind me to my faults and personal sin. I know I don't have all the right answers, but I pray for the wisdom to always seek You first so I might know Your will when the questions arise. Help me also, Lord to be more sensitive to others and their struggles with decision making so that I may play the role of encourager and never judge. Thank You for Your grace, and Your son Jesus Christ. Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Have you ever blown it by saying something to a friend that was hurtful and you immediately wanted to take it

back? Have you ever told a lie only to wish you hadn't? Discuss with others how you felt during times like that and what you did to correct it.

PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 13

MIND _____

BODY _____

SPIRIT _____

DAY 14 – BOLDNESS

FACE BATTLES WITH BOLDNESS by A.J. Ali

In any contact sport, athletes are taught that it's always better and safer to be bold – to be the aggressor. A martial artist who attempts to break a board or a brick with a non-committal strike of the hand may very well end up with a shattered hand! In football, linemen are trained to “run through,” not into the other man. Chicago Bears great and NFL Hall of Fame football player Mike Singletary evoked fear in his opponents simply by piercing his eyes straight through the blocker he faced and to his intended target, the ball carrier. He physically and mentally destroyed his opponents with his passionate play, iron will and unrelenting boldness. Because of his reputation as a warrior, opposing teams tried scheme after scheme to thwart him, but he would prevail time after time. In contact sports, those who are prepared mentally and physically and who initiate contact are typically those who are triumphant. Those who just try to get by, or even shy away from the hit, tend to get hurt and defeated.

2 Chronicles 18:28-34 tells the story of how Ahab, the King of Israel, and Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, went into battle against the Arameans. Now, Ahab went into battle in disguise after hearing the prophet Micaiah tell him he would be killed if he went into battle. In his fear, Ahab told Jehoshaphat to wear his royal robes, hoping to make Jehoshaphat a target to increase the chances of his own survival. Sure enough, the Arameans went after Jehoshaphat, thinking he was the King of Israel. But he cried out to the Lord and the Arameans recognized he was not the King of Israel and they stopped pursuing him. At the same time, someone drew his bow at random and struck Ahab between the sections of his armor. He was propped up at a place from where he could see the raging battle. I can only imagine what his thoughts were throughout that day, as he reflected on how he so cowardly set Jehoshaphat up to fall in his place, only to be felled by an arrow in the most unlikely way. He most certainly gave thought to the words of the prophet Micaiah. At sunset, he died. And Jehoshaphat, who boldly went into battle, and who boldly cried out to the Lord, was saved because of his faith and obedience.

There are battles you and I face every day. Some are on the playing field and some are spiritual. In either case, nothing good comes from hiding, or laying low. Be bold in your play and in your faith. Trust in God's perfect will for your life and He will be your protector. By being bold, you will be victorious.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.” (*Proverbs 28:1*)

POWER PRAYER: Lord, please show me how to be bold like Jehoshaphat. Show me how to rely on and trust in You, my maker and my protector. I pray for opportunities to stand my ground for You. To be a victorious defender of the faith. To be a warrior, not a worrier. In You I place my trust. I walk without fear, knowing You are with me. Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: The next time you face an opponent on the field of play, be prepared mentally and physically to prevail against the challenge. Know that their purpose is to overcome you as they seek victory. Use that knowledge in your preparation and then boldly step onto the playing field and give your all. Likewise, as you face spiritual battles, know that Satan’s henchmen are influencing those around you who would seek to destroy you. Seek the Lord’s will for your life. Know it. Live it. And claim victory!

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PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 14

MIND _____

BODY _____

SPIRIT _____

DAY 15 – TRAINING

STAY IN SHAPE by Vera Jones

For every athlete that may come across these readings, I have but one great piece of advice, “stay in shape.” Similarly, for every Christian, again I offer, “stay in shape.”

Today, humbly, I provide you with confessions of a woman gone astray in hopes that you might learn from my mistakes.

As a child, I was naturally active and competitive. I began running in track competitions and picked up my first basketball with serious intentions as early as age five. All through my youth, I got over on natural, uninhibited energy and drive. I didn’t think twice about being out of breath, being out of shape, or the possibility of injury. I just wanted to play, to run, and have fun. We are almost all like that in our innocent youth. What a blessing.

As a young adult, I discovered I could no longer just get by on pure fun or natural ability. I had to actually train, to workout and work hard everyday to maintain a competitive edge. I was a collegiate scholarship basketball player who slowly was starting to dread the stamina and endurance it took to maintain a top level of performance that once seemed to come so easily.

By my mid-twenties, I still loved to play basketball, but for fun only. I was still competitive at heart, but not in body. I gained fifteen pounds so quickly you would have thought I ate an exploding biscuit. I just seemed to wake up one morning and there the fat was promising to hang around and be my friend forever. Gee, thanks.

Just past thirty, the pregnancy and birth of my son brought my weight gain total to 60 pounds. (No, this is not a typographical error, it reads correctly: sixty pounds.) Suffering from repetitive illnesses, shortness of breath, bad knees, swollen ankles, and a tendency for my mid-section to look as if I was smuggling an inner tube, it finally hit me to take my health and my fitness seriously. Although I had stayed partially active on and off since my collegiate playing days: a health spa here; a ¼-mile jog there; a daily sprint after the ice-cream truck; I never found a consistent maintenance plan for staying in shape for any serious length of time. I learned the hard way that being active and staying fit has to be a way of life, not an occasional fad.

Having lost 50 pounds over the past two years, I feel healthier, have more energy, and I am a lot happier with my appearance. Staying in shape with fitness and proper diet (don’t get me started on the diet part) is a happier, healthier way of life. It’s a lot easier to stay in than fall out and try to get back in again. I just wish it didn’t take me so long to figure it out.

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Along the way, I figured something else out. My Christian walk needed to be more than a *Jesus Loves Me* sing along with my son. It needed to be more than going to church once every Easter or saying grace before dinner and thinking I would be OK. There was so much more God had in store for me to be happier and healthier spiritually. Just as it took some ugly low points of my life before I would take fitness seriously, it also took some dismal low points in my emotional and spiritual life before I recognized I definitely needed to be on a better “Christian Exercise Program.”

I prioritized and increased my prayer time, found a great church and Christian friends, and became more mindful of the needs of others. I educated my mind and spirit with regular Bible reading, and I finally became disciplined enough to know when to be still and just hear God. I began to appreciate the talents God gave me and started using them for His glory. Before I knew it, I was doing things I never imagined, like helping to write this book!

The one thing I have found over the years is that each time I let myself become out of shape the more difficult it became to get back in. Each attempt brought painful joints and muscles, heart palpitations, and tremendous frustration and shame. Falling out of line with God's will is equally as painful and frustrating. The devil gains yet another foothold every time we get lazy, preoccupied or just plain disobedient to what we should be doing daily for God. When you continuously remain knowingly disobedient, you become numb to the Holy Spirit. Eventually, you will hit a dangerous point where you'll no longer seek the truth and begin to justify your disobedience. You just give up and offer the, “well, I was just meant to be out of shape” excuse. Beware.

How disciplined are you in your Christian training? Do you “work out regularly” as a way of life or just when you hit your low point? Does your character and lifestyle mirror that of a yo-yo dieting, occasional workout Christian or a fully committed fitness buff? The decision is always yours. But this advice is mine, “Stay in shape!”

SCRIPTURE VERSE: “We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.” (*Hebrews 6:11-12*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, please grant me the strength and the courage to stay in shape and in line with Your will. I have been lazy and disobedient, but my heart longs for a healthier life with You. Lead me out of the temptation to be a lazy and unproductive follower of Christ and into

the countless opportunities and blessings You have in store for me. These things I ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Test your spiritual fitness level. What things do you do intentionally each day to build your relationship with the Lord? Do you “workout” through prayer, reading the Bible and meditation? Do you participate in Bible studies or read books such as this one on a regular basis? Maintain your spiritual fitness level by doing these things and constantly trying to take in more of the Word of God.

PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 15

MIND _____

BODY _____

SPIRIT _____

DAY 16 – HONESTY

A TRADITION OF HONOR by A.J. Ali

There are a few things in sports that are sacred. Trust among teammates. Dedication to excellence. Honoring the spirit of competition. Just to name a few. In today's sports world, at every level there seems to be a shortage of these great traditions. Players are found to be routinely hiding injuries severe enough to have slowed their step or weakened their strength, just to keep their minutes up so that bonus money comes in, while other, more physically capable players wait on the sidelines. I've even heard from credible sources that teams and players have conspired and collaborated to manufacture certain records "for the good of the game." Some owners have found the formula to their success to reside not in excellence, but in profits, doing just enough to keep the team barely competitive, yet not shooting for championships – or even playoffs – so their player salaries don't go through the roof and cut into the margins of "victory." More than once, a team has gone completely cold near the end of a season in order to lock up that last place finish because last means first on draft day. First on draft day means the ability to sell that spot to a larger, richer team. Sometimes, it's all about the money. Sometimes, it's all about the pride. Infamous parents have incited brawls, encouraged cheating and even beaten each other to death over the "spirit of competition" – obviously the spirit they were following wasn't the Holy Spirit.

Trust. Dedication. Respect. Commitment. Honor. As I replay in my mind the thrills and spills from the intro to *Wide World of Sports* – "the thrill of victory, and the agony of defeat," pre-multimillion dollar salary memories resonate back to a time when there was an unwritten code of honor among athletes to be true to the sanctity of the game. Win, lose or draw, it all began with honor. The ceremonies, both formal and spontaneous, were so crucial to the game and all that it stood for in our lives. Baseball, hot dogs and apple pie were symbolic of the simple pleasure of the pursuit of honorable sporting competition. I'm not saying that sports in the past was a perfect world. No, far from that. But before the current world of "bling bling," honor stood for much more than the dollar stands for today.

It is possible to be at the top of one's game and keep a focus on being honorable. There are, believe it or not, role models that still exist even in today's jaded world of sports. Some of those athletes are featured in these very pages. None of them are perfect, but they all share a common bond – the desire to be perfect. The Bible says we all fall short of the glory of God. So in order for us to be truly honorable, in order for us to honor

God and become True Champions, we must set our sights on the One who walked the earth and didn't fall short of the glory of God – because he was God. Jesus Christ is the example for the athletes in the pages of this book, and for you. Even in the world of sports, even in the heat of competition, if we strive to perform as Jesus would perform in the field of play then we will be performing with honor.

In Mark 14:46, Jesus provided the best example when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane and said to the Father, “Not my will, but thine be done.” He honored our Father with his words, and later, his actions as he stretched out his arms and died for you and for me. He could have bent, broken and changed the rules easier than anyone and avoided a painful death, but He chose not to. He chose honor. He chose truth. I challenge you to do the same.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.” (*Romans 12:10*)

POWER PRAYER: When I have to make a decision today, on or off the playing field, I pray, Father God, help me to make the right decision, the honorable decision. Please place in my heart the spirit of honor. I pray that Your Holy Spirit will guide my every thought, my every word, and my every action. Thank you, Jesus for providing an example of perfection and honor so that I may know what that looks like. It is in the honorable name of Jesus that I pray. Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Discuss the attributes of your favorite athletes that relate to honorable decision-making. Discuss how you can apply those attributes to your daily life.

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PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 16

MIND _____

BODY _____

SPIRIT _____

DAY 17 – COMMITMENT

THE WORKOUT REWARD IS WITHIN by Vera Jones

I remember my first aerobics class. I was amused at the various fashion statements each individual participant seemed to be making. There was the tight, satin pink leotard clad woman who seemed to be screaming, “look at me, I’m a decorated and proud fitness buff!” There were the basic baggy, black and blue cotton participants whose colors seemed to indicate exactly how their bodies felt (I was definitely feeling the black and blue group). And there was the well-fitted spandex shorts and gray sweatshirt variety that were the “no-nonsense, hit me with your best shot” aerobic excellence participants.

The class began with some relatively basic moves, a few side slides complete with handclaps, and an occasional march in place. This was the warm up stage, and being admittedly a bit out of shape, boy did I feel warm quick! With sweat already pouring, I began to look around the room to see if I had any partners in this agony. The cute and perky, well-cut instructor was bellowing out some demands for us to “lift those knees up high” and “punch up in the air.” (I thought she said, “If you need to cry, crunch up in a chair.”) That’s when I felt the pull in my hamstring and decided I better sit this one out and stretch some more. So I excused myself to the back of the room.

Once my heart stopped racing and I realized there wasn’t going to be a need for a paramedic, I decided it was best to become more of an observer than a participant. What I noticed as I looked around the room was pretty amusing. As the aerobics lesson progressed, and became more difficult, the energy and enthusiasm that everyone started with began to dissipate dramatically. This workout was painful, no doubt about it. But the way the participants reacted to the pain is what began to really settle into my spirit.

There were some individuals who were obviously fit and well trained and seemed to endure the workout with ease. The perspiration that was evident on their bodies was an indicator that this was no easy task, no matter how easy they seemed to perform it. I knew this was the level I wanted to work to be at, and I watched with great admiration. There were a select few others there who were clearly as out of shape as I was, but they were giving it their all, trying really hard to hang in there. Some of them looked like they needed me to make that paramedic call immediately! I had a lot of respect for them.

What was most amusing, however, were the people who originally hid themselves in the back of the room. Their goal was just to “just get by.” When the instructor would turn the routine around so that these people in the

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back of the room were positioned in the front, suddenly, they kicked high, punched hard, and looked full of energy and enthusiasm. When the room about-faced and they were out of the instructor's watchful eye again, their arms never left the "at rest position" by their sides and they barely lifted their legs off the ground. Who did they think they were cheating? After all, they paid for the aerobics class, and it was their bodies that they desired to improve. It wasn't like the instructor was handing out prizes. (I could have used a new hamstring muscle if she was!) I got more of a "kick" out of this observation than I did out of the aerobics lesson, that's for sure.

Whether in a grueling aerobics class, showing up for another tedious team practice, or even in our everyday lives at our jobs, at school, serving in our churches and communities, or just helping out a friend or parent, there is always a place for giving it our all. There is a lazy tendency to believe our best is only required when the boss, teacher, instructor, or someone whom we wish to impress is watching. I've got news for you. The real boss is always watching, and expects us to serve and work at our best everyday He grants us the ability to do so. Granted, there will be times when we are in pain, struggling physically or mentally, and feel unable to perform adequately. On these occasions, it is important that we take the time to pray for strength and guidance, and get proper rest. This would be the time we might need someone to help us. How much more do we appreciate their help when we recognize it as their best?

When we feel that urge to be lazy, to just get by, or to only perform at our best because we deduce we will gain special favor or attention, it is very important that we pray then as well. Something other than God is at work in our hearts when we perform this way. God wants us to be diligent servants and workers in all that we do, for His glory, not for superficial approval. It is only in our best work that we can adequately and consistently measure our growth or achievement. The personal reward should always be the satisfaction that you gave your best. In other words, the reward for your workout or service should always be measured from within.

SCRIPTURE VERSE: "Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free." (*Ephesians 6:6-8*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, Thank You for the courage and strength to give my all today in all that I do. Please speak to my heart when I feel lazy or am seeking favor or approval for my own pride or glory. Grant me the wisdom to know the difference between when I am working hard and

hardly working. Let me not lose focus on Your desire for me to perform today. Gratefully, in Jesus name, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Even though you'll probably fall short of perfect (believe me, there's a pretty good chance you're not perfect!), do everything to the best of your ability today. At the end of the day, journal how you feel during those times you get it 100% right. Also, write down how it affects those people close to you. Take that lesson with you as you tackle tasks in the future.

PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 17

MIND _____

BODY _____

SPIRIT _____

DAY 18 – HUMILITY

“I’M THE GREATEST OF ALL TIME!” by A.J. Ali

There are no sports today that equal the epic brutality and dark grandeur of the gladiators from centuries gone by. Two thousand years ago, great coliseums were erected and filled with expectant fans. They were coliseums that rivaled the great stadia of today. Although jumbo screens, Coca-Cola and permanent seat licenses were nowhere to be found, they played their own contemporary version of “Who Let the Dogs Out.” As Russell Crowe so aptly displayed in the movie “The Gladiator,” dogs were the least of those reluctant warrior’s worries. Even the strongest, meanest, most highly skilled gladiators were eventually defeated – or worse yet, ripped to shreds and eaten by their fiercest opponents, the lions. For a man to shout, “I am the greatest of all time!” in that arena meant only that his time of silence had not yet come upon him. Such a proud boast would surely speed along his fate. Fortunately, today’s athletes enjoy a somewhat safer playing field and a considerably longer lifespan. The end of one’s career doesn’t automatically signal the introduction of one’s mortality.

Today’s sport of professional boxing, with its brutal goal of “destroying” one’s opponent, is the closest thing we have to the gladiators of yesteryear. Yet, with the exception of having to face Mike Tyson, one needn’t fear being eaten while competing in the ring. Muhammad Ali was perhaps the greatest boxer in modern day history. He was big, broad, powerful, bold, entertaining and possessed a wit as quick as his jab. He floated like a butterfly and stung like a bee. Ali personified outspokenness. His statements made both inside and outside the ring made him irresistible to both the fans and to the media. His personal war cry, “I’m the greatest of all time!” was heard time and time again. He backed up his brash words with bolder actions. Yet, like the gladiators of yesteryear, Ali was silenced. Like a lion descending upon warm flesh, Parkinson’s disease ravaged his ability to make bold, brash statements.

But as this modern gladiator was dethroned from a reign of ranting, a mysterious and joyous thing happened to Ali and the rest of us. In his humility, Ali found grace. Now, his whispers speak louder than his shouts ever did. His lighting of the Olympic flame in the 1996 summer games in Atlanta brought tears to the eyes of millions around the world. Tears not of sadness, but of hope. Tears of joy. Tears of humility. A humble, quiet walk speaks volumes about a person. A raging water may gain notice, but a still pool can reflect its’ maker. Is God doing a work in your life? Is He the Greatest of all time, or do you desire the glory? Let others see God reflected

in your life. Like Jesus, walk with humility and grace. Light the torch of faith quietly and let God work through you in the lives of those around you.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (*Mark 10:43-45*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, Thank You for sending Your son, Jesus, as the greatest example of all time of humility and grace. I thank You for the gift of eternal life, made possible by Your love for me and by the humble actions of Jesus in doing the will of the Father over the desires of the flesh. Thank You, Jesus, for showing me how to be humble and how to serve. I pray for our brothers and sisters in the limelight, that they would remember Your actions, which speak louder than words. I pray for strength in my own walk, that Your spirit would rule over my flesh and I would walk with humility and with a servant’s heart. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Practice humility in your life on and off the playing field. Let your actions speak louder than your words. Let others sing your praises and even then, direct all of the glory and honor to God. We realize our true greatness by humbling ourselves in front of our Lord and allowing Him to shine through us.

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DAY 19 – ENCOURAGEMENT

YOU CAN DO IT, SON! by Vera Jones

My son is four years old, and he seems to have inherited my spirit of ambition and competitiveness. Although I started playing basketball when I was five years old, I have not pressured, influenced or have any expectation that my son will develop the same passion. I admit, however, watching him take interest in the game is quite enjoyable.

We were in the basement playing on the Little Tikes Jr. Hoops Set. (So much for me not influencing his passions). I hit four or five jump shots in a row and demonstrated exaggerated excitement after each one. “Yeah, Mommy is good!” “3-2-1- Swish, Mommy wins another at the buzzer!” My son took great interest. After I remembered sharing was an important lesson I needed to teach, despite my thrill of making five for five, I gave him the little basketball to try a few shots of his own. Airball. Brick. Thud. And then, the lip quiver followed by the tears and the whining.

“I can’t make any!” my son cried out which broke my heart. With this, he stormed over and sat down crying as if he was in great pain. I didn’t want my son to be a quitter. This fun basketball challenge was quickly becoming a disaster. I pulled him to his feet and explained that he should never say, “I can’t,” and that he just needed to keep trying. Still the tears flowed.

I guided my son over to the basket with great patience and showed him how to dunk it. This he did with ease. Then I helped him move another step back, to which he still ran in and dunked it. Why change a good thing? I moved him out to shoot the jump shot again. Slowly but surely, on my words of encouragement, I watched him miss a couple of shots, getting closer each time. Finally, he scored! What a celebration we had! He couldn’t wait to try another. Swish!!! Now we are having some fun! After making four in a row, he missed. I gasped. Would he throw a tantrum? Quickly, I shouted, “Great shot, son” as I grabbed the rebound and purposely missed (of course I could never “accidentally miss” on a Jr. Hoops Set). Then I screamed an over exaggerated, “Oh, no, Mommy blew the game!” and fell to the floor as if in tremendous agony as my son watched and laughed out loud with glee. He, too jumped on the floor and rolled around giggling as if he assumed this was a natural part of the game, and to him clearly the most fun! We love basketball and I think my son is going to be just fine.

There are times when we all feel like four year olds trying to make that jump shot. When we encounter new things and can’t seem to get it right, it is frustrating and we often lose focus and become discouraged. How wonderful it is when someone offers a word of encouragement or even

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demonstration to help us? Perhaps a lighthearted gesture of, “it’s not so bad, I foul things up too, sometimes” is even more comforting. We all want to be good at things, and sometimes, whether we are novices yet to learn the basics or presumed experts just having an off day, we need encouragement from others.

I don’t know whether my son will continue to love basketball or whether he will even be really good at the sport. I do know that I try always to teach him not to give up when the going gets tough. There is always another shot, a better shot, waiting if he’s just willing to give it a try. God wants us all to be willing to give it another try. Without challenges and failures, we don’t grow, and we fail to truly appreciate the joy of our triumphs. While we all are blessed with different spiritual gifts, being an encourager is a gift we all have been trusted with. So don’t miss an opportunity to reach out and encourage someone at work, at play, in marriages, friendships or personal quests to achieve a better life as a Christian. We must never be so competitive as athletes that we forget how truly blessed we are as cheerleaders.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “And we urge you brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” (*1Thessalonians 5:14*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, Thank You for a voice and a heart that can be encouraging. Please touch my spirit so that I might be fully aware of times when others need encouragement and that I might be a blessing to them and a reminder of Your greatness. When I become discouraged, Thank You for placing people in my life at the right moments to help me achieve greater things. In the name of Jesus, I am truly thankful, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Give some encouragement to someone in need. See how your blessing others can become a blessing in return.

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DAY 20 – FAITH AND WORKS

ACTING ON FAITH BEYOND BELIEF

by A.J. Ali (WITH BILLY BLANKS)

True faith includes action. Acting on beliefs. Acting on things not yet seen, and believing in results not yet proven. According to world champion martial artist, actor and fitness guru, Billy Blanks, “True faith is the action of your beliefs.”

Billy shares with us a hypothetical story – a modern-day parable:

“Let’s say, my assistant Julie Ann decides to move to Arizona and interview for a job. I say to her, ‘God Bless You, have a good time and be the best you can be.’ So, she takes off and leaves for Arizona. But before she leaves, I ask her this one question: ‘How much do you weigh?’ She says, ‘I weigh 140 pounds.’ Then, Julie Ann leaves, but six months later she walks into my studio. I’m up on stage teaching and all of a sudden I see her coming through the door, struggling to maintain her balance. She’s reaching out, calling my name and then she faints and hits the ground.

I walk over to her and say, ‘Wow, she looks like she’s lost about 70 pounds.’ I ask if there are any doctors in the room and a lady comes over. I say, ‘She used to be my assistant and she went to Arizona. It looks like she didn’t get the job because she looks like she’s dying of starvation.’

The doctor revives Julie Ann and sits her down in a chair and asks her ‘What happened? Julie Ann says, ‘Well, my job didn’t go through and I haven’t had any money to buy food, so I’m just starving – dying of starvation.’ The doctor asks someone to go get some food, so someone gets the food on a tray and brings it to the doctor. The doctor then says to Julie Ann, ‘If you don’t eat this food within two minutes, you’ll die. Julie Ann, do you believe this food will save your life?’ Julie Ann says yes, but doesn’t eat the food. Almost two minutes later, the doctor is still talking to her and tells her ‘You’ve only got five seconds left. Do you truly believe this food will save your life?’ Julie Ann says yes and then falls dead.

Julie Ann believed that the food would save her, but she never ate the food. She didn’t act. Faith is action. It’s the action of your belief in things unseen. It was faith that enabled me to get up out of my chair and become world champion, when I could have just sat in the chair and believed, but not acted on that belief.”

The Bible tells us to have faith beyond belief. In James 2:19, it tells us that “Even the demons believe... and shudder.” So, everyone can believe. The key is having faith beyond belief and acting on that faith beyond belief.

In Billy's story, Julie Ann truly believed that eating that food would save her life. It was sitting right in front of her. She saw it, smelled it and had access to it – but did not eat it. Had she acted on her belief, she would have demonstrated true faith and she would have lived. How many times in your life have you known something and truly believed in it, but didn't act on it, only to see a potential blessing slip by? "If I had spent just an hour more studying for that test, I would have earned an A rather than a C." "I knew I could have run that mile 20 seconds faster, but I spent my time partying rather than training." In those situations, people believed in something, but didn't act on it, and suffered the consequences, just like Julie Ann in Billy's parable.

Throughout life, we will face many tests of faith. Many times, we will have a tray of spiritual food placed before us and if we choose to eat that food, we will win the battle, but if we don't we will lose. In other words, it's not enough to *believe* in what the Bible says. "*Even the demons believe.*" When you are faced with real-life choices and challenges, you have to *act* on what the bible says. Even when there is peer pressure to feel a certain way, act a certain way, you should act on your faith in God's word. Put your beliefs into action and act on faith beyond belief!

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" (James 2:14)

POWER PRAYER: Dear Heavenly Father, I pray for ever-increasing faith. I pray that my beliefs would not get in the way of true faith. I pray that I would not just sit in the chair believing when I should be acting in faith – a faith beyond belief. I pray for that kind of faith that Abraham demonstrated that earned him the right to be called Your friend. Thank You for being a God that I can have faith in for You are worthy of faith beyond belief. I pray that my actions demonstrate that in all that I do. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Find a story in the Bible about someone who had belief, but not faith; and find a story about Abraham demonstrating his faith in God. Read them and discuss with a friend how those stories are similar to your personal experiences in life.

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DAY 21 – PAIN

DESENSITIZING YOURSELF TO PAIN by Vera Jones

Upon visiting my college roommate who had recently become the Head Coach of the Hofstra University women's basketball team, I had the opportunity to sit in on one of her early practices with her new team. What caught my eye even more than the ongoing workout on the basketball court was what I witnessed off of the court.

Traci Nickola was the athletic trainer directing a young player in what seemed to be a very tiring and painful workout. Inquisitively and intrigued, I began to ask her questions. Traci explained to me that the player was suffering from very painful calcium deposits in veins in her lower leg. The subsequent therapy she was undergoing was one I was unaware existed. Traci described it as “desensitizing yourself to pain.” Ever heard that term “pain is mental?” Well I never put much stock in that thought either until I heard this theory.

The player was undergoing a series of very regimented and repeated drills of the running and hopping variety. She often winced and grimaced as she moved along the sidelines. I empathized with every move she made. Nevertheless, this player pressed on with admirable strength and stamina through every painful hop, skip and jump. Theoretically, she was teaching her legs, her body and her mind to adapt to the pain. Eventually, when she was ready to step into a normal practice or game situation, she would already have conditioned herself to a numbness to the pain and play through it as if it did not exist.

As difficult as the procedures are to prepare ourselves to overcome pain, we all must develop them. The thought of actually doing things that feel very painful to us to prepare us to accept even more pain can be a bit traumatizing. Yet it is as much necessary in our Christian walk as it is for that young woman basketball player I witnessed that day. Satan is like a calcium deposit, very painful, distracting and sometimes even debilitating. When we are caught off guard, the painful tactics he employs can feel overwhelming.

With God's love and guidance, we can learn to condition ourselves to accept the fact there will be painful times in our lives. Some of the very “drills” we must exercise to accomplish this may seem difficult or even painful to us. The act of continuously practicing self-control is one. Forgiveness is another that immediately comes to mind. How many times have we been tremendously hurt by people in our lives and then as painful or difficult as it feels at the time, have to love them, pray for them, and continue to encourage them anyway? Seems a lot easier to just hate them and move on, right?

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Satan wants you to fear him, to give in to his tactics of pain. He plants himself like that annoying, stubborn and painful calcium deposit in your vein. With God's help, and your diligence to numb yourself to his ways and his tactics, you can and you will desensitize yourself to him, and live on for Christ. Love endures all things.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." (*1Peter 4:12-13*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, Please grant me the strength to endure whatever trials and tribulations I must face, especially for the sake of Christ. Help me to find comfort when things become painful and to constantly condition myself to be aware of the painful tactics of the evil one so that I may never be debilitated or discouraged by them. In Jesus name, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Is there some area in your life that you struggle with, such as overreacting when people say things about you? Make it a point to, before you react to something that bothers you, take a deep breath and consider how your response will affect that person's view of Christianity. In other words, what would Jesus do in that situation and would He be proud of your response to that person?

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MIND

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DAY 22 – WINNING

THE ULTIMATE COMEBACK VICTORY by A.J. Ali

The most electrifying moments in sports are when the home team is down by a substantial margin at halftime, only to have the coach deliver the speech of their life, the home crowd rally in support of their team and the players put on a show of determination and grit culminating in a last second victory on a goal by an unlikely second-string hero. At the sound of the buzzer, the hero slumps, falls and lays prone, sweating and exhausted from her effort. Every ounce of energy poured out into the game, her team and their win.

After the game is over, everyone wants to know what motivated them. What was it the coach said that changed the course of the game from being a blowout loss to an ecstatic celebration of victory? What did the coach see in the young unproven player who lit up the scoreboard and showed the veterans how to win in the most unlikely of circumstances? What drove that player to “leave everything on the field” and play with total abandon, giving her team the victory at great personal cost?

Some two thousand years ago, God the Father sent his only son, Jesus to become man in the flesh and become the unlikely hero in our lives. During his 33 years on earth as a man, Jesus never sinned, never went against the wishes of God the Father, even when times were hard and all around Him people doubted, jeered and plotted against Him.

When Jesus was crucified, many in the crowd and certainly Satan and his demonic army rejoiced, for surely they thought the victory was theirs. And when He was buried, it was as if the final seconds were ticking down on the game clock, and they knew the trophy was theirs. In fact, I can picture Satan high-fiving his most loyal followers and claiming the greatest victory known on earth. But wait! Jesus wasn't finished. His death and burial were only part of the plan God had in store for us.

Jesus claimed the ultimate comeback victory when He rose from the dead and fulfilled prophecy so that who ever believed in Him would not perish, but have everlasting life. You see, Jesus paid a terrible price for us. He left everything on the cross for us. He died for us, so that we would be able to claim victory over Satan and death and rise to be with Him in Heaven. And just like we accept the most unlikely of hero's in a comeback victory at a sporting event, all we have to do is accept Him and the price He paid for us to assure us of victory in our own lives.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go

and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’ (Matthew 28:18-20)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, Thank You for sending Your son Jesus to die on the cross and rise again, claiming victory – the ultimate comeback victory over sin and death. Thank You for Your grace and mercy, allowing me to ask for forgiveness of my sins, through the shed blood of Jesus, and receive eternal life with You. I pray Lord that You would use me also to reach my friends so they too can celebrate the victory of eternal life. In Jesus’ precious name I pray, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Use the analogy of Christ rising from the dead as being the greatest comeback victory the next time you have a post-weekend discussion of sports victories with friends.

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DAY 23 – FORGIVENESS

FORGIVENESS: THE GREATEST CHALLENGE by Vera Jones

During a speaking engagement to a group of youth, I was once asked what the hardest part about being an athlete is. At the time, not giving much thought, I believe I said it was “commitment to training.” Over the years, having spoken to a lot of athletes from all sports, all ages, and while training is a good answer, I no longer believe it to be my true opinion. The hardest part about being an athlete is forgiveness. Forgiving is, in my opinion, the hardest part of being an athlete because it is the hardest part about being human, being Christian, and just plain being.

In college, I was once involved in a post-game brawl. Without going into painful detail, a young woman player on the opposing basketball team did and said some pretty ugly things to some of my teammates. After the game I confronted her on her behavior, and she then said and did some very ugly things to me. Before long, we were on the ground wrestling. Teammates, fans and family from both sides joined in. It was the most shameful part of my career. When the fight was cleared and we were asked to apologize and shake hands, she refused to do so and shouted ugly obscenities. This may have cleared my name as being the instigator, but did not clear my conscious of embarrassment and shame, or my heart of anger and resentment. It took a long time to forgive her and to forgive myself for losing control.

To date, the most moving story I have ever heard was from a young woman athlete I’ve had the privilege to mentor, coach and befriend. She was the victim of childhood suffering from a drug and alcohol abusive father. Imagine a childhood where being awakened at two or three in the morning with a bucket of cold water poured over you in the bed for failing to wash or dry the dinner dishes properly was commonplace. Imagine then returning to sleep on the wet sheets. That was just one of many horror stories with her father. Imagine spending a lifetime learning to forgive.

On as much as off the playing field, our lives are filled with experiences that force us to learn how to forgive and how to love each other no matter what the offense. The official makes a bad call that causes your team to lose the game. Forgive. Your teammates say malicious things about you. Forgive. The coach is mean. Forgive. You make a bad move or a botched play and cause the team to lose. Forgive yourself.

My friend has a brilliant smile and a warm personality, most would never know the past she comes from. I asked how she made it through. She said, “I just tried to let go and let God.” So much was out of her control, and she’s had to repress so many things in an effort to forget, forgive and move on. She admits she has some psychological scars that make

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reconciling and forgiving difficult. But she understands the importance of letting go so she will not be further hindered in her life and God can continue to bless her, heal her and heal the father she always wanted to please and still has a heart to love.

Remember that we all share one true opponent who is evil and knows our weaknesses. As long as we keep an unforgiving heart, we become hardened and eventually will not be able to truly trust, love or hear God's will for us. That is why I now answer, "the hardest thing about being an athlete is forgiving because your greatest challenges on or off the playing field will come with your desire and ability to do so."

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: "If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven – if there was anything to forgive – I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes." (*2Corinthians 2:10-11*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, my prayer is simple though my pain is not. Help me to forgive as You have forgiven me. I rebuke the devil in his schemes to harden my heart. In Christ's name I Thank You for Your mercy and love, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: When someone does or says something to you in the heat of battle on the sports field, forgive them. Not just in your heart, but also let them know that you forgive them. By releasing that forgiveness and making it known, you will experience a freedom that is priceless and you'll open up the door for a positive relationship to develop.

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DAY 24 – WISDOM

BRACE YOURSELF by A.J. Ali

After 10 weeks of being in a leg brace as part of rehabilitating a surgically repaired blown Achilles tendon, it was time to come out of the brace and begin the process of walking again. I say “process” because the simple act of putting one foot in front of another wasn’t so simple anymore. In fact, it took a few days of painful attempts to be able to go for any length of time out of the brace.

During that transition period, it was much simpler to just give up trying to squeeze my swollen foot into a regular shoe, and I could get around much faster and with less pain by putting the brace back on. But, what seemed to be a great immediate fix was actually hindering the healing process. At this stage of my recovery, it was necessary for me to endure a great deal of pain and frustration, and to slow my pace down dramatically, in order for me to move forward. Continuing to rely on the brace to protect my leg and help me get around was detrimental to my physical growth.

We tend to do the same thing in regards to spiritual growth and understanding. People are much more inclined to do the thing that is easy at the time, not what is difficult, what takes longer and what does not impart instant gratification. But in order for us to experience spiritual growth, we must rely not on our own version of a spiritual brace, but on God’s divine understanding of what’s best for us.

It is sometimes necessary for us to experience some pain and to limp along a bit rather than walk at full pace with whatever “brace” we choose. For a single guy, that brace may be living with a woman prior to marriage to ease the pain of loneliness. Or maybe for a woman it might mean wanting to get pregnant to fill a void of not feeling loved. Or maybe it is going out drinking with friends to try to fit in better. These “braces” are temporary fixes at best and will not provide us with lasting peace or joy.

God’s plan for us, that straight and narrow path, may seem to be unfulfilling in our own wisdom or too emotionally painful from the outside looking in, but if we just rely on his wisdom and experience what He has in store for us, we will realize that His way will heal all our wounds, make us stronger and enable us to endure.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.” (*Proverbs 3:5-6*)

POWER PRAYER: Lord, please help me to trust in Your ways and to realize that sometimes the easy way is not necessarily the right way.

Please give me the wisdom to know when to take the path that is more challenging. Please help me through those times, because I do not have the strength to go it alone. Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Psychological studies have shown that the majority of people who are engaged in life threatening bad habits are more likely to continue them than stop even after they find out that the habit is life threatening. Discuss with a friend some bad habit each of you had that resulted in some negative result. Discuss how difficult it was to break out of that bad habit and whether or not you thought it was hurting you while you were engaging in that habit.

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DAY 25 – BOLDNESS

PERFECT CONFIDENCE by Vera Jones

She was only 14 years old. She stood only 4’-11” tall and weighed in at 86 pounds. The daughter of a mechanic from Romania, Nadia Comaneci in one confident moment in Montreal became an Olympic legend. In route to three gold medals at the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal, Canada, Nadia had accomplished the one feat no other gymnast before her had – PERFECTION.

Known for her unparalleled precision, unyielding concentration and a stoic “game-face” expression, Nadia became an instant fan favorite. It was only the first day of Olympic competition when she approached the uneven bars, mounted and began whirling, twirling, flying and freezing until her captivating dismount yielded what became an Olympic first in gymnastics - a score of a perfect 10! More amazing, was this 86-pound sweetheart of the Games had received not just one, but seven perfect scores.

Even today, Nadia Comaneci’s greatness at such a young age was how totally confident and bold she was in her abilities and her chance for winning the gold. When Nadia was asked about her first perfect ten on the uneven bars, her response was, “I knew it was flawless. I have done it 15 times before.” When asked after receiving her first gold medal if she was confident she would win, she simply replied, “Yes, I was sure.” There was nothing cocky or overbearing about her responses. She merely felt perfectly confident about herself, and with good reason as she was well practiced, well coached and well prepared for her defining moment in history.

I’ve heard people when asked if they think they will go to Heaven return various unsure responses. What if we could assume the same confidence in winning our place in Heaven as Nadia Comaneci assumed in winning her place in Olympic History? “Yes, I am sure.” Well, the truth is, we can. In fact, we should! As Christians, it should come quite confidently out of our mouths and out of our hearts that our salvation is already provided for. Jesus Christ loved us all so much that He wanted to leave us no doubt. Our belief in His sacrifice for our sins and salvation is our promise that there is a place for us when our time in this life is over.

Unlike Nadia Comaneci, our performance does not have to be flawless, because Christ’s life was. We are confident that we go to Heaven because we believe in a perfect life Jesus lived, died, and rose again for us, not because of our own “perfect 10’s.”

We are assured of this in Ephesians 2:9 “for it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, so that no one can boast.” We also gain great confidence in God’s love for us in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and

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only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Now that is something to speak confidently and boldly about!

As we continue to walk a Christian life, striving to be exactly who God wants us to be, repenting when we fall short, and making ourselves available for how He wants to use us in His master plan, we sometimes feel we are in a gymnastics competition, on the uneven bars, hoping for a good score. Had Nadia Comaneci fallen, or had her performances in that gymnastics competition wavered even to the slightest fault, would she have been as confident about her chances at victory? Probably not. Disappointingly, we fall many times. But the beauty of God's grace is that though we may not be perfect, we can have perfect confidence in our salvation through our faith in Jesus Christ. As Christians, we already have the victory in hand long before our final dismount!

SCRIPTURE VERSE: “So do not throw away your confidence, it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” (*Hebrews 10:35-36*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, what joy and confidence my spirit is filled with right now! I accept Your promise for salvation in Jesus Christ. I am so humbly grateful for the mercy You shine on me everyday. I am a sinner and my life is far from a “perfect 10.” But You sent Your perfect Son to show You love me anyway, and that Your will for me is to spend eternal life in Heaven with You. For whatever wisdom I may lack and need You to fill me with, this much I do know: I live because Christ died for me. Help me to boldly speak this truth everywhere I go. In Jesus name I Thank You and I pray, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: For the next 24 hours, keep a journal of how many times you fall short of being a “perfect 10” in school, relationships, thoughts and actions. Each time, write down what you could have done differently. At the end of the 24 hours, count up the number of times you've fallen short and go to the Lord in prayer. Repent for any sins you have committed, ask for wisdom to handle difficult situations in the most appropriate way and thank the Lord for making the ultimate sacrifice for us so that we can be made whole in spite of our imperfections. Then, start the next day with humble confidence that your life in eternity is secure knowing that your sins are covered by the blood of Jesus and seek to share that gift with confidence with others in your life.

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DAY 26 – INTEGRITY

WHAT'S ONE MORE MULLIGAN GOING TO MATTER?

by A.J. Ali

It is said that a person's true character is revealed by what he or she does when no one but God is watching. In the movie "The Legend of Bagger Vance," Randolph Juneh, (played by Matt Damon) was playing in an exhibition golf match against two of the most famous golfers in history, Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen, for a \$10,000 prize. His caddy, Bagger Vance, (played by Will Smith), had mysteriously appeared out of the darkness while he was considering participation in the match and cajoled him into playing the game he once loved but had given up after being jaded by the war. In fact, he had given up on just about everything, including himself.

During the two-day, two-round tournament, Juneh began to find the integrity and spirit he once had, but lost. Through encouragement and support from Vance, he shrugged off a first-round disaster to battle back and find his game. The crescendo came on the 18th hole of the final round, after he had come to within a Birdie's chance of winning the tournament. Vance's job complete (he was there to restore the heart, more than the game), he walked off into the sunset much in the same way he had arrived days earlier. Juneh was left to finish the round with only a little boy as caddie. Darkness had fallen. However, they played on aided by headlights of cars lining the fairway. After a tremendous drive, he was about to hit his second shot on the last hole when the ball moved just a bit. According to the rules of golf, if the ball moves away from its original resting position after you've addressed the ball you are penalized one stroke.

Now, no one saw the ball move except for Juneh and the little boy. It would have been easy to ignore the movement, hit an easy shot to the green and go for a birdie for the win. But at that moment, he found himself – and his integrity. Much to the dismay of the boy, he addressed the officials and told them what happened. He had played so well that even the officials and the other two players urged him to reconsider, to blame it on the poor lighting. But he stood firm and took his penalty stroke. He played by the rules even though it may have cost him a victory in the eyes of men. He went on to make a great shot to the green and tap in for par. The match ended in a 3-way tie, but clearly the victory was his.

As Bagger Vance walked off into the distance, sea gulls singing above and the rush of waves from the sea, he paused as a great roar of approval surged from the 18th green. In that same moment, Juneh found his

integrity intact, and therefore that night, he found the champion within. In our lives, we have decisions to make every day as to how we will live. Will we live to serve God from our hearts, or will we live to impress men? Will we live only to win favor in their eyes? Will we display integrity and character that is pleasing to God on the field, in our jobs and in our households? God has a mighty victory in store for us as our reward for integrity. A victory that is worth more than the accolades thrust upon us from a thousand times a thousand men. They are the words “well done, my good and faithful servant.”

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.” (*Ephesians 6:6*)

POWER PRAYER: God, please help me to show integrity in all situations. Help me to be the person You have called me to be. Please take away any impure thoughts that can lead to impure actions. I pray for the ability to serve graciously and with vigor, as a slave to Christ, doing Your will in all things. Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: When you are tempted, try to remember that even if you are alone, God sees your every move and knows what’s in your heart. Don’t think of this as an overbearing rule-enforcing relationship, but more of a loving father who wants the best for his children. He wants to protect you and help you become the best you can be. Remember that God your father is there with you and do the thing that will make Him proud of you. Know that your actions will be rewarded in heaven even if they go unnoticed or unrewarded by men.

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DAY 27 – FORGIVENESS

A TRUE KNOCKOUT by Vera Jones

Their names appear as two of the greatest fighters in the history of Professional Boxing. Greater still, may be their rivalry, arguably declared the most intense of any competitors in any sport. Their names: Muhammed Ali and Joe Frazier.

The first match between these two in 1971 donned recognition as “The Fight of the Century.” It was the first time two undefeated heavyweight fighters met for an undisputed title. The much anticipated bout went beyond the normal rivalry sports often induces, because it became very personal. Before the fight, Ali publicly made references about Frazier, a former slaughterhouse worker, as being ignorant and dumb. Frazier, reasonably angered, was not intimidated -- not before, nor during the fight.

After a brutal compilation of blows and punches thrown by both sides on that historic March 8, 1971, Frazier threw a memorable left hook to Ali’s chin in the final round and dispensed one of only three knockdowns in Muhammed Ali’s entire career. Unanimously, Joe Frazier became the Heavyweight Champion and Ali had suffered his first professional loss.

Three years later, Muhammed Ali would avenge his loss in the ring to his archrival Joe Frazier with a unanimous decision. The pre-fight battles included a near scuffle on the set of a TV show prompted by Frazier ridiculing Ali’s need to go to the hospital. The outcome of this second fight set the stage for what boxing experts consider the biggest, most brutal and most bitter match in professional boxing history, “The Thrilla in Manila.” Some remember the verbal bout better than the actual physical fight in the ring. Ali wasted no time with the “tongue lashings” calling Frazier a “Gorilla” among other insults. He often made a mockery of Frazier’s lack of speaking eloquence. However, Frazier had no problem clearly orating his distaste for Muhammed Ali saying, “I want to hurt him. I don’t want to knock him out. I want to take his heart out.”

Recaps from this final bout on September 30, 1975 between these two great fighters include vivid imagery of Ali knocking Frazier’s mouthpiece out of his mouth and out of the ring in a brutal round 13. It was Ali throwing a blow that completely shut Frazier’s left eye in a haunting round 14, which led Frazier’s trainer to waive the last round, granting Ali the victory. Both fighters had fought to complete exhaustion with Ali actually fainting in his corner at the end of the fight. It is reported that sometime during the Thrilla in Manila”, Ali told his trainer, Angelo Dundee, that he was as “close to dying” as he’d ever been.

There has never been any question about these two fighters’ disdain for each other. Boxing is a brutally physical sport and most trainers and

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fighters alike will tell you there is little room for “love” for your opponents, other than the love to knock them out. Sport has a way of mirroring life. We as humans want to hurt those people who are mean to us, say harsh things about us, are critical, envious and disrespectful in all ways to us. We certainly want to get back at those people who physically injure us. Additionally, the desire to win, to get revenge and to beat our opponents can become distorted and harmful. As athletes, we are expected to show good sportsmanship and “shake our opponents hand” no matter how bitter or brutal the contest. Similarly, yet more importantly, in our Christian life, when we are hurt we need to forgive. We can’t adequately focus on the victories that lie ahead if our vision is clouded with rage and revenge for past losses.

After the 2002 NBA All Star Game, Washington Post sports columnist Michael Wilbon wrote this about his most memorable and touching moment at the game held in Philadelphia (the City of Brotherly Love) and it had nothing to do with basketball stars, but rather two spectators in attendance:

“It came just before tip-off here Sunday, when Joe Frazier steadied the trembling body of his life’s enemy, Muhammed Ali. Just seeing the two of them sitting next to one another in the front row, knowing how Frazier has loathed Ali for almost 30 years, gave me goose bumps. Tenderness between the two of them is a most unimaginable emotion.”

That experience between Ali and Frazier, for those who witnessed it, was probably the biggest knockout either of these two heavyweights could have delivered: an act of love and kindness between bitter rivals. Maybe there is someone in your life who has hurt you and you cannot imagine forgiving. Know that as sure as you do, God will forgive you (Matthew 6:14). So go ahead and open your heart to forgiveness, showing love and humility instead of bitterness or retaliation. Toe to toe in the ring against anger, hurt and confusion, there is no greater knockout.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe your selves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” (*Colossians 3:12-14*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, open my heart today and help me forgive. I confess to You that I am hurt and I am angry but I do not want to sin any further. I am so thankful that You forgive me of my sins when I confess them to You with a sincere heart. Grant me the strength and the

courage to be the loving and forgiving person You want me to be so that I might be an example of how the peace of Christ rules my heart, and not the devices of Satan. I need You; I love You and I Thank You in Jesus' name. Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Is there someone in your life who is a bitter rival, or who has caused you severe pain in the past that you have not let go of? If possible, seek out that person and share the story of Ali-Frazier with them. Talk about the bitter rivalry and the poignant moment at the NBA All-Star Game when all was forgiven. Relate that story and their relationship to your relationship with the other person in your life, and “forgive as the Lord forgave you.” If you have wronged the other person, apologize and ask for their forgiveness.

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DAY 28 – PREPARATION

BRING YOUR “A” GAME! by A.J. Ali

How would you describe your daily life as a Christian? If I asked you to compare your Christian walk to, say, an athlete’s way of approaching their sport, who would you choose to best describe you? Would you be more like professional golfer Vijay Singh, striving for perfection -- or would you be a spiritual version of Rodney Dangerfield from the movie “Caddyshack,” being laughed at by demons who don’t give you any respect? Do the people in your perimeter know that you are striving to be Christlike? Striving for perfection? Or do they think you’re just doing enough to “get by?” In other words, is your walk worthy of respect? Did you bring your “A” game to your Christian life?

As an athlete, you wouldn’t dare think about beginning a season without training first. And it doesn’t stop there. You have to decide what level of commitment you are going to have in your training regimen. Your level of commitment helps to determine your potential. Your level of commitment dictates whether you’ll be early to practice, or late; whether your diet will be designed for performance or for pleasure; whether your equipment is cared for or sloppy and worn out through misuse; and whether you cramp up or stand strong when everyone is physically and emotionally spent and the game is in double overtime.

The same principles apply to your spiritual preparation. Do you study God’s word or barely open it up? Do you spend much more time watching television than you do in prayer and quiet time with the Lord? Do you know your playbook, or are you lost when the conversations get deeper than John 3:16. By the way, if you don’t know what John 3:16 says, now’s a good time to put a bookmark here, close this book, open your bible and read that wonderful verse. It’s a great place to start – but it’s only the beginning if you are to be a fully effective and prepared team player to reach people for Christ.

Strive for perfection. Be prepared. The reason Vijay Singh is so good is clear. He spends so much time in preparation. Of course, one can argue that he is naturally gifted, physically strong and mentally focused, but all the natural ability in the world doesn’t win championships. Championships come through preparation. In order to be a true champion for Christ, you’ve got to commit yourself to having an “A” game, which means:

Always strive to be more like Christ.

Arm yourself with the full armor of God.

Acknowledge God in all that you do.

Act according to His will, not yours.

If you do these things consistently, you will develop a level of preparation fit for a champion -- a true champion for Christ.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.” (*Ephesians 6:10-20*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, please forgive me of my sins. Please cleanse my heart and my mind. I pray for a persistent desire to be more like Christ – to be Christlike in every way. Please help me to bring my A-Game to my Christian walk by reminding me through Your Holy Spirit to follow the guidelines set forth in Ephesians 6. Thank You for Your Word and please help me to instill Your Word in my daily walk. Amen

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: For one week, cut your TV time in half (I know, a fate worse than death) and spend that time in prayer, reading your Bible and discussing with friends verses dealing with preparation.

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DAY 29 – HUMILITY

SHOWMANSHIP VS. SPORTSMANSHIP by Vera Jones

It was bigger than the touchdown. It may have been bigger than the game itself. It was arguably the one thing most remembered in the game between the San Francisco 49ers and the Dallas Cowboys on September 24, 2000. Terrell Owens, one of the NFL's top wide receivers, did something unthinkable in Dallas. After scoring a touchdown, he stomped and danced on the mid-field star, a cherished Dallas Cowboy symbol at Texas Stadium. The controversial, taunting dance was played over and over again in highlights after the game and sparked great sports news debate across the country. To the Dallas Cowboy team and beloved fans, it was an act of great disrespect.

Fast forward to October 2002, and Terrell Owens is in the news yet again, not for an outstanding reception in the end zone, but for another controversial "show-off" antic after one. Owens, in a Monday Night Football game against the Seattle Seahawks, immediately after a touchdown catch, pulled a Sharpie pen out of his sock and autographed the football, then handed it to a fan in the stands. While some of Owens' fans and teammates laughed and seemingly adored the antic, many of the Seahawks fans and players were enraged. Seattle Coach Mike Holmgren described it as "shameful" and "a dishonor to anyone who's ever played the game."

Owens defense was that he was "just trying to be crazy, just trying to have some fun." While there is a lot to be said positively for individual or team spirit and celebration of great feats and victory, there is a lot more to be said for humility. There is no harm in being proud of and even celebrating your achievements. But pride becomes sin when you mock others or exalt yourself in any form above them, even in the good name of fun and sport. Remember that all good gifts come from God including our talents and ability to score game winning touchdowns. Our feeling a need to show off, taunt, tease or become bigger than the game itself comes from somewhere else.

There is ongoing debate over what kind of celebration is too much. At what point does one cross the line? Most would believe a team rallying high-five is OK. Others see no problem with a choreographed dance, a spiked ball in the opponent's face, or a verbal taunt or suggestion that the other team is inferior. We often think it's all in good fun - until it provokes bitter feelings or even a fight. It is a wise man who understands when to forego showmanship for sportsmanship.

Terrell Owens is certainly not alone in his antics, and the truth is there are plenty of people who find delight and humor in those who show off. Perhaps we need to evaluate where we stand as a culture on such acts.

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Do you wonder where you should stand personally as a Christian? Well, do you imagine Jesus giving a high five to his disciples and signaling that he is “No. 1” after he healed the sick or signing autographs in the midst of feeding thousands? I certainly doubt he danced a jig when he died on the cross for our salvation and then rose again, defeating death! I can’t imagine a single feat greater than that. It’s just a thought. Psalm 37:11 reminds us “the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.” When in doubt, practice peace, not pride.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: “...All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another because, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (*1Peter 5:5*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, Thank You for all my gifts and talents. I recognize I can do nothing without You and all things with You. Forgive me when I am sinfully proud. Please grant me the wisdom to remain humble and thankful in all I do and to encourage others to do the same. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Discuss your favorite sports heroes with friends and pick out the common traits they display. Compare those traits with the traits shown in 2 Peter 1:5-8 and discuss how you can increase the measure of those traits in your life and in the way you compete.

PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 29

MIND

BODY

SPIRIT

DAY 30 – PERSEVERANCE

NEVER GIVE UP! FINISH THE RACE! by A.J. Ali

Indomitable adj. Incapable of being overcome, subdued, or vanquished; unconquerable.

That sums up Tiger Woods' victory at the 2008 U.S. Open. I witnessed every stroke of the tournament with complete and total awe. It was the Thrilla in Manila, Michael Jordan's "flu game" and Braveheart all rolled into one. As a writer, I was mesmerized. As a golfer, I was awestruck. Unfolding before me on the television was a script being written stroke by stroke. Driver as keyboard. Putter as pen. An epic battle of a man's mind versus his body, versus the competition and versus the very ground he walked on. I contemplated making that viewing the last sporting event I would ever watch. And 24 hours later, I regretted not making that decision as I watched the Lakers wilt like drunken lettuce against the Celtics. On Wednesday morning, I immersed myself in highlights of Tiger's unforgettable display of indomitable will to sear them deeper into my memory so that maybe, just maybe, I can use those memories one day to draw down on his kind of strength to sink a putt (or maybe to save my life if ever attacked by Ninja Sumo gangsters in some dark alley).

Three days after Tiger's victory the magnitude of his accomplishment fully revealing itself to me. Tiger had climbed golf's Mount Everest with a torn ACL and a double stress fracture of his left tibia! He stood toe to toe with all comers for five days and on the final day, in an arena filled with more than 20,000 fans, with no competitors left standing, he held the trophy high. He stood alone, triumphant, even then not letting on the extent of his injuries lest another rise up to fight him.

All week long during the tournament telecast, Nike ads featured scenes of Tiger and his late father, with an Earl Woods' voiceover: "I'd say, 'Tiger, I promise you that you'll never meet another person as mentally tough as you in your entire life.' And he hasn't. And he never will." That wasn't a commercial. It was prophesy fulfilled.

There is a story about a runner who came from a tiny African nation to compete in the Olympics. He didn't win the race. In fact, most people who watched him compete thought he would never even finish the race. He struggled and fought and somehow stayed on his feet long after his legs and the rest of his body had given out. After everyone else had crossed the line and most of the spectators had left, he managed to cross the finish line. Battered and exhausted, cramped and in excruciating pain he answered the

reporters questions with “They didn’t send me here to start the race, they sent me here to finish the race.”

In the 2005 Preakness horse race, the second leg of the famed Triple Crown, a similar story unfolded, except with exceptional results. A horse by the name of Afleet Alex that came from a little known farm, owned by a quickly-assembled team of average people, had a great year and entered the race as a favorite to win. This horse was not from one of the famed and fabled breeding farms, nor did he have a majestic lineage that one would expect. In fact, when he was born, his mare, Maggy Hawk was unable to produce milk for him, depriving him of a vital nutrient called Colostrum, which protects the newborn horse from disease. He had to be bottle fed until a nurse mare could be found 12 days later. He had only a 10% chance of survival and he beat the odds. He was described as “a scrawny, nasty looking thing” by breeder John Silverland. With all of the odds against him, Afleet Alex managed to thrive and in his third year he came to the Pimlico race track ready and eager for victory. When the race started, Afleet Alex was in the pack, running a respectable race. At the three-quarter turn, the jockey onboard Scrapy T switched hands with the whip and caused Scrapy T to veer into the smaller Afleet Alex. He stumbled, no, fell to his knees at a full gallop, but miraculously managed to rise up – horse and jockey Jeremy Rose intact. A new race was born. With a thunderous and surreal burst of energy, Afleet Alex sprinted forward, overtaking every last horse in front and charged to an unbelievable 4 ¾ length victory. With a “Never Give Up!, Finish the Race!” spirit, Afleet Alex won the Preakness and won the hearts of millions watching on television.

While writing this book, I came home one day to find my wife Jane standing in the hallway of our home. I knew instantly from her posture and facial expression that something was wrong. “What is it?” I asked. She said “I found a lump.” Time stopped at that instant, the memory of that moment forever engraved in my mind. As much as we both wanted it to be nothing, we both felt deep down that life had changed for us at that moment. That day, April 2, 2005, the day after April Fool’s Day, was the last day I would grumble about the high price of our health insurance. Jane had left her job at the end of 2004 to work full time with our sports marketing business and thank God we had secured the best health insurance we could find. After weeks of tests, then a painful lumpectomy procedure, bad news was delivered. Jane had stage two breast cancer. Another painful procedure followed to remove more tissue and lymph nodes. The tests of the lymph nodes showed that the cancer could possibly spread and a regimen of chemotherapy and radiation was strongly recommended and undertaken. Three years later, at the end of 2008, she is healthy with no signs of cancer but the process was exhausting, painful and emotionally draining beyond belief. Every day we wake up, we thank God for being alive, we thank God

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for each other and we thank God for his grace, mercy and healing powers. There was a time many years ago when we weren't so thankful. Our marriage was, as they say, on the rocks. After years of selfish behavior on both of our parts and allowing the devil to gain a foothold in our lives and in our marriage, we reached a point where we were stumbling and falling. Like the African runner or Afleet Alex in the Preakness, all signs were that we were going down – fast and hard! But, thankfully, we surrendered our pride and allowed others to help us with our struggle. There are many people to thank who stood by us, but namely our good friends Rod and Sheri Hairston (Rod is the chaplain for the NFL's Baltimore Ravens) who guided us through a very painful "last-hope" counseling session in their home where tears were abundant and the last immature barbs were foolishly and desperately thrown and seeds were planted by their example that changed our hearts against the grain of our will ("not my will by thy will be done"). There was also an email I received from my great friend Dr. George Miller, president of Davis College at that time. George and his wife Elaine were rocks of friendship to Jane and me through our very rough times. Their love towards us never showed favoritism and never wavered. His email to me on February 6, 2002 simply read "AJ, remember that God does not want you and Jane to give up. NEVER GIVE UP! Our prayers and love are with you. George." I printed that email and kept it in my daytimer – and do to this day. Those simple words let me know to "Never Give Up!, Finish the Race!" Let me say that Jane and I, through the grace of God, not only mended our relationship but made it stronger than ever. When we found out she had breast cancer, we were able to stand and fight it together. I know what Tiger felt inside as he was gutting out his near-impossible victory. I know what that runner felt like as he stumbled towards the finish line. I know what the jockey felt as his horse refused to fall, kept him in the saddle and exploded to victory! I know that God has great things in store for us. Jane was a brave soul throughout her test. Her courage inspired me and God gave me the strength to be there for her when she felt weak and defeated. Together, we refused to fall. We refused to give up. We will finish this race together to serve His purpose.

When God sent His son Jesus to earth, He didn't do it without purpose. He sent Him not to start the race, but to finish it! He did it for a reason – so that we might be saved. But Jesus just coming to earth wasn't enough. He had to pay a price. He had to die for our sins and rise again so that we might have a way, of entering the kingdom of heaven. Jesus endured horrible, indescribable pain on the cross. There came a point when He actually began to sweat blood from the physical and mental agony. He

could have called on a legion of angels at any time to pull Him down and stop the pain, but He didn't. Jesus loved us so much, He loved you so much, that He endured the pain and finished the race. As Christians, we are also called to finish the race. No matter how hard life is, or what obstacles come our way, we are to remember that we are here for a reason. God wants us to be a light in the darkness. God wants us to finish the race. By finishing the race, we can be crowned True Champions.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 'Make level paths for your feet,' so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed." (*Hebrews 12:1-13*)

POWER PRAYER: Dear God, please give me strength to finish the race. I pray for my family and friends to also finish the race victorious. Thank You for lifting me up when I was falling. Thank You for enabling me to stand when I didn't know how I could stand. I pray for Your continued guidance and blessing to enable me to help others also finish the race. Amen.

CROSS TRAINING TIPS: Is there someone in your life who needs you and you have not made yourself available? Take some time and pray for forgiveness and for that relationship to be made whole. It's not just that they might need you – you might need them in order for you to complete God's will for your life. Prepare yourself for the times to come by making

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those relationships right and allowing yourself to be used by God. Never give up. Finish the race as a True Champion!

PERSONAL JOURNAL – DAY 30

MIND _____

BODY _____

SPIRIT _____

GO DEEP!

Want to know more about a particular principle? Here's where you can find additional scripture verses on each spiritual principle covered in the book:

Spiritual Principle	Scripture Verses
Anger	Exodus 34:6, Psalm 30:5, Proverbs 15:1, Proverbs 22:24, Proverbs 29:11, Proverbs 29:22, 1 Corinthians 13:5, James 1:19
Authority	Matthew 9:6, Matthew 28:18, Romans 13:1, 1 Timothy 2:2, Hebrews 13:17
Boldness	Psalm 138:3, Proverbs 21:29, Proverbs 28:1, Acts 4:29
Commitment	1 Kings 8:61, 2 Chronicles 16:9, Psalm 37:5, 1 Peter 4:19
Encouragement	Romans 15:4-5, 1 Corinthians 14:3, 2 Corinthians 7:13, Philippians 2:1, 2 Thessalonians 2:16, Philemon 1:7, Hebrews 12:5
Endurance	Romans 15:4-5, 2 Corinthians 1:6, 2 Corinthians 6:4, Colossians 1:11, 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 1 Timothy 6:11, 2 Timothy 3:10, Titus 2:2, Revelation 1:9, Revelation 13:10, Revelation 14:12
Faith & Works	James 2:14, James 2:18, James 2:22, James 2:24
Fear	Deuteronomy 10:12, 1 Samuel 12:24, Job 28:28, Psalm 2:11, Psalm 23:4, Psalm 27:1, Psalm 27:3, Psalm 33:18, Psalm 34:7, Psalm 34:9, Psalm 46:2, Psalm 86:11, Psalm 103:11, Psalm 111:5, Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 1:7, Proverbs 8:13, Proverbs 9:10, Proverbs 15:16, Proverbs 29:25, Isaiah 33:6, Isaiah 41:13, Revelation 14:7
Forgiveness	Psalm 130:4, Matthew 26:28, Acts 2:38, Ephesians 1:7, Colossians 1:14, Hebrews 9:22
Giving	Psalm 100; Matthew 6:4, 2 Corinthians 8:7, Hebrews 13:1
Honesty	Proverbs 16:11, Proverbs 24:26, Romans 12:17; Philippians 4:8
Humility	Psalm 45:4, Proverbs 11:2, Proverbs 18:12, Proverbs 22:4, Zephaniah 2:3, Philippians 2:3, Colossians 2:23, Colossians 3:12, James 3:13, 1 Peter 5:5
Integrity	Nehemiah 7:2, Job 2:3, Job 2:9, Job 6:29, Psalm 7:8, Psalm 25:21, Psalm 78:72, Proverbs 10:9, Proverbs 11:3, Proverbs 13:6, Proverbs 17:26, Proverbs 19:1
Pain	1 Chronicles 4:10, Matthew 4:24, 1 Peter 2:19, Revelation 21:4
Perseverance	Romans 5:3-4, 2 Corinthians 12:12, 2 Thessalonians 3:5, Hebrews 12:1, James 1:3-4, James 5:11, 2 Peter 1:6, Revelation 2:19
Preparation	2 Timothy 2:21, 1 Peter 3:15, John 14:2-3, 1 Peter 1:13
Self Control	Exodus 32:25, Proverbs 29:11, Romans 6:20, 1 Thessalonians 4:4
Spiritual Gifts	1 Corinthians 12:1, 1 Corinthians 14:1, 1 Corinthians 14:12
Strength	Exodus 15:2, Deuteronomy 6:5, 2 Samuel 22:33, 1 Chronicles 16:11, Psalm 18:1-2, Psalm 18:32, Psalm 21:13, Psalm 28:7, Psalm 29:11, Psalm 46:1, Psalm 105:4, Psalm 118:14,

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	Proverbs 24:5, Proverbs 30:25, Jeremiah 9:23, Jeremiah 17:5, Mark 12:30, Mark 12:33, Luke 10:27, Philippians 4:13, 1 Timothy 1:12
Training	1 Corinthians 9:25, Ephesians 6:4, 1 Timothy 4:8, 2 Timothy 3:16
Trust	Psalm 31:14, Psalm 37:3, Psalm 52:8, Psalm 56:11, Psalm 91:2, Psalm 143:8, Proverbs 3:5, Proverbs 28:25, Isaiah 12:2, Isaiah 26:4, Jeremiah 39:18, Romans 15:13, 1 Corinthians 4:2
Winning	Proverbs 3:4, 1 Corinthians 9:19-22, Galatians 1:10, Ephesians 6:6, Philippians 3:8, Philippians 3:14, Colossians 3:22, 1 Thessalonians 4:12
Wisdom	Genesis 3:6, 1 Kings 4:29-30, 1 Kings 10:24, Job 38:36-37, Psalm 110:10, Proverbs 1:7, Proverbs 1:20, Proverbs 2:6, Proverbs 2:12, Proverbs 3:13, Proverbs 3:19, Proverbs 3:21, Proverbs 4:5-7, Proverbs 4:11, Proverbs 5:1, Proverbs 8:11-12, Proverbs 9:12, Proverbs 10:13, Proverbs 10:23, Proverbs 10:31, Proverbs 11:2, Proverbs 13:10, Proverbs 16:16, Proverbs 19:11, Proverbs 21:30, Proverbs 23:4, Proverbs 24:3, Ecclesiastes 2:13, Ecclesiastes 7:19, Jeremiah 9:23, Luke 2:52, 1 Corinthians 1:25, 1 Corinthians 2:5, Ephesians 1:17, James 1:5, James 3:13

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All net proceeds benefit Marathon of Miracles' cancer wellness programs.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

A.J. ALI

A.J. Ali is an award-winning producer, writer, host, brand-builder and cancer wellness advocate. He has built his entrepreneurial career based on the principle of making a difference in the world daily. A.J. is the Founder of Eclipse Sports & Entertainment, LLC, marketing, public relations and business development company that helped charities raise \$5 million between 1999 and 2009. He was selected to the Baltimore Business Journal's 2003 40-Under-40 Emerging Leaders list and guided Eclipse to becoming one of the fastest growing and largest minority-owned companies in Baltimore in 2005. Prior to starting Eclipse in 1999, A.J. crafted a long and successful career in sports marketing and public relations.

From 1983 to 1987, he served his country honorably in the U.S. Air Force, working public relations and playing soccer for the Air Force Team. A.J. has more than 27 years of experience in the field of sports and entertainment based business development. He has owned two professional soccer teams and has developed hundreds of sponsorship deals on behalf of clients and his sports business interests. His vast experience in cause-event marketing and relationship marketing has made him a sought-after speaker, writer and consultant. He has written, produced and been featured in numerous print, television and radio programs including various commercials, dozens of PSA's, the POSITIVE CHOICE mentoring video featuring acclaimed TV host James "JB" Brown and other programming.

An accomplished writer, his "On the Tee with A.J. Ali" inspirational column appears in numerous publications and online. He plans to publish a business golf book, based on his highly successful business golf workshop curriculum, in 2010. His writing pursuits also include music, TV and film. His musical lyrics stir the soul and inspire positive change. His recent work includes writing and producing the song "Through the Darkness, Into the Light" and producing the compilation music CD "Survivor Celebration" to benefit breast cancer survivors. The song is available at www.survivorcelebration.com. His 2007 Survivor Celebration campaign helping cancer survivors in the U.S. won the Hollywood Fame Awards "National Community Service Award." The success of Survivor Celebration has led to an opportunity for A.J. to develop and host the Survivor Celebration TV Show.

Active in the community, A.J. and his wife Jane are co-founders of the nonprofit Marathon of Miracles (MOM). The MOM mantra is "A Christian cancer outreach and wellness organization offering hope for the mind, body and spirit by inspiring, educating and empowering survivors and others that wish to thrive." Mom is creating a cancer wellness center in Malibu and beginning a 20-year campaign to plant 10,000 Miracle Wellness Gardens worldwide to teach people holistic wellness and the role of foods in fighting cancer. They served together on the Presidential Advisory Council of Davis College, the third oldest bible college in the United States. A.J. is the founder of Praise Partners (www.praisepartners.com), a Christian business-networking ministry. He is co-founder of SAVE, a violence prevention charitable Foundation that has worked with Congressmen, NBA players such as Carmelo Anthony, trauma surgeons, the Maryland Governor and other national, state and local officials. He serves on the board of directors for Life Connections Intl. (www.bringlife.org). A.J. participates in sports ministry programs with professional and student athletes across the nation. He has performed chapel services for several professional sports teams, including the Pittsburgh Steelers, New York Jets, Baltimore Orioles and Philadelphia Phillies. A.J. was the second African American graduate of the highly esteemed Sacramento Entrepreneurship Academy in 1989. His community involvement also includes

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being active in his church, Crossover Ministries in the Los Angeles area. He is the proud father of Sierra Ali.

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VERA JONES

Audiences large and small, across the country have been captivated and motivated by this “naturally gifted” public speaker, award-winning television and radio broadcaster, and Hall of Fame athlete. Vera is most notably known for her extensive background in broadcasting serving as a National Collegiate Athletic Association and WNBA Basketball Color Analyst and Reporter. She has been an on-air personality at several radio stations from New York to Florida earning the South Carolina Broadcaster's Association "Personality of the Year" in 1994. Over recent years, she has groomed her training, mentoring and leadership skills in the arena of collegiate coaching. She currently spends the NCAA Women's Basketball season broadcasting for the Big Ten Network **and is the author of *Play Through the Foul - Basketball Lessons for the Game of Life*, anticipated to be published July of 2009.**

A 2002 inductee into the Syracuse University Orange Plus Hall of Fame, Vera was also recognized as the 1988 Big East Women's Basketball conference Scholar-Athlete of the Year. She earned both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Syracuse University's renowned Newhouse School of Public Communications.

In addition to more than 20 years of fulfillment as a broadcasting and media professional, her diverse background has invited her to wear many other exciting hats: coach, teacher, academic advisor, trainer, sales and promotions manager, program director, writer, real estate agent, actress, and stand-up comedienne.... As a communicator, she's truly been there, done that! Vera's “first big speech” came when she was asked to deliver the commencement address in front of an audience of over 2,000 at her high school graduation. Over two decades and hundreds of public speeches later, her “gift of gab” is still in demand.

Vera's penchant for empowering and entertaining has been cultivated by employment and training opportunities by prominent corporate, media and academic industry leaders. They include Procter & Gamble, Pulte Homes, ESPN, Fox Sports, Madison Square Garden, NBA/WNBA, NCAA, Syracuse University, Indiana University, the University of Dayton, and the Paul Robeson Performing Arts Company. Using a unique and interactive blend of wit and wisdom, Vera has parlayed her wealth of personal and professional experiences into a motivational public speaking and communication training career as President of Vera's VoiceWorks, LLC. Thus, not only are people gratifyingly discovering why Vera's voice works, but how confidently and effectively theirs can work too!

Vera joyfully resides in Jacksonville, FL with her 11-year old son Andrew.

Email Vera at coachvjones@aol.com.



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- Dan Wood

Executive Director, National Christian College Athletic Association

"Al, I'm buying the first 100 for my ministry with the team. This is an excellent resource – clear, applicable, well written! You and Vera have written one of the most significant and useful devotionals I've seen in a long time. Ravens players and coaches will love this tool for training camp! I'm excited to see it go to print and I'm honored to be a friend of one of the co-authors, a true champion indeed."

- Pastor Rod Hairston

Team Chaplain, Baltimore Ravens

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The True Champion's 30-Day Challenge is an invitation to anyone seeking to energize their mind, body and spirit. Read insightful sports-based daily devotions and put the simple action steps to work in your life. By taking the challenge, you'll replace three bad habits that hold back your mind, body and spiritual growth with three good habits that will propel you into a successful life as a True Champion in just one month. Take the challenge today and transform your life! Get enough copies for your entire team and learn to win on and off the field together.



AJ. Ali is an award-winning producer, writer, host, brand-builder and cancer wellness advocate. He has built his entrepreneurial career based on the principle of making a difference in the world daily and currently serves as Co-Founder of the Marathon of Miracles cancer wellness not-for-profit organization. An avid golfer, his "On the Tee with AJ. Ali" blog, magazine column and golf programs help cancer survivors throughout the world by raising awareness and funds.



Vera Jones is a naturally gifted public speaker, award-winning television and radio broadcaster, and Hall of Fame athlete. Vera is most notably known for her extensive background in broadcasting serving as a National Collegiate Athletic Association and WNBA Basketball Color Analyst and Reporter. She is the author of *Play Through the Foul - Basketball Lessons for the Game of Life*, published July of 2009.

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