

STEEVE

YOUNG

ON BECOMING A SPIRITUAL ATHLETE

FIRST, LET ME THANK BYU LAW SCHOOL, DEAN RASBAND, PRESIDENT WORTHEN, AND PARTICULARLY FORMER DEAN REESE HANSEN. DEAN HANSEN HAD THE VISION TO NAVIGATE MY ADMISSION TO LAW SCHOOL THROUGH ROUGH SEAS BY PETITIONING THE ABA SO THAT I COULD ATTEND ONLY WINTER SEMESTER LAW CLASSES FROM 1988 TO 1994. TWO OF THOSE SEMESTERS I WAS FOUR WEEKS LATE BECAUSE I WAS PLAYING WITH THE 49ERS IN THE SUPER BOWL. ALL THOSE YEARS I WAS LATE TO THE FIRST CLASSES OF THE SEMESTER BECAUSE OF PLAYOFF GAMES THAT WENT DEEP INTO JANUARY. I WOULD ATTEND CLASS THE DAY AFTER THE SUPER BOWL, AND JIM GORDON OR RICHARD WILKINS WOULD ASK FOR MY NOTE FROM HOME FOR BEING LATE.

ILLUSTRATION BY EVGENY PARFENOV



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There were many benefits of attending law school, but one negative aspect was the number of times that a defensive player would hit me late and then yell, “What are you going to do about it—sue me?” I would always answer that I had retained the chief legal counsel for the NFL. That would create enough doubt to hold them back for a few plays. I am very proud of my JD. My dad was very proud of my JD too. Throughout my 18 seasons of professional football he kept asking, “When are you going to get a real job?” He pushed me to be prepared. He said, “What are you going to do when the day comes that you aren’t playing football anymore?” Law school has been a platform for success in my life as I have transitioned from professional football. The day after I retired in 2000 I woke up to the realization that the one thing I was really, really good at was over. Having my law degree opened up opportunities, like my becoming a partner in a large private equity company, that would have been impossible without it.

THE NEW JOE MONTANA

While I was attending law school in the winter I was playing football in the NFL from July through January. In 1991, in the midst of my law school experience, I was thrust into the starting lineup for the San Francisco 49ers. Joe Montana was hurt, and I held the reins of the most successful team of the decade. The feeling of responsibility was enormous. I struggled with every fiber of my being to try to keep the flame of success going, but the team was floundering. It seemed as though all my efforts fell short of the “Joe Montana standard.” I had to remind teammates and fans that Joe had thrown an interception once and had actually lost a game or two. It was in this environment that an op-ed was written in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: “The Gulf War: It’s Steve Young’s Fault.” I mean this is as tough as it gets—like trying to replace Jim McMahon at BYU with his 83 NCAA records. It was a frustrating time.

I found myself on a plane from Salt Lake City to San Francisco sitting next to Stephen R. Covey. I opened up to him and unloaded all of my frustration and fear about how hard it was, how difficult it was to please so many people, and how I wasn’t living up to their expectations. “There are too many guys on the field—11 is unmanageable,” I told him. “There are too many variables of focus and preparation with so many people. I should have played golf or tennis.”

TOO MANY PEOPLE AND A DIFFICULT PLATFORM

He agreed that it was a difficult situation no one would walk into voluntarily. He told me that the optimal number for efficient interaction with people in a group is seven. Once an eighth person is added, it becomes geometrically more difficult to work efficiently. He

agreed that 11 was very difficult to manage. But he also said that working with “too many people” offers the most rewarding outcomes in life—the very experience we need with agency is being balanced with opposition. Succeeding in large numbers is the point of it all. It is difficult, yes, but also “messy but joyous,” as he put it.

He reminded me that I had a wonderful platform from which to succeed with “too many people.” I had the greatest coach in Bill Walsh, a once-in-a-lifetime mentor in Joe Montana, and an organization that was the best in football. I was looking at an opportunity to find out how good I could be on a platform that was a dream to most people.

I told him that I hadn’t thought of it that way. It flipped a switch in my mind. After that I felt relieved and invigorated to see all of my negative perceptions as challenges that helped me discover how good I could be as a leader, a teammate, and a quarterback. I was really facing a perfect storm of opportunity.

I understood, and it changed me for the better and stayed with me for the rest of my football career. I remember racing to the practice field the next day hoping that I hadn’t been moaning so much that I had lost my job. I was looking forward to this opportunity to find out how good I could be not just as a physical athlete but as a spiritual athlete too. It became a quest beyond winning and losing; it was about my growth as a human being. It didn’t become easier; it just became more clearly worth it for much bigger reasons.

The call of a spiritual athlete is gaining perspective from higher vistas. It is refining and pruning our worst parts and honing and strengthening our best parts as we accept the difficult circumstances ahead. In fact, just as Stephen Covey explained, it’s the degree of difficulty we tackle that creates the refining steel of our spirits. By eternal decree, the formula of “too many people” coupled with incessant opposition and then agency to choose our reaction to every breadth of experience becomes the pruning force for good.

SPIRITUAL ATHLETICISM

Spiritual athleticism is driven by a conscious self-awareness. The sacrament helps in this process. It can become a valuable weekly

evaluation between the Lord and us in which we ask for His help to see clearly—“What lack I yet?”¹—and then seek His help to achieve the changes that are necessary.

A goal at my private equity firm is to recruit the best and brightest people from the top schools in the country. But despite the incredible intelligence and expertise of the candidates, some are missing the ability to make the subtle and not-so-subtle day-to-day course adjustments for navigating the intricacies of “too many people” and a difficult platform. The algorithms of math are easy compared to the algorithms of human interaction. The ability to look beyond ourselves, to be in the moment, to see the dynamics of the situation, and to respond accordingly seems to be more difficult than finding an open receiver. Developing the ability to gain perspective is essential.



BEING IN THE MOMENT WITH CHARITY

This idea of handling dynamics “in the moment” was brought home to me many times by the great Reggie White. Reggie was *the* dominant defensive lineman of my generation. Six feet six inches and at least 300 pounds, he was as fast as the wide receivers and as strong as anyone on the field. He played most of his career with the Green Bay Packers, and he easily entered the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He was a devout Christian and his team’s spiritual leader.

For most of the 1990s, the 49ers and the Packers were locked in a battle to see which team would go to the Super Bowl each year. These games were always heavy with implications for the championship. *Frenzied* would not overstate the atmosphere around 49er-Packer games during that time. When we played the Packers, the number-one concern was always how to stop Reggie. We would try with two or three or even four players dedicated to slowing him down, but Reggie was a fierce competitor and was almost impossible to stop.

Unfortunately, I saw him a lot. If he wasn’t sacking me for a loss, he was tackling me as I scrambled. But what I remember is that he was never vicious. The atmosphere of the game, with all that adrenaline, sometimes got to us. Pressure brings out stuff we would rather hide. Reggie, however, would knock me down and immediately transition into a friend. Reaching out his hand, he would say, “Sorry about that. You okay?” or “How’s your family? Say hi to your dad for me.” My dad and Reggie had become friends when we were rookies going into the USFL. Reggie had a lot of questions about agents, and my dad, who was a corporate attorney, was a trusted resource for him.

Honestly, there were times I could tell that Reggie had forgotten where he was. I had to remind him that as much as I wanted to chat, I had to get back to work. I would tell him, “Let’s not meet again until after the game, and then we can catch up.”

Despite those awkward exchanges that I remember so well, over time I have come to understand what an incredible non-football talent Reggie had acquired: the ability to be in the moment—and when I say that, I mean really in the moment—having every ounce of you physically and emotionally invested at that moment on the field, and then to transition from competitor to friend so completely. He was above the moment, looking down and seeing it in all of its potential for good. I guess you could say it in another way: Reggie knew how to be in the moment but not of the moment. It takes spiritual discipline. It also demands eternal perspective to see beyond yourself, not just in quiet reflection but right now, in the din of play.

Steve Young (8) scored touchdowns by running, passing, and receiving when the Cougars defeated Missouri 21–17 in the 1983 Holiday Bowl. BYU’s game-winning touchdown came on a halfback pass from Eddie Stinnett to Young that barely cleared the outstretched arms of a Missouri defender.

As Latter-day Saints we are constantly urged to see our personal interactions through the eyes of charity. We know that charity in this context is not simply the charity of giving our material goods to others. Charity is the pure love of Christ—to see others as God Himself sees them. This is not gained by any earthly act or acts. It can only come as an endowment from our Heavenly Father as we learn to love His Son with all our hearts and our fellow beings with this same fervor.

Charity allows us to see opponents, litigants, and adversaries for their own eternal potential. As an integral part of our profession as lawyers, we are called to be adversarial. It takes a spiritual athlete to be adversarial and charitable at the same moment. Reggie was a living example of this gift. Reggie has been gone now for a few years, but he is sorely missed and often remembered. The more I live, the more situations I encounter in which charity becomes the defining element of the interaction. This quest for the endowment of charity from on high is the most worthy of efforts.



Steve Young (8) is pressured by Green Bay Packers defensive lineman Reggie White (92) during an NFL playoff game on January 11, 1998, in San Francisco.

WORKING THROUGH MISTREATMENT

But there is another degree of difficulty beyond the competitive and adversarial bruising; there are the deeper wounds of mistreatment, resentment, grudges, and ill will of every sort. These are the things that are not self-inflicted but that are done to us. How can we carry charity into every corner of hurt? I turn to the Old Testament and the story of Abigail and David. James Ferrell, in his book *The Peacegiver*, recounts this interaction so well. Abigail, wife of Nabal, had come to intercept David as he and his men sped toward Nabal's home to exact revenge.

Nabal had abandoned David and his men at a pivotal moment, even though David had spent time and effort protecting Nabal's flock. I agree with Ferrell that "being mistreated is the most important condition of mortality, for eternity itself depends on how we view those who mistreat us."²

Abigail brought provisions to David and pled for his forgiveness for Nabal's mistreatment. Abigail said:

I beg for my house [Nabal], yes, but for thee also, my lord, that this shall not be an offence of heart unto thee, either that thou hast shed blood causeless, or that my lord hath avenged himself. For the Lord will certainly make thee a sure house because my lord fighteth the battles of the Lord, and evil hath not been found in thee all thy days. So it ever may be so, my lord, I pray thee, forgive the trespass of thine handmaid.³

Abigail was begging David to not sin by avenging his mistreatment. She was placing herself between Nabal and David, hoping to dissuade David from seeking revenge against Nabal.

Ferrell wrote:

The atonement is as much for the benefit of the sinned against—the victim of sin—as for the sinner. . . . It suggests also that one of the effects of sin is to invite those who have been sinned against—David, in this case—to become sinful themselves, and that the atonement provides the escape from such provocation to sin.⁴

PHOTO CREDITS
Pages 18, 19, 21: Mark Philbrick
Page 20: AP Photo/Greg Trott

A higher level of spiritual athleticism is to realize that we cannot righteously hold resentment, grudges, or ill will for mistreatment we have suffered. The Savior stands between us in these interactions. Ferrell wrote:

The Lord, by taking the sins of our Nabals upon his head, extends us the same mercy. “Upon me let this iniquity be,” he pleads. “Let me deal with it if there is any dealing to be done. But you, my dear son or dear daughter, let it go. Let me take it, as I already have done. Forgive.”

... When we withhold forgiveness from others, ... we are in effect saying that the atonement alone was insufficient to pay for this sin. We are holding out for more. We are finding fault with the Lord’s offering. We are in essence demanding that the Lord repent of an insufficient atonement. So when we fail to forgive another, it is as if we are failing to forgive the Lord—who ... needs no forgiveness.⁵

We here need to become the best spiritual athletes as we negotiate the difficult balance of being in the world but not of the world among “too many people” and on the platform that is ours. It sounds like I need to go stretch my spiritual hamstring just saying that. We are asked to wrestle with justice and mercy and, coincidentally, to deftly work with the ironies of life with way “too many people.”

GAINING TRUE PERSPECTIVE

I want to close with a story about perspective on the football field. I am six feet tall. Linemen are taller than that. There were times I couldn’t see an open receiver because of the linemen looming over me. I couldn’t jump up on stilts; I couldn’t spring up and look around and throw. This happened to me on more than one occasion. I would see Jerry Rice—my favorite receiver—just moments before. I knew he was headed in the right direction and I knew where he was going, so I decided to throw the ball—blindly, in faith, with only a gut feeling. I started doing that more and actually became very good at it. Looking back, some of my greatest memories on the football field were ones where I would drop back to pass and couldn’t see the receiver, but I knew where he was going and I would throw anyway.

I remember in Atlanta one time when I dropped back to pass and got knocked down. Just as I was getting hit I threw the ball, even though I couldn’t see Jerry. He caught the pass while I was at the bottom of the pile. I remember thinking to myself as the crowd quieted and we looked like we’d won the game, “This is the greatest moment of my career; I’ve thrown another ball blind.”

What’s interesting about this is that it was never in the newspaper. People didn’t say, “Oh, Steve Young throws blind.” It was always something that was internal. Perspective is gained in incremental moments as we gain the perspective of the Savior and become a spiritual athlete. [cm](#)

NOTES

- 1 Matthew 19:20.
- 2 James L. Ferrell, *The Peacegiver: How Christ Offers to Heal Our Hearts and Homes* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2004), 33.
- 3 *Id.* at 36–37; emphasis added; see 1 Samuel 25:28, 31.
- 4 *Id.* at 52.
- 5 *Id.* at 65–66.

STEVE YOUNG

This bio was delivered by Ryan Tibbitts, ’84, at the annual Founders Day dinner.

Steve Young graduated from BYU in 1984 with a BA in international relations. He earned an NCAA postgraduate scholarship for his outstanding performance on the football field and in the classroom. Concurrent with his education, he was a consensus All-American quarterback, the runner-up in the Heisman Trophy race, and the winner of the Davey O’Brien Award for being the best quarterback in college football. He set numerous passing records at BYU and in the NFL. Young graduated from J. Reuben Clark Law School in 1994, and during his time in law school he won two Super Bowl rings with the San Francisco 49ers. He is a member of the BYU Hall of Fame, the College Football Hall of Fame, and the Pro Football Hall of Fame. A three-time NFL MVP and eight-time player in the NFL Pro Bowl, he was also the most valuable player of Super Bowl xxix, throwing six touchdown passes—a Super Bowl record. He has had his jerseys retired by both BYU and the 49ers.

Young is an analyst for ESPN and a founder and managing partner of Huntsman Gay Global Capital, a private equity firm with more than a billion dollars under management. He is also the founder and, along with Barbara, his wife, the driving force behind the Forever Young Foundation, which serves children in need around the world. The parents of four children, Steve and Barbara reside in northern California.

