

EAGLES, HAWKS . . . AND STEELERS!

Today is a special day here at Saugatuck. We have welcomed a new member, we will share communion in a few minutes, and later we will indulge in a Chili Luncheon followed by our annual meeting. A special day indeed!

It's also a special day for millions and millions of football fans—Super Bowl Sunday. And hard as it may be to believe for many of us, this is the fortieth anniversary of the Super Bowl. It was a different world back in 1967—the New York Giants actually played in New York. The Colts hadn't abandoned Baltimore. And there was something called the American Football League.

The fortieth edition of the Super Bowl features the Seattle Seahawks and the Pittsburgh Steelers. For a lot of folks in this area that's less than exciting. After all, the Jets and the Giants had less than stellar seasons, and the New England Patriots got eliminated in an early round of the playoffs.

Sports columnist Chris Casavant finds himself in a bit of a bind when it comes to this year's game. He writes: "Normally I find something aggravating enough in these big games to pull for [one or] the other team, but there's really none of that. No matter what team wins next Sunday, I'll be happy for the victor and feel bad for the loser." Then he notes, "Come to think of it, that's how my mom feels after almost every game." (*Connecticut Post*, 1-29-06, D-2)

That may be true of his mother, but the mother in my house has a clear favorite in this game. Linda is a dyed in the wool Steelers fan. Back in the seventies, she was with a group of her friends one day, when Franco Harris, former running back for the Steelers, appeared on television.

"Wow," said Linda, "That guy is a real hunk! What team is he on?"

When she was told Pittsburgh, she vowed then and there to cheer on his team. And she has done just that. In fact, our son Matt has also become a Pittsburgh fan. Once, when asked why a kid like him from upstate New York was a fan of the Steelers, he said "Because my mommy loves Franco Harris."

Of course, you may be saying "So what?" You may agree with the late Erma Bombeck who once wrote: "If a man watches three football games in a row, he should be declared legally dead." But even the most fervent hater of sports has to acknowledge football does offer up interesting lessons in life.

Starting with Gatorade.

Gatorade?

Yes, Gatorade. That lemon-lime green beverage consumed in great quantities on football sidelines all across the country. That same green stuff that gets dumped over the heads of coaches whenever there's a win. Actually it comes in a variety of colors and flavors now, but many still swear by the original. What differentiates Gatorade from plain old water is its special formula which is designed to replace not only liquid, but also electrolytes lost in the sweat expended in the game. Gatorade, so goes the claim, not only refreshes, but it also renews. It brings new life and vigor to worn down, tired out players.

But what happens when a team isn't just physically exhausted but mentally and spiritually worn out as well? What happens when a team can't get it together? When they lose game after game after game? No amount of Gatorade is going to help them out! They need something else. They need something more.

In the mid-eighties that's exactly what happened to the football program at the University of Minnesota. They lost game after game after game. No wonder they were known as the Minnesota Gophers. The football team was lackluster at best, and simply awful at worst. But then a man came along who was able to see the situation more clearly, more objectively. His name was Lou Holtz. What happened? Well, let Coach Holtz describe it:

“Somewhere along the line, some people got the misconception you cannot win in Minnesota It's too cold there. When I was told the state bird was the mosquito, I was really worried. The whole attitude was: we can't win anyway, so what's the sense in trying? And then you have failure and you get away from the fundamentals . . . and become insecure and begin to worry” (Quoted by J. T. Ford, *Sourcebook of Wit and Wisdom*)

So the Coach went and reminded them about the basics. Retaught the fundamentals. Assured them again and again they could win. They could play well. And in about a year and a-half, Holtz was able to turn things around so dramatically that the Minnesota team appeared in one of the college-level bowl games at the end of the season.

That's exactly what happened to the ancient Jews to whom our passage in Isaiah is addressed. The year was 540 BC. They were in Babylon, over 800 miles from their homeland. Some fifty years earlier, their homes, their businesses and the Temple in Jerusalem, had all been destroyed. And thousands of them had been forced into exile. They'd been in Babylon so long that many of the older folks had already died—died in a foreign land, far from home.

And so they began to give up. They began to complain. They began to question whether God was ever going to help them out. They were insecure and resentful. Some of them had given up hope. They had given up faith.

But then, like Coach Holtz in Minnesota, a prophetic soul stood up and said, “Hold on! Wait a minute! What’s with all the negativity? What’s with the attitude?”

And then Coach Isaiah reminded them of the fundamentals:

Have you not known?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told to you from the beginning?

It is God who sits above

The circle of the earth . . .

Who stretches out the heavens

Like a curtain . . .

The LORD is the everlasting

The Creator of the ends of the earth.

(Isaiah 40:21, 22, 28)

Listen, it might look bleak, but remember whose team we’re on! Remember who owns this outfit! The Creator of the Universe! You think God’s going to give up on us? One bad season and we’ll get sold out? No way! Over and over again, God has seen us through! Why not now as well? Let’s get an attitude adjustment here, people of Israel! We can make it! Because God will give us the strength and courage to do so.

God gives power to the faint,

And strengthens the powerless

Those who wait for the LORD

Shall renew their strength.

They shall mount up with wings

Like eagles,

They shall run and not be weary,

they shall walk and not faint.

(Isaiah 40:29, 31)

Listen up, team, we’re not talking about some form of sixth-century sports drink; we’re not talking about glorified Gatorade; we’re talking about the life-giving strength and power that only comes from, the creator of life itself! We’re talking about the renewing, refreshing, revitalizing, resurrecting power of God.

And those ancient Jews must have listened. Because by all accounts their attitude was turned around. They were empowered by God, and enabled to mount up with wings like eagles. And in a very short time, they headed back for their homeland.

Most of us haven’t played college or professional football. And most of us have never lived in exile. But I dare say most of us, at one time or another, have felt defeated. I dare say most of us have felt worn down, tired out, weary and faint. Sometimes life’s circumstances simply overwhelm us. The death of a loved one. Divorce. A serious illness. Times of financial difficulty. And then, like that Minnesota football team, or those ancient Jews, we fall into a state of despair.

It is then that we need to remember the words of Isaiah. It is then that we need to remember that God stands ready to come to our aid. It is then that we need to remember that God will indeed lift us up and carry us along as if on the wings of eagles! But sometimes we are too worn down to even do that. And so it is in those tough times that we may need a Lou Holtz or an Isaiah. Someone who'll come alongside us and remind us, often just by their presence, that God still cares, that all is not lost.

One of the greatest times of despair we have known as a nation were the days and weeks following the attacks of 9-11. Here in metropolitan New York we were reeling from the collapse of the World Trade Center. In Washington folks were shocked by the destruction at the Pentagon. But in western Pennsylvania lives were most closely impacted by the crash of Flight 93 on a lonely field near Shanksville.

Shanksville is a tiny little burg. Its population barely tops two-hundred and fifty souls. When Flight 93 crashed it was firefighters and EMTs from Shanksville who responded, along with dozens of others from the area. They saw first hand the death and destruction. They knew the pain and agony suffered by so many. So three days later, when a candlelight vigil was held near the crash site, they needed all the support, all the encouragement they could get. They needed an Isaiah. They needed a Lou Holtz. And one showed up. In fact several showed up. All in the form of football players and coaches. Football players and coaches from their beloved Pittsburgh Steelers who'd come to Shanksville on a bus to share in the ceremony.

Unlike Isaiah, they didn't have much to say, but their mere presence, their willingness to share the grief and sorrow, their willingness to share in the tears, spoke volumes. As Paula Long, a volunteer at the Flight 93 memorial put it: "People felt good that they wanted to be part of it These big, tough Steelers . . . were letting go of their emotions." That day, it didn't really matter that they were big football stars, what mattered was that they were fellow human beings, doing what they could to support those who were in the midst of despair. Doing what they could to offer a bit of encouragement, and a word of hope.

And sisters and brothers, you and I are called to do the same. We are called to remind one another that our God is the Creator of the ends of the earth. We are called to remind one another that that same God gives power to the faint, and strength to the weary. We are called to remind each other, over and over again, that those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength, shall mount up as on the wings of an eagle. For when we wait on the Lord, when we draw on God's power, we shall, indeed, run and not grow weary. We shall walk and not faint.

**Amen
John H. Danner**

