

“Backs and ends on the goal line!”

Off the Top of My Head. May 24, 2007. By Dave Gibson

I played high school football for the Rapid City Stevens High School Raiders. I was a senior the first year our new school was opened and we did not yet have our own football practice field. So they would take us by bus to a city park where we would practice each day. The season began with the dreaded “two-a-days.” We would practice two or three hours in the morning, go home and sleep, and then practice two or three hours in the afternoon. Our trainer fed us salt tablets and chipped ice to keep us alive after practice. I vividly remember sitting on the bus at a stop light one August day after the afternoon practice. I was sweat soaked, exhausted, and eating ice chips out of my helmet. (We filled our helmets with ice chips and did not worry that our helmets were not as sterile as a serving bowl down at the Hilton.) I looked out the window and the bank sign said it was 95 degrees. Going out for football seemed like a good idea until that moment.

Our coaches, like most coaches, operated on the theory that we needed to be in better shape than our opponents. Under this approach we should be able to wear down the other team and win in the fourth quarter. Vince Lombardi, for whom I never played, once said, “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.” I am sure that Vince had a huge influence on our coaches. As part of that conditioning/torture process our coaches made us run multiple 100 yard wind sprints at the end of each practice. We were already tired and had already been through plenty of drills and conditioning. The key question in the mind of every athlete was, “How many today?”

One of the assistant coaches would yell, “Backs and ends on the goal line.” I was a tight end, the slowest athlete on the team, and I would join the other backs and ends—crouched over and waiting for the whistle. When the whistle sounded it was expected that we would sprint, not run, to the other goal line. (Anyone suspected of “doggin it” was singled out for special torture.) As soon as we were ten yards down the field we could hear the coach yell, “Linemen on the goal line.” Soon a whistle would shrill out behind us and the lineman lumbered after us. (A couple of the fast linemen would nearly catch me.)

After 5 to 7 of these 100 yard sprints, our legs rubbery and our lungs burning, I would think to myself, “Surely they will not run us again.” The next thing I would hear was, “Backs and ends on the goal line.” It was not uncommon to hear, “Backs and ends on the goal line.” as many as 5 more times after I was certain they would not run us again and after I was certain that I did not have another 100 yard sprint in me.

Our coaches never ran me until I collapsed. But here is the lesson viewed from 37 years after the last sprint: it turns out that I had several more 100 yard sprints in me than I thought I had in me. I had a lot more endurance than I would have known if someone had not pressed me. There was more in me than I was willing to give of my own volition.

“...let us run with endurance the race set before us...” Hebrews 12:1b.

There is a great deal to be said for running the right race and for running smart and for running with others. But sometimes the key issue is just endurance—just keeping on under the burdens of life and not doing something crazy or evil to get away from the spiritual conditioning. I am not advocating that we do nothing about difficult situations in our lives. We must always pray and think and ask for help and act as we are able. I am simply advocating that we do not “squirt out” from under burdens and situations that God has put us under.

You have a lot more endurance in you than you think—probably a lot more than you are willing to give of your own volition. Needing to give more endurance than we want to give is one of the core realities about life in our difficult world. There are times in life when we hear, “Backs and ends on the goal line.” and realize it is the voice of God. God would not run you again if He did not know you have it in you. Don’t be “doggin it.”