

## **Football Has A Dream**

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The 2000 hit film, *Remember the Titans*, tells the fact-based story of the 1971 T. C. Williams High School football team. The movie chronicles how players and coaches from two segregated schools were forced to merge into one school and how they learned to work and play together as an integrated team. As described by noted movie critic, Roger Ebert, it is "a parable about racial harmony, yoked to the formula of a sports movie." Ebert's comment raises an interesting question, however. If football could bring this group of black and white males together to work in harmony toward a common goal, is there something about playing football that might combat attitudes of racism and prejudice in others?

A new study from the National Football Foundation Center for Youth Development through Sport at Springfield College provides some interesting answers to that question. The Center's research shows that football may be unique among sports in providing participants with opportunities to learn about themselves and to understand and appreciate differences in others. These two skills require open communication and are at the core of building relationships that are based on trust and acceptance. In fact, the real life football coaches who were portrayed in *Remember the Titans* described the importance of communication and understanding when addressing a youth leadership seminar held in Cincinnati.

Coach Herman Boone said, "Once you learn to dialogue with someone of a different race you develop a trust for that person. Then and only then can you create the glue that binds you together in some form or fashion for the rest of your life."

Coach Bill Yost echoed Boone's sentiments and added, "the more time you spend with people, the more things you realize you have in common than differences."

Is football uniquely suited among sports to foster the kinds of communication that lead to self-understanding and appreciation for differences? The answer appears to be, yes. Football has the distinction of not only being the sport with the greatest number of team participants, but it also has the largest number of specialized roles. Only in football, can you have 11 players on offense, another 11 players on defense, and a large number of different people playing on special teams who are involved in kickoffs, punts, field goals and extra point attempts. The NFF Center's research indicated that players and coaches believed that for a team to be successful, each individual had to perform his assignments with total commitment, while trusting that his teammates would do the same. If a player did not fulfill his individual obligations, the whole team suffered the consequences.

People may argue that most team sports require teamwork and reliance on others. So what is so special about football? Well, think of it this way. Can you name another sport in which a person can be an all-star without ever having touched the object ball or scored a point. The fact is that much of the real inner workings of a successful football team happen at a level that goes unobserved by most fans. The intricate blocking or defensive schemes employed by football teams often get lost in the excitement of a running back breaking into the open or a safety making an interception or a punt returner

going 80 yards for a touchdown. Rather, beneath the surface of every successful play are a bunch of individuals who execute dozens of tasks without getting any recognition outside a pat on the back by a teammate or a high five from a specialty coach.

Football is a very complicated and strategic game. In some ways, it is like a chess match with 11 different pieces on both offense and defense moving simultaneously in efforts to outsmart their opponents. The sheer volume of information that goes into each and every play is enormous and requires at least a week of planning and preparation. Scouting reports and films are analyzed and each player and every play is dissected in efforts to identify potential weaknesses and to plan strategies to overcome an opponent's offensive and defensive systems. This information is then molded together by coaches who examine the strengths and weaknesses of their own team members and strive to develop a game plan that will maximize their chances of success. Through this process, each player gets plenty of feedback about themselves and what they need to do to counteract each move by their opponent. Players must also communicate with each other on every play to adjust to any changes that their opponents have prepared or make in the course of the game.

In football, individuals learn to subsume their own abilities within the larger context of the team. They learn what they can do well and what others can do well. Their skills and attitudes are mixed and match with others who have complementary strengths in efforts to identify subunits that blend together into a well-functioning whole. Players and coaches, who were part of the Center's research, talked about the special bonds that develop between individuals when they are forced to rely on each other in the emotion and heat of a football contest. Players' relationships with each other go much deeper than an appreciation or tolerance for differences to a level of mutual respect that is based on trust and interdependence.

The bottom line is that through football, players learn about their strengths and weaknesses and how their individual contributions fit into larger team efforts. At the same time, they have to be cognizant of their teammates' abilities and be willing to allow themselves to trust and rely on others in efforts to achieve team success. The amount of self-understanding, communication, and valuing of differences required to play football at a competitive level can go a long way toward providing the "glue" that Coach Boone believes can overcome racial misunderstanding and lead to life-long friendships. As famed quarterback Jack Kemp put it, "A successful team walks onto the field with issues of race, religion, and all societal pressures ratcheted down to inconsequential by the strength of common goals. Bigotry and divisiveness have no place in a huddle, on or off the field."