



THE BIGGEST WIN

PRO FOOTBALL PLAYERS TACKLE FAITH

JOSHUA COOLEY

FOREWORD BY

CARSON WENTZ • NICK FOLES • ZACH ERTZ

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“With icebergs, we celebrate and are amazed at what we see above the water but there is so much more below the surface. As the entire world watched Super Bowl LII, we witnessed and celebrated the amazing elements of sport that we can see. *The Biggest Win* takes you below the surface to see how much more God is at work in these players—as well as in our own lives—and how to win the biggest game of all.”

Shane Williamson, President/CEO, Fellowship of Christian Athletes

“Josh Cooley, a talented sports writer with unusual spiritual insight, has written a unique and engaging book. Neither fanboy nor critic, Josh shows these pro football players as what they are: authentic and imperfect brothers striving to honor Jesus. The timeless biblical principles at work in their stories carry over seamlessly to readers. Well written, true-to-reality, and spiritually uplifting, *The Biggest Win* is one of the finest sports books I’ve ever read!”

Randy Alcorn, Author of *Heaven*, *Seeing the Unseen*, and *Courageous*

“As the Philadelphia Eagles’ offensive coordinator during their Super Bowl LII championship season, I enjoyed a close, personal look at how real the stories are in this book. These men are true brothers in Christ whose lives have impacted me significantly. In *The Biggest Win*, Joshua Cooley not only does an incredible job helping us learn from their examples, but he also uses the platform of sports to equip and inspire us in our Christian faith.

Frank Reich, Head Coach of the Indianapolis Colts

“I couldn’t read this book fast enough. Throughout my baseball career, I always long for teammates who are hungry for God’s Word and bold about their love for Jesus Christ, just like the 2017 Philadelphia Eagles were during their Super Bowl season. *The Biggest Win* inspired me—and it will do the same for you—because it shows what genuine Christian faith looks like for any athlete as we compete.”

Adrian Gonzalez, Major League Baseball Player and Five-Time All-Star

“If you are an athlete struggling with how to balance sports and your walk with the Lord, I definitely recommend *The Biggest Win*. Joshua does a wonderful job showing how your faith can be strengthened—not compromised—while you pursue your athletic endeavors. After reading this, you’ll realize that true victory can be yours long before you even start the game.”

Jordan Matthews, NFL Wide Receiver

“*The Biggest Win* is far more than pro athlete testimonials. This book lays a much-needed foundation, starting with the Bible, for how athletes should view and engage in sports. Joshua has given us a great resource.”

Mark Householder, President of Athletes in Action

“In *The Biggest Win*, Josh, has done a wonderful job combining God’s word, real life athletic experiences, and thoughtful self-reflective questions regarding faith and how it intersects with life and sport. It’s like having a devotional and a road map to success for the Christian athlete and is a must read for any aspiring athlete or fan!”

Bryan Clay, Olympic Decathlon and World Champion; founder & CEO, The Bryan Clay Foundation

“Joshua Cooley, one of the premier Christian sportswriters in the country, shares fascinating stories about six NFL players who are playing for more than gridiron glory, but what I enjoyed most was how Josh shared spiritual insights and lessons that we can all take to heart.”

Mike Yorkey, Coauthor of the *Every Man’s Battle* series and *Picking Up My Shattered Pieces* with Gina Pastore

“As a pastor, I usually read non-fiction, theology books. But I was refreshed to read how the good news of Christ is powerfully revealed in the athletic world. I think you’ll find Joshua Cooley’s retelling the story of an unusual group of godly men who played on the 2017 Philadelphia Eagles to draw you in to the best story ever, the gospel. If you are a young athlete, an old athlete, or a non-athletic pastor, you will get both a great sports story and a glorious Jesus story in one place.”

Jay Thomas, Lead Pastor at Chapel Hill Bible Church, Chapel Hill, NC; author of *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*

“I thoroughly enjoyed reading *The Biggest Win*. Joshua Cooley seamlessly weaves solid biblical truth with the God-honoring testimonies of the six featured Eagles football players. Their stories bring the theological concepts Josh presents to life. *The Biggest Win* isn’t just a book for athletes; this is a book for everyone.”

Marty Machowski, Pastor; author of *The Ology*, *Long Story Short: Ten-Minute Devotions to Draw Your Family to God*, and *The Gospel Story Bible*

“With the question in the foreword, ‘Are you ready to glorify God?’, the author had me hooked. In *The Biggest Win* Cooley’s spiritual commitment to the gospel is laced together with his journalistic field experience and his ability to craft a compelling narrative to produce an entertaining and encouraging read. Each chapter contains personal snapshots of well known athletes’ spiritual victories and struggles woven together with God’s Word to provide all of us a fresh challenge to glorify the Lord in all things.”

Ken Coley, Senior Professor of Christian Education, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC; author of *Entrusted to the Faithful*

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FOREWORD

When Josh Cooley asked to interview us for this book, we said yes for just one reason—we want our lives to count for something bigger than our performance on the football field. That might sound strange coming from a group of guys who just won the Super Bowl, but it is true. As amazing a moment as that was and as thankful as we are to have been a part of it, it's not *the* most amazing moment we have experienced. The most amazing thing for each of us is that we are loved by God and have a whole new life that stretches into eternity.

We love football. We love what we do. But football is just a game. And one day we will retire from football. But becoming a follower of Jesus Christ means our identity doesn't have to be in our latest performance on the field—our identity is in Christ. Following Jesus means that our purpose is larger than being the best athlete. We have a whole new life of meaning, purpose, and service that will last longer than our football careers and have more impact in the world than anything we could accomplish on the field.

We want to share all of that with you. Wherever you are in your journey as an athlete, we want you to know the joy, meaning, and purpose we have found as followers of Christ. The pinnacle of life is not winning; it's living for God through all of the big and small moments of life. We hope that as you read this book, you too will get to know Jesus and his

love for you, which stays the same through all the seasons of life. That would be the biggest win for you, and it would be our privilege to play a small part in that.

— **Trey Burton, Zach Ertz, Nick Foles, Jordan Hicks,
Chris Maragos, and Carson Wentz**

INTRODUCTION

Aaron Rodgers's experience at the 2005 National Football League draft was unforgettable. Before you could say "Curly Lambeau," the night had already achieved legendary status.

The strong-armed University of California junior was a surefire NFL prospect and possible number-one pick, held that year by the San Francisco 49ers. On draft night, however, the 49ers chose Utah quarterback Alex Smith.

No biggie. Certainly one of the next few teams would snatch up Rodgers. But then, Miami didn't pick Rodgers at number two; Cleveland, Chicago, and Tampa Bay also passed on him. Four hours later, the Green Bay Packers finally selected the shell-shocked twenty-one-year-old with the *twenty-fourth* pick.

Of course, to date Rodgers has won a Super Bowl, two MVP awards, and been named to six Pro Bowls. Most teams searching for a future Hall of Famer's heir apparent (as Green Bay was at the time for Brett Favre) can only dream of stumbling upon someone like Rodgers. Since

that fateful night, the national media has hashed and rehashed Rodgers's epic slide down the draft board. But consider the Packers' perspective: Through absolutely no effort of their own, they received a stunning, unexpected blessing.

This book was kind of like that for me.

On March 31, 2017, I received an email at 5:37 p.m. It was a normal Friday night; our family was probably sitting down to dinner when it arrived. The subject line read: "Looking for a freelance writer."

Bible Study Magazine, a publication I had never written for before, was outsourcing a November 2017 cover story about a group of Philadelphia Eagles players who were uncommonly devoted to seeking God's Word together. Intrigued by the idea, I suppressed my natural NFC East allegiance (full disclosure: Lifelong Redskins fan here) and took the gig.

The article focused on Trey Burton, Zach Ertz, Nick Foles, Jordan Hicks, Chris Maragos, Jordan Matthews (who was traded to the Buffalo Bills in August 2017 before the article ran), and Carson Wentz. These guys weren't perfect, nor did they claim to be. But I was immediately struck by their unquenchable hunger for Scripture and their commitment to genuine Christian discipleship, accountability, and obedience to Great Commission living. Rarely, if ever, have I spoken to a group of professional athletes so committed to pursuing biblical truth together.

Maragos, the oldest of the group and a veteran of multiple NFL teams, said he'd never seen anything like it during his career. Best-selling author Randy Alcorn, who mentors some of the players, told me he was "very impressed with the unusual level of biblical and theological interest in this group."

Soon, I realized there was a much larger story to tell. Since creation, God's marvelous plan of redemption has been moving toward ultimate fulfillment. And amazingly, he allows athletic competition—enjoyed by billions of humans worldwide—to be one of many catalysts for spiritual growth. This book is a humble effort to examine this fascinating topic.

What about you? Regardless of your athletic skill level, are you ready to live out your faith and glorify God? And if so, how can you achieve this worthy goal?

It's your job to answer the first question. This book, Lord willing, can help you with the second.

The divinely inspired words of 1 Corinthians 10:31—"whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"—reveal that even something as fleeting as athletic competition falls under the sovereign lordship of our heavenly King. We owe him our heart's allegiance at home, school, work, church . . . and yes, in sports. That's what this book is about: pursuing God's glory as we compete, recognizing the God-given lessons that athletics provides, and becoming more like Christ through the triumphs and challenges that sports presents.

Need more evidence that your faith and athletic life should be integrated? Consider the Bible's numerous sports metaphors. The apostle Paul wrote about athletic training (1 Corinthians 9:25, 27; 1 Timothy 4:8), receiving a victor's laurel (1 Corinthians 9:25; 2 Timothy 2:5; 4:8), boxing (1 Corinthians 9:26; 2 Timothy 4:7), and foot races (1 Corinthians 9:24, 26; Philippians 3:14; 2 Timothy 4:7). Jeremiah 12:5 and Hebrews 12:1 also feature running imagery. The point is this: You most certainly can live out your faith in sports, and you absolutely can glorify God while competing.

As we proceed, our journey will need a personal touch—a human element to understand how all this plays out. That's where the dedicated Christians on the 2017 Philadelphia Eagles team come in. As athletes who love Jesus passionately and compete at the highest level in front of millions of people, their voices are prominent in this book. Their stories, insights, triumphs, and failures provide helpful perspective along our course.

Their amazing 2017 season—culminating in a 41–33 victory over the New England Patriots in Super Bowl LII, providing the eighty-five-year-old franchise with its first-ever Super Bowl title—was a wonderful blessing from the Lord. This historic championship afforded them a much bigger platform, to do what every great Christian athlete does: deflect glory toward their Creator.

We will draw upon the experiential wisdom of these elite players, but we won't idolize them. They are remarkable athletes with outsized salaries and fame that most of us will never know. But they are no better or worse than anyone else—a fact they happily admit. They are some

of the most humble, likable professional athletes I've ever encountered (even if they *are* Redskins rivals). They are sinners saved by grace, just like all believers.

So avoid the “us vs. them” mentality. These players are no different in the heart issues that God cares about. As 1 Samuel 16:7 says, “the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” God isn’t impressed by financial statements, Twitter followers, or jersey sales. He desires our hearts. He expects our worship. He demands our allegiance.

Our goal has eternity in mind: exploring how all believers—male or female, young or old—can grow in their faith by using sports to glorify the Lord. This is my prayer for you. While six NFL athletes are central characters, I hope you’ll see that the book’s true Protagonist is “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2), in order that “your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:5).

As God’s image-bearers, we are to reflect his glory in all our endeavors. To do this well, we must constantly look to the Spirit-inspired Word of God. The loftiest human paradigms cannot replace the timeless truths found in the Bible. As Jesus said in Matthew 24:35, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

The Lord God Almighty has created all things for his glory, including you and your athletic talents. He is using hungry, committed Christians in the NFL to accomplish his purposes through sports. By his grace, he can use you, too.

The preseason has ended. It’s game time. Are you ready to glorify God?

—Joshua Cooley

CHAPTER 1

BEING A CHRISTIAN ATHLETE

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

—Matthew 5:16

Carson Wentz’s life was about to change forever, and he had no control over the results. For a self-described “achiever” who often only sleeps six hours on his off days—so he has time to tackle his to-do list—this was a problem.

It was April 2016, and the annual NFL draft was approaching. The pre-draft hype machine was chugging along at full steam. Pundits were pontificating about Wentz as the potential number-one pick overall.

This kind of limelight was unfamiliar territory for the young man from Bismarck, North Dakota. Sure, he had been on the roster at North Dakota State for all five of its consecutive NCAA Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) titles from 2011 to 2015—the last two as starting quarterback. But the Bison play in the Missouri Valley Conference—an obscure frontier outpost on the college football landscape.

An NFL team was going to draft Wentz—that much was clear. But which one? And when? Some early prognostications said mid-first round. Then, thanks to a prolific pro day prior to the draft, his stock

began to climb. Would he begin his career in Cleveland, Denver, San Francisco, Jacksonville, or New York (Jets)? Each team had varying levels of unrest at the quarterback position. There was even scuttlebutt of Dallas trading up to anoint him as Tony Romo's successor. The hype machine clattered along.

The whole process wasn't easy for a guy like Wentz, who's wired to manage the final outcome of games as much as possible through careful preparation, study, training, and execution. Most quarterbacks, by nature, are control freaks to some degree. They put in an inordinate amount of hours to master one of the hardest positions in sports. Chance and randomness are anathema. Eventually, though, Wentz had to put the unknown into the hands of the One who knows all things.

"One thing I try and always avoid is to not let it be something bigger than it needs to be," Wentz says. "Going through the draft process, I don't know how many times I told people, 'Hey, it's just football. It's still just a game.'"

As the draft approached, Wentz positioned himself as well as he could. Most importantly, he humbled himself before his heavenly Father. "God," he prayed, "*bring me where you want me, so I can grow spiritually.*"

In a small way, Wentz's humble petition resembled Solomon's prayer for divine wisdom in 1 Kings 3. As the ancient Israelite king assumed his father David's throne, he could have asked the Lord for anything—fame, riches, honor, long life, the destruction of his enemies. Instead, he asked for the ability to govern God's people. Similarly, Wentz wasn't focused on the fact that he was about to make the rare (and extremely lucrative) leap from FCS quarterback to likely first-round NFL draft pick. Like Solomon, he simply longed for God's guiding hand.

And God's hand moved. Two weeks before the draft, the Tennessee Titans traded the first overall pick to the St. Louis (now Los Angeles) Rams, in a total exchange of nine selections over two seasons. A week later, the Cleveland Browns followed suit, in a seven-pick swap with the Philadelphia Eagles—including the second overall selection.

On opening night, April 28, 2016, the Rams drafted Jared Goff first overall. At number two, the Eagles minted Wentz as their franchise quarterback.

It was a surreal moment for the six-foot-five, 237-pound redhead. When NFL commissioner Roger Goodell called his name, Wentz strode across the stage at Roosevelt University in Chicago to meet the league's chief. The two men hugged, shared a few words, and held up an Eagles jersey together as cameras flashed. Wentz had just become the highest drafted player from an FCS school since the NCAA split Division I into two classifications in 1978. The kid from far-flung Bismarck was heading 1,600 miles east.

Next stop: The City of Brotherly Love.

When Wentz got to Philly, that's exactly what he found in the Eagles' locker room: biblical *agape*. His new NFL teammates were a small but spiritually vibrant group of Christians who warmly welcomed him. "They were very open, very loving, and very caring," Wentz remembers. "When we got to know each other, it was challenging in a good way. Like Proverbs [27:17] says: Iron sharpens iron."

Eagles players have been gathering together for Bible study since at least the early 1990s, when Hall of Famer Reggie White was terrorizing quarterbacks on the field and preaching the Word off it. "The Minister of Defense," an ordained minister who died of cardiac arrhythmia in 2004, started the group during his time with the Eagles (1985–1992). In the years since, the group ebbed and flowed. During the 2004 season, when the Eagles reached Super Bowl XXXIX, Ted Winsley, team chaplain since 2002, recalls that close to thirty players regularly attended the team Bible study: "When I got there, it felt very dry, so our major focus was on not sinning. That's where we were in the beginning. When I would tell people the names of the guys who were there, they'd be like, 'He's saved?'"

The dynamic began to change significantly in 2012, when the Eagles drafted Nick Foles, a six-foot-six quarterback from the University of Arizona. Foles started twenty-four games over three seasons, before being traded to the Rams.

During his first stint with the Eagles, Foles quickly teamed with Winsley and wide receiver Jason Avant (whose final NFL season came in 2015) to reach out to other players. Attendance remained much lower than previous years, but the group was collectively stronger. They desired deeper fellowship and accountability and hungered for rich, gospel-centered teaching. They spurred each other on to share their faith, both in the locker room and beyond.

“You saw, from the very beginning, the hunger and sincerity from Nick,” Winsley says. “Nick is a leader, period. He has a quiet demeanor, he’s approachable, but he’s not afraid to speak his mind and live what he believes.”

In 2014, Trey Burton (tight end/special teams), Chris Maragos (safety/special teams), and Jordan Matthews (wide receiver) arrived in Philadelphia and joined the Bible study. But when the Eagles traded Foles for Sam Bradford in a March 2015 quarterback swap, the small group of believers had an important choice to make.

“We either could have kept the momentum and kept the seeds and the fruit and stuff producing, or we could have just let it all fall away and gone our own different ways,” Burton recalls. “But when Foles left, we felt like there was something special being built there, so we took it like a storm and basically started hitting even harder. We kind of understood the direction and felt like we knew what God was calling to happen here in Philly.”

Linebacker Jordan Hicks, a third-round draft pick, joined the team and Bible study in 2015, and tight end Zach Ertz, a second-round draft pick in 2013, committed to the group after submitting his life to Christ at the start of the 2016 season.

In May 2017, Foles signed a two-year deal to return to the Eagles. “A big reason why I wanted to come back to Philly,” Foles says, “is because of a great group of guys who want to do great things in Jesus’s name.”

As Wentz witnessed his new teammates’ spiritual hunger, he remembered his pre-draft prayer. God had answered in a mighty way, and the rookie was left to marvel at what God had done. Unmistakably divine fingerprints covered everyone’s paths to Philadelphia. “I definitely got

that sense right away, but it took time to truly get a sense of *how much* he answered my prayer,” Wentz says. “He knocked it out of the park. God is good. I can’t say that enough.”

The group of believers on the Eagles’ 2017 roster provides a tiny window into God’s expansive kingdom. There are Caucasians and African-Americans. There are high first-round draft picks (Wentz), undrafted go-getters (Burton and Maragos), and everything in between. The players hail from all over the country—California, Colorado, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin. Their collective faith stories paint a beautiful tapestry of the Lord’s sovereign, saving grace.

The group quickly gelled and committed to meeting often for Bible study, prayer, and strategic planning on how to affect the team for Christ—not only during the season but also the offseason and preseason. Once the season started, and players’ wives moved into the Philadelphia area, the group held a regular couples’ devotional time as well.

For Wentz and his teammates, a tightly knit group of fellowship provided a priceless spiritual oasis in the midst of a grueling season. Today’s NFL presents players with enormous spiritual challenges. There are obvious potential pitfalls, such as the instant fortune that athletes attain. The allure of celebrity, narcissism, and sinful gratification assaults these men as soon as they arrive in the league (and often before). Then, of course, there is pressure to perform from management, coaches, fans and—for many players—the guy behind them on the roster. The NFL’s popularity doesn’t have a trickle-down effect on players’ psyches—it’s more like a roaring waterfall. Every feat or foible is rehashed endlessly on TV news cycles, radio talk shows, and social media. “Everything is overblown—good and bad,” Ertz says. “If you have a good game, you’re the best player ever. If you have a terrible game, you’re the reason they lost.”

Pressure also comes from the NFL’s salary structure. Unlike other pro leagues, the NFL does not fully guarantee player contracts. Each deal is negotiated and structured differently, but because of the league’s high injury rate, large active roster, and other factors, players rarely collect the total value of the contracts they sign. As such, many players often risk their personal health to stay on the field.

Says Winsley: “I know a player who—if I said his name, you’d know who he is—where the doctor said, ‘If you take another hit like that, you’re going to be paralyzed.’ It’s his contract year. He looked at me in the eyes, put his helmet on and said, ‘I got to go.’ And his wife said, ‘Baby, you got to go do this.’”

While the magnitude of the issues confronting NFL players might be unique, the issues themselves are not. The professional stage might amplify the fame, pressure, money, physicality, accessibility to vice, etc., but everyone who has ever thrown a pass, kicked a ball, swam a lap, or swung a bat has struggled with the same basic challenges. Who doesn’t worry? Who doesn’t struggle with pride or self-sufficiency? Whose faith hasn’t wavered in trials? Who doesn’t sometimes seek their identity in sports, work, or other things apart from Christ? As 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.”

The same sin-stained heart that beats in you also beats in the athletes featured in this book. At the heart level—where God does business (Jeremiah 17:10)—their struggles are your struggles, even as they strive to become more like their Savior.

Likewise, their spiritual victories are your spiritual victories. They rejoice when they see someone submit to Christ. They are grateful for personal spiritual growth. They thank the Father when he answers prayer.

As you read the stories in this book, think about *your* story. Who’s calling the shots—you or God? Where do you see unmistakably divine fingerprints covering *your* path? How are you seeking to grow in the Lord and glorify him?

Now, think about the sport(s) you play. How did you come to the team you’re on, or the sport you compete in? Can you trace God’s purposes for being there? What do you hope to accomplish? Is it just a pastime, or can it be something much greater—something with eternal significance?

Left to themselves, the deeds of mankind—even the greatest athletic accomplishments—are transient, a fleeting vapor. The years of our lives “are soon gone, and we fly away” (Psalm 90:10). But what we do for God’s glory will follow us into eternity.

Sometimes God brings together a team of believers to make a significant impact, like he has done in Philadelphia. Perhaps this is what he's doing in your life, too. Or maybe you're in a situation without many other believers around, and God's calling you to be a strong, solitary witness. Either way, you have a job to do. Matthew 5:14–16 provides the game plan:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Being a Christian athlete is a fantastic opportunity to light the world with God's glory. You'll connect with people you wouldn't otherwise reach, each one a potential life God can change. But be forewarned: Being a Christian athlete isn't easy. The challenges you'll experience will be significant. You'll get pressure to conform to the world, from both inside and outside your team. You'll deal with frustrating people, maddening situations, and spiritual lows. Satan will attack you. This is all part of sports—and life. So prepare yourself with the armor of God (Ephesians 6:10–18).

As you compete, you'll see that sports also can be an effective means of personal spiritual maturation. You'll witness God's goodness and faithfulness in action, and be stretched to grow in new ways.

So don't hide your light. Let it shine brightly. No matter where you are on your journey, God can use you to do great things—for his glory.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. What challenges does sports present to your faith?

2. How can you answer those challenges with the Bible?
3. How do you think God wants you to grow spiritually?
4. What's one way you can be a light to others through sports?