

Chapter 4-Who's in your Huddle?

“We compare and we compete with men, that’s all we ever do. It leaves most men feeling isolated and alone and it destroys any concept of community.” Joe Ehrmann from Season of Life

“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work...though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A chord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

King Solomon.....Ecclesiastes 4:9, 12

To huddle, “to waste time between football plays.”

Huddle is defined in the verb form, “to gather or crowd together in a close mass.” Several teams are given credit for the first huddles including Amos Alonzo Stagg in 1896 at the University of Chicago. Back in 1894, however, legend has it that Paul Hubbard, a quarterback at Gallaudet University, a school for the deaf in Washington D.C., noticed that teams were stealing his signs. He came up with the revolutionary idea to “huddle” with his line-mates and protect their communication together. I like to think that they were the true pioneers. The idea that they overcame their weakness together through the huddle is powerful for me. Like the men at Gallaudet, almost one hundred years later I entered a huddle that would mean so much more to me than just wasting time between plays. 1

November 28, 1981 was a special day for me as a Pittsburgh Steeler. That was the day I was accepted in the huddle to replace All Pro tackle Larry Brown. He had just pulled his hamstring and it looked like he wasn’t coming back anytime soon. I had played a few snaps earlier that season but nothing like the responsibility I was now facing. We were locked in a hard-fought battle with the Los Angeles Rams and I had the unenviable assignment to block Hall-of-Fame defensive end, Jack Youngblood. Running into that huddle my heart was pounding with anticipation, excitement, and dread all at once. As I looked around, there were supportive looks

and back-slaps from our Hall-of-Fame players like Franco Harris, Terry Bradshaw, Mike Webster, Lynn Swann, and John Stallworth. Jon Kolb, Steve Courson, the incredible hulk, and my roommate Wolf were also there. My heart began to experience a calming presence. I felt as if a blanket of belonging, validation, and encouragement were draped around me from those men. Terry let me settle in for a few seconds, knowing I was getting up on a big stallion for the first time, then gave me a big smile and asked, “Are you ready hoss?” I swallowed hard and said, “Heck yeah!” Truth be told, I felt more like the guy ready to be terminated on the television series “Weakest Link.” I look back on that experience now and I view the “huddle” as an important symbol for the place where a man’s relational need for God and his brothers is forged. It is here we experience the body of Christ in the most intimate way outside of perhaps our marriage and family. Four biblical principles stand out to me from that powerful huddle experience. I believe they have universal application due to the power of God’s Word lived out in community.

The first principle is the requirement to be authentic. In the huddle you get real, you are forced to take off the façade. Authenticity is the chief thing. Offensive linemen have a greater need for trust and dependence on one another than any other unit on the team. Maybe it arises from their labor in obscurity; the countless hours of film study where getting “graded” is a routine occurrence, or the fear of public humiliation giving up a sack or a holding penalty. One thing is for certain, facing those fears together builds unity and strength. I remember weeks where Wolf had to face Hall-of-Fame defensive tackle, Randy White from the Cowboys. He would be on edge all week and we would take turns encouraging him and pushing him in his preparation for the challenge. On another week it might be me and my fears over Reggie White’s dreaded club and “hump” move that wreaked devastation on tackles across the NFL. Our commitment to one another took an even deeper dimension for some, “huddling” as brothers in Christ while with the Steelers.

The concept of small groups is not new to the Christian church. Small group bible studies, discipleship groups, and prayer groups have been mainstays in growing churches for

sometime but men have been running from small groups for years. Bible studies alone or service teams do not address this need for men. At my church, South Hills Bible Chapel, and with White Fields men's ministry, huddle groups are the heart of community-building and making disciples. An important first step in these huddles is where men "tell their story." Sharing our life journey, focusing on key relationships, triumphs, and failures represents our story. In this vulnerability, our calling as men, our calling to God, and our response to Him are brought out. The result of the overnight for men is usually an awareness that we don't have it together **because we don't**, that we are broken **because we are**, and that our only shot at wholeness lies in relationship with Jesus and one another, **because it is!** Men learn to become more authentic with this self-awareness. The greater the intimacy and trust that is built in a group the more authentic men are encouraged to become. These qualities form the foundation for a remarkable strength that can never be attained alone. This is step one in huddle formation but we return to it in many different ways throughout our two year journey together.

The second area, which I have come to believe is essential for a huddle to mature and grow is compassion. This was demonstrated powerfully to me in my Steelers huddle experience by Mike Webster. Compassion and mercy are a central part of the gospel message. Jesus shared his life with the sick, poor, and disenfranchised having empathy for their suffering and offering forgiveness to the most hard-baked of sinners. Webby modeled this through his work with kids who lived with the hardship of Spina-Bifida. To see his tenderness and compassion with those children, his hands wrapped around those precious little ones, I was inspired. I remember seeing those hands that were like vice grips; bend over backwards behemoth nose tackles like Curley Culp and Bob Goalic. With those children, his hands were the "touch" of tenderness. That inspiration led me to become involved with Light of Life Rescue Mission in 1987 where a whole new group of heroes began to take a special place in my heart. I'll never forget my first meeting with the small group of counselors who worked there with recovering addicts. Their Christ centered compassion blew me away. I have been involved with the Mission ever since. These

portraits of compassion will always be a powerful marker to me, symbolic of a defining quality of godly men. If you're anything like me it is easier to show compassion to the poor and disabled but it's often harder to see the brokenness of successful people and respond with the love of Christ.

Compassion is one side of the love needed for huddles to grow. The other side of that love is accountability. We must be willing to be accountable to one another through God's Word as our guide and our ultimate authority. For a group to be spiritually healthy they must be kept in balance. Compassion and trust are required if men are going to lower their guard and become vulnerable. The huddle must offer this safe place for men. Trust also leads to a deeper sense of security and belonging. One of the most powerful evidences of this happens when men confess areas of sin to one another, experience the Lord's forgiveness, and the unconditional embrace of their huddle. James expressed that this was essential if we were to be made whole. "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." James 5:16

The third principle of the huddle is that we must learn to carry each other's burdens. Many amazing stories of God's powerful love and healing have been the direct result of our huddle men carrying one another's hardships. These stories represent compassion in action. To quote Nike, "Just do it." We may be stirred through our compassion but it is in the obedience to carry each others burdens that God is glorified. In my huddle one of our men, Mark, recently had his father terminally ill with little time given by the doctors. Mark was concerned for his Dad's preparation to meet the Lord and the group prayed fervently for him. Mark was afraid to talk with his Dad about eternal life and God's plan for us through Christ our Savior. Another huddle member, Glenn, called Mark's Dad, to comfort him and have that important conversation about where he would spend eternity. He called him and related the assurance that he could have in Christ as he prepared for his final journey. Mark's father indeed confessed Christ and he was comforted by God's word of assurance (I John 5:11-13). Mark and his family were deeply grateful for that resurrection hope after his passing a short time later. Paul wrote, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Galatians 6:2 The love and

witness of Mark's huddle brothers was a real testimony to God's love for their father and the family.

Robert Lewis in his series, "The Quest for Authentic Manhood" points out that we need to be cheerleaders for one another. As men we provide an important validation to one another in our cheer leading encouragement each day. I received that validation when I stepped in the huddle against the rams in 1981. Another Steeler friend, offensive tackle Pete Rostosky, expressed this kind of cheerleading on a regular basis to us. One day during 1 on 1 pass rush drill I had defensive end Keith Willis stopped cold in his tracks with out allowing any penetration when I heard Pete yell out, "Way to be you Tunch!" Everywhere we went as offensive linemen, on or off the field, Pete picked great moments to be celebrated, cheering us, "Way to be you." There is a lot of good theology in Pete's statement. How often do we encourage with specific praise, celebrating each other's unique gifts and purpose?

My assistant in our men's ministry is Jimmy Mac. He is a former FBI agent of 25 years and a former Viet Nam helicopter pilot. He is now devoting a huge part of his time to loving and equipping men. His infectious enthusiasm, leadership gifts, and administration have helped our team to build a thriving men's ministry at our church. One of Jimmy's huddle guys, Mike Holtcamp, recently was in the hospital to remove a brain tumor that threatened his life. All of the huddle men came to pray with Mike's wife on the day of a blizzard and to stay throughout the surgery, lifting him up to the Lord. Currently, he is doing remarkably well and his group is closer and stronger than ever as a result of standing as one man. I said earlier that a deep sense of trust and belonging forged in our huddles forms a foundation of great strength that we could never achieve on our own. It is in battles with the enemy like this one where God's supernatural strength is witnessed as a result of men locking their arms and their hearts as one. Solomon was right when he said, "...though one may be overpowered two can defend themselves. A chord of three strands is not easily broken." That third strand is the powerful Holy Spirit!

Jesus needed a huddle group too. Jesus' brokenness in the Garden at Gethsemane shows us how he kept coming back to his need for the support of his closest brothers. He asked Peter, James, and John, his inner circle of closest disciples, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death, stay here and keep watch." It was a moment of crisis and he needed his teammates to stand with him against the enemy. He said to Peter, "Are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?" Mark 14:34-35

In essence he was saying, "Come on. What's up? When I need you most, facing Satan and the agony that awaits me in the cross, you don't stand with me?" And by John's account, Jesus is actually sweating blood. Jesus experiences the feelings of abandonment by his friends in his hour of great need. Because we are made in His image we long for the same kind of intimacy in the battle together. This represents the fourth principle of the huddle; the principle of spiritual warfare. We are wired to be in the spiritual battle together with other men. We can only be dressed in the full armor of God by an armor bearer. We cannot be equipped alone. "For our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers....the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Ephesians 6:12

Jon Kolb used to lead us in the ritual of putting each others shoulder pads on as offensive linemen before each game. One way that villainous defensive linemen would gain an unfair advantage when pass rushing was by grabbing our jerseys. We tried to neutralize their advantage with the form-fitted jersey. Of necessity you had to depend on your brothers for this preparation; it could not be accomplished alone. We had to carpet tape our pads to our jersey and pull that coat of armor over our head in pre-game. You had to have someone get it on for you and help you with the fitting. Jon would pull that tightly fitted jersey and shoulder pad one-piece like a sheath over me. He would then ask, "How's that?" I would give him some feedback and we would work together until it was just right. The whole time this process went on Jon would pray for me to be strengthened for the battle in the trenches that awaited. When he finished he would always say, "Alright let's go get 'em I got you covered." He had me covered physically as my line-mate and

spiritually as my partner in the spiritual battle. This is a symbol of the armor bearer's role in spiritual warfare. The main difference however was that the armor bearer dressed the warrior and then ran to the battle line with him at great risk to his life. This was seen in Jonathan's armor bearer when they were about to attack the enemy as recorded in I Samuel 14. His response to Jonathan's request to go after the Phillistines revealed his deep loyalty, "Do all that you have in mind...Go ahead I am with you heart and soul." We must help each other don the spiritual armor for battle against the forces of evil and run to the battle line with each other as brothers in the huddle. The question for us is am I willing to be an armor bearer?

Something deep within calls to us of the hunger we have for God and the experience of real community. Often times however men are afraid of intimacy and accountability. One reason for this is that we are trained from an early age to compete and keep score. This intense competitiveness keeps us from letting our guard down.

As Joe Ehrmann points out, "We compare and we compete with men, that's all we ever do. It leaves most men feeling isolated and alone and it destroys any concept of community." Men compete in many ways: becoming the top sales producer, having the biggest home, driving the fastest car, having the most toys, the best golf game, being the toughest guy in the room... you name it. We push our kids to compete, often stealing the joy from them, so that we can compete against our neighbors. Did your son Johnny make All-Stars? Did your daughter make the travel team?

Another reason that we isolate ourselves is because we feel inferior or unworthy of love because of past failures or low self-esteem. Our sense of shame or inadequacy keeps us on the outer edges of meaningful community, fearful to get in. After the Fall when Adam and Eve hid from God in the Garden it was because they were ashamed. We learn to hide in many ways too. Often times the Church is the last place we want to open up because our perception can be that everybody there has it together except us. The reality is that we are all broken, we are all sinners,

and the pathway to our wholeness lies through the cross of Christ our Savior and his body, the church.

The four principles that we have explored regarding the huddle in order that it would work as God designed it are: the quality of authenticity, the virtue of compassion, the obedience of carrying each others burdens, and our partnership in spiritual warfare. These four areas comprise the foundation of a healthy huddle that will experience great joy together and a sense of eternal purpose.

In closing, I am reminded of an old teammate, linebacker Mike Merriwether, whose words are meaningful here. He used to pace our locker-room in pre-game shouting, “Don’t be scared, don’t be scared, men!” Are you willing to make a huddle commitment where Christ and your brothers can put you on the pathway to wholeness?

If you are in the South Hills we would love to get you connected in one of our huddles at the Chapel (shbc.org) where I lead the men’s ministry. My buddy Wizzer leads the men’s ministry for White Fields (www.whitefieldsfoundation.org) where men from many different church traditions come together. They have monthly events and at least 3 weekly huddle groups where you can experience real community.

1 USA Today, December 15, 2008 p. 2C