

A soccer player in a red and black striped jersey is shown from the chest up, celebrating with his arms raised. He is holding a soccer ball in his right hand, which is raised high. The player's face is lit up with a smile, and his mouth is open as if shouting or cheering. The background is dark and blurry, suggesting a stadium at night. The overall style is that of a watercolor or soft-focus photograph.

LIFTING THE TROPHY

A story
of soccer
and the
game
of life

Victory celebrations

I will never forget that feeling. The final whistle blew and the crowds went wild. It had finally happened. All the hard work and training, all the dedication had come together. We were champions! As the trophy was handed over to us we could get lost in the moment of victory. As a team we formed a great unit and as players we were best friends. We could share this moment together as fireworks lit up the night skies in front of thousands of cheering fans in the stands and even more who were sitting in front of their televisions.

Later as we were walking on the field looking up into the empty stands, I thought back to where my love for this game started. My dad introduced me to this beautiful game of soccer. He was not there to share in our glory for he had already passed away but I knew he would have been happy for me. He would have been happy because of our victory but he would have been happier because I finally understood what he meant when he tried to explain to me that: "Life is pretty much like a soccer game".

My dad and I got along really well and as a kid I used to laugh at him when he made this statement. I can still remember him chasing me and playfully tickling me for daring to laugh at him. Sometimes I miss my dad a lot even though I know he is in a much better place right now than I am. Looking up into the empty stands, I suddenly missed him. "Yes dad – life really is like a soccer game". Let me try and explain. As a boy, I only understood soccer so the "life" part of his statement was pretty vague to me...

PART ONE: THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

Starting as a soccer player

I still remember clearly the day when, as a young boy, I was playing around with a soccer ball in our back yard. I would dribble the ball and shoot at the goals which were marked with bricks or stones. I would imagine being some soccer hero and scoring the winning goal in a huge tournament. As a boy it was all about winning and scoring goals. My Dad was watching me and broke

through my dreams with wise advice. He said: "Son, it's time for you to take your game from the back yard to the big field!"

The soccer coach

As I grew up I started playing soccer with other boys. It was great fun, but it was scrappy because as a young boy you play according to your instincts and only try to score as many goals as you can. There is no plan. One of the first lessons that dad ever taught me was the importance of a soccer coach. When dad taught me this, I started learning that the game is much more than just scoring goals. It is about getting into position to score goals and stopping your opponents from scoring goals. A good coach knows the game and the strategy required to beat the opponents. A good coach knows how to train the players. He knows how to develop their skills. He knows how to build the team into a unit. He knows how to get the best out of each player but then the players have to trust the coach and believe that the coach will make them the best players they can be. Players sometimes have to give up their own ideas of the game and trust the coach. Sometimes coaches will be planning late at night when all the players are sleeping. Dad always used to say: "A good coach knows the game and has a game plan. The coach knows his players. You can trust a good coach".

The soccer team

The first time that I was selected to be in the team, the coach called my name along with the rest of the guys and I remember feeling so proud. I couldn't wait to play and prove myself. I knew in my heart of hearts that I wasn't the best player nor was I really worthy of being picked, but the coach told me that he had been watching me and had seen a spark of potential that he wanted to develop. The coach saw things in me that I had never even dreamed of. My dad was also proud of me but, as usual, he was on hand with some good advice that kept me humble. He said: "Remember to always set an example to people who are watching you play and who may be considering whether they should play the game of soccer".

The coach always said that a team does not consist of only one player. Any soccer team needs strikers, midfielders, defenders and a goal keeper. The coach made us look at each player in the team and think about the role each one

of us had to play. For example, the goal keeper should not try to score goals up front. I can still hear the coach saying: "A team consists of more than one player. Each player has a specific role to play in the game of soccer".

The captain of a soccer team

Without a captain nobody would make important decisions on the field. A good captain knows what the game plan is and makes decisions on the field. The captain leads by example from the front and the players will follow his example and decisions eagerly. Dad always said: "A team without a captain is like a car without a steering wheel, no one knows where it is going to go!"

Training and developing soccer skills

Once we had made the team we had to train really hard. I remember how I developed as a player. My skills were not as good as they are now. In training all players learn to believe in themselves. They develop self confidence to be able to take their skills from the training field on to the playing field. The more you love the game of soccer, the more you start eating, drinking and sleeping soccer. Training also prevents you from making silly mistakes on the field. Dad would say: "Train hard because then you will develop your soccer skills and become a better player on the soccer field".

The rules of soccer

The game of soccer has very strict rules. If the players do not play according to the rules, the referee will award a free kick or a penalty kick to the opponents. If a player transgresses badly, the referee will show him a yellow (or even a red) card. Dad gave me some good advice regarding the rules of soccer: "Always obey the rules and if you break a rule, go and apologise to the captain and try your best not to make that mistake again".

The soccer game plan

A good coach will have a game plan. The coach will use each player's skills to win the game. Each player must accept the game plan because on his own a player cannot beat the opponents. However, a good game plan in itself is useless. Players have to go on to the field and play according to the game plan. That is why: "A good coach has a game plan which players must accept".

Scoring (and defending) soccer goals

Ultimately, any soccer game is about scoring more goals than your opponents. We have to score goals and keep our opponents from scoring. It is always thrilling to score a goal and it always feels good when we prevent our opponents from scoring. That is why dad always said: "You need possession of the soccer ball to score goals. Do not give away possession of the ball".

The final whistle ends the soccer game

The game ends when the final whistle blows and not a moment before that. Sometimes this can really cause some pressure situations. Players can get nervous and do silly things when they are under pressure. If you have given your best when the final whistle blows and your team has won, you are happy. You share the victory with many people. Dad used to say: "Remain calm in pressure situations and when the final whistle blows be sure that you have given your best during the soccer game".

PART TWO: LIFE IS LIKE A SOCCER GAME...

It was only later in my life that I realised what my dad had meant when he said that LIFE is like a soccer game.

Starting as a player in the game of life

In the same way that we start playing soccer, so too are we players in God's game of life because He created us. Dad always told me that God had made each one of us wonderfully. We were part of His wonderful creation and we were made wonderful. God knew about us and our individual skills long before we were born.

"Realise how wonderful it is to play in the game of life."

God created us

"So God created human beings in his image. In the image of God he created them. He created them male and female".
- Genesis 1:27

God created us wonderfully

"You made my whole being; you formed me in my mother's body. I praise you because you made me in an amazing and wonderful way. What you have done is wonderful".

– Psalm 139: 13-14

"But why are people important to you? Why do you take care of human beings? You made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You put them in charge of everything you made. You put all things under their control".

– Psalm 8:4-6

The Life Coach

In life we have the best coach ever. God is almighty and He is our Coach. We have an unfair advantage because we cannot lose with God as our Coach. Surely, bad things may happen to us, but at the end of the game of life we will always win. He has already beaten the opponent. It is an absolute guarantee. We win if we trust God with everything in our life. This is what He wants. He will use us if we trust Him. Our Coach loves us. He knows our every move and that is why He selected us to play in His team in the game of life. He is with us every day. God never sleeps. Long after we have fallen asleep, He is still watching over us.

"Trust God as your coach. He knows all the players and He knows the game of life because He created it."

God is in control

"God says, 'Be quiet and know that I am God'". – Psalm 46:10

God knows us

"Lord, you have examined me and know all about me. You know when I sit down and when I get up. You know my thoughts before I think them. You know where I go and where I lie down. You know thoroughly everything I do. Lord, even before I say a word, you already know it".

– Psalm 139:1-4

God loves us

"And I pray that you and all God's holy people will have the power to understand the greatness of Christ's love- how wide and how long and how high and how deep that love is. Christ's love is greater than anyone can ever know, but I pray that you will be able to know that love. Then you can be filled with the fullness of God".

- Ephesians 3:18-19

You can trust God

"Trust the Lord with all your heart, and don't depend on your own understanding. Remember the Lord in all you do, and he will give you success".

- Proverbs 3:5-6

The team

In the game of life the Coach always reads out our names whether we deserve it or not. He invites us to play in His winning team. We have the choice to either accept playing for His team or not. Once we accept our selection, we become part of God's team that cannot lose in the game of life. Therefore:

"Be humble and set an example to people who are watching you. Some people may be considering whether they should play in God's team in the game of life".

God invites us to play in His winning team

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you and you will eat with me".

- Revelation 3:20

God is referring to a feast if we allow Him into our lives.

Be full of joy when you make the team

"Be full of joy in the Lord always. I will say again, be full of joy"

- Philippians 4:4

Be humble when you make the team

"God has chosen you and made you his holy people. He loves you. So always do these things: Show mercy to others, be kind, humble, gentle, and patient. Get along with other people and forgive each other".

– Colossians 3:12-13

When we live according to God's will we do not become like robots. Nor does our life become boring. God created each one of us with different personalities. He will use each one of us for the benefit of His Kingdom. In God's team, there are many players and each one of us has different skills. But together we form a unit for God's team.

We are like parts of a "body"

"Each one of us has a body with many parts, and these parts all have different uses. In the same way, we are many, but in Christ we are all one body. Each one is a part of that body, and each part belongs to all the other parts".

– Romans 12:4-5

Does this make sense? Just like a soccer team needs strikers, midfielders, defenders and a goal keeper, so too does the body need different parts. So- to use an example- we are created like parts of a body. Each one of us has a different part to play in God's Kingdom. In the end it is all about God's Kingdom.

The Captain

In the game of life we have the honour of playing with the greatest captain ever! Jesus Christ is the son of God. He is the Coach's son. If we accept Him and trust Him, He will be our Captain in the game of life. He provides direction in our lives. He walks in front of us and leads us by example and we follow Him by asking Him for guidance in our lives. We start listening to Him and even if we cannot actually physically hear Him, we 'hear' what He says because we get to learn what His will is and what He wants us to do. The stronger our relationship with Him grows, the more we will experience His guidance in decisions

we have to make in our lives. I make Jesus the captain of my life by inviting Him to everything I do.

"Make Jesus the captain in every area of your life!"

Jesus is the truth and the way

Jesus says: "I am the way and the truth and the life. The only way to the Father is through me".
– John 14:6

We can follow Jesus because He is the way!

Training and developing life skills

Initially we may struggle in the game of life and we may make silly mistakes but we must persevere and not give up. Jesus has given us a great example and we learn to follow His example by studying the Bible and talking to Him. Jesus 'talks' to us through the Bible. We must talk to Him in prayer, and know that He is listening to us. We can start building a relationship with Him and listen to what true followers of Jesus say about Him. As our relationship with Him grows, His presence will become more evident and real in our life. By reading the Bible and praying to Jesus we:

"Train hard and develop skills for the game of life and become a better player".

Read the Bible (God's Word)

"Your word is like a lamp for my feet and a light for my path"
– Psalm 119:105

The Bible (God's Word) is like a lamp for our feet. It will show us the path and where we should walk. By studying the Bible, we see where we should walk. Remember earlier? Jesus is the way and the Bible is a lamp to show me the way. The Bible teaches me more about Jesus.

Talk to God through prayer

“Continue praying, keeping alert and always thanking God”

– Colossians 4:2

To pray continually means that I can talk to God at any time during the day or night

“As your relationship with Jesus grows you start eating, sleeping and drinking Jesus through His Holy Spirit in every area of your life. As the Holy Spirit fills your life, you start knowing what is right and what is wrong and you start to live accordingly because you want to live that way. Your entire life becomes an example to others.”

Let God's Holy Spirit fill your life

“Do not change yourselves to be like the people of this world, but be changed within by a new way of thinking. Then you will be able to decide what God wants for you; you will know what is good and pleasing to him and what is perfect”

– Romans 12:2

“...be filled with the Spirit”

– Ephesians 5:18b

If the Holy Spirit is in my life

“But the Spirit produces the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. There is no law that says these things are wrong”

– Galatians 5:22-23

Did you notice? If God's Holy Spirit is present in my life, I will do these things and I will automatically obey all the rules of the game of life.

The rules

As we develop our skills in the game of life, we automatically obey the rules of life. But as in soccer, we may slip every once and again and commit some sin against God or other people. In the game of life we can go to God and ask for his forgiveness. We will be forgiven if we really mean it. If we're really sorry, we will not get a yellow (or red) card and we'll be able to continue in the

game. Even if we get a red card in life, God will still welcome us back onto the playing field if we're sorry. Jesus waits for us to repent and say we're sorry and He will never abandon us.

"If you make a mistake, apologise to the Captain and try your best not to make that mistake again. Once you're selected, you are always part of His winning team."

Ask for forgiveness and God will forgive you.

To explain this, Jesus uses a story in which a son sinned against his dad. He decided to go and apologise. "While the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt sorry for his son. So the father ran to him and hugged and kissed him. The son said: 'Father, I have sinned against God and have done wrong to you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son'. But the father said to his servants, 'Hurry! Bring the best clothes and put them on him.'"

– In Luke 15: 20-22

The Captain took a red card for us

There was a specific part in dad's story where he got more serious. It was when he explained how our Captain in life- Jesus- once took a red card for us. As players in the game of life we transgress the rules continually and badly. We sin so badly that we deserve a red card. God is holy and He is righteous and our sins need punishment. But God is also a God of grace who loves us. To save us from the punishment we deserve, Jesus took the red card on our behalf by dying on a cross for our sins. He did nothing wrong. He did not deserve it. Yet, He died on the cross for our sins so that we may live forever.

"Can you imagine any greater act of love than Jesus dying on the cross for our sins?"

Jesus died on the cross for us

"But he took our suffering on him and felt our pain for us. We saw his suffering and thought God was punishing him. But he was wounded for the wrong we did; he was crushed for the evil we did".

- Isaiah 53:4-5

"But God shows his great love for us in this way: Christ died for us while we were still sinners. So through Christ we will surely be saved from God's anger, because we have been made right with God by the blood of Christ's death".

- Romans 5:8-9

"Christ carried our sins in his body on the cross so we would stop living for sin and start living for what is right. And you are healed because of his wounds".

- 1 Peter 2:24

The game plan in life

In the game of life we fit into God's game plan. The game plan is all about honouring and glorifying Him and seeking and building His Kingdom in everything we do with the unique skills and talents that He has given us. As His Holy Spirit fills our lives, we automatically do good deeds.

"The Coach has a game plan and He will use your skills in His game plan to win the game."

It is all about God's Kingdom

"The thing you should want most is God's kingdom and doing what God wants. Then all these things you need will be given to you"

- Matthew 6:33

And glorifying Him

"Everything you do or say should be done to obey Jesus your Lord. And in all you do, give thanks to God the Father through Jesus"

- Colossians 3:17

Faith leads to good deeds

"My brothers and sisters, if people say they have faith, but do nothing their faith is worth nothing"

- James 2:14

Scoring (and defending) goals in life

As our relationship with Jesus grows, we start witnessing for Him in our lives, maybe without even speaking. People often recognise a coach in the manner his players play the game. We must play the game of life so that people recognise that God is our Coach.

"If you put Jesus in the centre of everything you do, you will honour and glorify Him. You will have possession of the ball and score many goals for His team."

Reflecting God's light (witnessing for Him)

"You are the light that gives light to the world. A city that is built on a hill cannot be hidden. And people don't hide a light under a bowl. They put it on a lamp stand so the light shines for all people in the house. In the same way, you should be a light for other people. Live so that they will see the good things you do and will praise your Father in heaven"

- (Matthew 5:14-16)

In John 8:12 Jesus says that He is the light of the world. If we follow Him, we will never live in darkness but will have the light that gives life. We start reflecting His light. We show people that God is our Coach in the manner we play the game of life.

"You are God's children whom He loves, so try to be like Him"

- (Ephesians 5:1)

But, the opponents will also try to score goals. The devil will try to tempt us and lead us astray. If we stray he will try and make us feel guilty because this is how the devil scores his goals.

"Even the best teams sometimes concede goals even though they try their best to defend. Never concede a goal easily. Don't give in to temptation. Fight against it and if a goal is conceded, always stand up and ask God to forgive you and get back to scoring goals yourself!"

Preparing to defend

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His great power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can fight against the devil's evil tricks".

– Ephesians 6:10-11

Even Jesus was tempted. (Matthew 4:1-11) However, He did not yield to it. He fought temptation with knowledge of the Bible. The Bible (God's Word) is part of His armour.

The reward for sound defence

"When people are tempted and still continue strong, they should be happy. After they have proved their faith, God will reward them with life forever. God promised this to all those who love Him".

– James 1:12

If a goal is conceded in the game of life

Remember the story earlier of the son who sinned? When he realised that he was sinning he said: "I will leave and return to my father and say to him, 'Father I have sinned against God and have done wrong to you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son, but let me be like one of your servants'. So the son left and went to his father".

– Luke 15:18-20

His father forgave him and prepared a feast with his son.

"So, do you think we should continue sinning so that God will give us even more grace? No! We died to our sinful lives, so how can we continue living with sin?"

– Romans 6:1-2

The final whistle in life

There will be some pressure situations in the game of life as well. However, God gives us peace if we play the game of life with Him. As our relationship with Jesus grows, we learn more about His peace. This helps us to remain calm in pressure situations and give our best for Him. With Jesus you cannot ever lose the game. Victory is guaranteed as soon as you choose to become part of the team. Imagine never being able to lose a world cup final. This is how certain our victory in our game of life is. We are part of His Kingdom as soon as we join God's team.

"Always remain calm in pressure situations and when the final whistle blows be sure that you have given your best for God's team during the game of life."

Remaining calm under pressure

"Let the peace that Christ gives control your thinking, because you were all called together in one body to have peace. Always be thankful".

- Colossians 3:15

The certainty of our victory

"God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him may not be lost, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Did you see that? Whoever believes in Him is saved.

"Christ is our life, and when He comes again, you will share in His glory".

- Colossians 3:4

Giving your best in the game of life

"I keep trying to reach the goal and get the prize for which God called me through Christ to the life above".

- Philippians 3:14

Thanking my Coach and Captain for a wonderful season

It was an awesome season which ended with us being champions. I looked up at the night skies and stared long and hard at the stars that form the Southern Cross constellation. It reminded me; as it always does; of another cross. I prayed to my heavenly Father:

"My heavenly Dad – life surely is like a soccer game and thank you for allowing me to be able to play it and enjoy each and every moment of it with you. Thank you for being my Coach and my Captain. Thank you for being much more than my Coach and Captain and for also being my almighty God and heavenly Father. Thank you for also being my Friend and Saviour. I will never forget that you died on the cross for my sins. You rose from the grave and conquered death. Thank you for sending us your Holy Spirit to be present in our lives and to fill our lives. Thank you that the Holy Spirit gives us the opportunity to build a personal relationship with you. Thank you that you are always with us and that we can experience your presence anywhere. Please say hello to my human dad for me."

Written and compiled by: Two willing followers of Jesus
(who are still developing their skills to score goals for His team in the game of life).

A world famous soccer player (Kaka) in Jesus' team

Kaka is arguably the world's best soccer player. In 2008, he fell on his knees in prayer while revealing the slogan "I belong to Jesus" on his shirting after helping his team AC Milan beat Liverpool in the Champions League. According to media reports, Kaka is a devout evangelical Christian who "got religion" at the age of 12. He suffered a career-threatening spine fracture, but remarkably made a full recovery. He attributed his healing to divine intervention. Kaka is a member of Atletas de Cristo (Athletes of Christ).

Source: Mail and guardian. 2 May 2008. God at the goal posts. Available on the Internet: <http://jcsuperstars.wordpress.com/2008/05/02/god-at-the-goal-posts/>. Date of access: 4 April 2010.

References:

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