

Topic: Total Athlete

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My name is Corwin Anthony. I am the Executive Director of Pro Ministries for Athletes in Action.

It's an honor for me to speak with you today because of who you are and because of the enormous responsibility you have as coaches.

You are the **influencers** of the next generation of athletes. We at AIA desire to come alongside you to help equip you as coaches to be the best at bringing healthy perspectives to the sport you love so dearly and at maximizing the potential of the athletes under your care.

We also recognize that athletes have a strong voice in culture and regardless of what Charles Barkley proclaimed a few decades ago, athletes still are and always will be role models for the young and old.

We are inspired by the dedication and the work that coaches and athletes put in to achieve success in their sport. We love the stories of men and women who had to overcome unfavorable odds to accomplish their childhood dreams of being a top athlete. It's no wonder that many young people try to emulate their heroes in sport and in life.

So what you invest into your athletes has far reaching implications beyond the athlete themselves. What you invest can dramatically change the trajectory of that young man or woman's whole life not just their athletic careers.

You are affecting their legacy and probably the legacy of that athlete's family for generations to come because you are Coach. And in some cases, your influence will be the strongest influence on that young woman or man's entire life.

Maybe that's not what you signed up for. Maybe you only signed up to teach strategy and techniques so that you can accumulate as many wins as possible, but the reality is, you are going to impart life lessons whether you intend to or not, so the question is, "***What Kind*** of life lessons do you want your athletes to walk away with when they leave your guidance?"

I'm sure for those of you who were athletes before becoming coaches, I'm not sharing anything you don't already know. I am just hoping to help someone understand the gravity of their role and responsibility.

I am hoping that someone feels the weight of it just a little more. I'm hoping that someone who needs to make a change in how they operate, does so, and longer continues down their journey as coach, in a nonchalant way.

There is a scripture in the Bible that says, "to whom much is given, much is required." Coaching athletes, at any level, puts you square in the middle of the "much is given" category.

That's why I'd like to talk to you today about the importance of developing the Total Athlete. The Total Athlete is one who is developing themselves body, mind and Spirit for the purpose of maximizing their full potential in sport and in life.

Too often athletes and coaches only focus on the physical and the mental aspect of the game. Yet when we ignore the spiritual aspects of the game, we shortchange a huge part of the makeup of an individual.

**Humans are 3 dimensional.** We are body, soul and spirit. If the spiritual development of an athlete is prohibited or neglected, then you're only partially allowing your athletes to thrive.

I don't know about you but if I'm going into fierce competition, I'd want my athlete to bring every part of him or herself to the court or onto the field and I would want to maximize all of it to accomplish the task at hand.

Doesn't it break your heart when you think of all the gifted and talented athletes whose careers were cut short or never got off the ground because this aspect of who they are was never encouraged, never reinforced or even accepted in the athletic space?

Well there are probably hundreds of thousands of athletes around the world, who are living right on the edge of derailing their career and maybe even their lives. Because they have

only focused on the physical and mental part of the game. They leave themselves spiritually vulnerable when they do that.

Back when I was the team chaplain for the Miami Dolphins, I was walking through the locker room after most of the players had gone for the day, when our star player, the team captain, the one who everyone loved, looked up to and wanted to be like, quietly called me over to sit next to him.

Here is what he told me as he spoke quietly so no one could hear. “I’m scared of myself. During the offseason I party like a rock star, taking drugs and drinking heavily, and the women I’m with, I don’t even care anymore what they look like, I’m addicted to sex and I’m out of control and I am afraid of myself.”

He was very aware that although everything looked great to people on the outside, he was in deep trouble on the inside. His spirit was dying and becoming calloused. Thank God he recognized it and reached out for help.

You can’t tell me that the state of his soul didn’t also affect his performance on the field. There was no way he was free to perform and free to fully enjoy the opportunity of being a pro athlete. He needed spiritual input. I’m so glad he knew well enough to seek it out.

Yes, it’s true. Not all of your athletes will be interested in developing spiritually and you may not be able to reach all of them with the life principles you might want to impart, but certainly some of them will have their whole lives transformed in a positive way because you cared just as much about their total personhood as you did about their performance.

For decades in America there was a perception that you could not be a fierce competitor and a lover of Jesus at the same time, so athletes who were serious about their faith were looked at very skeptically.

Again, when I was serving as chaplain for the Miami Dolphins, someone on their staff went into their scouting archives to get the scoop on the kind of athlete I was coming out of college.

He stumbled upon my scouting report from my senior year at UCLA and was shocked by what was written about me 9 years before by one of their scouts. The report read, in the category of “Strengths”: Good Hands, Fast, Athletic. In the category of “Weaknesses” he wrote: Can be inconsistent sometimes and very religious.

This NFL Scout had never even met me but as he gathered information about me from others, he concluded that my commitment to following Jesus was a weakness. He concluded that me wanting to be developed spiritually was a detriment to the team rather than an asset. How absolutely wrong he was.

This scout did not know, that for me, learning to compete spiritually for the glory of God meant that I was to do my best and give my all in everything I do, even when no one was watching because God was watching all the time.

I was to be the best teammate I could possibly be and help my teammates perform better any way I can because I was called to love and serve my brother.

I was to set aside my personal preferences for the good of the whole and not be divisive when decisions were made that didn't help my individual statistics. Because I was called to live sacrificially.

I was to be the most focused, most intense and least distracted player who did everything they could off the field so as to not jeopardize my performance on the field so we could accomplish our mission as a team.

For me, that's what it meant to bring my spirituality into my profession. Who wouldn't want players like that?

**Motivation:** The total athlete doesn't allow his motivation to be superficial. He or she doesn't need the motivation of money, fame, or the adoration of fans to give his or her all. The total athlete plays for a higher calling. They heed the commandment that says, "...whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

Do you fully understand the implications of this when your athletes figure out the need to bring all of themselves unto the court including the spiritual aspect?

It means the Total Athlete did not lose motivation last season when the arenas were empty and there were no fans chanting their names, cheering them on.

The Total athlete doesn't just live for the moments of glory, but they thrive in the crucible of the daily grind.

Can you imagine the kind of athlete you will have and the kind of culture you might be able to create if your players are just as dedicated and motivated about practice as they are about performing on game day?

I know that sounds pretty far-fetched but why not figure out how to get your team there.

**Competition as Worship:** The Total Athlete views competition as an opportunity to worship his creator who gave him the gifts and talent to excel in his sport. Matt 6:19-21 says, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Did you catch that?

The total athlete who learns and understands this principle brings their heart into the game when they compete for a higher calling than medals, money and accolades.

### **Developing a Strong Root System:**

The Total Athlete is also like a tree planted by water. Psalm 1:1-3 reads, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; <sup>2</sup> but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, he meditates day and night. <sup>3</sup> He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

When I picture a tree planted by a stream, I think first of **Struggle and Strength**.

A tree planted near a stream in a desolate land is highly Dependent on the continual nourishment that the stream provides.

As the roots of the tree are constantly being nourished by the steady supply of water and the fresh nutrients that the water brings, the roots have all the resources they need to keep working their way down through the compacted dirt and around buried rocks and other plant material to spread wide and go deep into the earth.

There is a **struggle** going on in this process. But Progress is inevitable because of the continual nourishment from the stream. The end result will be roots that have wrapped themselves around the rocks and penetrated the deep hard soil and other plant material and turning those obstacles in the ground into reinforcing objects that provide additional support, creating an almost impenetrable root system of **Stability, Stamina and Strength**.

When the heavy storms come and when the heat of drought moves in, that tree still has what it needs to stand firm and keep producing fruit.

**Stability, Stamina and Strength** is what many will say they needed most in 2020. It may very well be what we need most in 2021. The total athlete who realizes their need for continual spiritual nourishment will stay close to stream that provides living water.

Here is what I know to be true. The storms of life will never cease. Emotional famine will occur. In sports as it is in life, heartache and heart break will happen. Being mistreated and misunderstood is inevitable in every profession. Intense stress and pressure to continually meet expectations and standards that you and others have set, will not go away.

Learning to develop oneself spiritually is staying close to the stream. Only then will the obstacles and challenges we face in life and in sport will become sources of stamina, strength and stability for our souls.

Tony Dungy's favorite verse in the Bible is Matt 16:26. It reads, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world yet lose his soul."

In the same way, what good does it do to win in sports but lose in the game of life? When that final buzzer goes off and you and I take our last breath, the only thing that will matter in that moment will be how you and I invested spiritually into every aspect of our lives.

I encourage you to be a total coach and coach total athletes.