

A Note to Coaches: What is Gratitude for an Athlete?

Entering my front door after an evening walk, I'm greeted by a familiar sound that I just can't place. Music, yes, it's music — but who is that sultry voice behind the bluesy tune playing in the kitchen? Ah, yes, it's Bruce Hornsby. (If any of you recognize that name, I'll have given away my age.)

My kids had pulled the old disc out of my high school music stash (yes, that was in the early days of compact discs, kiddos), and as the smooth ol' crooner was belting out his "Defenders of the Flag" for no one else to hear (everyone had long since left the room, so I'd become an audience of one), I began to listen closely to the words of a song written in 1988. I expected to find myself amused at the silliness I'd enjoyed in my teenage years, and instead I found myself a rapt listener to a nearly 25-year old insight into the signs of our country's moral collapse.

*It's coming any day now, said the captain / It's coming any day now, cried the priest
The people in high places may defend you / But, son, you better hope they keep the peace
Can't you hear them calling / Can't you see them shine
The city halls are falling / The defenders drink their wine
And when the party's over, their stomachs start to sag / Defenders, defenders of the flag*

*The congregation's waiting at the altar / They can't find the preacher anywhere
They found him with the new girl from the choir / Where they store the boxes of the book of prayer
If these guys are the good ones / I don't want to see the bad
You wonder how it happened / They just picked it up from dad
Faded Old Glory, hanging like a rag / Defenders, defenders of the flag*

OK, so get on with it...right? What does this nostalgia from my childhood have to do with gratitude and athletics? The answer is...everything. I've been thinking a lot lately about the consequences of the decline of gratitude upon our world, and I believe Hornsby's song gives a pretty good picture of the reality of an ungrateful culture (which, sadly, *is* a reality — not a prediction of the future). We ponder the current state of things, wondering when our leaders became corrupt, how our defenders developed a hunger for lust and money and power (rather than service). We decry the fracture of the family and the brazenness of big business (with its lack of empathy for anything but its own ambition); and then we turn in desperation to our churches, only to realize that the disease didn't stop at the back of the sanctuary.

As you embark on this season's study of gratitude with your team, please keep the brokenness of our culture in mind; and what I'd like you to consider is this: *What difference would gratitude make?* If a person knows his Creator and lives in relationship with Him, what does that produce in his life? As I've studied this topic in Scripture, I am convinced that a gratitude for God's gift to us produces a life of obedience and the passion for a Kingdom that cannot be shaken, one that puts the treasures and desires of this world to shame, quite literally. The problem with Bruce's refrain is that he's lamenting the wrong thing; we have lost our way not because Old Glory is "hanging like a rag," but because we've treated the wisdom of God's word like garbage itself.

Lead your athletes, then, in a pursuit of gratitude, which truly is a pursuit of closeness with Christ — and see if they don't find in it a hope that is strong enough to change the world (even if one life at a time).