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Lessons from Between the Lines
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If you happen to be a tennis fan, you know we are in the heart of the professional tennis season. The French Championships finished less than two weeks ago and Wimbledon is just about upon us. As you might guess by my bringing up the topic that, I am tennis fan. My interest is brought about by many hours on the courts. I have only played tennis once or twice a week for many years now, but in my growing up years tennis was in many ways my full-time job. It enabled me to play for a Division 1 program and to compete and coach at some pretty high levels. A few years back, I took stock of some things I had learned playing tennis, stood me well in life, and have considerable application outside the lines. It's those lessons learned between the lines that I offer you today.

Lesson number one is this: you can't put in what God's left out. One of my favorite movies is now an oldie. It was the 1981 Academy Award Winner for Best Picture. It's title? *Chariots of Fire*. It featured two athletes who would go on to Olympic fame in 1924. One was Eric Liddell, who was known as the flying Scot. The other was Harold Abrahams, a self-conflicted Jew. Prior to the Olympics their paths crossed in a 100 yard dash, and Liddell soundly beat Abrahams. Abrahams was completely distraught and immediately sought the personal coaching of Sam Mussabini. When he asked Mussabini to coach him, Mussabini reminded Abrahams that his coaching wouldn't insure success because in the end "You can't put in what God's left out."

The poignancy of these words really struck me some years after the movie came out. By that time, I had long finished my competitive days, and a friend of mine had become the coach of the number one player in the world. I asked him what made that player better than either of us, and his answer was simple: "He can just do things with a ball that you I could never do." That was a sobering thought. We believe that if we just try a little harder or are a little more disciplined we can become great at anything we set our minds to. In fact, that is what we often tell our kids. But that's simply not true. Try as I might I could never be an Olympic champion in the 100 yard dash as Harold Abrahams was, and I cannot because I cannot put in what God left out. Now, I think there is a lot of

freedom and even direction in understanding this truth, because it keeps us from measuring ourselves against an unattainable standard and allows us to enjoy the gifts we have to the measure we have been given them.

Lesson two is that I must trust God on my “bad” days. Notice that I put “bad” in quotes; that is on purpose. Because by “bad” day I don’t mean those days in which I am a jerk in some situation, but rather those days when I just don’t perform so well. I am sure you know what I mean when I say some days you and I just don’t perform as well as others. I have become more aware of this as I have gotten older. Like it or not, there are days when our minds or focus just aren’t as sharp, our reflexes aren’t quite as quick, and our stamina or speed seems to be lacking.

Some years ago, I was playing tennis with a good friend of mine. In fact, we have played about every other week for the last 15 years. There are times when I beat him and there are times when he beats me. On one particular day, however, I was not playing too well, and I began to get very frustrated. Let’s just say angry. I slammed a ball against the fence. Now, I must tell you it wasn’t the first time I got angry on the court, nor was it the last, but it was the day that I learned a very important lesson that has helped me become less frustrated on low performing days on or off the court.

I used to always think the reason I got angry on the court was because I wanted to be seen as a good player in the eyes of others, and when that was not happening I got angry. But that sort of explanation just did not fit this situation. My friend and I were playing on a back court. No one was around. He and I had played so many times there was no losing face by playing poorly. So I asked the Lord to give me insight into my frustration and a couple of days later I believe he did. And this was that insight. I felt as if the Lord said to me: “John, you think you have a right to have your body perform on demand. But it’s not always going to be as you want it. The question is are you going to accept what I give you on a given day as enough to accomplish my purposes for you.” Now, I need to tell you that thought wacked me on the side of the head. I had fallen into the thinking that God could only use me on days when I had all cylinders firing. But frankly looking back on it that would mean I would not be very useful to God on most of my days. Certainly God wants me to put in a good effort in most situations, but when I trust

that what he has given me on any given day in terms of energy or acumen is enough to get done what he wants, it helps me handle my “bad” days and the frustration that comes with it in a much better way.

A third lesson I have learned on the court is that new habits take hard work to form, but once they are formed they are not difficult to maintain. Tennis strokes are like signatures. If videos were to blot out the faces of the best players in the world, it would not be difficult for me to pick out each player. The guys I played college with, if I saw them from a distance and couldn't make out their face, I could still identify them by just watching a couple of their strokes. Accomplished players have developed steadfast habits in their strokes, and it would be much harder for them to play without using the stroke patterns they have honed than using the ones they have developed through years of practice. This tells me that if I want to act and perform and live in generally positive ways, I need to make those ways a habit. I need to be willing to put in the hard work up front, so that my auto pilot is to do the things I want to do.

In my reading of the last couple of years, I have bumped into a good bit that has talked about habit forming from a psychological and neuro-scientific perspective, and I am fascinated when I read that the same task that takes a lot of brain activity when it is new takes very little once it is habituated. Sometimes people think folks who have good habits are so disciplined, but really they were only disciplined when they are forming the habit. After the initial forming phase, performing a habit becomes almost mindless. I find this to be a very important insight in life. I think all of us can look to areas in our lives that need an overhaul or can use some shoring up, but for many the task of changing seems so daunting. But if we are willing to put in some hard work to form a habit, it's really not that tough down the road to keep doing what is good or right.

The fourth lesson came to me when I was about 20 years old. I was travelling with some college and professional players in Mexico. We played exhibitions and then shared about Christ. We had warm-up jackets, and embroidered on them were the words John 3:16, a reference to perhaps the most well-known verse in Scripture. After one exhibition, a Mexican man approached me, pointed at my jacket, and said, “John.” Then he asked, “Is that your name?” I looked down and

said “Why, yes it is.” Then he said, “3:16. Is that your birthday?” At that point I was a bit shocked. My birthday is March 16, and all I could say is “You’re right, it is my birthday!”

After he asked his questions I tried to share with him the fact that John 3:16 was really a bible reference that had a lot of significance, but I am quite sure I had already lost him. As far as he was concerned it was my name and birthday and anything else was just a coincidence. On that day I learned how hard good communication can really be. I cannot tell you how many times over the years I was certain I communicated in a clear fashion only to find out later that someone took my words to mean something completely different than what I intended. This has pushed me to work hard to be clear in what I communicate and not assume that everyone defines terms the same way I do.

The fifth lesson is perhaps best summed up in the words of Wayne Bryan. Wayne Bryan is the father of twins Mike and Bob Bryan, who together are the best doubles team in history. Wayne Bryan has lots of good coaching insights into doubles, but none better than this: Find yourself a good partner...and buy the balls. You see, Wayne Bryan knows that it doesn’t matter how good a player you are, if you don’t find yourself a good partner and do what you can to keep them, you just aren’t going to do much in the game of doubles. And the truth is the same is true for just about anything in life. Whether it’s business, family or personal life, or work in the community, without good partners you just can’t get much done. And there isn’t much hope in keeping those good partners if you don’t treat them well . . . if you don’t buy the balls. A wise and ancient ruler records these words in Scripture: “If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!” (Ecclesiastes 4:10). And pity you and me in nearly every arena of life if we have not found good partners to stand with and make ourselves good partners with which to stand.

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