

OSV

In Focus

Catholics and Sports

Faith

ON THE FIELD

Ministries focus on serving Catholic athletes as they spread the message of Christ

By Joseph O'Brien

Catholic sports journalist John Morales loved sports — to the point that it became his religion.

"I was a cradle Catholic, but I worshipped at the altar of ESPN," he told Our Sunday Visitor. "Honest to goodness, I was consumed by sports. It was all I cared about. I used to record 'SportsCenter' (on ESPN) every day religiously."

His obsession carried over into his professional life, too, as he resigned from his work as an insurance salesman and trained to become a sports journalist.

"I wanted to be the most recognizable Hispanic on national television," he admitted. "But obviously God showed me that he had much bigger plans for me to work directly for the Kingdom. It took a while, but I eventually learned it wasn't about me — but about him."

Morales reveled in the limelight of sports broadcasting — first at a local station in Houston, and then as the Spanish announcer of Chicago Cubs and Chicago Bulls games for radio station WBBM 780 in Chicago. But he also found his personal life tumbling before his idols.

Looking back, he said that he hit bottom when a woman he was involved with became pregnant and aborted his child.

"My child would be about 24 years old now," he said.

From there, it was, Morales said, a slow

but steady recovery and return to the faith. He said that, inspired by Our Lady of Fátima, he began investigating his faith with all the enthusiasm he once reserved for box scores and players' stats. But rather than having to give up his love for sports, he discovered a way to harness that passion with his rediscovered faith.

Sports as evangelization

In 2007, Morales wrote and co-produced "Champions of the Faith," a video featuring many of the big names in baseball, including major-league pitchers Jeff Suppan and Mike Piazza, slugger Mike Sweeney and World Series winning manager Jack McKeon. But rather than speaking about their own accomplishments, these figures spoke about what God has accomplished through them as they expounded on their Catholic faith. A year later, the video was followed by "Champions of Faith: Bases of Life," which offered a look at the faith-filled personal lives of major-leaguers.

An instant hit, "Champions of the Faith" became a watershed moment for Catholic sports evangelization.

Today, there are Catholic individuals who, like Morales, have established organizations to carry this same concern not

being served by Bible-based Protestant ministries such as Baseball Chapel and Fellowship of Christian Athletes, there was no similar service for Catholic athletes.

According to McKenna, CAC serves players by helping to schedule Mass and other opportunities for practicing the Catholic faith. They also provide a speaker's bureau of players who offer presentations to the greater public and especially youths. In conjunction with Catholic priests around the country, they also help provide spiritual direction for Catholic players.

But there's another reason CAC is active in professional sports, McKenna said. As part of its mission, CAC attempts to provide a Catholic vision — to counteract the Protestant view of Christ's teachings. When Catholic players are invited to join a sports-based Protestant ministry, McKenna said, they find their faith under attack because of the Bible-only approach to Christian belief.

"I have a lot of respect for our evangelical brethren, but not at the cost of sacrificing our Catholicism," he said, explaining that CAC offers Catholic players an alternative to the view that the Bible is the sole authority when it comes to the teachings of Christ. CAC, McKenna said, provides a full account of the magisterium and the sacramental nature of the Church.

"These (Protestant) groups have Catholics in their Bible study, and they will say things that are fundamentally anti-Catholic," McKenna said. "For instance they'll cite the Scripture verse that says 'Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven' (Mt



only to the baseball diamond, but also the gridiron, the racetrack and other fields of play.

By providing a visible and easily accessible witness to the Catholic faith, Catholic sports figures play an important role in spreading the message of Christ and his Church to the wide world of sports and the wider world in general. If the success of the ministries these stars have teamed up with is any indication, the role of sports seems to be playing an increasingly vital role in addressing this hunger for the truth.

Offense and defense

Catholic Athletes for Christ (CAC) President Ray McKenna was inspired to found his organization after realizing that while the evangelical Christians were



Morales

Now pitching for the Catholic faith...

By Joseph O'Brien

Pitcher Bobby Keppel began his professional baseball career when he was drafted by the New York Mets in 2000, and made his debut appearance in a major-league game for the Kansas City Royals on May 26, 2006. He's played for several teams since then, and takes to the mound this year for the Rochester (N.Y.) Red Wings, a Triple A team in the Minnesota Twins franchise.

But since meeting Ray McKenna, founder of Catholic Athletes for Christ (CAC), Keppel has also been part of another team. Its all-star roster of Catholics hopes to connect with the world in spreading the truth of the Catholic faith.

Keppel has recommitted his life as a baseball player to Christ and his Church. Through Mike Sweeney, another CAC member and first baseman for the Seattle Mariners, Keppel was introduced to McKenna and has since attended several CAC-sponsored retreats. He's also been signed on as a member of CAC's growing speaker's bureau.

Faith fundamentals

After being a member in his own high school days, Keppel has also become a speaker for LifeTeen of Mesa, Ariz., an international Catholic organization dedicated to spreading the Gospel among teenagers.

Keppel traces his growth in the faith to his friendship with Sweeney when they were teammates on the Kansas City Royals. As one of the featured players in "Champions of Faith," Sweeney has made a name for himself — and the Catholic faith — by being a fearless witness to Christ.

Keppel said a little of that fire has sparked in him and now he's ready to take on the same work of pitching the faith wherever he goes, on the field and off.

And there's plenty to do.

"It might be surprising to know, but

on my teams, I've never actually met a practicing Catholic, except for Mike Sweeney," he said. "No one goes to Mass with me. I've invited some along the way, but most go to Baseball Chapel."

Like any good ballplayer teaching the rules to rookies, Keppel starts with the fundamentals.

"I try to challenge people to take an active part in the Mass," he said. "Most people go through the motions and don't understand why they do what they do. When you say the Creed every Sunday, try to understand what that prayer is saying."

Spiritual slump

His own faith wasn't always so strong, he admitted, and he experienced a slump that beat anything the big bats ever experienced.

"I was drawn away from the Church because I'd hear people saying, 'All you need is Christ,' or 'All you need is the Bible,'" he said. "I never had a personal relationship with Christ; I had the knowledge, but not the love for him in my heart. I looked at these other guys who were Christian, and I didn't think I necessarily needed to be a good Catholic, just a Christian who read his Bible."

After falling away from the Church, Keppel said, he acquired a gambling addiction even as his moral life in general deteriorated.

"I would walk a gray line in my relationship with girls," he said. "There was no moral authority, and I slipped further and further from the truth."

God drew him back, though, Keppel said, when he met his future wife, Suzanne, an ardent convert to the faith who challenged him to return to his faith.

"Early on in our dating, she gave me a book called 'Surprised by Truth,' by Patrick Madrid," he said. "I had really seriously begun doubting that there was anything like absolute truth, and this book opened my eyes to what the truth is and



where it's found — in the Catholic Church. I saw that there could be a moral authority out there that can guide us, teach us, and help keep us on the right path."

Eventually, he began frequenting the sacraments again — starting with his first confession in more years than he could remember, Keppel said. Through spiritual guidance, too, he began finding the truth again — not in shades of gray but in black and white.

"I began to understand that there was a big difference between going to Mass and just reading the Bible," he said. "I would have said the Eucharist was a symbol at one point, but now I began to understand — and believe — that it really was the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ."

Keppel also began to seek treatment for his gambling addiction and in the process found himself becoming more open with people, especially his future wife. In turn, Suzanne also helped him understand the importance of chastity.

"We were strong because of my wife," he said. "She challenged me, and so we waited for marriage. I was lukewarm about chastity before I met her."

From lukewarm to red hot

Now, instead of lukewarm, he's become passionate about his faith — and about the Church that guards and teaches that faith. With that faith came a new way of looking at the issues of the day. Having attended Notre Dame for two and half semesters in the off-season, Keppel considers the recent news that President Obama has been invited to speak at his school.

"From a guy that was lukewarm in college, I would have said, 'Hey, what's the big deal if the president is in violation of Church teaching on certain subjects? He can believe what he wants to believe.' But now, because I don't think there's any bigger issue than abortion, I think we're living in a holocaust right now... and President Obama is known as the most pro-abortion president we've ever had, so to have that man honored at a Catholic university sends a very mixed message about what the Catholic Church teaches."

As a rookie CAC member, Keppel looks up to players like Sweeney and Jeff Suppan, pitcher for the Milwaukee Brewers and another outspoken witness for the faith.

"Both those guys have done a wonderful job," he said. "I would love someday to do what they've done. They take their faith and live it; they don't separate their faith from their work. The two things are intertwined — it is such a part of their hearts. I would love to have that impact someday, if that's what the Lord wills for me, but if not, if I'm just supposed to be a fringe player, then I'm content with that, too."

23:9), and many of them view that as something the Catholic Church violates by calling a priest Father."

On deck for Christ

Inspired by "Champions of Faith," Sports Faith International of Chicago — which often works in collaboration with CAC — also seeks to use sports to spread the Catholic mission. Co-founded in 2008 by Morales, businesswoman Angela Tomlinson and Chicago Bears owner Patrick McCaskey, the organization uses new media and sports to transform the culture through Catholic witness.

The owner of her own marketing company, Better Value in Marketing, Tomlinson said she has the media savvy to grab the attention of the young, but it was her association with Morales and McCaskey which gave her the essential ingredient for success: content.

Through their connections, SFI began featuring some big names in sports, including many of the same figures that play a prominent role in CAC.

For the past two years, SFI has hosted a Catholic Sports Hall of Fame. Inductees from 2008 include the late George Halas (1895-1983), one of the founders of the National Football League and player-coach and owner of the Chicago Bears; and Danny Abramowicz, wide receiver for the New Orleans Saints (1967-1973) and national Catholic speaker. In



Tomlinson

2009, the organization inducted, among others, Father John Smyth, who walked away from being a first-round NBA draft pick to become a Catholic priest.

But alongside the great players and coaches of modern sports, SFI has also begun featuring potential future greats. Last year, SFI held its first ever high school sports awards banquet with Catholic high school teams, individual players and coaches receiving awards for the excellence they've shown in practicing the faith and playing sports. By focusing on high school level players, Tomlinson added, SFI is working on its mission of transforming the culture from the ground up.

"Children form their cultural behavior when they're 8- to 10-years old," Tomlinson said, citing her own marketing research on this point. "For children, local high school stars are as big as the pros are. So we thought that if we could build traction and build relationships with Catholic high schools, it would be like we're starting with the farm crew for the next college and professional stars."

Tomlinson told OSV that SFI hopes to bring their Catholic message to colleges and grammar schools around the country.

Considering the effort under way by groups like SFI and CAC, Tomlinson said that she's confident that the efforts to use sports to transform the culture are bear-



Bobby Keppel has played for many major-league teams, including the Florida Marlins and the Kansas City Royals. ZUMA PRESS PHOTO

Ex-soccer star underscores sporting life with life of faith

By Joseph O'Brien

As a professional soccer player, Chase Hilgenbrinck is used to keeping his eyes on the goal. When he decided last year to retire after less than five years of professional play, many fans may have wondered whether he'd lost sight of it.

A fullback with the New England Revolution of the Major Soccer League, Hilgenbrinck's whole career seemed destined to follow a trajectory into sports stardom. Recognized as an All-American player in high school, after graduation in 2000 he played in college on a scholarship from Clemson University in South Carolina.

After college, in 2004, he played three and half years for a team in the professional league of Chile before coming back to the United States where he played for New England in the Major Soccer League.

Then he announced his retirement last summer. His reason? It wasn't that he was bored with the game or lost his fire for it. Rather, he readjusted his sight on a greater goal. He was going into the seminary to study for the Catholic priesthood.

Hilgenbrinck is now studying for the priesthood for the Diocese of Peoria, Ill., at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Maryland.

Hearing the call

A strong faith life at home and attending Catholic schools, Hilgenbrinck said, prepared the groundwork for his vocation, but it wasn't until he went to South America, away from family and friends, that he began to seriously consider his vocation.

"It was a place I could be alone with God to hear his call in my life," he said. "That's really where my vocation came from, the silence of being alone and shaping up my prayer life.... I have no question that playing in South America gave me the opportunity to see the difference between my profession and true vocation."

"You only practice a few hours a day, so there was a lot of downtime," Hilgenbrinck explained. "I filled that downtime with prayer and Mass and spiritual reading. I hung out with friends, but living on my own there was a lot of

time for listening to God."

Hilgenbrinck's faith didn't just fit well into his life off the field. He also carried it with pride into every professional game he played.

"You can play sports all you want, but without Christ, you can't do anything," he said, noting that his constant prayer on the field was Philippians 4:13 ("I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me."). "Every time I stepped on the field I felt like I could do all things, like I had a companion at my side. I knew that by invoking the name of the Lord, I was capable of all things, and that took some of the nervousness and anxiety out of playing."

Similarities in training

But life as a professional soccer player was as much a challenge off the field, Hilgenbrinck said, especially in South America where the players are expected to live up to a certain image.

"There's this athlete persona that a lot of guys tried to live up to," he said, recalling his days in Chile. "You were expected to be at the best parties and with the best-looking women, or to always be partying and playing well at the same time. It is obviously hard for anyone to live up to (that expectation) and also hard to separate yourself from that persona."

But Hilgenbrinck said he was able to avoid these temptations by keeping his cleats firmly planted in God's playing field. Mass and the sacraments were necessary staples in his spiritual life.

"Even when the team traveled, I made it a game for myself to always find a church and Mass that would fit into my schedule that day," he recalled, adding that along with the Eucharist, confession also became a bigger part of his life.

"The benefits of reconciliation were just incredible for me," he said. "It was great for me to be able to see more clearly God's call and listen more attentively, be more aware of my actions in my life not only for my discernment but also for the temptations one feels."

Once an athlete always an athlete, though, and Hilgenbrinck looks at his training for the priesthood as no different, in a sense, from his sports training.

"On the soccer field," he explained, "I



Chase Hilgenbrinck, a former fullback for the New England Revolution, left his athletic career behind to study for the priesthood as a seminarian of the Diocese of Peoria, Ill. CNS PHOTO

would try to envision what the game might bring before it ever happened, and that's something integral to our training as seminarians, envisioning our future, the issues that might come up and how to put them into training years in advance."

In fact, Hilgenbrinck said he hopes to take his experiences as a soccer player with

him into his priesthood.

"When I was down in South America, one thing I noticed was how passionate people down there are about soccer," he said. "To see a stadium full of people passionate about one thing—it brings great hope really to know... that they could one day be that passionate about their faith."

ing fruit.

"Wherever God puts us, though," Tomlinson said, "whether it's at the plate or behind the scenes, I know that's where God put us to do our best."

Sideline witnesses

Among those working behind the scenes—or at least on the sidelines—SFI's 2008 All Star Catholic High School Hall of Fame welcomed coaches Patrick Griffin and Amy McMahon to their ranks in 2008. Griffin coaches cross country and track and field at Trinity Academy, Pewaukee, Wis., and McMahon coaches the varsity soccer team at the all-girls Willow Academy, Des Plaines, Ill.

Griffin won the "Light of Christ" award for his work as a Catholic coach and as a founding member of the Men of Christ conferences in Milwaukee challenging men to live and teach the Catholic faith.

"I try to provide the young men and women I coach a real, actual Christian man who tries to know God, love God and serve God," he said. "They as much as anyone know that I stumble along just like everyone else, but that's one of the great things about SFI. No one is looking for the unreal hero; they realize everyone is called to be a saint, and we all have our bruises, but none of us has quit."

According to Griffin, he tries to impart to his runners both the importance of win-

ning but also a sense, win or lose, of their worth in God's eyes.

"Forming these kids and getting them to know that Christ is with them on the cross-country field... is one of the most important things I can do," he said. "I try to show them that he is true and he is real. When he said, 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you'" (Jer 1:5), that's not just a quote from the Bible, but an overwhelming statement of God's love."

SFI honored McMahon as "Coach of the Year" for 2008. Her Willow Academy players, according to Tomlinson, took first place at the annual tournament last year with an 11-3-3 record. But the real record of success for McMahon is found in the

character of her players.

"Faith plays a part in everything we do," she said. "The faith isn't just in their day-to-day schoolwork, but in the little things they do like the athletics in which they compete."

Prayer in particular plays as important a part as making goals for McMahon's players—and she knows that, as with everything they do as a team, if she takes the lead, the players will follow.

"It helps the girls to see this woman in her late 20s publicly praying and that she's not embarrassed by it," she said. "It is great to see that they're receptive to that."

Joseph O'Brien writes from Wisconsin.

From court to convent: A lesson in perseverance

By Joseph O'Brien

Sister Mary David Tappan never made a name for herself in sports — at least not in the big leagues. But she was a serious contender for Division I college basketball teams. And after that, who knows? The scouts were looking. Scholarships were in the offing. Plans were being made. She'd been playing basketball since Kindergarten, after all, and her whole high school career was focused on excelling at the game.

But after a knee injury took her out of contention for playing college and perhaps even professional hoops, the Franciscan third-year novice does not dwell on what could have been. She's too busy focusing on what she has now: a call from God to join him at the St. Francis Convent of the Franciscan Sisters of the Martyr St.

George (FSGM) in Alton, Ill.

Looking back, though, Sister Mary David sees in her avocation for sports the groundwork for her vocation to religious life. It remains a source of lessons in perseverance she continually returns to throughout her discernment.

'Damaged goods'

In 2001, her high school junior year, Mary Tappan made a name for herself on the basketball court, so much so that Division I colleges and universities were paying her court to play for them. She admits now that, with a head full of hoop dreams, she was already in high school planning a life devoted to basketball. In the state playoffs, though, she tore the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in her knee, and while it did not end her ability to play, it did end her college hopes.

After surgery, she said, the colleges just stopped calling.

"Basketball is a business, and there's nothing wrong with that, but if you can't do what they want you to do, then you get cut," she said with neither regret nor bitterness, explaining that colleges will rarely sign on players with severe injuries.

But her injury didn't prevent her from playing college hoops altogether. She still found a few minor colleges willing to con-

sider her for their teams, despite being, in her own words, "damaged goods."

At the same time, she learned about Benedictine College, in Atchison, Kan. And the more she learned, the more she liked. Her college career came down to a choice, she said, between attending Benedictine and a college that had offered a full basketball scholarship. Benedictine, she said, offered neither a scholarship nor a promising sports program, but it did offer a campus alive with the Catholic faith.

"When I came home from visiting Benedictine, there was a letter waiting for me from the other school informing me that after examining my knee, the school decided to revoke my scholarship," she said. "Normally I would have been extremely angry, but actually I was relieved. I wasn't thinking about religious life at that

time, but I knew that I wanted to go to Benedictine."

One-on-one

She applied to Benedictine and was accepted in the fall 2003. That same semester, she said, she first met FSGM sisters who also were enrolled at Benedictine. She came to know them well, she said. As her parents lived relatively close to Alton, Ill., she would often ride home with the sisters for holidays. On one of these car trips, a sister invited her to a retreat sponsored by the order, she recalled.

"The last half hour of the retreat I spent in the adoration chapel," she said. "It was one of those times when you just know God is present on all levels."

In fact, Sister Mary David said, at that moment she first began asking God to help her discern her path in life. But she said, her vocation was not a slam dunk, but remained very much a jump ball between herself and God. She still felt the draw of the basketball court.

"I knew God was asking for something, but I was unwilling to surrender basketball for it," she admitted. "Finally, I remember going back to that same adoration chapel and saying, 'Lord, what do you want me to do?'"

That's when she knew not

only that she had a vocation but that God was calling her in a clear voice to become a sister, she said. Although she couldn't be sure, she added, she believes that with her assent God responded in kind with a generous thank-you gift.

"Not that God works this way all the time, but my knee felt better the rest of the year, I was one of the main players on the team, and I played at least half of each game. It was good. I was playing basketball the way I remembered it, as if the Lord was saying, 'This is My gift to You. Thank you for giving your life to Me.'"

Life lessons

Looking back at what she learned on the court, Sister Mary David said, certain virtues have put her in good stead with her struggle to discover God's will in her life.

"St. Paul talks about athletes denying themselves all kinds of things to win a perishable crown, and he says, 'They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable' (1 Cor 9:25). Along those same lines of discipline, playing basketball taught me not to quit, no matter what I was doing, but especially in discerning my vocation."

She recalled her eighth-grade basketball coach being particularly hard on her during practice. When she finally confronted the coach about his treatment, she said, he imparted an important lesson.

"My coach just said, 'To him whom much is given, much is expected. I do this because I see the potential in you and want you to be good, not for me, but for you, because you've got what it takes,'" she related. "So persevering through tough situations, you push yourself down that last spring, or into the convent, in my case. If you don't feel like praying, you know to persevere; if you're tired after spending the whole day working, you go say the Stations, you do that last bit, even if you might not feel like it. In the end you'll know the reward is there, and so you do it out of love."



Sister Mary David

SCRIPTURE

Bible's evolving use of sports imagery

Old Testament references tended to be negative, while St. Paul used them to reach his audience

By Carl E. Olson

The word athletics is derived from a Greek word meaning "to contend for a prize." And prior to the conquests of Alexander the Great (332 B.C.) and the subsequent spread of Greek, or Hellenistic, culture, athletics and games were uncommon in Palestine, especially among the Jewish people.

Thus there are only a few Old Testament references to sports or related activities. One of the earliest and best known is the description of Jacob wrestling with a mysterious messenger from God through the night "until the break of dawn" (Gn 32:24-26; see Hos 12:3-5). Far from recreational, the encounter was a demanding and entirely serious test.

In a similar fashion, a deadly game between 24 young men (2 Sm 2:12-17) was not sport, but serious warfare: "Then each one grasped his opponent's head and thrust his sword into his opponent's side."

Psalms 19 employs the metaphor of an athlete joyfully running his course (v. 6) in describing how the heavens and creation "declare the glory of God" (v. 1). The author of Ecclesiastes, reflecting on the difficult nature of life, wrote, "Again I saw under the sun that the race is not won by the swift, nor the battle by the valiant." (9:11).

But later references to sports are decidedly negative, reflecting the disgust harbored by devout Jews against the gymnasiums, stadiums and athletic activities of the Greeks. During the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.), a gymnasium was built at the base of the Temple Mount (1 Mc 1:14; 2 Mc 4:9-15). The gymnasiums were cultural and educational centers, aimed at training both mind and body in Hellenistic culture and thought. It was especially scandalous for Jews that athletic activities were done in the nude.

Yet some temple priests apparently participated in various athletic events sponsored by the gymnasium in Jerusalem: "Disdaining the temple and neglecting the sacrifices, they hastened, at the signal for the discus-throwing, to take part in the unlawful exercises on the athletic field" (2 Mc 4:14).

Athletic metaphors

Athletic activities are mentioned several times in the New Testament, and receive a far more positive treatment there. Most of the references are found in the writ-

ings of St. Paul, which is not surprising considering he was a Roman citizen, was very familiar with Greek culture and had traveled widely. Also, it is clear he sought to use metaphors his non-Jewish readers could appreciate.

A good example of this is found in 1 Corinthians 9, where St. Paul writes of the spiritual discipline needed by disciples of Jesus Christ:

"Do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win. Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor 9:24-27).

Corinth was the site of the Isthmian Games, which were similar to the Olympics.

Spiritual training

Paul emphasized the discipline, training and focus required for those events, and applied those qualities to the spiritual life. He used the same basic metaphor in writing to Timothy: "Train yourself for devotion, for, while physical training is of limited value, devotion is valuable in every respect, since it holds a promise of life both for the present and for the future" (1 Tm 4:7-8). In other letters he referred again to running (see Gal 2:2; 5:7; Phil 3:14) and fighting (1 Tm 1:18), as well as to wrestling (Eph 6:12) and gladiator contests (1 Cor 4:9; 15:32).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews also drew upon sporting imagery in exhorting his readers to "rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us" and persevere in "running the race that lies before us" (12:1-2) — that is, the spiritual race of faith. And like St. Paul, he emphasized that the race can only be finished by "keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus."

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