

Lofty Dreams and Buried Blessings



When your shoulder is shattered, and with it your dreams, what can you build from the pieces? Coach Frank Allocco shares his story of faith disappointed – and new faith discovered.

When I was a young boy I had a dream. To be the starting quarterback at the University of Notre Dame.

At Our Lady of Peace grammar school in New Jersey, I looked forward to recess each day. Our asphalt playground was split in two, one side for boys and one side for girls, and we boys made sure to play touch football in the middle of the playground because we wanted the girls to watch us. One day I walked over to Sister Loyola, the eighth-grade girls' teacher, and told her, "Keep following Notre Dame football, Sister, because one day I will be the starting quarterback there."

I went on to high school just across from that playground, at New Providence High School, and in my sophomore year I went to the football coach and said: "I want you to give me every drill you can to get me to Notre Dame. I want to be the starting quarterback at Notre Dame." He laughed and said, "Notre Dame? You're not even going to play *here*, you're too slow and too small and there's an All-American quarterback ahead of you." I said, "Don't

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worry about all that, just help me get to Notre Dame."

Every day after our regular football practice ended, Coach Carpenter would teach me the footwork to run Notre Dame's offense. I was an eager student, because I had a DREAM. I gradually got bigger and stronger, and in my junior year I emerged as the starting quarterback. I had an outstanding season and began to get attention from colleges. I was named a preseason Kickoff All-American, and the letters started to pour in, including one from my favorite school, Notre Dame.

The first game of my senior year we took the opening kickoff. Three plays later I threw a touchdown pass for our first score of the season. On our second

series, rolling out on an option play, I lowered my shoulder and crashed into a defensive back. After the collision, I felt something strange in my

shoulder. I had snapped my collarbone in two. On the way to the hospital, my father and older brother Jerry were trying to console me, but I knew my dream of starting at Notre Dame was over. My dad finally convinced me that I would just have to concentrate on

having an outstanding season in basketball. I finally stopped crying and accepted the situation, but on the way home I turned on the radio and there was a broadcast of a Notre Dame football game on. The fight song was playing, and I began crying all over again....

That night my football coach stopped by my house to visit with me. He told me that my dream wasn't over, that I had to have faith that God would guide me toward the fulfillment of my goals. I had always had tremendous faith in God, and this reassurance brightened my spirits, and I began to pray and to heal inside, finding solace

in some lines of poetry quoted by Sister John Bertrams, a dear family friend: *"Each sorrow is a shadow sweet / That tells how near Christ's nailed feet / Are walking by thy side / Then let thy soul confide!"*

I did not return to the football field that year, but I had a great basketball season and was offered many scholarships. Most football programs wrote me letters saying they wouldn't commit a scholarship to a player who didn't play in his last year of high school. However, one day in January I heard from a Notre Dame football coach who was going to visit and watch me play basketball. After the game he asked my coach for films

of our preseason football scrimmages. A couple of months later, I made my official visit to Notre Dame and I was offered a football scholarship.

When I arrived at Notre Dame for my first football meeting, I looked at the posted depth chart and saw myself listed at quarterback – but as ninth-string! Not having played my senior year, I was at the bottom of the chart. I decided that rather than complain, I would do everything I could to climb that ladder. I believed that if

I worked hard, God would take care of me....

I gradually worked my way up to second-string, and was a three-year varsity

letterman. I played in two Orange Bowls and one Sugar Bowl and was on the 1973 national championship team. I still believed that my opportunity to start at quarterback, the fulfillment of my dream, would come, and in the middle of my senior season, our legendary coach Ara Parseghian asked me if I would like to apply to the NCAA for an extra year of eligibility. He said that we would have no experienced quarterbacks returning, and that the starting quarterback job would be mine. I jumped at the chance, and was ultimately granted an extra year.

My dream was about to come true.

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campus news

I can remember our winter workouts, how I would leave those practices so excited that I would just honk my horn as I drove home, the noise proclaiming my happiness. I decided to attend Mass every day to thank God for rewarding my faith with this opportunity. One day, near the end of Communion, an old man walked into the church and sat down in front of me. It was a freezing day, in fact a blizzard, and he was rubbing his hands to warm them up, and I could see tears frozen on his face. After Mass I talked with him a bit. His name was Harry Davis, he was 85 years old, and he told me that he rode his bike to Mass every day and that today, because of the blizzard, he had had a difficult time getting there. I asked him if he would like me to pick him up every day in my car and take him to Mass. He readily agreed.

As I drove him home, I asked him what he usually did after Mass. He told me that he would ride his bike to the cemetery to visit his wife's grave, a trip that would take about 15 minutes by car, but which took him several hours of pedaling. He did this EVERY day no matter the weather, with trucks speeding by, splashing water on him, sometimes running his bike off the road. I said that I could drive him to the cemetery if he wanted, because my first class of the day was a late one.

He agreed, and a new friendship was born. As I drove him to the cemetery he would tell me stories of the past. Although I never told him that I was slotted to

be the starting quarterback at Notre Dame, he told me about how he had helped to build Knute Rockne's house, and he talked about the legendary football players of Notre Dame. When we arrived at the cemetery, I would watch his ritual, how he would walk to his wife's grave, brush off the snow, and kneel reverently. When he returned to the car, he would tell me that in the spring we would make a wooden cross and put artificial flowers around her grave....

A few weeks later, spring practice began, and I stepped in as the No. 1 quarterback. In our first scrimmage I threw a touchdown pass to Ken MacAfee, my favorite receiver, who would go on to play for the 49ers. Everything was perfect. I was going to have that senior year that I was denied in high school.

Toward the end of the spring, I was rolling out to pass and a linebacker dove at my feet and tripped me up. As I put my right arm to the ground to regain my balance, a defensive end dove on top of me and we crashed to the ground. My right shoulder absorbed the full impact of our combined weight. The shoulder was burning, and I knew I had a serious injury. The trainer came over and all I could say was, "All of the time I put in, all the years, all the work -- for this?" I was so close to my dream that I could taste it.

We went into the training room and I was diagnosed with a shoulder separation that would need immediate surgery. As I went to the hospital, and then lay in the

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hospital bed, I was trying to figure out why this always happened to me, and why I could never get a break. I was angry, and I couldn't understand why God was not there for me.

That evening Notre Dame's new head coach, Dan Devine, came to visit, and I asked him if I should just give up my dream and go ahead and graduate. He told me that I was his only experienced quarterback, and that if I was well, I would start. I decided to stay at Notre Dame and to begin the difficult task of coming back. That summer I worked out every day like a man possessed. I lifted weights. I did range-of-motion exercises in the pool. I ran everywhere, and my day was dedicated to getting my shoulder rehabilitated. The culmination of my intense daily workout was running the stadium steps. I ran up 60 rows and down 60 rows for each of the 36 gates of the stadium.

One day, when I had finished 31 gates, I was hot, and exhausted, and as I approached the 32nd I began to slow down. For the first time, I was going to let the last few go. As I looked at the entrance to the stadium below the goal posts, I saw an older couple there with a young man who looked about 18. They were looking around the famous arena. Obviously, mom and dad were dropping off their son for his first semester at Notre Dame. I was wearing my practice jersey, with my number and name on the back, and as I glanced at them, I thought, "They know I'm the starting quarterback at Notre Dame..." When I said those words, I had a burst of adrenaline and I sprinted those last few gates. Then I ran over to the people and introduced myself and welcomed the young man to Notre Dame.

Toward the end of the summer, my rehabilitation was going great. I was throwing the football well and was in the best shape of my life. Then, on a follow-up visit to my doctor, I was told that the mersilene tape inside my body that was holding my collarbone in place was creating a small divot in the bone. He explained that this weakness could cause my collarbone to snap again, and that I should have another operation to take



the tape out. It was a minor surgery, but this second operation set my rehab back about four weeks, and I was never quite able to regain that time.

Our season opened with a nationally televised game at Boston College. I was on the traveling squad

but I was not going to play in this game. I remember standing on the sidelines and crying as the national anthem was played. This was my game to start, but here I was, unable to play. I took solace in the fact that Coach Devine told me I would get an opportunity to be re-evaluated later in the season. However, that opportunity never came and for the first time in my life, my faith was not rewarded.

Throughout that final season, I constantly wondered why God would do this to me, a loyal follower. I asked why there were players there who drank, who smoked, who didn't train, who didn't follow their faith, but yet their dreams were fulfilled. My faith was weakened, I felt like God had cheated me. I had done everything He asked and I still didn't get what I wanted.... It was a miserable senior season.

Toward the end of the season, a letter arrived from my best friend's mother. In the letter she told me that she was sorry that I never got a break. She reminded me of how in my senior year in high school we had had 19 starters coming back and had been projected as one of the top teams in the state, and then, with one hit, our dream season had ended. She wrote about my patience in college, working and waiting for a final opportunity, and then losing that on one fateful tackle. She concluded by saying it just wasn't fair that I had never gotten that break to fulfill my lofty dreams.

I thought about her letter and her words and about my journey to achieve my dream. I thought for days about it, and wrestled with my feelings, and then I took a piece of paper and a pen and I began to write back to her.

I wrote that although my career had been a difficult one, filled with adversity and disappointment, I really didn't have many bad breaks. I told her that I realized



Spartans' Head Basketball Coach Is Catholic Coach of the Year

Sports Faith International inducted Frank Allocco into its Hall of Fame as 2012 Coach of the Year. This national award is presented each year to an outstanding coach who is a role model for Catholic students. Allocco was introduced at the induction in Chicago in February by his colleague Bob Ladouceur, De La Salle's head football coach and a 2010 Sports Faith Hall of Fame inductee.

"It is an honor to be inducted into the Sports Faith International Hall of Fame," said Frank. "I appreciate the recognition by a group that is passionate about our Catholic faith. I believe that in any great teaching, parenting, or coaching endeavor, it is never about the mentor, it is always about the students, and I'm grateful for the thousands of young people that I have coached. They have enriched my life and continue to be my greatest teachers."

Bob Ladouceur said, "Frank is the very best coach I have seen at getting the most out of his players' potential. But this is secondary to what makes Frank so deserving of this award. Frank is a very devout Catholic who sees his coaching career as a vocation, and he uses basketball as a vehicle to teach kids to see the bigger picture. That is, he teaches these students to be servants to their fellow man. From his court drills to his chapel services, he instills in his players all the intangibles that go into being an authentic teammate. These intangibles serve his students well beyond their high school days."

Allocco offered this reminder to the audience: "To the teachers and coaches assembled here, we have been called to the highest calling, to mold and mentor young boys and girls who respectfully call us coach. This is not a job, it is a ministry, it is a precious candle which we hold for a moment, and we must all commit to make it burn as brightly as we can as we pass it on to future generations."

now that at each step of my journey, when God had planted an obstacle for me, there had always been a lesson in it.

I said that through my daily attendance at Mass, I met Harry Davis, the old man who rode his bike in the sleet of an Indiana winter just to spend a few moments at his beloved wife's grave. He was sent into my life to teach me what real love was.

I told her that I had learned that I wanted to be the starting quarterback at Notre Dame for all the wrong reasons. I wanted the fame, and the NFL career. I wanted to please and impress others.... But God had wanted me to learn that real satisfaction comes from within, not from the adulation of others.

I wrote about my experience running the stadium steps -- how I couldn't run one more step, but then when I saw that couple and



Frank Allocco (center), Bob Ladouceur (right), with Patrick McCaskey of Sports Faith.

their son, I could have run for days. I told her that through my disappointments God was showing me that the beauty of sport is not in the glory of success and the fulfillment of dreams. It is in the journey. It is in the man who runs the stadium steps when the stadium is standing empty, not necessarily in the man who is lucky enough to run there when the stadium is full....

Years later, I appreciate that all of the heartbreak and all of my questions about my faith led me to a better path. I see that when a lofty dream falls to the ground and shatters, it marks a spot where a buried blessing can be found. God's plan for me, as I know now, was to learn a new perspective on athletics and life so that I could teach others, who have their own dreams, where the right path is, and that fulfillment can come in many unexpected ways. As a young man, I thought I had a clear vision of what my life should be, but God had a better plan. I just had to let go and trust that He knew the way....

This article is based on an address given by Frank Allocco at De La Salle's Lenten Prayer Service on April 19, 2011. As a high school athlete, Frank won all-state honors in football, basketball, and baseball, and was scholar-athlete of the year for the class of 1971. Some of his poetry and prose is posted on his website, www.frankallocco.com. He has been head basketball coach of the Spartans since 1997.