

THE ARMOR

BUILDING THE FORTRESS

Throughout our lives, we will find ourselves in situations where we are asked to look fear in the eye and continue charging forward right through it. It might be a public speaking engagement, asking our boss for a raise, or asking someone we have feelings for out for a date. Life is filled with events like these where we need to have courage to do something we are tentative about or not comfortable doing. Adults and youth alike must learn to deal with these situations.

Athletics in general put us in positions where we are in front of crowds showing all in attendance how hard we have worked and how good we are at our craft. Most games will have moments that are crucial to the final outcome of the contest. It is during these moments that some will shine and perform their very best, while others will fold and crumble under pressure. Certainly, in a majority of instances, success in these moments is much more associated with mental traits (mental toughness, courage, confidence, fortitude, attitude, the will to win, etc.) than with the physical gifts an athlete possesses. Sometimes, great athletes who are physically blessed fold under pressure, whereas others who aren't as gifted become "clutch" players when the game is on the line.

Over the years, I have grown to believe that the best coaches are able to get their players to rise up and perform when the pressure is on. I have always appreciated the saying "Great leaders do not light a fire under someone's feet, instead they build a fire within." In my years as a high school coach, the two things I found that tend to inspire athletes to take it to the next level and perform their best are playing with a sense of family and unity and playing with faith in God as their foundation. For the remainder of this piece, I am going to focus on the faith component.

My coaching staff tried to build the fire within by encouraging our players to "take God with you on every play." We instructed our players to say a quick prayer before every snap and to carry God in their heart during that play. We also shared that with Christ in our hearts, we had nothing to fear. Perhaps my favorite activity in all my years of coaching came every Friday night in the fall right before we left the locker room to take the field for the opening kickoff. After our pre-game talk, we would always kneel in a tight circle for team prayer. Then the players would stand and touch their helmets overhead as we "put on the armor and build the fortress" before taking the field. I would say a shortened version of Saint Patrick's Breastplate Prayer. I would say a line, and the players would repeat it. We would then move to the next line. Here is the shortened version we used:

Christ behind me,

Christ before me,

Christ under my feet,

Christ beside me,

Christ over me,

Let all around me be Christ."

After they repeated the last line I would ask, "With Christ in our hearts, whom shall we fear?" To this the players would respond energetically, "No one!" We would then head out to the field for the opening

kickoff. We called this “building the fortress” because we felt like we were creating God’s armor around our team before going to battle. This was always powerful because our players were extremely focused. It also made them realize that if we were going to ask God to protect us, we had a duty and an obligation to give everything we had to bring honor to Him, our families, and all those who love us. As I looked our players in the eyes before sending them out, they were usually a bit emotional and many would have tears in their eyes. I then knew they were ready to do something very special on the field!

I truly believe that we are teaching our athletes and our children a valuable life lesson when we encourage them to take God with them in their hearts every day, especially when they are facing a challenge in their life. Imagine what would happen, as a faith-filled person, if we started every day by personally building the fortress of God’s armor around us. The challenges we face in life certainly would not seem so daunting. This is great advice for both young and old.

With Christ in our hearts, whom shall we fear? ... No One!!

1. What in this sport creates fear for you as a player?
2. What can you do in your physical training to create better armor to protect you from injury?
3. How can building the armor of your faith around you help you perform your very best?
4. If our team builds the armor before every game, how can this help us win games?
5. How can building the armor each day assist you in your day-to-day life?