



4TH & 10

Coaching NFL leaders with a winning game plan

By Adam Miller

It was late fall. The NFL season was in full gear. The Indianapolis Colts were making a perfect push toward the Super Bowl with an undefeated season in the AFC South. The Seattle Seahawks were coming on strong in the NFC with only two losses. And the New England Patriots were having a decent season. Twelve games down, four to go. Jack Mula, chief administrative counsel for the New England Patriots, had just settled in with his remote control to see the day's sports highlights. Shortly after midnight his Blackberry rattled on his hip. He looked down. *Are you weary?* the subject read. It was a message from Joe Savage, the North American Mission Board's national missionary to the NFL (National Football League), and his brother, Phil, general manager of the Cleveland Browns.

At that point, Mula was beyond weary. Football season can be brutal, even for the guys in the front offices. Like most people Mula was trying to balance a high-stress career with family responsibilities. Weary was an understatement.

Don't wait until you are about to drop before you go to bed, the message read. Your sleep is more important than SportsCenter or Leno!

"It was amazing how appropriate that email was," Mula recalls.

Eventually he put down his Blackberry, turned off SportsCenter and went to bed. >>>



LEFT: Jeff Friday, Baltimore Ravens CENTER (L-R): Phil Savage, Sr., Phil Savage, Browns' general manager, and Joe Savage, national missionary, are taking Christ to the NFL. RIGHT: Mel Tucker, Cleveland Browns defensive back coach, is among the network of believers in the League.

Fatigue is just one challenge facing NFL players, coaches, managers and staff. Add to this the pressure to win, the pressure to compromise values and the constant temptation to let status and position coddle the ego, and you've got a pressure cooker career.

"NFL players have chaplains who lead Bible studies and pre-game prayer. They also provide a listening ear to talk about life," says Joe. "But the executives and coaches don't have anything like that."

Brothers Joe and Phil Savage saw a great need to minister to leaders in the NFL. Phil felt the pressures first hand as he took the helm at various administrative posts in the NFL—finally landing at the Browns. As a 14-year veteran of the NFL, Phil is highly respected. He's known throughout the League as one of its top talent evaluators. Because of his experience and position, he has a wonderful opportunity to share Christ in a unique mission field.

Joe, a pastor in Mulberry, Florida, caught a vision for reaching people in the NFL as he watched his brother's ministry develop. Thus emerged the idea for Winners Influence (www.winnersinfluence.com), a ministry devoted to encouraging the executives of the NFL and providing

them the tools and opportunities to share their faith in personal and even large settings. When Joe was commissioned as a NAMB missionary last winter, he'd already begun mentoring the leaders through email devotionals and one-on-one relationship building.

"When I approached my brother with the idea for Winner's Influence, he'd already had similar thoughts," Joe says. "I remember him telling me 'this could impact the entire world.' You have to realize that while football is an American sport, it's followed, often 'religiously,' by people in nearly every country."

Adds Joe: "We immediately saw an open door to affect the leadership of teams and harness a platform to impact the world. The NFL is not an easy place to be. The head coaches are basically given three years to win or they're gone. There's a ton of pressure to perform and a danger of becoming prideful, because they roll out the red carpet for you when you're in these positions. We want to teach these guys that God has given them the ability and connectedness for His glory's sake."

There's been fruit already. Joe took seven Christian coaches and players from the Baltimore Ravens on a trip to the economi-

cally depressed side of Cancun, Mexico. These sports giants coached underprivileged kids in the rudiments of football.

"As I watched them teaching those kids, I realized these men want to minister, they're just not sure how or where to do it." Joe uses situations like this to equip leaders for future ministry opportunities.

Joe and Phil also have seen coaches and executives use their leadership positions to encourage college and high school coaches as well as aspiring athletes.

THE PLATFORM

It's certainly not what you'd expect from an executive of one of the decade's most respected NFL teams, but Jack Mula of the Patriots will give up several days of his month to share a word about football, success and, especially, godly success with high school football teams.

"I have to admit that Joe Savage's words will often find their way into my messages," Mula says. While Mula is a high-profile executive in the League, rank doesn't preclude anyone in the NFL from having an influence. From strength coaches to general managers, the world is watching and waiting.

When you have millions of eyes

trained on you and your organization any given Sunday—some critical, some hopeful, some idolizing—as do players and coaches in the NFL, how you perform on and off the field has an effect on a large number of people. What if you were to take those eyes and through your life and words divert them to the face of Jesus Christ? This is exactly what NAMB is doing through the network of Winner's Influence. By finding and forming genuine relationships with NFL personnel then "sending" them to tell His story to a watching world, the Savages are slowly changing the climate of professional sports. Their vision is to see this network expand into other professional sports and even into North American corporate life in general.

"We want to put the Word in front of these guys every day. We come in saying we don't want anything back. That's something they're not used to, because someone is always asking for an autograph or photo or something," Joe says. "They don't mind getting to know someone who has an unconditional interest in their spiritual and professional success. We do. We genuinely want to see their spiritual and professional lives soar for the glory of

God, and we're going to walk with them every step of the way."

THE CLIMATE

Perhaps it used to be so, but no longer do people typically look to professional sports as a place to find godly men and women for role models. And while the NFL isn't the most notorious organization for wayward men, it has its share of players and professionals who need Christ. Surprisingly, quite a large group of men are seeking God even as they perform excellently at their jobs. Take Jeff Friday, strength and conditioning coach of the Baltimore Ravens for example.

"The opportunity is there for spiritual growth," says Friday. "You just have to be careful of sin and realize you're called to a higher standard and then live up to that standard as best you can."

Friday adds: "I feel like God is preparing me and others for something big. I have a feeling that this is a stepping stone for something greater that God is going to do in the NFL."

Friday is responsible for the success of more than 60 players, and he views his role as a trainer of the mind, the body *and* the spirit. His players know him as a wise man, and they often approach him for advice about life. Friday views his position as one of great spiritual importance.

As does defensive back coach for the Cleveland Browns, Mel Tucker. "Remembering why I'm here and the purpose God has for me in this position gives me a greater sense of purpose in my job and my life."

THE CHURCH

As Joe and Phil continue their relationships with the NFL and other sports leagues, the church's prayer support is crucial to the success of this ministry. The Savages and the network of believers in the League come under attack almost daily in their line of work, and the prayers of churches are already being felt.

The local church also provides

a place where sports professionals can learn, grow and develop a local network of believers. Churches also can reach the non-professional coaches and players in their communities. These leaders are shaping the minds and lives of future leaders in professional sports. From hosting a coach's breakfast to offering chaplaincy services, local congregations can make an impact on the sporting world for generations to come.

NAMB is committed to equipping leaders in influential fields of ministry such as the NFL, other professional sports and in the corporate world. Through NAMB's Next Level Leadership and through missionaries who are impacting mainstream culture and through the local church, Southern Baptists can equip leaders no matter where they are.

For more on equipping leaders, visit www.namb.net and click on "equipping leaders."@

Adam Miller is associate editor of On Mission.

FROM THE FIELD

As always thank you for your timely thoughts. It's amazing how when I am in need I am given answers. Always, Kevin

KEVIN SPENCER, PITTSBURGH STEELERS COACH DEALING WITH DISCOURAGEMENT

Joe, thank you so much for your devotion. I have been overwhelmed with anxiety lately, and looking for answers. I turned on my computer, and there you were. I really appreciate your words, and I look forward to reading them each week.

TERRY MCDONOUGH, JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS SCOUT DEALING WITH STRESS

This was excellent! As you can see by the time of this reply I needed this. I'm returning from Buffalo and was thinking about staying awake to get some extra work done, but I'm going to sleep instead! Thank you! DJ

DWAYNE JOSEPH, MIAMI DOLPHINS SCOUT STILL PLUGGING AT 2 A.M.