

Russell Kelfer

The Name of the Game Isn't Football

302-A

Series: Fictional Stories

A Christmas Story



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The Name of the Game Isn't Football

The brisk November winds caught up buckets of bright orange leaves and threw them round about as though decorating the world in its fall regalia was its calling. Winter was coming at last. The crisp, north winds began to howl as though calling out for attention. With temperatures dropping daily, the first snowfall of the year just had to be only days, if not hours, away.

And not a moment too soon, either. Warm weather and football are just not totally compatible. And football was Ron Sylvester's life. Though unknown to him, it would soon be sharing center stage with a totally different kind of game; a game where the stakes were even higher, but no matter the contest, Ron was a man of such intensity, that you knew somehow he was going to be a winner. To Ron, losing just wasn't acceptable. Even if it took a miracle to win, Ron, to that degree, believed in miracles.

Speaking of miracles, when he took over the Longfield Rangers, a new NFL expansion team, it was a miracle that they fielded a team at all. Taking a mixture of misfits, has-beens, and green-behind-the ears rookies and turning them into winners was not the kind of challenge weak men reach for. Ron Sylvester, however, was not a weak man. He had coached Fairfax High School to three consecutive state championships when he was hired by State U. to take over their seemingly defunct football program. Their combined won-lost record for the four years prior to his taking over was 6 wins and 44 losses.

Three years later, with Ron at the helm, State won the conference championship and went on to the Orange Bowl where they whipped up on a favored Notre Dame team, ending the year third in the polls, nationally. Winning was in Ron's blood. He often said, "If you don't know how to lose, you're better off." That philosophy was to undergo some changes as the years passed, but at that juncture of his career, Ron thought his success was

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due to $\frac{1}{3}$ talent and $\frac{2}{3}$ effort. In fact, though his first year with the Rangers was projected to be a disaster, somehow he managed to win 5 games and come incredibly close in 3 more. Everyone, especially his opponents were in awe. But that wasn't enough for Ron. To him, winning was everything.

Of course, if winning is everything, anything that gets in the way of winning comes under the heading of "Things to Avoid". And in that sense of the word, winning sometimes means losing; losing the things in life that are really important. Often such things as marriages, children, and moral and religious pursuits fade into relative obscurity as the quest for the victory overtakes reason.

This had been the case with Ron Sylvester. The aroma of the gridiron conquest had clouded his sense of priorities until nothing mattered but winning. He found himself literally consumed with strategy sessions, the hiring and firing of assistant coaches, and of course, during the season itself, with nothing but preparing for and winning games.

His wife, Amy, had paid the price. A faithful, sensitive, kind woman, she had enjoyed the financial benefits of being a winner's wife, but in the process, she felt she had lost her husband. Their relationship had become little more than a sharing of a household, not a sharing of the heart. Even when Ron was at home, his mind was on the next game or the next trade or the next interview with the press. He didn't "have time to be bothered" with things like broken water pipes, clogged drains, a leaking roof, or a slipping transmission. But more than that, he didn't have time for his daughter Sylvia's ballet concert or his son, Robert's tennis game. "Tennis is not a real sport", he would mutter under his breath, deeply wounded that his only son didn't follow him to the gridiron wars.

Part of Robert's fleeing from the football fray was due to his size, but the greater part was that he didn't want anything to consume his life the way football had consumed his dad's. And he knew that should he pursue the role of a tight end or even a place-kicker, he surely would end up "not quite good enough" for dear old dad. So he chose a sport his dad wouldn't care about, just so he could be his own man.

To sum it up, Ron had virtually alienated his family through neglect. It wasn't football's fault. Were he an insurance broker

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or an attorney or a doctor, the story would have been much the same. His problem was not his job. His problem was his perspective. But be that as it may, the results were the same. His drive to be the best and to be a winner had made him a loser in the only game that really mattered. (And poor Ron was so busy basking in his sports successes, he never even knew what he was losing). In fact, as time will reveal, Ron was losing the only game that counted, and he didn't even know the name of the game.

This November was a memorable one for both Ron and the Rangers. (Or Ron's Rangers as they were now dubbed by the press) Down the stretch towards the end of his third year in the NFL now, Ron had taken a team that could hardly be called a team and molded it into a potential wild-card contender with an outside chance at the Super Bowl. The acquisition of Billy the Bully O'Brien at running back had made much of the difference. In his rookie year, Billy the Bully had burrowed his way to the top of the rushing statistics and brought the Rangers within two games of the division leaders, with four more games to play.

Billy got his "bully" name in college. He not only managed to run over people on the football field, he had a reputation for leaving people in his wake all over his life. He had been in jail twice for barroom scuffles and had been expelled twice, only to be reinstated by pleas from a desperate coach. His first marriage failed, and his second was on the rocks. A saint he wasn't. But then saints aren't necessarily what the Ron Sylvesters of this world are looking for. They are looking for winners. Winning, remember, is what life is all about.

That was, in fact, Ron Sylvester's stock warmup cheer in the locker room before each game. "We're number one in the game that counts." he would literally shout. "And the name of the game is football." Soon the whole team would chant in unison. "The name of the game is football." Then they would race onto the playing field growling like wild lions roaming the forest seeking their prey.

Billy the Bully, Ron's number one commodity, would often lead the cheer, then lead the team onto the turf. The great delight in his life was to see an opposing lineman carried off the field in pain because they tried to tackle him and got run over instead by this human version of a Mack truck.

All that ended, however, on that November day when those

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brisk autumn winds that were hurling the colors of autumn to the ground were seemingly interrupted by the sound of death. It was a light aircraft, a Cessna 210, piloted by one of Ron's assistant coaches, and it somehow got caught in a crosswind and one wing clipped a high wire line just south of the Longfield International Airport. The explosion could be heard for miles. Three of the four passengers were thrown clear of the crash on impact. Two of the three, alongwith the pilot, died instantly.

The sole survivor was Billy the Bully. He was alive. At least for the moment. As the ambulance screamed its way towards Parkwood General Hospital, one human life and the hopes and dreams of one single-minded coach were all but snuffed out. Here was the strongest, meanest, toughest of men on a stretcher, seemingly hanging on to life by a thread.

Ron Sylvester was at home in his study, working on Sunday's game plan on his computer when the phone rang and the voice on the other end hesitatingly told him the bad news. An assistant coach and two backup defensive backs were dead. And Billy the Bully, if he were to live, would never play football again. It would in fact be a miracle if he ever walked again.

Ron seemed unmoved by the deaths. The self-centeredness that had permeated his life and the single-mindedness that controlled his thoughts centered only on one thing: He would never make it to the Super Bowl now. How do you replace a Billy O'Brien in late November? It was only a moment before the doorbell rang. The press had wasted no time swooping down on the angry, bewildered coach to capture on television film the emotions of a man who had just lost a coach, two players, and a season all in a moment of time. The truth is, they were hoping he hadn't heard yet, so they could capture his first reactions of grief on videotape. Such was the mindset of the media.

"How can you cope with your grief?" a female reporter from WMBH asked first. "Are you in shock?" Hers was a more sensitive question, but asking it was not sensitive at all. "Coach" Bob Hammer of KLTR interrupted, "What will this do to your season? and what do you think of Billy going down in flames the day after he got religion?"

"The day after he what?" the bewildered coach responded. "The day after he what?" He was angry at the press for their timing; mostly because he hadn't had time to come up with a

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well-oiled speech that would make him look both strong and sincere at the same time. But now he was really angry. This veteran reporter, who seemed to never get his sources wrong, was saying that Billy's plane crash was preceded by some kind of a religious experience, something so out of character for Billy the Bully that it almost seemed like someone was making a joke at an inopportune time.

"You haven't heard?" the leathery old newsman went on, "He made some kind of 'decision for Christ' at a church gathering night before last, and announced that he was giving up his partying ways to follow Jesus."

"Follow who?" Ron Sylvester bellowed back. "Billy never followed anyone but a good blocker. Where did you get that hogwash?"

"It's true!" a quiet female voice responded from just behind the angry coach. "It's true. I was there." To have a woman know something about one of his players he didn't know was too much for Coach Sylvester. Especially if that woman was his wife. He turned and gave Amy, his devoted mate, a look that would melt steel. But Amy Sylvester didn't move. She could see that her husband had no compassion and no concern for the families of the dead coach and players, and certainly no respect for these newsmen and women who had caught him off guard. And she had just about had enough of Ron Sylvester's cold heart.

She had been there the night Billy the Bully made his religious decision. In fact, she had invited him. Amy Sylvester, about six years before, weary over a marriage that had no meaning, had sought purpose in life by seeking a relationship with God. "A bad marriage is the best thing that ever happened to me," she told her best friend, Jenny Wilkins. Jenny, somewhat of a New Age enthusiast, thought her longtime pal had lost her mind.

"No, I mean it!" Amy had added intently, "If my marriage had been the picture perfect image I projected when I, the college cheerleader married the quarterback, I would have won the battle, but lost the war. Because I didn't find the happiness of my childhood dreams, I looked for something more. And I met Jesus."

"Oh, dear God," Jenny had responded, (not seeing the irony in her use of that expression). "Oh, dear God, not another religious nut." "No," Amy had replied, "Not another religious nut, just a life

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transformed by Jesus Christ. Don't knock it if you haven't tried it." Jenny did knock it for about three years. Then one day, when her own marriage fell apart and she attempted suicide, her friend Amy Sylvester at her hospital bedside, showed her how to put her life in someone's hands who could handle it. For Amy and for Jenny, the name of the game had changed.

Little by little, Amy's spiritual strength had grown. She had developed an inner resolve her famous husband couldn't grasp. She didn't preach to him. She just quietly let God change her life. He could see it, but somehow he had determined that Christians were losers, and he wanted to be a winner in the game that counted. And, you guessed it, from Ron's perspective, the name of the game was football.

Right now, however, as these media buzzards circled overhead, the name of the game for Ron seemed to be damage control. Totally devoid of any answers, the harried coach turned his eyes towards the glare of the video lights, and with a sound of grief in his voice, a sound that wreaked of hypocrisy to those who knew him, he put his head down and said, "You guys will have to understand. I am in shock. I am broken and grieved over the loss of some of my best friends in the world. Now if you'll excuse me, I must go to the hospital and see that my number one running back makes it back into the game. He will. He's a winner. And football is the name of the game."

Having regained his political composure, he hung his head for just a moment as if to grieve once more, and then moved towards his car as though seeing Billy and consoling the families of Coach Fielding and the other two players were the only things on his mind. The press, of course, had a field day. The "Daily Chronicle" the next morning featured this headline:

COACH'S WIFE WITNESSES BILLY'S "CONVERSION"

Shocked Ron Sylvester can't believe the bully became a lamb.

Amy Sylvester's involvement in Billy's religious experience became a source of deep embarrassment to Ron and further drove a wedge between he and his wife. Amy, however, was undaunted. "He may die, Ron", she pleaded. "This is a miracle. Now we know he will go home to be with God."

"All I know is he won't be taking us home to the Super Bowl, and that religious stuff is for sissies and women. Even if he was

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able to play, I can hear it now”, Ron went on. “There goes the bully through a hole at left tackle. Uh-oh, he stopped. What’s he doing? He’s apologizing to the defensive tackle for running into him. ‘I hope I didn’t hurt you,’ he must be saying. ‘Oh, please forgive me mister lineman, I won’t run into you again.’” Ron’s voice was dripping with sarcasm.

“Christianity is for losers”, Ron was shouting now. “And I don’t believe in losing. The purpose of the game is to win. And the name of the game is...” Amy interrupted at this point. Tears streaming down her face, she whispered, “I know. The name of the game is football.” With that, she ran from the room; raced to the study, and fell on her knees and began to pray.

“Oh, dear God,” she prayed. “My husband has no use for you. But I must love him the way you love me . . . unconditionally. Please change my heart so I can do that. And Oh, God,” she prayed, “Please give Billy a chance to share what you did in his heart. I know you saved him for a reason. Dear God, please use him. And Lord, whatever it takes, please reach my husband with your love. Amen.”

From then on, all you could hear was sobbing. God, however, heard quite clearly. He heard the beating of a woman’s heart who was willing to give up anything to see her husband come to know the joy she had come to know since trusting Jesus. What she didn’t know was that Ron was standing in the doorway, and heard every word she prayed. It was like pouring kerosene on an already burning inferno. “Reach my husband,” he muttered to himself, “I know how God can prove Himself to me,” he said. A huge smile crossed his face for the first time in a long time.

“He can take us to the Super Bowl and let everybody know He can win the Big One.” You could just see the wheels spinning. “Maybe I should try to con Amy into promising God will deliver the season into my hands without Billy. That will shut her up. I doubt if even the gospel of Hezekiah or whatever it is she reads can promise that.” With that, he raced downstairs to see if he could find a free agent to nab who had at least three or four good games left in him. The funeral services for Coach Fielding and the other two players was just 15 minutes away, but if he had to miss it, he would. After all, winning was what was important, and the name of the game was...well you know the rest.

So far, Billy the Bully had never regained consciousness.

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Chances were, according to the doctors, he never would. That made Amy's prayer even more ridiculous to Ron. He didn't know just how to blame that plane crash on God (if there was a god), but he was certainly going to try. That might get Amy off his back.

Ron missed the funeral. But he did hire a free agent, a guy named Jessie Brown. He had been nicknamed, "Buster Brown" because he was quoted as saying, "I like to bust people's heads open". Sounds like Ron's kind of man. Jessie once won the NFL rushing title, but a series of injuries took him out of the lineup and out of the game. Doctors had warned him not to play again. But Ron figured enough money could solve that. Enough money could solve just about anything, he mused. Sure enough, Ron offered Buster a salary he couldn't refuse.

"I'll tell the press I was just too broken up to make the funeral," he decided. "Then I'll hit 'em with my Buster Brown story. Maybe we have a chance to win after all," he said to himself. And after all, winning is what it's all about.

The next two weeks were filled with excitement and challenge for Ron. Though he never got by to see the widows of his three lost friends, he did have Amy send a card to each one, and he publicly through the press gave his condolences. "Can't live with dead," he railed at supper one night. "Got to get on with living. Got to get on with winning." Amy was learning. She bit her lip until it almost bled, but said nothing. She had come to realize that there was a war going on for the soul of her famous husband. And until he gave his heart to Christ, his greed and his selfishness would only get worse. There was a chance he would never give in. But Amy had a promise. "The testing of my faith works character," she would quote to Jenny. "And I want to be changed. Even if Ron never gives his heart to Christ, I'll be a different person if I respond God's way."

So Amy kept praying, and Ron kept playing the game to win. And believe it or not, his red-hot Rangers took on the 49ers in Candlestick Park the next week, 14 point underdogs and won the game in the last two seconds. The hero of the game? Buster Brown. He came in off the bench in the second quarter, and though the playbook was new to him, he ran like the pro that he was, and his 110 yards rushing was enough to make him player of the game. On the last drive, he ran three times for more than 8 yards a carry and got the ball to the 18 with two seconds left. That

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was when Eddie Collier kicked the pigskin through the uprights and all but guaranteed the Rangers a spot in the playoffs.

“Wish Billy the Bully were here to see it,” one lone lineman was heard to say in the locker room. “Billy who?” laughed Ron. We got Buster now. You got to look ahead. You can't ever look back if you're gonna be a winner. And the name of the game...” He paused, waiting for the team to join him in unison. But no one said a word. They were glad they had won, but they couldn't grasp Coach Sylvester's lack of respect for the very guy who had brought them to this place. Billy was laid up in bed in a coma, and he was already forgotten. A kind of icy silence permeated the dressing room as one by one, the players slipped out into the crisp afternoon winds . . . the winds that had been blowing scattered snow throughout the game.

Ron took note. “These guys are still sissies,” he thought. “They've got to get the picture. Whatever it takes to win, you do it.” Then it hit him. If they were that hung up on Billy the Bully, he'd play it for all it was worth. He'd have a big picture of him blown up, plaster it on the dressing room wall, and come up with a “Let's win one for the guy in a coma” speech. That ought to take the heat off today's gaffe and turn it into a plus. “You've got to be smarter than them to motivate 'em,” he thought. “If you're going to be a winner, you've got to be smart.”

Amy, meanwhile, spent much of every day ministering to the bereaved widows of the three who died. And much of the rest of the time was spent with her friend Bess O'Brien at the bedside of her comatose husband. With each day, the doctors gave him less hope. But each day, Amy seemed to have more. And her clear testimony of how God had delivered her in the midst of a really bad marriage made an impact on Bess. It wasn't long before she too knelt by the side of Billy's bed and prayed:

“Oh, dear God, are you there? Are you really the loving, caring friend Amy says you are? I need you, God. I need you to forgive me of my sins. I need you to comfort me in my grief. I need you to give me peace in the midst of this horrible trial. I don't know if Billy will ever come back to life, but Amy says you did. And I want to give my life to you the way she did. Jesus come into my heart. I can't make it without you.”

Bess O'Brien rose to her feet a different person. The anger she had over the crash itself was gone. Already it had a purpose. The

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bitterness she had over Billy's wild, wild ways were gone. She had been forgiven. Now she could forgive. She was actually thrilled that Billy had trusted Christ before the crash. Up until now, she saw it as a publicity thing. But she had seen a marked difference in him in just the few hours she witnessed after his conversion. That was really the icing on the cake.

"If God can change Billy, he can change anyone" she had laughed the day before. "Even you?" Amy Sylvester had asked. "Even you?" That statement had kept Bess awake the whole night long. "Even you?" Thus it was no surprise when, as she rose from her feet after receiving Christ, her first words were, "Yes, Amy, even me."

The following Sunday was the first Sunday in December and the icy graveyard of Soldier's Field in Chicago was the site of Ron Sylvester's Raging Rangers' next bout on their road to the hall of history's miracles. The temperature was below freezing and the field would have been better suited for an ice hockey game than for football. True to form, Ron Sylvester had a six foot color photograph of Billy the Bully glued to the wall in the Ranger dressing room, and sure enough, the team forgot Ron's insensitivity the week before. "Win it for Billy," was the cry. "Winning is what he would want us to do. And the name of the game . . ." By now they thundered it so loud, the lockers shook on the concrete floor . . . "The name of the game is football!"

With that, these win-hungry madmen thundered onto the playing field, only ½ game behind the division leaders, and virtually guaranteed at least a wild card berth. Amy Sylvester and Bess O'Brien watched the game in Billy's hospital room. It was a hard thing for Bess to do. But if God could give her the grace to do that, He could see her through anything. So the two women, both with mixed emotions about this game, and about the game of football in general, tuned in channel 7 and watched.

Amy winced every time the camera zoomed in on her hypocritical husband, so consumed with himself and with winning. Bess cringed every time the announcer repeated, "As Billy the Bully so often said, 'winning is the purpose of the game' and the name of the game is football." Thousands of Ranger fans had trekked to Chicago for the game and all over Soldier Field were signs that read, "The name of the game is football!" It had indeed become the battle cry of a whole city. And with every mention of

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it, Ron Sylvester became more enamored with himself and with his philosophy of life; a philosophy which could be summed up in one sentence: "Winning is everything; people are expendable."

The score at halftime was 0-0. Both teams had missed field goals as the kickers slipped on the icy floor of the stadium and lost their footing. "Buster" Brown had a total of 12 yards on 9 carries, including one fumble and three tackles behind the line. Ron's new hero was a good fullback, but not much of a skater.

The team was glad just to be in the warmth of the locker room, so they humored Ron by listening to another of his "win one for Billy" speeches. But somehow his insincerity was a little too obvious this time. It was well known among the players that Ron had never so much as visited Billy or Bess since the accident, and his feigned interest in Billy's well-being was obviously nothing more than a cheap ploy to use a tragedy to his own advantage.

The truth of the matter was: they didn't need any pep talks. This team wanted to win almost as badly as Ron wanted them to. But for different reasons. The plane crash had caused a sense of reality to settle on this band of tough, unsentimental giants of the gridiron. The truth was: they really did want to win for Billy. But they would much rather see Billy conscious and improving than they would win the Super Bowl. That was quite a departure from Coach Ron's perspective.

As the team did their slip and slide routine out of the tunnel and onto the playing field, the sun began to blink its eyes and peering around an ocean of clouds, it began to send a touch of warmth that did more for everyone's emotions than for the temperature.

The Bears kicked off and the contest was off and running again. The first play from scrimmage, Buster Brown took a lateral and literally skated past the weak side of the Bear line, heading for Ranger history. The crowd was on its feet. Only one Chicago player stood between Buster and the goal line. One last lunge at the 20 yard line was all there was.

But it worked. Buster slipped, trying to miss the tackle and flipped end to end, landing on the 12 yard line, on his head. The crowd went wild. The Ranger fans were ecstatic. Could this be the game-breaker?

The announcer was shrieking through the microphone. "What

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a play! What a game! The name of the game is.....

It was at that point that the commentator stopped and said, "Wait a minute! Buster Brown has never gotten up. There are two doctors and a trainer over him now. I sure hope he isn't seriously hurt. The Rangers can't stand any more adversity this year. He isn't moving. He appears to be unconscious. There will be a time out on the playing field."

"Oh my God" cried Amy Sylvester. "Not again." "Oh, no," echoed Bess O'Brien, "Oh, no". It was so quiet in that hospital room you could hear a pin drop. The television announcer said nothing. Then just a whisper, "Don't die, Buster, don't die." It was such a weak whisper you know it wasn't meant to be broadcast. Then they heard it again. "Don't die, Buster, don't die."

Amy looked over at the clock on the wall to see what time it was, and happened to glance at the lifeless body of Billy the Bully. His lips were moving. Oh, God, his lips were moving. "Don't die, Buster," he was saying, "don't die." It wasn't the television. It was more like a resurrection.

A once-strong man, relegated to a virtual vegetable, was actually coming back to life. He could see the TV. He could hear the commentary. He even understood that Buster Brown, an old college teammate of his was lying lifeless on the floor of an ice-covered football field in Chicago. And he was urging him on from a bed that had held him captive for more than four weeks now.

He couldn't move his legs. He couldn't move his arms. But he could talk. And he could smile. And he could tell his faithful wife, Bess, that he loved her. And he could thank Amy for inviting him to that church service where Jesus came into his life. And he could ask about the coach and two players who were with him in that plane. Tears streamed down his rugged cheeks as Amy and Bess told him that he was the only one who survived.

"I'll never play football again," he whispered. "But I can score a different kind of touchdown now. I want to tell the world about Jesus." Tears now were streaming down the faces of Amy Sylvester and Bess O'Brien, as well, as Bess reached over and kissed her husband and told him that she too had asked Jesus into her life, and now they were truly one.

As they watched Buster Brown being carried off the field, still unconscious on a stretcher, their joy was mixed with sorrow.

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Would he live to tell his story? Would Billy the Bully live to tell his?

Nearly 500 people, including more than 50 members of the press were crowded into Longfield Chapel for the funeral service. Christmas decorations hung from the wall, but the occasion was anything but festive. One whole section of the church was roped off for fellow football players, though many of them looked as though they had seldom been in a church before, and most of them looked as though they had never cried before. But they were crying now. For in an extremely large wooden casket at the front of the sanctuary lie their friend. His name was Buster Brown. He had been pronounced dead on arrival at Mercy Hospital only moments after being carried from the twelve yard line at Soldier Field.

But not only were they crying because Buster was dead but because up at the front, just next to the casket, was the most unlikely preacher any funeral ever had. In an oversized wheelchair, his arms hanging to his side; arms that once had stiff-armed the toughest defenders in the league, was Billy the Bully O'Brien. As the organ stopped, a young man slipped a microphone in front of the once-feared fullback, and a world full of people heard these words:

"Hi. My name is Billy. And I'm not a preacher. I used to be a football player. I used to be a star. I'm not that anymore, either. I'll tell you what I am, though. I'm a Christian. And I'd rather be a Christian than a star."

"In this room is a man I have always admired. His name is Coach Ron Sylvester." Ron modestly bowed his head. "He taught me almost everything I knew about the game. A lot of you guys can say the same thing." Many of the players in the pews nodded affirmatively. Amy Sylvester wasn't sure where this was leading, but it sounded as much like a testimonial for her hypocritical husband as it did a memorial for Buster. She hung on every word. So did everyone else. Billy went on.

"Coach taught me something else. He taught me that winning was what life was all about." Coach Ron began to smile a little. "And he taught me that the name of the game is football." Amy squirmed in her seat. Bess was staring at her husband in frozen disbelief. Then came the words that turned that church full of people upside down. Billy looked at Ron Sylvester and said,

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“Coach, that’s a lie. The name of the game isn’t football. I gave my life for football. I exchanged my values and my family for football just the way you did. I wallowed in the sunlight of fame. And the moment I became useless to you and to the fans, I was history. Football isn’t the name of the game. You lied to me.”

An ant crawling up the aisle of that church would have made more noise than those 500 people did. No one even breathed. Tears were running down the face of this once-feared dynamo as he looked upon the corpse of his successor, and he added:

“No, the name of the game is Jesus. About thirty hours before I went down in that plane, I gave my heart to God. I accepted what His Son, Jesus, did for me at Calvary, and I asked Him into my heart. Peace swept over my soul. Joy filled my sin-scarred heart. And I became a new man. I prayed, ‘Lord, I want to be able to tell others about you. You’re the only game in town.’ I never thought I’d get to. And I never thought I’d never walk again, either. But I’d rather roll in here in a wheelchair on my way to heaven, than bully my way through defensive linemen on my way to hell.”

“Some of you guys had better get your act together. Where you’re headin’ there ain’t gonna be any football. And it ain’t gonna be icy cold like it was in Chicago. One of these days you’re gonna be lying there like Buster, and all your statistics are gonna go up in smoke. God ain’t gonna greet you and say ‘Hi, Leon, boy I’m glad to have you here. You threw 300 touchdown passes. Attaboy, Leon.’ He’s gonna say to you, ‘Depart from me, I never knew you’.”

“Some of you folks here aren’t in football. You’re bankers or lawyers or doctors or businessmen or salesmen or nurses or students or teachers. But chances are, somethin’ in your life is the only game in town. And I’ll bet your wife or your husband and your kids and your God knows it ain’t them. What are you gonna say to God when you’re about to meet Him? Look at my case load? Look at the patients I healed? Look at the cars I sold? You think He’s gonna say, ‘Well done, thou good and faithful servant, you sold 25 cars a month?’ No way. He’s gonna say, ‘Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I say?’”

“The name of the game isn’t football. Or medicine. Or law. Or business. Or anything else. The name of the game is Jesus. The only name. The name which is above every name. You can have two choices and only two as you look at your brother lyin’

The Name of the Game Isn't Football

here in that coffin. You can decide that for the rest of your life Jesus is goin' to be everything, and His will is going to be the only thing. Or you're gonna be like Coach here and substitute something that will one day go down in flames for the one thing in the universe that is fireproof. The name of the game is Jesus. Oh, Dear God, may we never forget it."

That, you see, is why grown men were crying in Longfield Chapel that December day just before Christmas. And that's how a man with a broken body, but a transformed heart, changed his world. How did it end? Would you like to know? How did the press handle that funeral? I'm not going to tell you. You'll have to wonder. Did the Rangers win the Super Bowl? I'll bet you'd like to know that, too. But it doesn't matter. None of that matters. All that matters is Jesus. And sometimes don't we lose sight of that reality?

We get all caught up in football or business or buying and selling or contracts or houses or clothes or cars and we get so interested in what we are doing, we neglect our families or our relationship with God. We don't stop to ask if what we are doing will last in eternity. Did Coach Sylvester get the message? I'm not going to tell you. I will tell you he's given up coaching and has retired to spend time with his family, working in his church. I guess you can guess.

But Ron Sylvester isn't what this story is about, either. It's about you. And it's about me. And it's about time we both stopped even implying that the name of the game is anything but what it is.

Oh, Beloved, the name of the game is Jesus. And in eternity, you will discover, it really was the only game in town.

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10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230
210-226-0000 or 1-800-375-7778

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