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Big Winners: NFL Players Learn Success Extends Beyond the Game

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What Happened:

The NFL Playoffs are in full throttle, with a handful of teams driving toward a potential Super Bowl berth. For professional football players, there are few greater thrills than playing in the championship game—and no greater achievement than winning it.

Of the NFL's 32 teams, 28 are already in “wait ‘til next year” mode. Some lost in the playoffs. Others never made it. Some face years of rebuilding before they have a realistic shot of qualifying for the big game.

For NFL players—as is the case for most people who compete in sports, winning is extremely important. Everyone wants to win, but many players have other priorities beyond winning.

Every year, the NFL awards the Walter Payton Man of the Year Award, one of the league's most prestigious honors. It doesn't go to the fastest running back, strongest linebacker or most successful quarterback; it goes to the player who's made the biggest difference off the field.

Each team selects its own Walter Payton honoree, and then one of these nominees is selected as the NFL's overall Man of the Year. Nominees this year include: Charles Tillman of the Chicago Bears, whose charity has helped more than 1 million needy Chicago-area children and often visits hospitals to visit sick kids; Lance Moore of the New Orleans Saints, whose charity helps needy area families; and Anquan Boldin of the Baltimore Ravens, who hosts summer enrichment programs for high schoolers and went on a mission trip to Ethiopia with fellow NFL player Larry Fitzgerald.

“It meant a lot for me,” Boldin said of the trip. “Being from America, we're spoiled. I got a chance to see firsthand the struggles of a lot of people in Africa. I thought I had it hard growing up, but in no way compared to what they're going through did I struggle at all. Going over there and experiencing it for myself allowed me to see exactly how blessed I am.”

Talk About It:

Have you ever won something in sports or another endeavor? If so, what was the thing you remember most about the experience? Was it the thrill of doing your best? The recognition afterward? What made it special? Is it something you'll always remember?

Have you ever come close to winning something but in the end lost? Were you disappointed or thrilled to get as close as you did? How long did the sting of the loss stick with you? How did you move past it?

How important is winning in our society? How important is it to your parents or friends? How important is it to you? What do you think would be more important in your life: good grades; great friends; making a positive difference in the lives around you; something else? Are there other ways of defining a *winner* than by winning something?

Much of the world would consider those of us who live in the United States to be winners. We generally get enough to eat, have clean water to drink and a place to sleep. Do we have a responsibility to help those who aren't as fortunate as we are?

What the Bible Says:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run as a man running aimlessly; I do not fight as a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

Paul Asay has covered religion for *The Washington Post*, *Christianity Today*, Beliefnet.com, and *The (Colorado Springs) Gazette*. He writes about culture for *Plugged In* and wrote the Batman book, *God on the Streets of Gotham* (Tyndale). He lives in Colorado Springs with wife Wendy and his two children. Follow him on Twitter at @AsayPaul.