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Rules to Live by on and off the Playing Field

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For eleven seasons, Jeff Kemp was a National Football League quarterback with the Los Angeles Rams, the San Francisco 49ers, the Seattle Seahawks, and the Philadelphia Eagles. He delivered his best performances in 1984, when he quarterbacked the Rams and led them to the playoffs, and in 1986, when he threw eleven touchdowns for the 49ers in six games. With an M.B.A. degree from Pepperdine University, he currently serves as executive director of the Washington Family Council, located in Bellevue, Washington, which is a nonprofit research, communications, and policy organization dedicated to strengthening the environment for family life. Mr. Kemp is also a member of the executive committee of Pro Athletes Outreach, which trains professional athletes to be responsible leaders and role models. He and his wife Stacy have four sons. ♣



Today's headlines and television news are often filled with lurid accounts of greed, irresponsibility, corruption, and excess in the world of professional sports. Former NFL quarterback Jeff Kemp reminds us that this is not the whole story. Athletic competition can be a tremendous force for good in our lives and in our society. His remarks were delivered at Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar, "Sport and the American Dream," in February 1998.

Socrates wrote that the unexamined life is not worth living. Sports help us conduct an intense form of self-examination. With that in mind, here are some principles that I think apply to the most important things in life—relationships, marriage, parenting, family, and service—principles for individuals as well as businesses, governments, and entire societies.

We live in an age when, too often, rules are scorned, values are turned upside down, principles are replaced by expediency, and character has been sacrificed for popularity. Individual athletes are sometimes the worst offenders, but not as often as we might think. That's because sports teach important moral lessons that athletes can apply on and off the playing field.

Many people dream of being a professional athlete. For me, the dream seemed within reach because my father, an outstanding quarterback, played for the Buffalo Bills. The trouble was, I was not very good! I was a third-string football player through most of junior high and high school and for two years at Dartmouth College. I was not any-

one's idea of a "hot prospect." After graduation, I was passed over by NFL scouts. When I was finally asked to join the Los Angeles Rams in 1981 as a free agent, I was designated as fifth-string quarterback.

Humility

It was a 50-to-1 shot that I would survive training camp. Rookies were the only players required to show up for the first week of camp. There were dozens competing for the few spots open on the team.

After two days, a young boy approached me as I was walking off the field. He asked if he could carry my helmet to the locker room. It was a long way, but I said, "Sure, I think you can handle that." The next morning, he showed up before practice and offered to carry my helmet and shoulder pads. And he was there again after practice offering the same service. So it went for the rest of the week. On the last day, as we were departing the field, my young assistant said, "Jeff, can I ask you a question?" (We were on a first-name basis by then.)

I thought, "This is my first fan! He is going to ask me for an autograph."

He then inquired, "When do the *good* football players come to camp?"

Right then and there, I learned a lesson in humility from a seven-year-old boy.

In my first three NFL seasons, I was forced to learn the same lesson over and over again. During all that time, I threw just 31 passes. But by 1984 I had managed to outlast the five NFL quarterbacks who had been ahead of me. With the Rams' record standing at 1-2, I took over for injured quarterback Vince Ferragamo and earned my first start against the Bengals in Cincinnati, eventually leading the team to nine more victories and a play-off berth.

Next season, I was back on the bench as a back-up quarterback. Humility, I was compelled to remind myself, was a good thing. It helped me appreciate what I had and avoid dwelling on what I did not have. It prevented complaining, which drains the spirit and unity of any group. It also led me to persevere and to be ready whenever opportunity presented itself.

In 1986, I was traded to the 49ers and sent to San Francisco as a backup for Joe Montana. While Montana was sidelined with a back injury, I was called upon to take over the offense. We won against the Saints, the Miami Dolphins, and the Indianapolis Colts primarily because a young new player named Jerry Rice reached the end zone with a number of my touchdown passes. As soon as Joe recovered, however, I was once again relegated to the bench. At about the same time, I received a fan letter that read:

Dear Jeff,

As Joe Montana returns, you'll probably feel like you were shoveled off to the side. Well, just remember, Joe Montana is the greatest quarterback to ever play the game. You should feel lucky to have even played on his team.

The author of the letter sang Montana's praises for another full paragraph and then closed with a real zinger:

P. S. You are not as bad as some people might say.

With fans like this fellow, I never had to worry that my head would grow too big for my helmet.

Honesty

The importance of honesty colors all the rest of life. Why is truth so important? It is because respect, relationships, and unity all depend on truth. If you cannot be honest with people, you cannot have healthy relationships. A family can't stick together without honesty, and neither can a nation—or, for that matter, an athletic team.

Sports taught me about the vital importance of honesty. They forced me to ask questions: Am I committed to the truth? Am I willing to let my flaws be revealed so that I can do something about them? In particular, football showed me that talk is cheap. We could boast that we were going to do this or that, but it wasn't until we were actually out on the playing field that the truth was revealed. We completed passes or we did not. We made it to the end zone or we fell short. We won or we lost. And there was plenty of game footage to provide an objective appraisal of our strengths and weaknesses.

I learned that if you try to hide from the truth, you will never grow. Without truth, I couldn't trust my teammates and they couldn't trust me. Seahawks Coach Chuck Knox used to say, "To thine own self be true." Shakespeare, it seems, knew about football. And football, it seems, made me confront reality. As Dostoevsky wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

The important thing is to stop lying to yourself. A man who lies to himself and believes his own lies becomes unable to recognize the truth, either in himself or in anyone else, and he ends up losing respect for himself as well as for others. When he has no respect for anyone, he can no longer

love, and in order to divert himself, having no love in him, he yields to his impulses, indulges in the lowest forms of pleasure, and behaves in the end like an animal, in satisfying his vices. And it all comes from lying—lying to others and to yourself.

To have a championship season, to follow a well-traveled course, and to live a significant and happy life, we need a fixed point of reference. We must seek and face the truth. None of us lives up to the perfect standard of always being true and always being honest, but we need to aim at this goal if our lives, our families, our businesses, and our communities are to prosper.

In this context, sports also taught me that there are rules of life that I must heed. What would a football field be like if there were no sidelines, no end zones, no yard markers? What if the goal posts were moved in the middle of a game? What would basketball be like if the court had no boundaries and the player dribbling the ball had no limitations? What would keep him from running into the bleacher section? Who would say he needed to make a basket to score? What would a track meet be like? Who would determine the winners in a race if the officials threw away their stopwatches and turned their backs on the runners?

Without life's rules—that is, without universally acknowledged truths—there is no form, no function, no way to prefer one kind of action or outcome over another.

Value Systems

Sports are elevated life. They are noble and ignoble, beautiful and ugly. They reveal the best and the worst of human nature in an action-packed arena that is dominated by intense emotion. When sports commentators repeat the old saw about “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat,” we all know exactly what they are talking about. As players or spectators, we have experienced both. But underneath the adrenaline rush is something even more powerful: our “value system.”

Sports, in other words, reveal what we treasure most. In 1988, I was playing for the Seahawks against my old team, the 49ers, when I learned firsthand that there are two competing value systems. Now, I wasn't bitter that my old team had traded me, but I wanted to beat it, all the same. Dave Krieg had been injured, and I was to start. I had a great week of practice and felt totally prepared. I entered the Kingdome in Seattle brimming with excitement. I envisioned leading my team to victory and establishing myself as the Seahawks' starter.

Coming out of the pregame meal, one of the

offensive coaches put his arm around me and strongly affirmed his faith in me. “I want you to know how happy I am that you are the Seahawk quarterback. I've been waiting for this day.”

I felt honored, valued, esteemed. This was going to be a great day!

Well, we ran the ball in our first two possessions, and we didn't gain much. On third down and eight, I threw to Hall of Famer Steve Largent. He split two defenders. There was tight coverage. I hit him right in the hands, and yet he dropped the ball. Next to Jerry Rice, Steve is, statistically speaking, the greatest receiver in history. He is also one of my best friends. But all I could do at that moment was chuckle and moan, “Steve, what's the matter? You never drop the ball. Why are you doing this to me?”

After that Steve didn't make any mistakes. I did. In fact, I played the worst game of my life. At the end of the first half, the 49ers were ahead 28-0. Every person in the Kingdome, with the exception of my wife (and there isn't even a witness to vouch for her), was booing me. Have you ever heard nearly sixty thousand people booing you? It's quite an experience.

As I came off the field at half-time, I knew that I might be benched. But I wasn't defeated. Ever since I had been a small boy, my father had been drumming into my head Winston Churchill's brave words to the students at Harrow School in the dark days of 1941: “Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense.”

I waded through the players to find the coach who had been so supportive before the game. I wanted to discuss some offensive strategies that might turn things around in the second half. As I approached him and began, “Coach—” he turned his back on me without a word. Then he called to another quarterback, put his arm around him, and began to discuss plays he would run in the second half.

Now, I understood that I was being taken out of the game. That made sense. I was hoping it wouldn't happen, but I understood. But that coach didn't say one word to me for the rest of the game, even though we stood next to each other on the sidelines. Nor did he say anything on Monday when we watched the game films. For about a month, there was complete rejection. He simply couldn't deal with the fact that I hadn't lived up to his hopes, that I hadn't helped the team succeed. He rejected me relationally because my performance fell short.

I discovered during this painful episode a faulty value system that is conditional and performance-based. It rejects relationships and dishonors the diverse yet equal value of every person. My coach, as well as other coaches and even owners, was not only exerting but feeling the pressure of this value system, which has been adopted by so many in business and the culture at large.

My career had been slowly, steadily rising, and now, all of a sudden, it seemed it was on a speedy downward course. The fifth-stringer had made it to first string only to be benched, booed by the crowds, and shunned by his own coach. It looked like my last chance to succeed had come and gone.

Eventually, however, I found renewed hope and confidence—through a transcendent value system, which is quite different. It is an unconditional, relational, and character-based value system. It leads us to treat others as we wish to be treated. Of course, performance and competition are important. So are rewards and incentives. But none of these things enhances or demeans the value of an individual.

From then on, I began to appreciate another important moral lesson sports taught me: My relationship with a person should not be based on how well I like his “external packaging.” What does he look like? What has she accomplished? How much money does he have? How successful is he? How popular is she? How many touchdowns has he thrown? These conditional valuations are corrosive. They make kids so insecure that they are afraid to make friends. They make adults so insecure that they make moral compromises, often sacrificing marriage, family, faith, and ethics on the altar of success. (It is a vain effort, however, for there is no true success apart from these things. My career, my loved ones, and God’s grace have convinced me of that.)

This lesson was underscored by my experience at the Special Olympics, where I loved the vital role of “huggers.” As runners cross the finish line in track events, there are huggers waiting for each and every one of them. A hugger’s only job is to embrace the runners with love and tell them, “Terrific job! You looked great out there.”

Winning *is* important. I would never disparage it. But doesn’t it feel good to have someone to hug you, whether you have won or lost—to value you for your relationship, not just your performance?

Leadership

Sports, and quarterbacking in particular, provide invaluable lessons in leadership—lessons that are applicable to all of us, in all situations. A leader is not solely defined by

his or her position. Everyone is a leader. Even backup quarterbacks. In life, most of us will spend a fair amount of time on the bench, but that doesn’t mean we aren’t in the game. We are constantly influencing and shaping the lives of countless people.

We don’t have to be first-stringers to have an impact. I wasn’t Joe Montana. I wasn’t John Elway. Nonetheless, there were things I could do to help my team and teammates. I could be a role model of preparation and commitment, inspiring others to their best effort. When a young player confided that he had marital problems, I could share what I learned from the Bible about commitment and about spiritual comfort in times of trouble. When a rookie was scared to death that he was going to get cut, I could give him encouragement: “Hey, I saw how well you ran today. You have a good chance!” As my wife Stacy pointed out, focusing on encouraging others also kept *my* mind off the stress of surviving each summer’s roster cuts.

And there was the punter who once fouled up so badly that our team lost two yards. The coaches were screaming epithets at him. I said to myself, “You know what? This is the only punter we’ve got! He may have to go back into the game, and I want him to do well.” I walked up to him, and said, “It’s okay, man. You’ll get it right next time.” I spoke too loudly, and one of the coaches started hollering at me. Still, some of the heat had been deflected from the poor punter.

Gary Kubiak is the quarterback coach for the Denver Broncos. He was the backup QB for John Elway for many years. He rarely ever got to play. But today he is one of the smartest and most respected coaches in the business. That’s because he has a leadership mentality. He has said, “Everyone has an influence on some other person. You must always assume that your actions will influence another.” No wonder Gary has helped the Broncos become world champions. Every person’s leadership counts. And the best leaders model, serve, and inspire.

Vision

Vision, not sight, is what makes us truly see. Helen Keller was once asked, “Is there anything worse than not having your sight?” She responded earnestly, “Oh yes, it would be much worse to have your sight but not to have vision.” Think of all the opportunities and responsibilities that are lost today because we are so busy looking at what is two feet in front of us.

Vision has allowed me to throw footballs when I could not see the receiver. Playing for the Eagles, I threw one to tight end Keith Jackson just before a blitz knocked me off my feet. I couldn’t see Keith,

and he couldn't see me, but we each knew what to do. We had visualized what our responses would be in that kind of situation many times before. Keith was right where I envisioned. He caught my blind pass and ran for a touchdown.

I learned to see not only where I was, but where I wanted to be in the future. The best players, in life as well as in football, are never content to win one game. They want to win the next game, too, and the one after that. This requires long-term planning and commitment.

Vision is also about seeing opportunity when it seems least likely. My parents reinforced this lesson. For example, when my college football team lost a game and I didn't even get to play, my dad consoled me by saying, "You looked great today." Stunned, I replied, "What?" And he insisted, "Yes, you looked great. I saw you warming up. The ball was really spinning. Your day is going to come, Jeff. You'll get your chance. Think like a starter." His optimism left no room for my short-sighted pessimism.

Vision is what has led me and my teammates to gladly make sacrifices. When I was playing for the 49ers, Coach Bill Walsh took special care to explain a certain play action pass to the entire offense. More than one player grumbled, "Why do I need to learn what the other guys are doing?" But Walsh knew exactly what he was doing. He was giving a vision of a play that would demand a great deal of us. We were to fool our opponents into thinking it was a run. He warned the linemen that they would have to fall forward, right into their opponents' knees. If they were lucky, they would only suffer swollen, bloody hands from the cleats of those same opponents' shoes. He told the halfback that he would have to dive over the line of scrimmage, holding his hands to his stomach and leaving his head completely unprotected, in order to make the other team believe that he had the ball. And he told me that after I faked the pass, lured the free safety two steps forward, turned, and passed the ball to Jerry Rice, I would end up flat on my back when the 260-pound unblocked defensive end hit me, after realizing it was pass.

And that's exactly what did happen—five times in six weeks. We scored a touchdown on every derivation of that play during the 1986 season. For most of the players involved, this play did not add one yard to their stat sheets, but that didn't matter. The vision Coach Walsh provided led them to trust one another and to make sacrifices.

Perseverance

Vision has also helped me develop appreciation for the value of perseverance in the face of adversity. For nineteen of my twenty years in amateur and professional football, I was not the starting quarterback going into training camp. As a pro, I was a fifth-stringer, a fourth-stringer, a third-stringer, a second-stringer, and a first-stringer, but it was not always a matter of forward motion: Sometimes, I was set back, traded, or cut. I persevered, however, trusting my vision rather than my sight.

My last game as a professional football player was the season finale against the Washington Redskins in December 1991. The Redskins (who would go on to win the Super Bowl) hadn't lost a game all season. My team, the Eagles, trailed 19-7 in the final quarter. The Redskins were stuffing the runs, batting down my passes, and beating me up. I had been sacked twice and knocked down at least half a dozen times. At one point when I came off the field, the offensive linemen apologized to me for the lack of protection. The offensive line coach, stymied and demoralized, also apologized.

I responded, "This is ridiculous! Let's get down to work and play to win. We aren't going to lose."

Sure, it looked as though I couldn't get anything done that day. My opponents were killing me before I could even throw the ball. But I felt in the game. I was sharp, and I was confident. I figured that we might be able to turn things around if the Redskins made even one error.

And they did. Enjoying a huge lead, they started "playing not to lose" instead of playing to win. We completed two touchdown passes and kicked a field goal at the end of the game that beat them. That season's closing victory was a testimony to perseverance.

Spirit

In sports and life, we need long-term vision, or we will never reach our goals. We must be persistent, which means remaining steadfast in purpose. Honesty and an unconditional value system shape the noblest of purposes. We need to remember how important relationships, family, and God's unconditional love are. I know that these things gave me the peace to play a game

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that has an incredible amount of pressure and insecurity, where I had to earn my spot every game and get my job back every year. I know that they are what will help our culture recover its vision of what is important and what is worth defending—family, marriage, responsibility, trust, and truth.

Sports teach positive lessons that enrich America even while revealing our flaws. Sports remind us that we are all leaders and we influence the lives of others. But, in the final analysis, it is our spirit that determines what we draw out of sports and what we draw out of life. 🏆