"On the Seventh Day there Shall be to you an Holy Day, a Sabbath of Rest to the LORD": The Religious Effects of Sunday Play on Latter-day Saints in the NFL

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“On the Seventh Day there Shall be to you an Holy Day, a Sabbath of Rest to the LORD”:

The Religious Effects of Sunday Play on Latter-day Saints in the NFL

Daniel Scott McKinley

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“On the Seventh Day there Shall be to you an Holy Day, a Sabbath of Rest to the LORD”: The Religious Effects of Sunday Play on Latter-day Saints in the NFL

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Religious Education, BYU
Masters of Arts

For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Ten Commandments are very much in effect today. The fourth commandment, to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, is heavily emphasized within church doctrine and culture (Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12). This command to set apart the Sabbath is observed on Sundays for the LDS Church as well as the majority of the Christian world, rather than the traditional Saturday. Though the Ten Commandments collectively have both individual and societal implications, the spiritual outcome from following them is indeed an introspective pursuit. This thesis seeks to address how members of the Church seek to keep the Sabbath day holy in a profession that is heavily involved in Sunday work. With the universality of sports among Latter-day Saints, and large numbers of youth hoping to play sports professionally, this study is timely because it seeks to elucidate the effects that playing professional sports, particularly in the NFL, have on church activity.

Chapter One details the history of the Sabbath from the Old Testament to the present day. It then discusses the doctrine of the Sabbath as taught by the LDS Church. It also discusses what the highest officers in the church, the First Presidency, Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and other auxiliary leaders have said about sports and Sunday play. It finishes off with a description of the research methodology and the interview process for thirty Latter-day Saints who played in the NFL. Chapter Two introduces the data and some of the main findings regarding Sabbath day worship in the NFL; it highlights the sacrament, church attendance, and other personal religious habits for these athletes. Chapter Three continues the discussion of the data and more particularly addresses some of the challenges more pertinent to LDS NFL players. It was apparent after the interview process that these participants found it challenging to be in an atmosphere so incompatible to their personal beliefs, including religious criticism from teammates, harsh language, lewdness in and out of the locker room, and many other difficult circumstances. Marriage is addressed and how it was a major factor for these players. It also includes quantitative information about the athletes’ backgrounds and faith experiences leading up to their careers in the NFL. Chapter Four summarizes the thesis and draws conclusions upon the data. It also recommends areas for further research. In the Appendix, redacted interviews of all thirty NFL players are included.

Keywords: The Sabbath, commandment, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, LDS, sacrament, Sunday play, NFL, church activity
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

So what now? After four years of coursework, papers, deadlines, and so much more, it will be nice to focus on my main roles as husband and father. To my wife, Jessie, I owe the most. I don’t know how I was lucky enough to marry someone as inherently good as she is. She has been patient, encouraging, and has endured to the end of this thesis as much as anyone. Marrying her was far and away the greatest thing I have ever done. Two of our children, Maxwell and Avery, were along for the ride all throughout the program, and Graham was born smack dab in the middle. Jessie has raised our three children mostly in my absence and has done a profound job, so well in fact that we are adding another one to the mix this summer.

There are so many mentors who have guided me through this process, and I wish to express my deepest gratitude to them. I want to sincerely thank my entire thesis committee for their time in editing and polishing; their sacrifice of time is honorable. Lincoln Blumell has helped me write this thesis in an intelligent and readable way, and I never could have imagined having such a brilliant and hard-working thesis chair. His passion for writing was contagious. Mikaela Dufur is the greatest professor-friend a college student could ever ask for. Her sociological expertise made the interviewing process possible, not to mention her help tackling the IRB!

All of the professors in the program deserve a huge metaphorical hug for all their guidance and wisdom. Richard E. Bennett and Brent L. Top first gave wings to my dream of interviewing NFL players, and Ray Huntington further encouraged my research. Clint Mortensen gave me the inkling of hope necessary to apply to the program in the first place. Dave Walton and Mary Lee were kind enough to dig up something good to write about me in their letters of recommendation. My teaching faculties at the Nephi and Provo Seminaries were very forgiving
as I was so often distracted with other things. My cohort became great friends who constantly pushed me to do my best. This would have been a very short and boring thesis without the thirty NFL players who agreed to participate; they were kind, honest, and happy to see this topic being discussed. Finally, I am undeserving to have such wonderful parents and siblings. My parents have encouraged me to do things even when it seemed to me that I could not. But time and time again my mother has proved that she is always right. A huge thanks to them for never giving up on me. Also, I lucked out with amazing in-laws. They are far too good to us and have helped us countless times.

I thank my great God for his mercy and grace. It is evident that he has helped me through both good and bad, and will surely continue to do so.
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Chapter 1

The Sabbath is Not Surrendered

This exploratory study examines the factors that influenced thirty members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to play in the National Football League (NFL), and how these players balanced sport and religion. It also seeks to shed light on the issue of Sunday play, which can be a controversial topic for many. This study investigates the choices made by these LDS athletes who retained their religious convictions during and after a career in the NFL. Also, for those who ceased church affiliation, what, if anything, was it about playing in the NFL that led them away from a church they once espoused? The following examination specifically aims to identify those facets of sports and religion most relevant to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The role that Sundays had in the lives of these athletes is intriguing due to the fact that they would have missed a significant amount of church, especially during the NFL season. The question I hoped to answer by conducting this research was, “How can someone stay active in the Church and play professional sports which predominantly require Sunday play?” This study does not intend to address the question of whether a Latter-day Saint should or should not seek a career in the NFL. It merely seeks to better understand the circumstances under LDS NFL players retained or abandoned their religious convictions.

1 After seeing the headline “THE SABBATH SURRENDERED” in a religious paper, Wilbur Crafts emphatically disagreed and added that, referring to the future, neither is the Sabbath likely to be surrendered. With so many things competing for the attention of our 7-day week, it is reassuring to find those willing to stand up for the sanctity and importance of setting this day apart from the rest. See Wilbur F. Crafts, The Sabbath for Man: A Study of the Origin, Obligation, History, Advantages and Present State of Sabbath Observance (Washington, D.C.: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884), 23.

2 LDS will often be used.
For Latter-day Saints and many other Christians, the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy is highly esteemed. For most Christians, the significance of honoring the Sabbath day was transferred from the “seventh day” (Saturday) to honoring the first day of the week, Sunday\(^3\), or “Lord’s Day” since the day of Christ’s resurrection. Sundays were once publicly observed and western society developed a way of promoting and protecting it; society even went so far as to ban sporting events.\(^4\)

Striking a balance between sport and religion has been a concern among religious leaders dating easily back to the conception of the YMCA\(^5\) in 1844. Media today might have us believe that sports are religion, not because the two have combined their unique characteristics and become one, but because sports function as organized human activities much like any given religious denomination.\(^6\) However, the literature suggests that sports are distinctive in their lack of inherent holiness, changes from traditional purposes, and therefore vie for the distinction as a “new” religion.\(^7\) It has been somewhat humorously touted that sports have become a religion over the years, leaving us to wonder whether this newly-found “religion” is not only

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\(^4\) Winton Solberg, *Redeem the Time: the Puritan Sabbath in early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 27–58. Often referred to as “Blue laws” or “Sunday laws,” these laws prohibited certain recreational and commercial activities. One instance occurred in Virginia in 1925 where two baseball teams and umpires were arrested for playing a game on Sunday. See Peter Wallenstein, *Blue Laws and Black Codes: Conflict, Courts, and Change in Twentieth-century Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 36.

\(^5\) The YMCA originally introduced recreation several years after its inception and then deliberated for several decades more on how it was best to be implemented. See William Baker, *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 42–63.


supplementing but supplanting the original place of traditional religion. With this blurring of the lines between sports and religion, there is a need to study the varying factors a devoutly religious person has to weigh when deciding to play in the NFL, a league that participates primarily on Sundays.

This study specifically examines the religious experiences and decisions made by NFL players who are Latter-day Saints. My focus on the overlap of sports and religion is valuable because of the LDS Church’s stance on keeping the Sabbath day holy. This is sometimes seen as a paradox and begs to know whether the two can coexist in the life of an actively religious person?

Evidently, sports can be a source of contention for religious affiliates. The potential conflict between religion and sport is manifested most clearly in dealing with Sunday play. On the one hand, a player excels in a given sport to the point that they can make a career out of it, and on the other they wish to attend their church meetings and keep the Sabbath day holy. Can professional athletes adhere to a religion that observes the Sabbath day? These scenarios and questions can lead LDS church members to have differing opinions when it comes to careers in the professional sporting arena. It can therefore be difficult for LDS athletes to decide if a future in sports is the right path for them, and if so, how to deal with this “conflict” between religion and sport.

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8 Tara Magdalinski and Timothy Chandler argue that “athletes are not gods, regardless of media treatment, and sports stadia, for the most part, are not places of worship.” See Tara Magdalinski, Timothy J.L. Chandler, eds., *With God on Their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion* (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: The Cromwell Press, 2002), 1.

9 For example, Joan Chandler argues that for many religious people who are involved in sports, their religion and sport are not expected to meet the same needs. Noting the stark contrast between sport and religion she said, “…sport exists to entertain and engage us, not to disturb us with questions about our destiny.” See Joan M. Chandler, “Sport is Not a Religion,” in *Sport and Religion*, edited by Shirl J. Hoffman (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), 55–61.
Players in the NFL participate in a rigorous 17-game season; in addition, they have four preseason games and the possibility of playoff games. Each team is allotted one bye week. For each of the first 16 weeks, one game is held on Thursday, one on Monday, and the remaining games on Sunday. Even for games played on Monday nights, there will almost certainly be travel, practices, and meetings on previous days. On the 17th week of the season, all 16 games are played on Sunday. Start times for these Sunday games range from the morning to the evening. Each of these games carries the hope of playing on “Super Bowl Sunday” in February. For the 2015 NFL season, training camp began on July 15, 2015, the playoffs began on January 9, 2016, and the Super Bowl was held on February 7, 2016. For many teams, this schedule means the football year lasts almost six months, and for the two teams which play in the Super Bowl it lasts just under seven months. For players who are Sabbath-keepers, being expected to devote part or all of their Sundays to their profession creates a dilemma.

The purpose of this research is to identify the degree to which playing professional football on Sundays affects the devotion and beliefs of Latter-day Saint NFL players. I chose to study this group because of their heavy participation on Sundays. I wanted to explore how these athletes reconcile church teachings and conflicting work requirements. Additionally, this study provides insight into the influences and factors that most affected their decision to play in the NFL. It addresses the difficulties in balancing faith and opportunity. Because the NFL plays most frequently on Sundays, participants who are also Latter-day Saints face a dilemma as their participation in the NFL conflicts with regular church attendance during the season.

Due to the popularity of sports among many Latter-day Saints, and with growing numbers of LDS youth hoping to play sports professionally, this study seeks to explain some of the effects that playing professional sports, particularly in the NFL, can have on church activity.
This type of qualitative case study has not been previously conducted among professional Latter-day Saint athletes. It is therefore unique and suggests insights into the devotion and religious practices of this small group before, during, and after their time in the NFL. Although all interview questions do not deal directly with Sunday play, they were designed to narrow the focus: working in a career that is heavily involved on Sundays while maintaining faith and devotion to the Church.

Methodology

Data for this research came from semi-structured in-depth interviews of current and former players from the National Football League. Criteria for participants include playing at least one season in the NFL and current or former membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Formal interviews took place in person in a variety of settings: my home, my workplace, homes of the participants, workplaces of the participants, or other public venues. In addition, several interviews were done over the phone and using FaceTime. These interviews ranged from twenty minutes to two hours in length. At times, it was necessary to follow up with these athletes to clarify a certain question or one of their statements; follow up questions were usually resolved via email or text messaging. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. I used a double blind procedure on the transcriptions to ensure anonymity. Instead of using names, each player was given a number based on the order in which he was interviewed. In place of pseudonyms, these numbers appear in parentheses after direct quotes by the player. The appendix includes portions of each interview that were not used in the body of this work. Any time direct quotes from the interviews are used, either in the subsequent chapters or in the appendix, the identifying factors have been omitted to ensure privacy. The actual interview
process lasted exactly one year, with my first interview being conducted on August 5, 2014, and my final interview occurring on August 5, 2015.

My initial contact came from a student who mentioned that his bishop was a former NFL player. When I first met and explained the purpose of my study to this contact, he immediately agreed to participate. He also agreed to put me in contact with anyone he knew who fit my criteria for the research. After that first interview, he sent text messages about the interview to several of his friends and told them I would be contacting them to participate. Acting as my “key entry point” I was able to utilize a snowball sampling procedure using his name and his recommendation to gain access to more interviews. Having never played football myself, the likelihood for these professional football players to allow me to interview them about their sporting and religious experiences was a large task. However, as I contacted potential participants and used the names of my previous contacts, I experienced the benefit of having each participant vouch for my credibility and therefore open doors to even more contacts just as sociologists Mikaela Dufur and Seth Feinberg found. These athletes—those who actually participated in the interviews—allowed me into their homes or agreed to a phone or Skype interview simply because I had interviewed their friend, and that fact alone appeared to be proof enough that I was worthy of their time.

Dealing with such high-profile athletes also came with certain challenges. When contacting the majority of these athletes, I began by sharing who my reference came from and then introduced myself and my study. A high percentage expressed interest in the topic and then agreed to participate in the study at a specific future date. When I contacted them to either verify our interview time or begin our interview over the phone, they often failed to respond to my

calls, text messages, or emails. Only two athletes declined up front, one because he wanted nothing to do with the LDS Church and the other because he felt like he had nothing to contribute that had not already been shared. In talking to the players who had put me in contact with them initially, they explained that these two players later apologized to them for not participating and expressed regret for not having agreed to participate, though neither of them offered me an interview.

Interestingly, when another player suggested one of these two athletes, and I explained that he had declined my interview, he bluntly explained that it was because this player was going against what he knew he should be doing. Perhaps players who did not participate felt guilty because they are no longer committed to the Church as they once were. When people reflect on past experiences involving faith and religion, it can cause emotional pain, especially when those things are no longer being practiced. Another possible reason for non-participation is that Sunday play and the NFL had no impact on their decision to disassociate themselves with the Church, and therefore they felt that their situation fell outside the parameters of this study. A third possible explanation is that although anonymity was promised, the possibility of exposure may have been too much, not only for these two athletes who denied an interview up front, but for several who initially agreed and then failed to follow through with the interview. A final explanation could be that respondents were concerned about a social stigma of playing sports on Sundays. These reasons could have affected their willingness or openness to participate.

Acknowledging doubt or inactivity or even separation from the Church among Latter-day Saints can be viewed as taboo.

Each interviewee was made aware of his freedom to withdraw from the study at any point. A minimal risk of discomfort relating to reviewing personal decisions was initially
present, but there was never a visually negative response from any of the players, and none withdrew once they began. I anticipated that respondents would be reflective and open regarding their religion and their devotion to it, and it did seem that the majority of these athletes followed that pattern.

Athlete interviews were based on a protocol of seventeen open-ended questions and prompts designed to draw out honest answers about the religious background, religious indicators, and outside influences of these players. The questions were crafted in a progressive fashion beginning with the religious rearing of the player, then through the teenage years to college, and then to their careers in the NFL. I reserved the freedom to adjust the interviews based on a player’s responses or situation. Some players were more eager to talk about their lives and would answer several unasked questions without realizing it. There were also several occasions where I added a unique question due to what the player had said.

The interview questions\footnote{There were several drafts made before these questions were approved. There were questions that either did not fit the parameters of the study, or were too personal in nature. One question that was taken out of the study asked if the player held a temple recommend during his NFL career. The answer to this question would have revealed very interesting things about each player. Holding a temple recommend means, among other things, that they pay their tithing and keep the word of wisdom. Most importantly, it infers that their priesthood leader considers this person worthy to enter the temple, the most sacred building for Latter-day Saints.} are listed in the order in which they were meant to be asked:

1. Tell me what life was like growing up (Church, Sundays, parents, etc.)
2. Are you a convert to the church? If so, what major factors led to that decision?
3. Did you ever play organized sports on Sundays growing up?
4. Did you graduate from seminary?
5. Did you serve a mission? If so, where?
6. What was the recruiting process like for college? Why did you pick ____ University?
7. Are you married? If so, did you get married in the temple?
8. What counsel did you receive about playing in the NFL from family, coaches, or priesthood leaders?

9. How many times during your first season were you able to attend church?

10. Throughout your career, did church attendance increase, decrease, or stay the same?

11. Tell me about church attendance in the off-season

12. What callings did you have during your career?

13. How did playing on Sundays affect you, if at all?

14. Overall, what was the hardest part of playing in the NFL?

15. What helped you most to maintain your spirituality?

16. Describe your church activity level now

17. What advice or counsel would you give a Latter-day Saint going into the NFL?

All of these questions are meant to narrow in on what these athletes did to maintain personal spiritual commitments while working in the NFL. Finding out the religious background of a player was key to understanding their home life and religious influences during their younger years. Participation in seminary, a scripture-based class held outside of public school, is stressed among LDS youth, would that be a major factor in determining if these players remained active throughout their lives? Brent Top and Bruce Chadwick conducted a study among LDS youth and found that, “Scores of teens identified seminary as the most important influence in their lives in helping them gain testimonies and have the strength to resist temptation.”12 I therefore hoped to find how religious background would impact these professional athletes later on in life.

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The other questions generally fell into two other categories: outside influences and religious indicators. Some affected these athletes before they entered the NFL, others after. Determining the degree to which their devotion to the Church was altered due to one of these influences was the aim for these interview questions.

From the pool of thirty players, only three are still playing football in the NFL as a profession. I interviewed players whose careers lasted anywhere from one to over fifteen years in the league. Some were on practice rosters, others were Pro-Bowlers, and some won the Super Bowl with their team. Some played on several different teams while others spent long careers with the same team. There is a wide variety of experience in this group of athletes. I hoped that such a variety of playing experience would bring with it a variety of religious devotion, perhaps because the more years someone played on Sundays, the more they missed out on vital spiritual experiences. The opposite could be true as well, where they figured out how to make up for their lack in church attendance and were therefore spiritually stable.

Limitations

One of the shortcomings in this study is that my sample resulted in a heavy participation from active Latter-day Saints. Twenty-seven respondents were active in the Church, two were less-active, and one was inactive. There is an obvious disparity between the number of athletes who are active in the Church and athletes who no longer attend or affiliate with the Church. Another limitation is the heavy contribution from athletes who attended Brigham Young University, an LDS Church-owned university in Utah. Twenty-two of the thirty respondents attended BYU, and only six went to a university outside of Utah. There are over one hundred additional LDS athletes who played in the NFL who did not participate in this study. More than

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13 I asked every interviewee to describe his current church activity level. Their responses are self-evaluations without any categorization on my part.
fifty of them were contacted by either myself or a “key entry point” but each of these either declined to conduct the study or simply discontinued communication with me after the initial contact.

As mentioned earlier, one of these contacts who declined an interview had grown up LDS and has since left the Church and wanted nothing to do with it. Another was inactive and did not want to share his responses. Athletes such as these would have rounded out the study and given it a more universal feel. Recognizing that limitation, I moved forward with those who were willing to participate. I acknowledge that the data will favor those who are still active members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Also, the nature of a snowball sample is that one must depend on others to provide potential candidates for the study. It consequently involves a reliance on these athletes to use their influence on others to ensure that more players agree to participate.

The pool of athletes is inevitably created by the players themselves, based on their associations with other athletes and the availability of these individuals. I spoke with several players after interviewing them and they expressed a desire for me to talk to their friends who did not currently associate with the Church. They admitted that these contacts would bring a fascinating angle to the study and would help to uncover more of the relationship between Sunday play and religious commitment. With few exceptions, however, they declined. Another reason for the heavy participation from active Latter-day Saints is that the athletes whom I interviewed were intending to make it easy on me, knowing that certain contacts would agree and others would not wish to be bothered. One final possibility is that active, church-going athletes, tended to associate more with other active church members, and consequently I was put in contact with players cut from the same cloth so to speak.
In spite of these limitations, the thirty athletes who I interviewed created a solid pool of participants, including players with differing religious backgrounds (some were converts to the church), differing ethnic backgrounds, and differing athletic backgrounds to suggest that some of this data can be applied more generally.

In order to contextualize this data, the pool of participants, and their religious practices, it will be vital to understand the role that the Sabbath day plays in the lives of faithful, active members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Sabbath Day

One of the most distinguished words in the Bible is the word qadosh, holy; a word which more than any other is representative of the mystery and majesty of the divine…. It is, indeed, a unique occasion at which the distinguished word qadosh is used for the first time: in the Book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time: “And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.”

Among the significant commands that God gave to the children of Israel through his spokesman Moses was this declaration: “Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you” (Exodus 31:13). The Sabbath has been a sign between God and believers from the beginning of time down to the present day. It is often repeated throughout holy writ as a reminder to God’s people of the promised blessings that accompany this command. The first direct mention of the Seventh day Lord’s Day as the “Sabbath” is found in Exodus 16:23 when the Lord designated “the rest of the holy Sabbath unto the Lord.” Later, the voice of the Lord came from the height of Mount Sinai: “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus

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It is similarly spoken in Deuteronomy 5:12, “Keep the Sabbath day to sanctify it, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee.”

There is little room to misinterpret the importance given to the seventh or Sabbath day as described in the Old Testament. It is called a Sabbath unto the Lord, a day which the Lord had given to his people. One main purpose then in hallowing this day was to have the people keep it holy unto the Lord; not just to remember the day but to remember Him. Regarding the two main Sabbath commands in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 Gerard Hasel wrote, “The Sabbath is grounded in Creation and linked with redemption.” Linked to the creation narrative of the Sabbath day, Hasel also wrote, “The ‘seventh day’ Sabbath is ‘blessed’ as no other day and thereby imbued with a power unique to this day.” These reasons explain why believers today devote one day in seven to the worship of their God.

15 Although the creation narrative in Genesis has no mention of the Sabbath, Rev. Francis Garden linked the Sabbath to “a day of rest,” and “to cease to do,” and “to rest.” He concluded, “This is the obvious and undoubted etymology.” See Francis Garden, “Sabbath,” in A Dictionary of the Bible, ed. William Smith (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1863), 3:1064. On the other hand, Michael H. Burer, referencing Genesis 2:1-3 wrote, “It should be acknowledged from the outset that the noun שַׁבָּת does not occur in this passage; thus this passage cannot be regarded as an institutionalization of the Sabbath. It should also be acknowledged that this passage centers on God’s rest and does not appear to describe any aspect of divine work on the Sabbath.” See Michael H. Burer, Divine Sabbath Work (Winona Lake, Indiana, Eisenbrauns, 2012), 29. Burer, in explaining this prior comment, went on to admit that, “It will become clear from many discussions about this passage, however, that it was interpreted in just this way… The law is thus viewed as retroactive” (footnote 15). Gerhard F. Hasel perceptively summed it up by saying that the debates regarding the origin of Sabbath are numerous and there is little evidence to settle the debate definitively. See Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Sabbath in the Pentateuch,” The Sabbath in Scripture and History, ed. Kenneth A. Strand (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982), 24.


18 Abraham Millgram’s research may be the foundational work on the Sabbath. Here, he explains how the seven-day week contributes to our understanding of the Sabbath: “The origin of the seven-day week ending with a rest-day is obscure. In the Bible the Sabbath is already an old and well established institution. In the first Decalogue we are told to “remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy”, an injunction which by its very wording infers that an established institution is being sanctioned. The biblical versions of the origin of the Sabbath, which ascribe its beginnings either to the creation of the world or to the Exodus from Egypt only substantiate its pre-biblical origin. The biblical author already knows of the seven-day week ending with the Sabbath, and he supplies two motives for the observance of this Sabbath. One motive is religious – that we are to imitate God and rest from our labor on the
This holy day was instituted by God for the intent to make his people holy. Biblically, God is the great giver of this gift to his children and indeed it is a gift to those who follow it accordingly. The details of origin will be debated, the significance of ancient and modern application will be misunderstood, but the commandment, the blessing, and the promise of God’s signature upon this earth will live on. Therefore, for believers, including members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, exalting the Sabbath above the routine order of life prepares them to better worship the Lord.

A History of the Sabbath

A commonly held belief is that in ancient times the seventh day of the week or Saturday was set apart as the holy Sabbath. For most Christians, the Sabbath changed to the first day of the week because Jesus Christ rose from the tomb on the first day of the week. “Sunday, then, as the day of the resurrection, represents the fulfillment and culmination of the Divine rest promised by the Old Testament Sabbath.” Sunday has strong ties to the day of the sun, symbolizing

seventh day; and the second motive is social – that we are to remember our emancipation from Egypt and therefore provide rest from labor for ourselves, for our slaves, and for the stranger in our midst.” See Abraham E. Millgram, Sabbath: The day of Delight (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1956), 338. Millgram asserts that the Sabbath was a pre-biblical institution. He further clarified how it belongs exclusively to God and his people: “The only conclusion that may be drawn is that the seven-day week, with its humanitarian rest day as we have it now, is a unique creation of the Hebrew religious genius, and is one of the most valuable Hebrew contributions to the civilization of mankind” (p. 342).


As will be shown hereafter, LDS Church members believe Sunday and the Sabbath are one and the same. The terms are used interchangeably among members and will be used accordingly for the remainder of this paper.

Even today some Christian religions continue to honor Saturday as the day of rest. Though there are several, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the largest Christian religion to worship Saturday, the seventh day, as the Sabbath.

Christ as the rising sun,\textsuperscript{23} and “worshiping the True Sun of Righteousness who on that day divided light from darkness.”\textsuperscript{24} This Christian day of worship is referred to by various names for different reasons. It is called the “Lord’s Day” not because it belongs to Christ but because it was supposed to keep alive the memory of the resurrected Jesus.\textsuperscript{25}

Robert A. Kraft offered the following viewpoint:

Sunday observance was being urged instead of Sabbath rest as early as the beginning of the 2d century, at the same time, a considerable segment of the Christian population continued to observe the (Jewish) Sabbath in some form or other—apparently this continued to be a live issue on into the 4\textsuperscript{th} century in some areas; some Christian communities observed both Sabbath and Sunday at least from the 3d century, and probably earlier, but there was a widespread attempt to divorce Sabbath observance from the ideas of solemnity (fasting) and idleness by making it a day of meditation and rejoicing (like Sunday)—that is, Sabbath “rest” was interpreted in a much wider sense than Rabbinic Judaism would permit.\textsuperscript{26}

From this history, it appears that the change from Saturday to Sunday, for Christians, was not instigated by scripture or revelation. Richard Bauckham suggests, “The primary reason for its origin must be the Christian need for a time of distinctively Christian worship.”\textsuperscript{27} W. D. Davies also said that Sunday observance arose “in conscious opposition to or distinction from the Jewish

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\textsuperscript{25} Rodorf, \textit{Sunday}, 220–221.


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Sabbath.”  

Some have argued that in general it was social, military, political, and literary anti-Judaic imperial policies that were the driving force behind this dogmatic change. However, Justin Martyr wrote about Sunday worship in the second century and gave very clear reasons on why Sunday was set apart instead of Saturday. He described how “on the day called Sunday” those in the city would join to hear the writings of the prophets, offer prayers, and then partake of bread and wine. Regarding Sunday he noted, “But we all hold this common gathering on Sunday, since it is the first day, on which God transforming darkness and matter made the Universe, and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead.” Undoubtedly there are those who disagree on which day of the week the Sabbath should be observed. Perhaps historian Craig Harline said it best when he summarized the overall change that the Sabbath day has gone through over the centuries: “Sunday will change as the world around it changes. It also seems safe to say that, whatever the changes, Sunday will retain its extraordinary character, however one might understand that.” Day of the week aside, discovering what the Sabbath means to Latter-day Saints is essential for our study.

The Sabbath for Latter-day Saints

For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the command to keep the Sabbath day—or Sunday—holy is very much in effect today. In fact, in the most recent LDS general conference Elder Quentin L. Cook said, “For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of

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29 Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, 212.


Latter-day Saints, honoring the Sabbath is a form of righteousness that will bless and strengthen families, connect us with our Creator, and increase happiness. The Sabbath can help separate us from that which is frivolous, inappropriate, or immoral. It allows us to be in the world but not of the world.”32

The Church in our day holds regular Sunday meetings which include the administration of the sacrament. A revelation explaining many of the guidelines for Sabbath day worship is found in Doctrine and Covenants 59 and was received on August 7, 1831, in Missouri. Historian William Hartley, speaking of this revelation, said that it “serves as our ‘constitution’ for Sabbath observance.”33 The main components regarding the Latter-day Saint worship of the Sabbath are found therein:

And that thou mayest more fully keep thyself unspotted from the world, thou shalt go to the house of prayer and offer up thy sacraments upon my holy day; For verily this is a day appointed unto you to rest from your labors, and to pay thy devotions unto the Most High; Nevertheless thy vows shall be offered up in righteousness on all days and at all times; But remember that on this, the Lord’s day, thou shalt offer thine oblations and thy sacraments unto the Most High, confessing thy sins unto thy brethren, and before the Lord. (D&C 59:9-12)

Members of the Church are counseled to attend church meetings regularly. Along with church attendance, avoiding worldly activities that could otherwise be attended to on other days of the week is encouraged.

Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles précised one of the driving forces of the Church in our day. Addressing worldwide church leaders he said, “I remind you once more, our primary goal is for everyone to have a spiritual experience and a

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strengthening faith in our Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ through Sabbath day observance. We want every member of the Church to join with us as we properly honor the Lord Jesus Christ on the Sabbath.”

Six months later there was another worldwide leadership training meeting to continue this push for more meaningful Sabbath day observance. Clearly the Church leadership is aware of and concerned for how Sundays are treated in our day. It is impossible to measure the devotion of a Mormon based solely on church attendance. The scope of this research is restricted to how one’s devotion to the Sabbath affects their church activity, faith, or spirituality. Therefore, one may question what church members are told regarding Sunday activities, including Sunday sports.

**Prophetic Commentary on Sports and the Sabbath**

Brigham Young said, “Recreation and diversion are as necessary to our well-being as the more serious pursuits of life.”

Over the years, many members of the Church have excelled in their respective sporting events. A number of these athletes have gone on to the professional arena and participated in Sunday athletic competitions. For some members of the Church this seems to contradict the fourth commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8). For others, sports on Sundays are acceptable as long as church-related behaviors and adherence to church standards remain constant. Church leaders past and present have raised their voices to give counsel amid changing circumstances; the best ways they have tried to do this is to give over-arching principles that can be applied to differing situations. In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the hierarchal order is such that the fifteen men that comprise

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the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles are regarded as prophets, seers, and revealers. Numerous other General Authorities and leaders (men and women) are highly revered and respected. Sustaining and supporting these leaders implies respect for what they say. With regards to sports and the Sabbath, what these men and women have said on the topic may help one find balance, if not a solution, to the debate.

Up to this point, very few official statements from Church leaders have been made regarding whether or not to play professional sports on the Sabbath. However, stories and examples from their speeches can help draw general conclusions for a diverse audience.

President Thomas S. Monson shared a story about Clayton Christensen who played college basketball for Oxford University. In the final tournament, the championship game was to be played on Sunday. Clayton, the starting center, desperately wanted to play with his team. He prayed and “asked his Heavenly Father if it would be all right, just this once, if he played that game on Sunday.” Clayton chose not to play, yet his team won the championship. When later asked about his decision not to play, he recalled, “Had [I] crossed the line just that once, then the next time something came up that was so demanding and critical, it would have been so much easier to cross the line again.”36 For the President of the Church to share such a story where the decision not to play a game on Sunday is so heavily emphasized, suggests a desire for all Church members to follow Clayton Christensen’s example.

Elder Richard G. Scott of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles shared a similar story in the April 2001 General Conference. Elder Scott was acquainted with a young man who excelled in swimming. The young man had been taught to live the commandments of God. He had to choose whether or not to participate in a championship swim meet held on Sunday. Elder Scott

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asked, “Would he participate? Would he rationalize an exception to his rule of not swimming on Sunday to help his team win the championship? No, he would not yield, even under intense peer pressure. He was called names, even physically abused. But he would not yield.” Elder Scott mentioned that the rule of not swimming on Sunday belonged to this young man, and not necessarily to the Church. Still, when an apostle highlights such specific behavior, his message may suggest similar behavior in others.

Elder Larry Y. Wilson of the Seventy used an example from his daughter’s life to teach about the importance of allowing others to decide how to observe the Sabbath day. He and his wife had allowed their daughter to choose whether or not she would play in her championship soccer game which was to be played on Sunday. The daughter, Mary, decided she would play. Elder Wilson concluded, “After the game ended, Mary slowly walked over to her waiting mother. ‘Oh, Mom,’ she said, ‘that felt awful. I never want to feel like that again. I’m never playing another game on the Sabbath day.’ And she never did. Mary had now internalized the principle of Sabbath keeping.” This example resonates with many. The question remains, is Elder Wilson suggesting that the principle of Sabbath keeping includes not playing in sports games on Sundays? What about those who have attended church meetings and later in the day participate in sports?

Eric Liddell is well known for his decision not to run the 100 meter race on Sunday in the 1924 Olympics. He went on to win gold in the 400 meters, leaving his mark as one who would not disregard God’s commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy. In a most straightforward

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fashion, Elder Quentin L. Cook related the story of Liddell and resolutely said, “Liddell’s admirable conduct was very influential in our youngest son’s decision to not participate in Sunday sports and, more importantly, to separate himself from unrighteous and worldly conduct.” It is possible that Elder Cook was simply declaring his family’s beliefs regarding Sunday sports. His story begs the question, however, does he link all Sunday sports with unrighteous and worldly conduct? Perhaps he meant that his son’s decision not to participate in sports on Sunday ultimately helped him avoid unrighteous and worldly conduct.

Another example that favors the Sabbath day over sports is the story of the New Zealand All Blacks rugby player Sid Going. In April 2011, Elder Neil L. Andersen shared Sid’s story as one of the greatest rugby players of his time, and his commitment to his beliefs. Practices and games were altered in response to Sid’s choice to not play on Sundays. For someone like Sid Going, a professional in his field, it would have been easy for him to justify playing on the Sabbath. The fact that he did not, and that his story was shared in General Conference, is evidence that Elder Andersen respects his decision to keep the Sabbath day holy.

Bishop H. David Burton shared an insightful statement stressing the need to forgo the temptation to play games on Sundays:

Now, I know it’s hard, particularly for our young people, to choose to observe the Sabbath day when athletic teams on which they so much want to participate regularly schedule games on Sunday. I too know it seems trivial to many who are in need of just a few items on the Sabbath to quickly stop at a convenience store to make a Sunday purchase. But I also know that remembering to keep the Sabbath day holy is one of the most important commandments we can observe in preparing us to be the recipients of the whisperings of the Spirit.

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Bishop Burton recognized the difficulty that many have in choosing between these two options, yet it appears that he sets them up as opposing choices and observing the Sabbath is the one which will bring spiritual benefits.

A vital part of worship is sacrament meeting attendance and partaking of the sacrament. Elder Roberts D. Hales stated that for the sacrament to have spiritual effect on us, “we need to prepare ourselves before coming to sacrament meeting.” He continued, “We do this by deliberately leaving behind our daily work and recreation and letting go of worldly thoughts and concerns.”

Elder Keith K. Hilbig of the Seventy stated that our commitment to, and involvement in, personal spiritual endeavors and behaviors can be determined by answering a few questions. Among them, he asked, “Do I spend more time with sports than Church attendance or callings?” One may argue that if a person spends more time with church attendance and callings than on sports, or at least equal time, professional participation on a Sunday could be justified. However, it is clear that Elder Hilbig placed church attendance and callings above sports.

Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin of the Twelve Apostles illustrated that activities can start off innocently and be completely legitimate, but if taken to the extreme can lead us down a destructive path. Elder Wirthlin, an athlete himself, said, “Many of us enjoy going to ball games and watching them on television. I am no exception. I love to watch a good athletic contest. If we spend excessive time with sporting events, however, we may neglect things that are much more

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44 Keith K. Hilbig, “Quench Not the Spirit Which Quickens the Inner Man,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2007, 38.
important.”45 He never mentioned the Sabbath during his talk, therefore one is left to decide for himself if going to or watching sporting events on Sundays is appropriate.

What about those who choose to attend religious meetings but also choose to attend or watch sporting events during other hours of the day? Elder Angel Abrea of the Seventy warned of this mindset by explaining to parents that their children would receive mixed signals and distorted examples when they see that “observance of the Sabbath depends on which sport event is scheduled for the day, or if the weather is ideal for an outing.”46

Perhaps the loftiest worldly achievement regarding sports is that of playing on a professional level, even many Latter-day Saints work to attain this status. Lavell Edwards, renowned football coach at BYU from 1972 to 2000, once gave a talk in General Conference. He related his speech to the young men preparing to serve missions and shared football stories about quarterbacks Steve Young and Robbie Bosco, both of whom went on to play in the NFL.47 Elder Quentin L. Cook shared a similar story in 2014 about NFL hall of famer Merlin Olsen. In his talk he even mentioned the accolades which Merlin had achieved saying, “In college he won the Outland Trophy as the nation’s best interior lineman. Merlin was ultimately the third overall pick in the National Football League draft and played in an amazing 14 consecutive Pro Bowls. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1982.”48 Certainly the telling of these stories from the pulpit at General Conference is not an endorsement for playing in the NFL, but rather inspiring stories of great men.

The most recent official counsel on Sunday recreation, occurred in April of 2015. Elder Russell M. Nelson gave a talk entitled “The Sabbath is a Delight,” in which he taught of members’ personal responsibility to see their Sunday activities as representative of their commitment to God. Talking of Sundays he said, “Routine and recreational activities can be done some other time.” It is noteworthy that he uses recreation and then says that it can be done another time or day of the week. Such is the tone throughout his address, reminding church members that it is up to them to choose appropriate Sunday activities and including the question, “What sign will you give to the Lord to show your love for Him?” for consideration.

In 1947 in Cache Valley, Utah, a baseball team was scheduled to play during one of the church meetings. The bishopric, knowing that the majority of the town would attend the game, decided to move the meeting time to accommodate players and fans. This is one isolated example, but there may be many similar stories of LDS congregations bending to accommodate sports while sustaining spirituality. On the other hand, events like this may have contributed to the Church’s decision to not hold church-sponsored sports and recreational events on Sundays.

The Church has a variety of physical activities in which youth and adults can become involved. The activities are not limited to sporting events. There are often plays, musical groups, campouts, service projects, and many more. However, the Church has made some limitations in regard to these sponsored activities. The official Church Handbook reads, “Sabbath Day Observance: No Church-sponsored sports events (such as games, practices, or travel) or recreational events (such as camping or hiking) are to be scheduled on Sunday. Nor should youth

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groups and others travel to or from camps or youth conferences on Sunday.”51 This policy, though limited to church-sponsored activities, may be representative of how church leaders feel towards all sporting events on Sundays. However, with a reluctance to mandate certain behaviors or activities on the Sabbath day, it allows church members the freedom to decide for themselves how they are to keep this day holy.

Increasingly Church leaders stay away from “absolute” statements regarding the Sabbath and allow the individual to determine if he/she is fulfilling the Lord’s command. However, leaders censure behavior that disregards the commandments: “Some trifle with the Lord’s sacred, hallowed Sabbath day and spend the day in sports, pleasure, and other worldly interests when they should have been resting from worldly interests and devoting time to the spiritual side of life in reading the scriptures, attending religious meetings….”52 The Church has long been an advocate of allowing its members to choose for themselves how to live their lives. Members must choose how strictly they follow counsel, how closely they adhere to scriptural and prophetic teachings, and how obedient they are at following spiritual promptings and impressions.

This debate between the Sabbath and sports will continue to be on the minds of members and leaders alike. For some, these prophetic statements are sufficient in their decision not to play on Sunday. For others, the need of prioritizing only increases because they want to be able to maintain their spirituality while playing on the Sabbath. With numerous stories and examples

51 Church Handbook of Instructions. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), 18.2.5.

shared during General Conference, Latter-day Saints are left to choose how they will govern their actions. Perhaps James E. Faust said it best,

May I mention two or three other messages which seem no longer popular? One is to respect the Sabbath day. While the Savior himself cautioned against extreme forms of Sabbath day observance, it is well to remember whose day the Sabbath is. There seems to be an ever-increasing popularity in disregarding the centuries-old commandment to observe and respect the Sabbath day. For many it has become a holiday rather than a holy day of rest and sanctification. For some it is a day to shop and buy groceries. The decision of those who engage in shopping, sports, work, and recreation on the Sabbath day is their own, for which they alone bear responsibility.53

This statement sums up the notion that church members are taught correct principles and left to govern themselves.54

**Authoritative Statements on Sports and the Sabbath**

In a church that tends to be more reserved with regards to absolute statements, as is the case with the modern LDS Church, it proved challenging to find many statements from authorities that had the feeling of “official” to them. Taken together, however, these declarations provide insight into this debated topic. One published statement says, “Sunday is not a day for shopping, recreation, or athletic events.”55 At face value, this is a succinct policy that settles the debate. Here we see that recreation and athletic events are not acceptable activities for Sundays. However, when examining the source, *For the Strength of Youth* is a pamphlet written for the youth of the church; it is approved and published by the Church and the First Presidency wrote the foreword. One can be confident that this is an official publication. The question would be the intended audience of the message, or rather, is it just meant for the youth?


55 *For the Strength of Youth* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 31.
Another recently published source—talking about how to keep the Sabbath day holy—declares, “Our prophets have told us that we should not shop, hunt, fish, attend sports events, or participate in similar activities on that day.”\footnote{Gospel Principles (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 141.} This references both attending and participating in sports events. It generalizes counsel from Church prophets collectively (without specifically mentioning names) to avoid sporting events on the Sabbath. Even without naming past prophets, the fact that this teaching is published by the Church can be interpreted as a confirmation that at least the current Church leadership agrees with the statement. In addition, the publication is used as the curriculum for a Sunday School class called “Gospel Principles.” The question again is does this pertain only to youth, or to adults also?

The final statement is a strong, authorized declaration against playing sports on the Sabbath. It reads, “We should refrain from shopping on the Sabbath and participating in other commercial and sporting activities that now commonly desecrate the Sabbath.”\footnote{Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 74.} Not only does it clearly advise against sporting activities on Sundays, it also implies that such events are among the leading causes of the desecration of the Sabbath. The source is Preach My Gospel, a manual used by missionaries in the Church. Missionaries study this material in preparation to teach those who are either being introduced to the Church or have recently become Church members. Once again, this manual is authorized by the Church and approved by the First Presidency and Twelve Apostles.

These three succinct statements deal with sports on the Sabbath. All three manuals from which these statements come, are directed toward the youth and new members. There is no
written distinction between sports as recreation and sports as a profession. In reality, however, there is an obvious difference between the two. Playing sports on Sundays as part of one’s career and simply playing for fun or competition are very different in nature, and as such must be separated when discussing Sunday play. This is not meant to suggest that if there were a church manual called “For the Strength of Adults” it would omit the essentials that youth are counseled to live by.

**Working on the Sabbath**

The commandment to honor the Sabbath day, found in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, expressly forbids work of any kind, not just by a believer but by all in their house. There was even a mandate to put to death those who failed to live by this divinely appointed code of conduct. Seeing that this was part of the law of Moses, what can be said about working on Sundays in modern times? Certainly, in our society, no one is put to death for a failure to keep the Sabbath holy, and in fact, it seems that the majority treat Sunday less like a holy day than ever before.

The Church has little to say about specifically working on Sundays in any official documents. In *For the Strength of Youth* it says, “When seeking a job, share with your potential employer your desire to attend your Sunday meetings and keep the Sabbath day holy. Whenever possible, choose a job that does not require you to work on Sundays.”\(^{58}\) Also, in *Gospel Principles* it states, “There may be times when we are required to work on the Sabbath. We should avoid this whenever possible, but when it is absolutely necessary, we should still maintain the spirit of Sabbath worship in our hearts as much as possible.”\(^{59}\) There is nothing said about

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\(^{58}\) *For the Strength of Youth*, 31.

\(^{59}\) *Gospel Principles*, 142.
working on Sundays in *Preach My Gospel*. A comprehensive look at working on Sundays is beyond the scope of this thesis. Further research into the topic would prove beneficial to members of the Church as well as those interested in professional sports and Sunday play.

But what about these NFL players who choose to work on Sundays by playing sports? To some observers, it may seem to fall under the umbrella of sports and recreation. That may arguably be the case for those who simply watch sporting events on the television or from the stands for entertainment purposes. But for athletes, it is a job, a way to make a living. In *Handbook 2*, under the section for “Employment” it states, “Members of the Church should endeavor to be involved in activities and employment upon which they can in good conscience ask the blessings of the Lord and which are consistent with the principles of the gospel and the teachings of the Savior.” This does not specifically discourage a church member from pursuing a career in professional sports. The guideline is to choose something respectable and in line with the church standards. Delineating between certain career preferences seems to be the issue: What careers that require Sunday work are acceptable for Latter-day Saints? Certainly, the medical field would be considered a worthy occupation in which to be employed because of the healing miracles performed by Jesus Christ on the Sabbath day. Public safety would likely qualify as acceptable, but does playing professional football fall into that category? More discussion on this topic will take place in the following chapters.

A distinction between sports on the Sabbath and working on the Sabbath may be due to the traditional divide between the two. In all but one of the examples used in the general

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60 It does, however, counsel members to avoid shopping and commercial activities (*Preach My Gospel*, 74). Perhaps people take that counsel and decide they should not work on Sundays either.

conference addresses, the athlete was not playing sports as a career. These athletes were not making a living from playing sports, but played competitive sports for recreation. In the case of Sid Going, who played professional rugby, days for practices and games were changed due to his refusal to play on Sundays. His story is the exception, but can be a strong case for keeping Sundays free of sporting events. As was mentioned earlier, it appears that the Church distinguishes between sporting events for pleasure or recreation and sporting events as a means to provide for oneself and/or a family.

Sports aside, General Authorities have encouraged members to make the Sabbath different from other days of the week. With this elevation of Sunday worship, they are also careful not to give specific do’s and don’ts. Russell M. Nelson shared his understanding of this principle and said that his conduct and attitude on the Sabbath was a sign between himself and God. He could then decide which activities were appropriate by asking himself the question, “What sign do I want to give to God?”62 For The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Sabbath is a different day, one which we can utilize as a sign to God, demonstrating our devotion to him.

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62 Nelson, “The Sabbath is a Delight,” 130.
Chapter 2

Sunday Aspects Pertaining to Latter-day Saints in the NFL

In the previous chapter I outlined the scope and purpose of this study. I discussed the interview process, the exploratory approach to a perceived conflict between a profession that works heavily on Sundays and a spiritual devotion to God and his commandments. I also briefly described the Sabbath day and its purpose and place in contemporary society, as well as how sports fit into the LDS understanding of the Sabbath. The results from these interviews provide insight into a solution to a better Sabbath-day experience. That does not imply that sports would be excluded from that solution. The data may help uncover the possible benefits as well as the challenges that go along with sports and the Sabbath. Church members, athletically inclined or not, will have to find a solution for them that helps “keep [themselves] unspotted from the world” (D&C 59:9).

Counsel Received Prior to the NFL

It is commonplace for many athletes to dream of moving on to the next level of competition. For college football players, that means the NFL. And like any other profession, college football players need to prepare—physically, emotionally, and for our purposes spiritually—for the profession they are trying to get into.

One question I asked each athlete was, “What advice did you receive from family members, coaches, or priesthood leaders about playing in the NFL?” The answers ranged from very involved and concerned priesthood leaders to receiving no advice whatsoever. Out of the thirty interviews conducted, only a handful of players specifically mentioned speaking with priesthood leaders, and even then, some simply said that their bishop or stake president was supportive of their playing in the NFL. I interviewed six players who had spoken with their
bishops about the NFL, two who mentioned speaking to their stake presidents, one who had counseled with his father-in-law who had been a stake president and a sealer in the temple, and one who received specific advice from his mission president. There were several players who remembered talking to former teammates who had made it to the league as well as members of their college coaching staff who opined on a future in the NFL.

For example, when I asked one of these athletes what counsel he had received he responded, “None. Primarily because nobody expected me to have an NFL career.” (13) Surely he would have received some sort of advice had others known he was going to become a starter in the NFL. A number of players referred to an adage that the NFL stands for “Not For Long” and how it is very common for players to only last a year or two in the league. Much of the advice received pertained to health factors that would either prolong or curtail their careers as professional athletes. One comical bit of advice was to, “take names and kick butt, go do it.” (4)

However, I was more concerned with the spiritual guidance that these players received prior to entering the NFL. Specifically, I wondered if any of these players received counsel or even criticism about playing on Sundays. What kind of attitude did family members, coaching staff, and priesthood leaders portray as they counseled these athletes about a future career in the NFL?

Counsel from Priesthood Leaders

As mentioned earlier, only one-third of the players remembered speaking specifically with a priesthood leader of some kind. Some of the reasons for this seemingly low number may be that the players either did not ask, did not want to ask, or do not remember any details from the conversation. For those who potentially forgot conversing with priesthood leaders, it has

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63 Players’ responses will be cited using a simple parenthetical reference with a number from 1–30. The numbers refer to the order in which I interviewed these athletes, and will be used throughout.
been a very long time for many of these athletes since they began their careers in the NFL, and it may have simply slipped their mind. Also, with so many questions in the interview, perhaps they felt that other experiences were more important to share. One player responded “I never thought about it to ask my Bishop.” (5) This seems to be a common occurrence because twenty athletes never mentioned having these kinds of conversations with priesthood leaders; they may have considered it more as a personal decision to be made between themselves, their wives or other family members, and the Lord. Also, they may have been more focused on practical advice such as how to make a roster or how to give their best efforts on the field while maximizing time with family. This sort of advice would have come from current and former NFL players and less likely from bishops and stake presidents. For those few who actively sought priesthood counsel, or at least those who remember receiving some sort of advice from a priesthood leader, much can be learned from their experiences.

The most dramatic response from any kind of priesthood leader occurred with a college player as he was serving in a bishopric during his senior year. His interaction was as follows:

My bishop, he did say to me as I was leaving, as I was getting drafted, he grabbed me one day and said “[player’s name], as I’ve gotten to know you I want you to know that I’m quite surprised that you’re going to play in the NFL.” And I said “why?” And he said “Because you’re going to be playing on Sunday.” And he said “I didn’t think you would ever do that.” And it was only a few years after Eli Herring came out and said he wasn’t going to play on Sunday. So he said “I kind of thought you’d be like Eli Herring and not play on Sunday.” And I said “You know, Bishop, I agree, I understand that I’ll be playing on Sunday but I have prayerfully considered this and I believe that this is where I’m supposed to be. I believe there are a lot of good opportunities, and good will come out of this, for the betterment of building the kingdom. So because I know that Bishop we are going to go.” And he looked at me like, whoa! So a week later he came back to me and pulled me into his office and said, “I went home and prayed about what you said to me, and it occurred to me that the Lord wants his priesthood leaders in all industries across the world doing good. It was confirmed to me that you should go and that you should go do it.” … When I got there, there was no question that there was lots of good to do, lots of good opportunities to build the kingdom, and it happened to be in an industry, in a setting where it required Sunday play. (21)
There are several things to be gleaned from this interaction. The bishop was surprised that someone so impressive (and presumably he was not talking about his skill as a football player) as this young man would willingly choose to play in the NFL and therefore on Sundays. And to add more pressure, the bishop even referenced Eli Herring’s choosing not to play in the NFL.64 This player defended his actions by clarifying that he had received a personal witness that this was what he was supposed to be doing. A week passed, and in the meantime this bishop had sought a confirmation of this player’s decision to enter the NFL, to know that it was acceptable and even favorable that he should move forward on this path. One might argue that it is not part of this bishop’s jurisdiction to know whether a player should or should not enter a given profession. Perhaps the experience was intended to help the bishop to better prepare himself for future interactions regarding professional placement and how to counsel those for whom he has ecclesiastical authority. It is significant that both of these men felt strongly that God wants his priesthood leaders—and their families—to be an influence for good in all areas of the professional world.

Another athlete with a similar experience shared how he and his wife had many conversations with the bishop and the stake president. His bishop at the time had a brother who spent many years in the professional spotlight as an athlete himself. This NFL player remembered very well the interactions with his bishop and how they ultimately helped him make the decision to move forward into the NFL:

[My bishop] had seen his brother in the spotlight and what he had gone through and the choices he had made because of a lot of the fame, his advice from [his brother’s] choices, which didn’t keep him close to the church or faithful, and the struggles in every aspect of his life since then, so it was great to sit and counsel with him. But never once was I discouraged from him for pursuing this. He told me about the negative things that could

happen if I let them get a hold of me. But he also said to look at the good that I could accomplish because of that line of work and anyone in the spotlight can do so much good for the world, especially for the youth… We counseled with the Stake President and the Bishop and there was never once anybody who said that I shouldn’t do this. It was more, “This is going to be a wonderful opportunity for you to be an example and share the gospel.” We felt like that was what we needed to do and the Lord would put us where he needed us and if it wasn’t right he would stop us. (30)

Having a bishop who understood the potential dangers of stardom would indeed be beneficial; his brother would not have gone through the exact thing, but general principles could be adopted for this athlete.

Another standout conversation happened with a player who had relatives who had played in the league. He recalled, “They counseled me a little bit, gave me some ideas of what to expect.” (26) He also mentioned how helpful it was to have former players return and detail what the league was like and what to expect. The most noteworthy conversation for him, though, happened with his bishop:

When I realized I would have an opportunity to play in the NFL I actually counseled with my old Bishop from [home town]. I sat down with him, he’s the only guy I ever asked about playing on Sundays. Like I said earlier I wasn’t one to be persuaded, I was just one to do and learn by experience, I kind of just went into things with my typical mindset. But I talked to my bishop about it and he said, “you know [player], the way I look at it, any chance you can get, put some religion in, any chance for you to read some scriptures or catch a sacrament meeting before a Monday night football game, or any religious opportunities you get where you can bolster and strengthen your testimony then do it. Outside of that, what you’re able to do as an LDS NFL player, through missionary work, through example in the locker room with those you will come in contact with, I believe that it can be a very good thing for you and for your family. The only thing I will tell you is to pay close attention to your testimony, and if it starts to waiver then you know what you need to do.” I really loved that conversation because it forced me to focus on my testimony while I was going through the NFL… That inward reflection that was put on notice by an old Bishop I had, it helped a lot. (26)

It is curious that he went to see his former bishop rather than his current one, but this counsel that was tailored to him was undoubtedly what he needed at the time. Also, he might have received the same counsel from his current bishop. The bishop in this case counseled him to
maintain his religion as a part of his lifestyle, and if he ever felt it slipping, to recapture it before too long. This type of response could be standard protocol, or maybe the bishop knew that it would do no good to give counsel concerning Sunday play, or maybe the response was inspired for the situation. The player specifically mentioned asking about playing on Sundays, and the direction that the response took could suggest that the bishop had nothing to worry about as far as this former ward member playing on the Sabbath.

Some more very specific instruction came from a bishop after his ward member had been drafted into the NFL. To this player he said, “I feel strongly to tell you that you’re not going out there to play football but you’re going to go out there to do some special things… You do what you got to do, and you do what you need to do outside of church so that you don’t fall away from church.” (4) The bishop told of a feeling he had to give particular guidance to this player, implying that it was not the standard instruction he would give someone. The player then recalled how much time he spent with the youth of the church while out there. Certainly having a faithful NFL player attend your ward and help out with the youth would be beneficial to those with whom he interacted. Perhaps this bishop saw potential in the player and wanted to channel his efforts off the field toward blessing and influencing others for good during his career in the NFL, when otherwise he could have been overly involved in football. Adding to what this bishop said to his player, he counseled, “We need more good people out…. Go have fun and preach the gospel. Go be a good example and make the most of it.” (4) Undeniably people can be influenced for good when they see a popular, professional athlete representing themselves, their families, and their church in a respectable, faithful manner. Truly, many people could benefit from an athlete who has been channeled by a priesthood leader to assert their influence and righteous example for good.
Different from receiving counsel from a bishop, one athlete counseled with his mission president while serving a two-year mission. As a missionary, a mission president is regarded as your ecclesiastical leader, so their counsel would be considered as pertinent as any other’s. This player had a mission president who had played college sports, and as they talked throughout his mission, sports often came up in their conversations. Along with advice about locker room chatter and what to do with religious clothing in the locker room and on the field, he touched on the Sabbath: “He gave me some advice about someday if I had an opportunity to play on Sunday, then to keep in mind the good that you can do and the influence you can have for good on members of the church.” (29) Interestingly, the athlete was on a mission, at least a couple years away from the possibility of entering the NFL, and yet the mission president gave him counsel on what to do in the future if the opportunity arose.

One interview in particular sheds light on how most of these players and priesthood leaders likely felt about the decision to play in the NFL. This player said, “My Bishop and a couple friends told me that it was my choice, it’s to make a living. ‘If you go into the league it’s your choice to play on Sunday.’ …I thought about that and I thought that if I did everything in my power to do what was right and follow the gospel, then it’s okay for me to make a choice and play on Sunday.” (18) While this counsel may sound vague, it is telling of the role of the priesthood leader in this type of circumstance.

As mentioned earlier, church members are counseled to seek jobs “which are consistent with the principles of the gospel and the teachings of the Savior.” While some may argue that playing sports on Sundays in the NFL is not consistent with the principles of the gospel, that matter is better left up to the individual, their priesthood leaders, and the Lord.
While drafting my interview questions, I was steered away from asking questions that were too clearly meant to probe into the most personal aspects of Latter-day Saints, particularly with respect to current temple recommends. Temple recommends are given to church members who meet the highest requirements of standard and conduct, and they allow them to enter into sacred buildings referred to often as a “House of the Lord.” While I never asked any player directly if they held a temple recommend or not, I did ask one player how his priesthood leaders felt about him playing in the NFL, to which he responded openly, “I held a temple recommend.”

(1) This is certainly revealing as far as one’s outward spiritual standing is concerned. Holding a temple recommend indicates how he feels about his own spirituality and how his ecclesiastical leaders feel about him as well. This is the only athlete who mentioned holding a temple recommend, and though collecting data from priesthood leaders would be fascinating and insightful, it is nevertheless outside the range of this thesis.

It would be helpful to know why there were so few interactions between these players and their priesthood leaders. Surely it was not because it fell outside their bounds of jurisdiction, but from the few experiences shared, these players are mature enough—spiritually and physically—to make this life decision in a more personal way.

**Counsel from Others**

In addition to counseling with priesthood leaders, several players counseled with family members and former teammates. This category of people would undoubtedly be held in high regard and their advice would be as substantial as any other’s. Among those conversations, a few stood out due to the content. One individual said vaguely that he might have had a conversation with his bishop about playing on Sundays but remembered vividly a conversation he had with a friend who had played in the NFL for several years: “I reached out to [former NFL player] and
asked him what he did on Sundays and that type of stuff. I wanted to find out what he did because it was obviously important to me to still live my religion as best as I possibly could. So I asked him what he did that helped.” It is noteworthy that he asked specifically about Sundays and then linked it to his desire to live his religion while in the NFL. This former player had remained active in the church through his years in the league, and was therefore a valuable resource of knowledge for how a Latter-day Saint could participate in this profession and persist in their faith.

For a married couple it would be crucial to counsel with one another about life decisions, especially regarding career choice and opportunity; for one of these players, he did just that. He recounted, “For my wife and I it is something that we took to the Lord. We felt like I needed to go, I felt like the Lord wanted me to do it. It was not like, oh yeah I want to go make all this money. It was more that we prayed about it and we felt like we needed to pursue this… The answer was yes you have to go.” (1) He then mentioned some challenges that arose, having children in different states, and questioning the decision to play in the league, wondering if the answer truly came from the Lord or not. He thought back to his original answer and said, “But the reason to make that leap of faith was because of a spiritual confirmation that we received that we needed to do it.” (1)

Similar to a player counseling with his wife, a relative’s advice can often be invaluable, especially when that relative has played in the NFL. With this player there was no “spiritual” advice prior to going into the NFL, but it was priceless nonetheless. He said, “He was kind of like preparing me about the atmosphere. I remember one thing he told me that I was going in there as a rookie and not to let people push me around. Don’t let them get into your head. Just stay focused on your family and set goals in your life that you want to accomplish while in the
NFL. Stay on that track, don’t get sidetracked with everything else.” (24) This relative was
cognizant of the fact that this player was going to play in the league and therefore chose to
counsel him on the atmosphere and the tendency to let the lifestyle associated with it sway
someone from their potential and their convictions.

In this sense, the counsel could very well be considered “spiritual” in nature. Being told
to “stay on track” could have several implications, one of them certainly being spiritual. In fact,
one astonishing comment I heard was in response to a question I had asked about the kind of
spiritual lifestyle this player led while in the league. He said bluntly, “That’s why my NFL life
was not long.” (20) He elaborated enough to say, “prioritizing what was right and wrong was not
my best at that time.” Although he gave little detail as to what exactly shortened his career in the
NFL, he took responsibility in his lack of discretion at choosing between right and wrong, at
shortchanging his spiritual needs. Clearly, the spiritual side of things can affect these players in
other areas of their lives, including their profession as football players.

One type of response that I frankly thought would be repeated more often was a negative
attitude towards playing, or working, on Sundays. For example, one player while serving a
mission described a conversation between himself and his companion about the potential of
playing in the NFL. When his companion asked him if he would play on Sundays, he explained,
“yeah, because I feel like it’s my job, it’s like a doctor. You train yourself in something and
become extremely skilled at something and it gives you the opportunity to be in it at the highest
level, and sometimes it’s a job where I have to do things on certain Sundays out of the year.”
(25)

One of the players I interviewed had a relative who had played in the NFL and would
share stories about how it all worked. As he recalled the counsel, he said, “He basically told me
not to worry about what everyone else was doing and just to do what I was doing and worry about myself. He always told me to work my butt off, play well and they will respect you and take care of you,” and he quickly added, “which is what ended up happening.” (6) Notice the absence of any spiritual advice, any counsel regarding church or testimony or the like. He concluded by saying, “But spiritually, nobody gave me pep talks. No matter what I was doing, I never had ups and downs, I was pretty steady, so I don’t think people worried about me in that aspect.” (6)

This is an interesting facet to consider, where a player would be spiritually strong enough so that priesthood leaders or family members would not need to worry about them in any kind of profession, including the NFL where so many Sundays are involved. Could that be one of the reasons for a majority of these players not mentioning any type of counsel from priesthood leaders? Were they in the same situation as this player, and therefore those with spiritual jurisdiction over them need not have worried about their spiritual stamina?

Almost identical to this last player, one interviewee responded, “As far as a Bishop sitting me down telling me not to do it, honestly I don’t think bishops have much to worry about, because I was always making an effort to go to church.” (12) Here are two examples of athletes receiving no spiritual advice or counsel against playing in the NFL due to their apparent faithfulness in spiritual matters, efforts to be personally active in the church, and so on. Two out of thirty is not very significant, but perhaps it helps explain why there is a seeming lack of encounters between priesthood leaders and their church members who are preparing to play in the NFL. If there truly isn’t anything to worry a leader, if these ward members have shown spiritual steadiness and are clearly in the “okay” group, it seems appropriate for leaders to reserve counsel on a future playing professional football. This is a major possibility because of
the makeup of my sample, with most of these athletes being active in the church for most of their lives up to the current day; they may have been more likely to stay strong in the NFL no matter what. Regardless of receiving counsel from priesthood leaders, the majority of these players seemed to have built their spiritual foundation strong and would not have strayed in any kind of profession.

Another explanation could be that the majority of players simply kept it between themselves and the Lord and moved forward with their decision. In fact, Chris Hoke who played for eleven years shared his opinion on the matter after he retired from the league. In a published interview, Hoke mentioned how passionate some people get about sports and Sunday play, and then said, “I felt the decision was between me and the Lord, and that’s how I looked at it… It wasn’t between me and other members of the Church or anyone else but me and my wife and the Lord.”

Certainly the decision will always rest with the individual. Seeking counsel from family, friends, teammates, and priesthood leaders is one more step in the process that many of these athletes took in their journey to play professional football and to engage in a worthwhile career to support themselves and their families. Moving forward into their new careers, these athletes needed to decide what place their religion would have in the NFL, and specifically how Sundays would be treated throughout their professions.

**Accommodations for Sunday Worship**

As previously mentioned, Sundays are the predominant day in which members of the church worship as a combined body. They attend three meetings over a three-hour period of time. The most important and most emphasized meeting among the three is termed the

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“sacrament meeting,” where members partake of bread and water as a representation of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and make a renewed commitment to follow him each week (D&C 20:75). The significance of the sacrament for Latter-day Saints is described in part in the Doctrine and Covenants: “And that thou mayest more fully keep thyself unspotted from the world, thou shalt go to the house of prayer and offer up thy sacraments upon my holy day… But remember that on this, the Lord’s day, thou shalt offer thine oblations and thy sacraments unto the Most High, confessing thy sins unto thy brethren, and before the Lord” (D&C 59:9, 12).

“Sacraments” are mentioned twice in these verses, emphasizing the need for their inclusion on the Sabbath.

To stress the significance of this meeting for members of the church, it has been called “the most sacred, the most holy, of all the meetings of the Church.”66 Elder Dallin H. Oaks, an Apostle of the church, said that church members “are commanded to partake of the sacrament each week.”67 Clearly it is one of the prerogatives of the church to have its members participating in sacrament meetings. For many of these athletes, it is difficult, if not impossible, to regularly attend their church meetings. One player summed it up by saying that in essence he had to take six months off from church attendance. (6) With Sunday participation so high during the NFL season, it begs the question of how these athletes can maintain their spirituality while missing their most important church meeting. How can they find time for their own spiritual growth while also being committed to games, travel, and other team events on “the day of rest?”

66 James J. Hamula, “The Sacrament and the Atonement,” Ensign or Liahona, Nov. 2014, 83. Elder Hamula is taking this quote from Joseph Fielding Smith. The full quote can be found in Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), 95.

In order to adequately examine how Sundays are observed for Latter-day Saints in the NFL, two main aspects of Sunday worship will be addressed: church attendance, and the sacrament. The latter will be broken into two segments, distinguished by normal and special circumstances. Laying these components out in this manner will help to explain some of the challenges that these athletes face as they strove to be dedicated church members as well as effective employees in the league.

**Church Attendance**

With a heavy emphasis on keeping the Sabbath day holy and, as will be explained shortly, partaking of the sacrament at church, it is vital to see how these professional athletes balance their jobs and their devotion to the church. Such heavy job involvement on Sundays could prevent them from participating in their church meetings. A remarkable experience was published in the biography of Eric Weddle. Eric converted to the Church while in college and has played in the NFL for the last nine years. In his book, Eric related his feelings surrounding football and church attendance:

> When I didn’t go to church during my first two years in the NFL, I didn’t know how it would impact me as a person. It was hard to go six or seven months without church. Going into my third year, I felt like I could do more. Football is important, but my family and faith are also important, and no matter how good a football player I am, I knew I still needed to be a good member of the church. Having that spiritual connection helped me throughout the season. It brought balance, I felt better about myself, and saw improvements in all aspects of my life.68

This experience is fascinating because of the progression that is described during the first three years of his career. He conceded that it was hard to go so long without church, and even being a convert, he was conscious of the need to do more on Sundays. Without detailing how he

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strengthened his spiritual connection, he told of the renewal it brought him in all areas of his life. Austin Collie is another player who had similar feelings towards church attendance. In an interview in *LDS Living*, he said, “I think I made it to church two times during the season, and I noticed the difference.”69 These are the types of responses I anticipated finding as I began this research. I expected that players would be affected by missing church and missing the sacrament.

I was told an experience similar to that of Weddle’s, where a player admitted that missing the sacrament was not as difficult as missing the whole experience that comes with being at church. He said,

> I missed the strength that you get from fellowship. So from not attending my three-hour meetings on Sunday, and being around the saints, hearing gospel doctrines, being uplifted by doctrine and other people, and seeing others who are trying to do their best, and being in the brotherhood of the priesthood, week after week after week, it all added up. That is where I lost my strength. I would go to the game for those four hours, and then we would take care of spiritual things in our lives, but there is power in being part of a congregation. People lose activity because they lose fellowship, once they lose fellowship they lose strength, and then they are preyed upon by the wolves of the world. That is where I was at risk all of the time…. That is where the Sunday thing started to impact me. (21)

This player claimed that there is a strength, a sense of spiritual power people can receive as they worship together. He acknowledged that although he was doing other spiritual things in his life, he was spiritually at risk by not being part of a congregation, a group that could buoy him up and lift him spiritually. Not to discount the importance of personal spiritual behaviors, which will be addressed later, it was this athlete’s experience that missing the three hours of church were more detrimental than anything else.

Another player had a similar opinion about missing church. He shared, “Not going to church on Sunday was really hard because when you’re not in church, you’re not in church.”

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69 Jamie Lawson, “Pushing Toward Perfection,” *LDS Living*, September/October 2010, 35–42.
can’t replicate it; you can’t make it up. When you’re singing the songs of the restoration with a whole chapel of people you can’t recapture that. If you miss it, you miss it. That was hard.” (2) These players shared similar opinions that by not being at church Sundays did not seem as sacred. One more experience was shared by a player who said that he played long enough to notice the contrast of the Sundays where he played football during the season and the Sundays where he was able to attend with his family after the season. (13) When someone is not able to fulfill the spiritual requirement of going to “the house of prayer,” they may feel a spiritual lacking.

Church attendance is not meant to define the spirituality of a member of the church. Obviously, one can be fully attending their church meetings but still be spiritually inactive. Herein lies the difficulty in separating outward spiritual behavior with inward spiritual devotion. It is nearly impossible to define spirituality, and these quantifiable factors are meant only to set parameters that can help illustrate how helpful or detrimental certain things are to these athletes. Knowing what church attendance can and cannot explain, it will still be beneficial to know some of the patterns that these players experienced during their time in the NFL. Table 1 (below) shows the frequency of church attendance for all thirty of these players.

When responding to the question about church attendance, many players gave their best recollection, and seemed satisfied with their estimation. Some players only specified how many times they attended church the first season of their career, and yet others included the succeeding years as well. As noted, this table includes only the frequency of actually going to the church building for meetings. There were several cases of players who received special permission to hold sacrament services outside of the normal hours and location. These will be addressed hereafter.
Table 1. Patterns/Frequency of Church Attendance During the Season

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Description of Church Attendance in General Throughout Their Career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3 times per season.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sundays before Monday night games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A couple times in the summer before the season, not at all during the season.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>&quot;A few times if that.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Never during his rookie year. Went a couple times per season after that when he could and before Monday night games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3 times per season.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>3-4 times per season. After two years, went before home games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>&quot;Zero, that was every year.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>3-4 times per season</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>0-3 times most seasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>A few times the first season. When he was injured, went half the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>First 2 years went twice per season. Switched teams and made it to church for home games. Switched teams again and couldn’t make it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Only before Monday night games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>None rookie year. In several years maybe 2-4 times per season.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>3-4 times per season</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Once per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>2 times per season</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>All home games, averaged 2 times per month.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Didn’t miss once during home games. Went about 8 times during the season.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Attended &quot;very, very little.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Before Monday night games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>“Attendance was not high at all.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>First year not at all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>If he didn’t have a Sunday game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Only on bye week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Never went to church.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Couldn’t make it if there was a Sunday game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>2-3 times per season</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Attended before home games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Attended before home games.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These patterns were compiled from the interviews and are intended only to give a snapshot of the players’ church attendance. Several players couldn’t remember how many times they went to church each season and simply gave their best guess. Also, the players were usually referring to sacrament meeting alone and not the 3-hour block. This table does not include occurrences of players participating in a separate sacrament service.

Several of the respondents switched teams throughout their career and mentioned that church attendance varied depending on the location of the church facility, proximity of the church building to the football stadium, time of the meetings, and so forth. The responses range from attending zero times in a season to attending before every home game. Twenty-two respondents remembered an average of attending four times or less per season, with three of those never attending. As mentioned earlier, the NFL schedule is extremely Sunday heavy, so
these players who went to church before Monday night games would have only gone to church a handful of times in a season. Doing what they can in a profession that has been called “cutthroat,” where they compete for their jobs on a weekly basis, it might be considered honorable for these men to make the sacrifice to attend any of their church meetings on Sunday.

The Sacrament at Other Times and/or Places – A Modified Sacrament Meeting

In my interviews I came across several instances where players had received permission to do variations of a typical LDS sacrament meeting either by themselves, with family, with church representatives, or with teammates. In each case, the player had received permission from the bishop or stake president to take the sacrament at another time and place. Of the 30 players interviewed, 11 spoke of times when they participated in taking the sacrament in a setting other than their formal church meetings.

Each bishop is able to use discretion for what they do with members of their own ward. In the church’s official Handbook 2 it states that, “the bishop may occasionally give authorization for a sacrament service to be held away from the meetinghouse. He may authorize such a service only within his ward boundaries.”70 This policy specifies changing only location of a sacrament service. Without mentioning the possibility of changing time and day, it can be argued that it would be an impropriety to do so. However, five of the eleven athletes who participated in these sacrament meetings away from their church house were given permission to have the sacrament on a day other than Sunday. First, a look at those who were authorized to have the sacrament on Sunday outside of the formal sacrament meeting will allow us to see how some of these athletes handled being absent from their church meetings.

70 Handbook 2, 18.2.2.
The first of these players had a member of the team’s coaching staff who was a bishop in a previous ward. This staff member asked the local stake president if it was okay for the LDS players on the team to have sacrament together every Sunday in the hotel, and he received clearance for it. This player said, “It was not three hours, but for those thirty minutes it was nice.” (23) Here we see an adapted schedule, more fitting for a cramped work day in the NFL; moreover, the acknowledgement of aid that was provided by setting aside half an hour for spiritual things is noteworthy. Another athlete described how he and his teammates, with permission from their bishops, would get together to listen to a general conference talk, offer prayers, read scriptures, and administer the sacrament every Sunday before they went to the stadium for their games. Having played in the league for more than five years, he held sacrament meetings with teammates for about four years. (28)

This player did not explain why he did this for only a portion of his career but it could have been a question of quantity. When there are enough LDS teammates to justify a separate sacrament meeting, either priesthood leaders are more inclined to consent or the athletes are more motivated to ask permission. It may be that once a player has the unique experience of having the sacrament in spite of his hectic NFL schedule, they desire to have that option open to them throughout their careers. They could then be more apt to request permission from their next priesthood leaders upon switching teams. And if enough players are requesting it, leaders could be more disposed to granting permission.

One experience shared by a player opposed this idea that a larger number of players made it more likely for priesthood leaders to grant permission for a special sacrament meeting. One year in particular, there were five LDS players on the same team and the local bishop gave them permission to have the sacrament on their own every Sunday. One of these players then changed
teams and was the only LDS player for the last three seasons of his NFL career. He continued this tradition and blessed and took the sacrament by himself. (25) It seems that each priesthood leader evaluates the situation individually and makes specific decisions as he deems fit. In the majority of the cases, players sang hymns, read scriptures or listened to General Conference talks, offered prayers, and then blessed and partook of the sacrament.

Evidently, in the cases where permission was granted to hold separate sacrament meetings, even partial church attendance was not an option. For example, one player mentioned that even though there were a couple other members on the team, “we wouldn’t seek out permission to perform our own sacrament meeting since we were at least able to go to church on a somewhat regular basis.” He quickly added that he would have looked into it if attendance was not a possibility. (19) Likewise, another player who had switched teams was able to join with his congregation for sacrament meeting, which started earlier in the day, and then head over to the stadium on time for the game, whereas the year before he attended a separate sacrament meeting in his hotel before every game. (29)

There are a number of cases where athletes either never thought about the possibility of having a personal sacrament meeting or simply did not ask. One player in particular recounted, “My first two years it was me and one other LDS guy on the team and we would try to do what we could but I had never really thought about talking to my Bishop and getting that type of thing going. My third year on I got permission from my local Bishop to do a morning meeting.” (25) He never explained what happened between years two and three to elicit his obtaining permission for a separate meeting, but he continued this practice throughout the remainder of his years in the NFL.
After switching teams during his career, a player frankly confessed that he and his teammate “never did even think about doing [their] own little sacrament.” (10) Another athlete stated that throughout his NFL career the sacrament was never important enough to him to elicit asking special permission to hold a separate sacrament meeting. He followed this statement by saying, “that is an option that would be an absolute must for me at this point.” (26) In comparison to the players who had permission to hold a separate Sunday sacrament meeting, there were those who were allowed to hold sacrament services on another day entirely. One player spoke of his experience:

For home games I was able to attend sacrament meeting because the games didn’t start until later. If I knew I wasn’t going to be able to attend sacrament meeting we would arrange it with the stake president and my Bishop that the sacrament was provided to me every Saturday or Friday before I left for my travels. We would have young men come in and somebody from the bishopric or my home teachers, under the direction of the Bishop, they would perform the sacrament for me. (30)

This player mentioned being able to attend sacrament meetings for his home games. Most often, game times as well as proximity to the chapel will determine the frequency of attendance for a given player. Later in his interview, he spoke of the spiritual nature of these special sacrament meetings where he would express gratitude and bear testimony to these young men of how much the sacrament meant to him. This player is still in the NFL and has done some variation of this model with three of the teams that he has been employed with so that he can partake of the sacrament on a regular basis. On one of his teams, the coaches authorized the use of a room in the hotel for the LDS services to be held, and someone would bring him and other teammates the sacrament. (30)

Another player had a very proactive bishop who said, “Hey, you’re going to take the sacrament on Tuesdays. I think it’s so important for your wife and your kids to see you taking the sacrament and it’s so critical for you to take the sacrament.” (2) Due to this approach, that is
exactly what happened. Every week he and his teammates would gather in his house and would have the sacrament on Tuesdays, being their day off in the NFL. In this respect, it would have been very much like the Sabbath, a day of rest, a day to cease from labors.

Interestingly, another athlete (who played in the league the longest out of my interviews) remembered being traded and playing for a short time on the same team as the player in the previous example. In his interview he said that the only time he ever took the sacrament away from church meetings was during the short time on the team with that player. (10). Another player recalled, “We had something very special, we were able to bless and pass the sacrament to our own families on Mondays. We were approved by the stake presidency to do that. I thought that was a really special thing.” (17)

For one athlete who played in the league for multiple years, there was only one year where he was able to join with four of his LDS teammates and hold a sacrament meeting together. They did this on Saturday evenings. (8) As he described it, “that was really a special time.” And surely it would have been special to share moments like these with teammates. Certainly having coworkers of the same religion would be a fortifying advantage in a league that has such an emphasis on and involvement in Sunday play.

Having more than one Latter-day Saint on a football team does not secure permission to hold personal worship services. Two individuals who played on different teams recalled asking their bishops for permission to hold a separate sacrament meeting. One of the bishops simply told the player to make it when he could (15), while the other bishop told his player to come in the morning like his teammate did. In the latter case, there was already a player who was making an effort to go to church every Sunday when game times allowed, so the bishop felt no need to make an exception. Rather, he encouraged the newcomer to follow the footsteps of the veteran
player. The most interesting thing about this situation was that he had recently been traded and in his previous ward the bishop had assigned the priests in the ward to take him the sacrament after each home game. (12) One difference was this new ward’s proximity to the stadium; being closer made it more accessible before games. An explanation is that the new bishop was stricter and did not want his ward members seeing NFL players receive special privileges. Maybe he simply wanted to find out if this new athlete would make a similar sacrifice to that of his teammate, another member of the ward.

This notion of devoting another time, even another day, to the taking of the sacrament is enhanced by what was shared in an interview. One of these athletes spoke fondly of participating in firesides the night before his college games: “It allowed me get in the spiritual frame of mind the night before, get away from the game of football, think about the things of most importance, and I really appreciated that.” Later, finding himself in the NFL and trying to replicate some kind of spiritual experience on Sundays, he would listen to music more appropriate for the Sabbath day, and do other things that were instilled in him from his mission. He said, “It gave me the feeling of things most important, which I was very appreciative of. But at the same time, game day is game day, and you have to be in a certain frame of mind.” (25) His former college teammate, who also went on to play in the NFL, tried to do spiritual things on Sunday but it was such a contrast to what their job entailed: “It is a violent and aggressive thing. So if we did a day game and then travel during the night then I would use that time after the game to read a talk or do spiritual things.” He then said that if he were to do it again, “I would utilize the day after the game instead.” (25)

Would that be such a terrible thing? Wanting to do spiritual things on a different day where your line of work was less conflicting? The same could be said about the BYU Jerusalem
center. To respect the religion and Jewish culture around them, they honor Saturday as their Sabbath, where they hold sacrament meetings, and worship services. An LDS branch in Egypt holds church on Fridays due to the predominance of Muslims and their honoring Friday as a holy day. After compiling these players’ Sabbath experiences, it is reasonable that the Church teaches plain and simple principles to church members as a whole, but allows those teachings to be adapted as necessary to differing circumstances worldwide.

**Church Callings While in the NFL**

Something I was very interested in was whether these players were able to hold church callings while working. Since their profession is most heavily involved in the fall, could they manage a church calling during their season? I inquired about callings both during the season and off-season and I received a variety of answers. In Table 2 (below) it describes the callings that each player had, and these are grouped into two categories: callings during the season and callings during the off-season, with one exception being a calling that one player had during the pre-season.

It is important to differentiate between these categories because of the nature of the NFL season, its length, its travel schedule, and its involvement on Sundays. Not all church callings require labor on the Sabbath. There are several different groups of church members who hold different events and activities on weekdays, these being organized and carried out by different members of the church, each with their own unique calling. It should be noted that many of these callings are embedded with some Sunday responsibilities in addition to those on weekdays. Players could still potentially hold a number of callings in the church notwithstanding their occupation.
Table 2. Church Callings During the Season and the Off-Season

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Description of Church Callings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ordinance worker in the temple.* Young men’s advisor.†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Young men’s.†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>With the youth.†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Young men’s.†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Young men’s.‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Young men’s.†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Executive secretary.‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Substitute seminary teacher.* Athletic coach, Deacon’s quorum advisor.†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>With the youth.* Sunday school teacher.†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Webelos leader.‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Ward missionary.†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Activities committee.* Primary teacher.†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Young men’s advisor.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Young men’s advisor.* Young men’s president.†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Ward missionary.* Young men’s advisor.†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Translator in sacrament meeting.* Sunday school teacher, Young men’s advisor.†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Cubmaster.‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Webelos leader.‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Seminary teacher.†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Sunday school teacher, Assistant scoutmaster.‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Elder’s quorum president. (Pre-season) Young men’s advisor, Ward missionary.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Gospel Doctrine teacher, Elder’s quorum presidency, Scoutmaster.* Young men’s.†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * indicates a calling during the NFL season. † indicates a calling during the off-season. Some players were more specific in describing their callings than others.

A church calling does not make a church member more or less righteous, worthy, or capable. In addition, the type of calling a person has should never be associated with a degree of faithfulness or faithlessness. The various types of callings allow people to serve in the church and contribute their unique talents, perspectives, and abilities. These NFL players would certainly have unique qualities to offer as they served the church in their local congregations.

A very interesting comment regarding a calling was that playing in the NFL is basically an “8 to 5” job and one could help out with activities in the evenings on weekdays. So why would priesthood leaders not give all of their players callings like that? It is impossible to assume
the needs and circumstances of a given church unit. Several players mentioned that their bishops did not want to give them callings that they would only hold for six months, since they might be moving after the season. It is true that many of these athletes lived in two places during the year. It could be a greater hassle to have an NFL player in a specific calling and get used to him, only to have him leave in January or February.

Hassle or not, there were two priesthood leaders who knew beforehand what they were doing when they called a player as the Elder’s quorum president. This calling is very arduous and requires a person to put in a lot of time and effort on Sundays as well as other days of the week. He said that they needed priesthood holders to fill callings and explained the way he accepted the calling: “I told them that I am willing to do it if you understand that during the season Sunday attendance will be lacking. But I will instruct and meet with my counselors as often as I can and make sure that the quorum and the ward are taken care of, and they said yes, that is what we think is right and that is what we want to do.” (29) After a short period of time this player was cut by the team he was playing for and picked up by another team, making it necessary to be released from his calling.

It is atypical for church members to request callings and it is most common for leaders to extend callings and then let the individual accept or decline. Maybe church leaders have been bothered by professional athletes and their irregular schedules and therefore extend to them fewer calls to serve in the ward. One such experience was related:

We went to our ward and our Bishop was indifferent for a while, not as warm and engaging as you’d like him to be. I remember him burning me and I thought, what’s going on here? I felt like he was questioning our commitment to the gospel. I remember finally one time when he was extending callings to us, and he admitted, because you are an NFL football player, I just figured you weren’t as devoted to the gospel as the rest of the people walking down the hallway here. My wife and I had to look him in the eyeballs and say, listen, yes we are doing this for a living, but please don’t ever question that again. And he became a very good friend to us. (21)
This could be a case where a bishop had a prior negative experience with someone in a similar situation and therefore treated this NFL player poorly. When confronted, the issue was resolved and they became good friends.

Some players did not specify if they held additional callings. It seems hard to believe that some of these players, most of which played multiple years in the NFL, would have held only one calling during their careers. Equally surprising is that eight players, a relatively high percentage, reported having no callings during their time in the NFL. They may have been thinking of their most recent year in the NFL when they answered the question. It is also quite possible that they were thinking of their rookie year, in which case it is quite likely that adjusting to their new career led their church leaders to avoid extending a calling during what was likely a stressful transition.

This seemed to be the case with a player who recounted how he and his wife told the bishop that they would be staying with this ward the whole year and to put them to work. Where previously he had a relatively less-demanding calling as a home teacher, the bishop soon called him as a gospel doctrine teacher, the scoutmaster, and as part of the elder’s quorum presidency. Referring to having these three callings at once, he good-humoredly said, “The Bishop has made up for all the years that I didn’t have a calling, and it has been awesome.” (30)

Whereas this previous player expressed an enthusiasm to serve in his church callings, making up as it were for lost time, an opposing viewpoint was conveyed by a player when I asked him if he ever held callings during his lengthy career. He said, “As for callings they knew it wasn’t our time or our place where we could be heavily involved in the community or the ward. They were just happy to have us there. If they had a chance to get us to speak they were delighted.” (7) He made it appear as though he had very little extra time to give to the ward and
was content instead to make it to church whenever possible. Again, church callings are not the measuring stick for faithfulness, and there are certainly various reasons for the level of involvement these athletes had in their wards while in the NFL. It should be noted here that it is not uncommon for church members to go for lengthy periods of time without holding a calling. The needs of the ward will often determine the capacity in which an individual serves, and for how long.

Among the thirty interviews, there were two players who taught early morning seminary. One was a substitute teacher during the season and the other was the only teacher during the off-season. It is very telling that priesthood leaders would assign NFL players to teach teenagers about the gospel. These priesthood leaders could have been more concerned with connecting to the youth and helping them have a positive daily experience with the scriptures than they were with the stigma of playing sports on Sundays. Even though these teachers might have been missing church on occasion, they were still deemed fit to teach these young people doctrines of the church. Another player found himself in a similar situation when he was called as the executive secretary to the bishop, who happened to be an avid sports fan. Again, it may have been perceived as odd to have someone in the NFL in a fairly high-profile calling, but it appears that this bishop was not concerned with his profession nor was he worried about his ability to serve in such a capacity.

Summary

Only a few topics regarding the NFL from a Latter-day Saint perspective have been discussed in this chapter. Receiving counsel from family, friends, and priesthood leaders proved helpful as these athletes prepared themselves for a career in professional football. Asking advice from those who cared most about them, from church leaders, and from athletes who had played
in the league was unquestionably among the best things they could have done to prepare spiritually for the NFL. Some of this advice may have been precisely what was needed for a player to keep his faith during his career in the NFL.

Church attendance varied dramatically among these players. While some did not attend at all, others attended on a fairly regular basis. It is noteworthy that so many received permission to hold a separate sacrament meeting service either on their own or with teammates. This type of meeting did not prove to be a tipping point for players to either keep or lose their faith, but was certainly regarded as a spiritual boost that they considered to be beneficial. While attending church meetings, especially the sacrament meeting, is important, it is one of many contributing factors to one’s religiosity. Therefore, if unable to attend church consistently, these players could still do other things to fill the gaps in their spiritual lives, and that is exactly what the majority of them did (as will be discussed in the next chapter).

Lastly, church callings were just as varied as church attendance. Several players held no callings during their entire NFL career, while others held several throughout. Again, the data does not show the degree to which church callings helped a player remain true to their faith, only that they did, in fact, contribute to the spiritual well-being of these players.
Chapter 3

Mediating Influences: Let Him Take Heed Lest He Fall

In the previous chapter I discussed the different aspects of the Sabbath day for Latter-day Saints, the most prevalent feature being that of missing church meetings on Sunday for a large portion of the year and how these players dealt with this absence on a spiritual level. The administration of the sacrament was also explained, both within the traditional type of church and an adapted meeting where players were authorized to meet privately at another time and/or location. Church callings (where members assist in teaching, organizing activities, and other responsibilities) were also discussed in an attempt to see if these players could serve others—especially giving time on Sundays—when so much of the day was reserved for their occupations.

Without discounting the importance of Sunday worship—including church attendance, partaking of the sacrament, and in general keeping the Sabbath day holy—it seems that there were other elements that came into play that made a greater impact on the spiritual well-being of these athletes than anything else. According to the interviews the three most influential factors were: (1) having spiritually strong wives who exemplified the standards of the Church; (2) being around upstanding teammates who shared similar values; and (3) the opportunity/responsibility to be positive role models to others.

During the interview process, two questions stood out as the determining factors for continued religious activity during and after the NFL. The two questions were “Overall, what was the hardest part of playing in the NFL?,” and, “What helped you most to maintain your spirituality?” It was very difficult to determine the most influential element to how these athletes dealt with the balance of faith and football. However, the two most frequent responses regarding

\[ D&C 58:15 \]
the difficulty in playing in the NFL was playing on Sundays and the unforgiving atmosphere. One response shows the close correspondence between the two: “The worst thing about being a Latter-day Saint in the NFL is you play football on Sunday every week for seven months basically, and that’s challenging. You’re not in church, you can’t make that up, it’s hard. The hardest thing about being a Latter-day Saint in the NFL is the atmosphere. It’s a very tough atmosphere.” (2)

Notice this player differentiates between “worst” and “hardest.” For him, the worst part of the NFL is Sunday play, while the hardest part is the atmosphere. His word choice is stimulating; his vocabulary allows a glimpse into this most crucial aspect of playing in the NFL. The word “worst” implies more of an annoyance or dislike, in this case, toward Sunday play; while the word “hardest” suggests that this facet of the NFL had more potential to tear down a person’s convictions about not only what they believe on a spiritual level, but also what activities they will or will not engage in. The atmosphere of the NFL could very well be more spiritually detrimental than playing on the Sabbath.

Thirteen players specifically mentioned that the environment was among the worst aspects of the NFL. Perhaps I should have expected these types of responses after reading in the Deseret News about Rodney Kimball, an athletic trainer at BYU for almost forty years. S. Gifford Nielsen who spent six years in the NFL recalled, “He taped my ankles every day and looked into my eyes, and he’d say with that little smile, ‘Go your way and sin no more. Remember the NFL is the tool of the devil, but you’ll be OK.’”72 Although Kimball never

worked in the NFL, maybe this was Nielsen’s way of suggesting that the comment from his former trainer had some truth to it.

One of the players who called the NFL “a very tough atmosphere” said that although it’s mostly professional in the locker room, “it’s not a missionary zone conference, it’s tough and you have to know who you are or else you’ll get torn up!” (2) This notion of having a solid foundation before entering the NFL was a common thread throughout many of the interviews. One player said the NFL “will eat you alive if you don’t have a strong testimony,” (5) and another said “if you’re not spiritually strong you could be easily influenced.” (7) So what was so hard about the environment of the NFL that required such spiritual preparation?

As with any profession, there are potential spiritual dangers all around; the NFL is certainly no exception and based on the interviews these dangers appeared far more pervasive. It became apparent that these players were frequently faced with temptations of all kinds. One player noted, “There’s a lot of money, a lot of opportunity, a lot of women, and you’re kind of above the law.” (22) These players did not need to go looking for temptations, it seemed as though they were surrounded by them, bombarded by them. One athlete said, “Parties happened everywhere, and you needed to make sure that you weren’t in those situations.” (17) Some situations were unavoidable; a player shared one such experience: “I remember sitting on the airplane, and all of their laptops pop open, and instantly they were watching rated-R movies and stuff, and I knew that if I look over there or there or there I could watch pornography right now. I remember having a headrest in every direction, so I could just block the screens with my headrests.” (21) Although he could not physically remove himself from the plane, he used something as simple as a headrest to avoid falling into the temptation at hand.
Being in a harsh environment would make it hard to keep yourself spiritually sharp, especially when you miss out on the spiritually uplifting moments that church members and meetings would facilitate. One athlete said that maintaining your standards was especially difficult in the NFL where there is so much peer pressure. He stated, “There is so much demand, and adulation, and sex, and drugs, and booze, and women, and pride, and every conceivable evil thing that you could imagine.” (27) Similarly, I was told, “the language was bad, the crudeness, the way they treat women, it would drive you insane.” (3) Another witness to this harsh atmosphere said, “In the pros, we would hang out as a group, and there were promiscuous, scandalous, slutty women trying to get the attention of some of the single guys, wanting to flirt and hang out and be around my teammates.” (29) Another spoke of the teasing his teammates would throw at him and the frequent invites to strip clubs he received. (1) Still another player simply referred to this conglomerate of temptations as “the demon ways that are glorified by this profession.” (20) As negative as those experiences are, my purpose is not to paint a bleak picture of this corporation, but rather to offer an honest look into this well-known, and seemingly public vocation.

Often I heard players speak about the locker room experience in the NFL. They shared with me that they had anticipated an experience different than college, and even a more vulgar environment. One player had a cousin who had played in the NFL and warned him, “There is a lot of stuff that is going to be a bad atmosphere.” (24) It was common to hear statements related to the following: “You are in the locker room and hear things day in and day out and there are things that linger in your mind.” (19) Along with being made fun of or tempted by teammates, another player mentioned the type of music that was played: “There were some shockers for me, like the first time I went to the weight room and the music that was on, I was like whoa! I
anticipated the songs that were on the radio to be edited, but I didn’t expect there to be a brand of music that I never even heard before, that you can’t edit because there wouldn’t be any music or any words. I wasn’t prepared for that.” (25)

There are situations that a player in the NFL cannot avoid. One could hardly circumvent the locker room for long as a professional football player. Association with teammates comes with the territory, and choosing those teammates is far beyond the ability of the players. Still, those associations will inevitably affect the lives and therefore the spirituality of Latter-day Saints in the NFL. As was mentioned earlier, one of these players talked about how life in the NFL was more difficult because of the inter-team relations. He remembered, “That is where I was at risk all of the time, not feeling as strong as I otherwise could have because now I was taking brotherhood from my teammates. I had great teammates, but it was nothing like being in an elder’s quorum.” (21) It should be emphasized that this player praised his teammates. But when someone replaces comradeship with church members with that of other coworkers, it will inherently bring some spiritual risks along with it.

Like any profession—or to be fair, any situation—there are temptations that could influence a member of the church to disregard or turn from the church’s teachings. This could imply then that the responsibility lies with the individual instead of the organization. And one such response illustrates this point: “I put myself in bad situations with the wrong people, not surrounding myself with the right people.” (23) It is apparent that he acknowledged that there were right people and wrong people and he chose to participate with the latter; thus he conscientiously chose activities that led him away from church activity for a time.

Among all the bad things that seem to be readily available in the NFL, I need to insert here that there were plenty of good teammates and experiences even in the locker room that these
players mentioned. Many of these experiences will be addressed later, but suffice it to say that there were plenty of opportunities for better or for worse in the NFL.

An interesting perspective was given to me in an interview when I was told “The NFL would throw some guys off the deep end. You got women throwing their breasts at you….” (4) And another added, “That environment can sway you either way.” (7) So why would the NFL throw some off the deep end while others would be faced with the same kinds of temptations and never stray from their beliefs and convictions?

How very titillating it is to learn about the challenges of these athletes who are faced on an almost daily basis with very strong temptations; these types of tests could lead them away from where they want to end up. What makes it even more fascinating is the fact that the overwhelming majority of these players maintained their standards throughout their time in the NFL. Giving these athletes proper credit for staying true to their religious while facing a myriad of temptations during their careers is certainly in order. Credit it not theirs alone; in their own experiences, they give a fair amount of recognition to their wives.

**Influence of Wives: It is not Good That the NFL Player Should be Alone**

The most common answer to the question, “What helped you most to maintain your spirituality?” was “my wife.” At the time that I interviewed these players, only one was unmarried. After analyzing the data, it is obvious that these LDS NFL players are benefitted from having a committed wife while they are in the league.

Over twenty years ago, the church issued a proclamation about the supreme importance and centrality of the family in God’s plan. They declared with unwavering certainty that, “marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the

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73 Genesis 2:18.
Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children.”⁷⁴ In fact, young adults are frequently counseled to date and have the faith necessary to marry.⁷⁵ In addition, numerous examples detailing the command to marry can be found in scriptures.⁷⁶

Moreover, on the church’s official website, under the gospel topic of “Marriage,” there is a quote from Russell M. Nelson, one of the Twelve Apostles, which says, “Marriage is the foundry for social order, the fountain of virtue, and the foundation for eternal exaltation. Marriage has been divinely designated as an eternal and everlasting covenant. Marriage is sanctified when it is cherished and honored in holiness. That union is not merely between husband and wife; it embraces a partnership with God.”⁷⁷ There are varying opinions of marriage at play in the world today, but it will not be misunderstood where the church and its leaders stand on the significance of a faith-filled, steadfast marriage, and what that can ultimately do for a couple—and for an athlete in the NFL.

When asked about overcoming challenges in the NFL, nineteen players responded that their wives were the biggest help and strength to their spiritual well-being. One additional player called his wife a “straight arrow” even though he didn’t specifically say she was the biggest help.

(3) When asked how he avoided some of the things that can overcome a Latter-day Saint in the NFL, one player emphatically responded, “I had been sealed in the new and everlasting covenant

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⁷⁵ The most recent reiteration of this counsel came in the April 2015 General Conference. See M. Russell Ballard, “The Greatest Generation of Young Adults,” Ensign or Liahona, May 2015, 69.

⁷⁶ A few examples include Genesis 2:24, D&C 25:13, and D&C 131:1-4. Though there are numerous other references to marriage in the scriptures, all three of these are thoroughly taught as scripture mastery passages to teenagers in seminary, showing that from a young age church members are taught these basic doctrines and expected to live by them throughout their lives.

in the temple, and I was worthy of a temple recommend, and I had a devoted companion, and a little girl. I would come home every day to a gospel centered home, to a woman who was devoted and committed to the gospel.” (21) Likewise someone said, “I went home every night to a wife that I had made sacred covenants with, children had been sealed to me, and so I had a way different outlook on life than many of my teammates.” (27)

It was significant to hear from these high-profile athletes that their wives were such a great strength to them spiritually. When asked how he stayed true to his beliefs, this player replied, “I had a wife that was there. I know a lot of guys that went out single who seem to have more of a tough time because they don’t have that support system. It’s easier to go out with the guys and get involved in things you shouldn’t.” (19) An additional experience that reassured me of the candor of these answers came when a player spoke about being sealed in the temple to his wife and children. He admitted, “I led too much of a single life and it put me away from the church,” and then added that it was his wife who helped him back into activity and back to the temple. (7)

Having someone there to bolster you in times of need is beneficial in any circumstance. Whether in a career, a religion, a degree, or something else, having others with similar spiritual goals and endeavors is undoubtedly helpful to one’s own faith and devotion. I often heard these players speak of their wives as their greatest support, and in the same sentence add that having LDS teammates was a great help. Having teammates who were LDS would certainly engender spiritual strength, but having a spouse, someone to come home to, someone who has an eternal connection with you, not an NFL contract with you, would indeed be the bigger contributor to staying away from temptations.
A handful of responses attest to a wife being a type of saving grace for her husband in the NFL. One player said, “She has been such a blessing and a help throughout this whole entire process. My wife has definitely been a rock in this entire thing.” (9) One who is still in the league said, “My wife by far…. She is my biggest help, the biggest blessing.” (30) Again, one said, “Being married while in the league has been great. It’s been amazing having a family.” (10) Another response was, “I married way above myself,” (12) as if admitting that without his wife he would have had a much harder time in the NFL. And still another added, “My wife was a huge reason to stay as straight as I could. My wife and kids.” He then followed this up by saying, “Luckily I was married. A lot of times my teammates would invite me to clubs, to strip clubs, and I would tell them that I was going home to my family.” (22)

It is very interesting to hear that this player’s wife and family were the reason for him not to go to strip clubs. It is apparent that these married players had an easier time saying no to such situations. These responses indicate that it was easier because they had a wife. One player responded briefly and clearly, “My wife, 100%.” (26) And to summarize the general feeling of these players, “The church is enhanced by having a temple marriage and marrying someone with a strong testimony. Especially going into the NFL, she was a good support system so I could hold on to my standards.” (19)

As mentioned earlier, only one of the thirty players interviewed was not married at the time of the interview. Interestingly enough, the players who got married during their careers credited their wives with the increase in their own spirituality. Speaking about the change from being single to married, one player said, “It gave me another foundation. And it put more responsibility on me to make sure I was doing the right things. It was much easier to be married. I think getting married was definitely a good thing for me.” (6) Another player said that being
married will keep you grounded. About his own experience he said, “It was good for me. It did turn for the better when I was married. Too many temptations come about when you’re single; you don’t have somebody there to come home to. Being married really helped to settle me and to keep me grounded and I think being married is always better.” (7)

It should not be implied that by simply being married, it would resolve any type of temptation or distraction from the life of the player—that would not be wholly true of the NFL or any other profession. Evidently, next to a wife, several of the players included reading scriptures as one of the great helps in their spiritual lives. Now you add a familiar element of the church to married life and it becomes a defense against the lures of the world. One player remarked that in order to maintain a spiritual lifestyle while not being able to regularly attend church, “I read the scriptures every day with my wife; we read them together. I listened to great music, so I’d listen to hymns driving to work. I needed that strength and protection going into the locker room so I’d do that every day.” (2) And another player echoed this sentiment by saying, “attending church, having a wife, and teammates who were LDS sure helped.” (19) One more example came when a player spoke very highly of his wife as well as a specific teammate who was LDS. These two people were a great support to him and helped him most while in the NFL. (17)

A certain player summarized it by saying this about his wife: “She was a big rock for me throughout my whole NFL experience. I think without her it would be tough, real tough. Overall it was my wife and trying to read scriptures every day, but mostly my wife…. I think overall it was okay just because my wife was there to keep me in check.” (15) In addition to this example, one player described the challenges he faced when he went out to training camp for his rookie year and was away from his wife and kids for weeks at a time. He said, “Spiritually I was kind
dead, I’m not gonna lie.” (24) He even attributed that partly to not going to church and not reading his scriptures.

When spiritual things are neglected, it causes strain on one’s life and the basics need to be reinstated, or in the case of an NFL player who cannot go to church for months at a time, other basic practices need to be brought to the forefront and emphasized even more. In this player’s experience he did just that: “We tried to say morning prayers and night prayers either over the phone or together because I knew I lacked that, I needed it. My first year was hard. It was a struggle for me. Spiritually it was a challenge.” (24) Admittedly, a number of these players continue to work on their spiritual well-being, struggling a bit during each season and improving during the off-season. Emphasizing different aspects of the gospel for different times of the year could prove difficult, but it appears that it can be effective in preserving faith and devotion. Additionally, this same player credited his wife’s influence by saying, “My wife was a big factor in my spirituality. She would try to make me happy and keep me spiritually going.” (24)

A certain athlete gave credit to his wife for keeping their church activity as one of their priorities. He said simply, “I married right.” (17) Maintaining motivation appears to be much more manageable when paired with someone who is at least equally committed to your spirituality as you are. One who played in the league for several years gave credit to his wife by saying, “She made sure we had the gospel in our home and that we were doing all the other things,” (8) and he included family home evening as one of the things that helped their young family stay close to the church.

Two players mused how they had developed a bad habit of going out to eat on Sundays. They never mentioned if this was a habit that started in the NFL or at some other point, but they both credited their wives as the reason for stopping the practice. One of them said, “Every now
and then I have the bad habit of, ‘family is in town, let’s go.’ And she would say, ‘you can go but I’m not.’ And then I would say, ‘no I’m not either. Just kidding. Just testing you!’” (5)

Describing how he gained a witness of the Sabbath and why he should keep it holy, he said that it largely hinged on the testimony of his wife. The second player said, “My wife has been a very good example of believing in the gospel. She was a good example, but I thought, shoot, let’s go eat out. But she wouldn’t budge, she was the one that followed to the T.” (18)

Other Positive Influences

Being married in the NFL does in fact seem to be an influencing factor to how closely a player will adhere to his spiritual convictions. Even when not being able to go to church for months at a time, or at least not being able to attend regularly, these players, together with their families, find other avenues to help maintain their levels of spirituality. And it was not necessarily the influence of their teammates that caused trouble in their lives. There were times, in spite of the atmosphere, that they excelled in their own right. One such example is highlighted by a current player who said,

I just don’t see anything about being with my teammates as a challenge. People always ask me if it’s hard to live my standards in the environment that I’m in. I feel like no, not at all. What would be hard is to not have my standards, or not have the gospel in my environment. That’s what I think would be hard. I see people and the lives they live with problems and struggles that they go through and I think that if they have the gospel it would be so much easier. So people always ask if it’s hard to live the gospel in a given situation and it’s the exact opposite, that’s what makes it so much easier for me to live. (30)

It is impressive to hear how this individual uses his experience in the NFL as motivation for sticking to his beliefs.

It may be that some of these athletes were more fortunate than others and found themselves on teams that were more mature. One player compared the NFL to his years in
college, and how having different types of teammates was a big factor in making good or bad choices. He said,

> You will find knuckleheads and good guys. I made friends with good guys. It was almost easier in the NFL than it was in college because there were more married guys in the NFL, who had matured and grown up, they were settling down and getting ready for real life. Whereas in college people were trying to live the college life and wanted to get drunk and meet girls and do stupid stuff. And there are still guys like that in the league who haven’t grown up and just aren’t ready in their life to do that. But you can find people who share your standards and respect you for that. You don’t have to bend it to some stereotype and do something that you think you need to do because you are in the NFL. (29)

Similar to teammates, sometimes there is no option of choosing co-workers, but despite those around them, every individual must decide for themselves, and then stick to that, or else someone else may decide in their stead, and it could be different from what they ultimately desire.

Another player said “Being LDS in the NFL has never been difficult for me. I have never partied before.” (28) You can almost sense that a player who is now an adult and has come this far without giving in to certain enticements in their life would not even have to think twice about a questionable activity available to them in the NFL. These types of enticements may be appealing to some, perhaps more so given their availability to these athletes, but someone who played for more than five years described some of his reasons for adhering to church standards:

> “I just looked around the locker room, and I saw some of my teammates and how they were living and how unhappy they were.” (27) When compared to the misery of some of his teammates, the standards of the gospel made life enjoyable for this player, and it made the task of avoiding these temptations and enticements much easier.

**Blessings That Come From the NFL**

Before I conducted these interviews, I would have said that two good things are possible from a career in the NFL: being a good representative of what church members are like, and a
nice paycheck. It may have been because I coveted the latter, but I did notice several times that these players mentioned how good it was to play in the NFL so as to be financially set for a long time. Two players specifically mentioned being able to help out their parents with paying off bills once they made it to the league.

Money aside, there were six interviews that I conducted where players referred to Steve Young in various contexts. They mentioned how he had influenced them to play in the NFL, to speak up about their personal beliefs, and to make sure and model appropriate church behavior because others knew Mormons were supposed to abstain from certain things and adhere to others. Certainly there are members of the church from all around the league who model good and bad behavior, but it was notable that so many referenced Steve Young’s positive influence; and in reality, all of these players are, in their own right, a “Steve Young” to somebody. They may be the only member of the church that someone has ever met, and therefore, their influence can be a powerful example for others.

Similar to Steve Young being well-known for his religious beliefs and practices, Chad Lewis, who played in the NFL for nine seasons, shared a story in his book *Surround Yourself with Greatness* that illustrates this principle that others are watching you and are aware of your actions. While Chad was playing for the Philadelphia Eagles, he was asked by a member of the coaching staff if he was a “Marmon.” He laughed at the pronunciation and replied, “Yeah, I’m a Marmon!” Chad was then asked if he was a good Marmon, if he smoked or drank, to which he replied that he did not. Then the man concluded, “Yeah, you a good Marmon!”

I did not ask anyone a specific question on the topic, yet a few players shared experiences about how the NFL was a blessing to them and their families. Two stories were told that have

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78 Chad Lewis, *Surround Yourself with Greatness* (Salt Lake City, UT: Shadow Mountain, 2009), 180–181.
meaningful lessons to be learned. The first player shared how he knew the NFL was a good place for him and his family to be:

I know the Lord placed us in positions where he needed us through football. Going into my third year we were cut by [NFL team]. So we made a commitment to go to the temple on a weekly basis and our prayers were more fervent. We were trying to do everything to get back in because we felt like there were great opportunities for us as a family, financially, and we also made the commitment to be better missionaries if we were ever out in the mission field again. So when [NFL team] picked us up we rented a little apartment. I was still trying to make the team. A little family from the Coast Guard moved in underneath us. The Lord put us together with them. [My wife] introduced them to the church through her awesome ways and the first year we introduced them to the missionaries, and started having Book of Mormon studies with the ward. Throughout the season we invited them to games, and were just really good friends. Then for a few months we came home to [home state] and they sent us a text asking when we were coming back and we told him sometime in March. They said, good, we want to invite you to our baptism on March 30. So we got to be a part of their baptism. I was invited to confirm them. So we continued being friends, and we went through another season being friends, and again in January came back to [home state]. We got another text asking when we were coming back. We told them, and they said, we want you to take us through the temple. So we got to see this family go from where they were before to being sealed to their daughter and they are in [state] now and he is the elder’s quorum president and she is in the young women’s. They have since had two more kids in the covenant. The Lord placed us together and it was football that he used. Otherwise we would have never crossed this family’s path, never. (12)

He mentioned a feeling that they had more to offer “in the mission field.” This terminology often refers to areas of the world where the church is relatively small in number, away from certain parts of the western United States. With an increased commitment to be close to the Lord, they were picked up by a team and in a position to share the gospel. He recognized that the only reason they were able to befriend this family was because of the location of his job. Most importantly, he acknowledged that it was the Lord behind all of this, and he had used football to allow them to get to know this family.

For the previously mentioned athlete and the athlete in the following example, being professional football players turned out to be advantageous in spreading the gospel and teaching others about the church. Their platform of being in a well-favored profession was valuable in
sharing their personal beliefs. This next illustration came when a player was explaining what the NFL had done for him personally. In addition to enjoying the Bible study groups that were offered by his team, he also said, “It has helped me, I guess, do missionary work. One of my teammates in [state] actually got baptized when I was out there. It was really cool to see something like that happen. I’m not saying it was because of me or anything like that, but to have some sort of part in that was cool.” (9)

One player shared a similar testimonial as that of the first player who mentioned that the Lord had placed him in a situation to bless someone else. Although a bit more general, he said, “I’ve had so many doors opened that never would’ve been if I wasn’t an NFL player. I know that’s from a sharing the gospel standpoint just as much as anything else as well.” (30) Many of these athletes shared how often they were invited to speak to large groups of church members, especially the youth, and this player may be referring to that type of opportunity. Specifics aside, he was a witness of doors being opened simply because he was an NFL player and in a position to do some good for the church.

The opposite is true as well; examples go both ways. Where one can be a positive example for the church, another could have a detrimental effect on others, all by the way they conduct themselves. One player lamented how his personal choices reflected poorly on the church. He said, “I think the one thing that hurt my feelings more than anything was to hear some of my teammate’s reactions when they heard that I was a member of the church. ‘You’re a Mormon?’ In my heart it hurt. I wasn’t doing what I was supposed to be doing.” (23)

Another way that these players felt blessed by playing in the NFL was by having their testimonies strengthened. It was as if they were going out as missionaries, either for the first or second time, and their convictions were being tested as they found themselves in the world.
Without nametags, but surely standing out, they needed to make sure that they could live their standards regardless of the atmosphere. This ranges from being faithful to their spouse, living the church’s law of health known as the Word of Wisdom (which prohibits alcohol, drugs, and other substances), and keeping the Sabbath day holy (which in their case meant determining to what degree the Sabbath would play a part in their lives). Speaking of this latter point, one player said, “I didn’t love the Sabbath, I didn’t crave it until Sundays weren’t available to me as they were to the rank-and-file of the church. It wasn’t until then that I craved the sacrament, I craved the sacrament.” (13)

Several of these athletes shared that when their faith was tested, they were able to see just what that faith meant to them. That does not imply that these LDS NFL players need to have failed the test to solidify their stance, nor do they need to abandon their traditions to find out that they indeed believe in the teachings of Jesus Christ as found in their very own church.

A particularly interesting facet of the church that is difficult for many is that of tithing—paying ten percent of one’s income to the church. The required percentage stays constant regardless of the profession of a given church member. A sixteen year old working her first job would give ten percent of her income, just as a starter on an NFL team would give ten percent of his income. NFL players typically have a much higher income than the average member of the Church and it might be perceived that paying tithing on a higher income would be more difficult. For one athlete however—the only athlete that mentioned anything about tithing—being able to pay tithing was a safeguard in his life. When asked what helped him maintain spirituality throughout his career, he responded:

Tithing. I think being able to pay tithing is kind of like having a special guardian angel watching over you. I have been blessed so much. … I feel like I have definitely been blessed and have angels watching over me. Even if something did happen I feel like it would be okay. I have been so blessed to play a kids game as an adult. Having a good
group around you, like my financial planners, and paying tithing, I think is huge. I think a lot of people don’t see it that way ... (28)

For Latter-day Saints, the principle of tithing is a commandment with spiritual as well as temporal ramifications. For this player, he experienced both, and continues to excel in his profession and his own personal beliefs.

**Been There, Done That: Advice to Future LDS NFL Players**

At the end of every interview I asked, “What advice or counsel would you give a Latter-day Saint going into the NFL?” Without any prompting on my part, the answers seemed to transform and take on more personal tones, often ending up as an experience that their own child had while trying to decide if they should play on Sundays. It was fascinating to hear what these players had to say, not only for future NFL players, but also for anyone who has grappled with the decision of Sunday play.

As one might guess, these players are often asked if they think it is acceptable for parents to let their child play sports on Sundays. Almost every single answer to this question involved some element of prayer, doing what is best for them, and seeking the Lord’s will. One surprisingly straight-forward answer I heard was, “I tell them all the time that I never played on Sundays growing up until I got into the NFL…. I never did anything on Sundays, I still made it this far.” (28) This player makes a strong case that young athletes do not in reality need to play on Sundays before the professional level. The argument may be that things have surely changed in the years since this athlete played competitive sports. However, it seems totally feasible for an athlete, especially one who plays football (which in high school and college is heavily played on days other than Sundays), to make it to the NFL without ever having played on Sundays.

Out of the thirty interviews, only four players responded with a definitive “yes” that a Latter-day Saint should pursue a career in the NFL. That is not to say that twenty-six players
advised against playing in the NFL, and in fact the majority of the responses are favorable towards a future in the NFL. Perhaps it was the wording of the question that garnered this type of counsel. If the player was “going into the NFL,” in other words, the prospective athlete is headed there no matter what, then their advice would be what to watch out for and how to be prepared for some of the pitfalls.

First, a look at the four affirmative responses and what counsel accompanied them. The first piece of counsel is very proactive and positive: “Go. Play. Have a great time. Take advantage of every opportunity. Build relationships with people, and rise up and be a man of God. If you will do that, then there will be opportunities for you to have a great impact on people around you.” (21) The second is as encouraging as the first: “Go full go. Don’t second guess yourself. Don’t settle for good, always go for the best.” (28) The third contains some advice similar to that of the first: “I would tell them to do it. It’s a great opportunity to be financially set the rest of your life, it’s what you’ve been working for your whole life. It would be a chance for you to be an example to people, members and nonmembers. Hopefully good things would come from other people watching you. Setting a good example for people.” (6) And finally the fourth response, which has a very unique insight embedded in it: “I would say go for it, holding to your standards … I don’t think the NFL will take a person who wants to stay strong in the church and turn them away. I think that would’ve happened either way. I would warn them about some of the things they will see here, but that’s just life, part of being in the world. I would tell them to go for it and good luck.” (19)

Two of the four comments mentioned being positive examples to others. This is clearly a major theme that these players are stressing, and the reason is most likely because they have been witnesses of this in their own lives. In a way, they are passing on this advice to safeguard
the church and any future LDS NFL players, because as long as a player exemplifies church standards, there is nothing to worry about. The last player shared something that is interesting. He opined that the NFL does not have the power, influence, or ability to take a person who is committed to their standards and their faith and turn them from that course of action. On the contrary, and this has been mentioned earlier, if one is not set in their convictions, the NFL will take advantage of them spiritually; as another player reiterated by saying, “Be firm in your foundation, because if you go into the NFL and you have any doubt, it will eat you alive.” (5)

How important it must be for anyone considering a career in professional sports to solidify their standards, and to etch their values in the fleshy tables of their hearts (2 Corinthians 3:3).

Returning to the theme of being an example, there were several other pieces of advice that furthered this idea. One player said, “You have to stay close to the Lord, because he can use you for good. But he can’t use you if you’re choosing the other way. If you know that and you have a firm testimony and you’re willing to pay the price, it’s going to be a great blessing in your life and maybe thousands of other people’s lives as well.” (1) He certainly had the big picture in mind with this advice. Addressing the Sunday debate, one counseled, “If your heart is good and you are a good person and your number one priority is your family and God, then I don’t think it’s an issue at all. If anything I think you can be a missionary and an example for the church.” (3) This player said that he would ask anyone going into the NFL, “What is your objective here? Why are you doing this?” (3) The counsel given by these NFL players overwhelmingly stress the importance of having your heart in the right place, and if your heart is in the right place, then God will help you know if the NFL is the career in which he wants you. An athlete put it this way, “As long as you got your priorities right, seek the counsel of the Lord, then you’ll be where you need to be.” (30)
Several more responses put emphasis on the need for individuals to take the matter to the Lord for confirmation. An athlete said, “Ultimately it has to be a decision that they make with the Lord.... You have to stay true to your covenants and do your best to always have a place in your life for the Savior and for the church.” (12) Similarly another said, “It’s between you and the Lord. You need to pray about it. You need to see if it’s right for you. It’s not right for everybody.” (11) This tidbit is most compelling because it suggests that some players could ask the Lord for his approval on an NFL career and not receive an affirming response. It is important for anyone seeking an answer from God to be in tune with the way God frequently answers questions—through his Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is God’s most frequently used messenger, and as one receives promptings or thoughts in their mind and heart, they can know that it is the spirit speaking to them (D&C 8:2). Referring to this type of communication, a player said, “You stay as close as you can to the Spirit. You try and make the best decision you can for yourself and your family, and get counsel from your church leaders; that’s the best advice I can give.” (2) Another player prompted, “Is that where you feel you should go? … If you are going to go against “the grain” of the church or the teachings, the general counsel, the spirit better be telling you and you better be darn sure that that is where you should be going.” (4) Here, he unapologetically admits that playing on Sunday is against the general counsel of the church. But within his response is a caveat, that there are people whom the spirit can guide into just such a path. Another honest response came from a player who said, “We always had to tell people that it was up to them and their family and Heavenly Father. We shouldn’t judge from the outside what people are going through and their decisions. It’s not easy for a lot of people to make that decision one way or the other. You’re giving up something. Make the decision and then do your best at it either way.” (8)
The athlete in this last example referred to this decision as a difficult one, and that something would be given up regardless of the choice made. He may have meant that by playing in the NFL, one would be giving up the ease of keeping the Sabbath day holy. When it comes to “weekday” careers and other careers that require working on Sundays, professional sports included, there must be a conscious decision made to keep the Sabbath day holy; it can be just as easy to disregard the Sabbath when you have that day off.

Important counsel from these men, who some set on a very high pedestal, was that one’s faith in God is worth much more than anything else. Two such responses stood out. One said, “If you have a testimony then hold true to it, because there are a lot of things that aren’t lasting. But your testimony and your beliefs in God and Jesus are forever. Don’t compromise. Don’t put yourself in any situations where you would hurt your testimony or put you in a standing where you don’t want to be.” (17) Likewise, the other response said, “Focus on your testimony, know where you stand with the church, and pay attention to it. If you feel like it’s declining, or you feel like you’re losing it, then you need to take the proper steps to get it back. Because it is more important than an NFL career.” (26) Here are two very successful men who were financially well off and spent a good amount of time in the spotlight, affirming that if you are not right with God, then you are wrong with everything else. They advised others to hold on to things that last; a personal testimony in God and Jesus Christ are more lasting than an NFL career. Notice that neither said that someone has to pick one over the other. According to them, playing in the NFL and adhering to spiritual convictions can be done simultaneously.

One of the most relevant themes I came across was to show your true colors all of the time. That meant that if one claims to be a Mormon, then they would act like a Mormon on and off the field; conversely, if they wish not to represent the Church, they simply need to be up front
about it. One player said, “You can’t say that when I go play football that I will switch off and be a part-time Mormon, and then on Sunday during church be Mormon again.” He then added, “You need to go in with a belief and not contradict yourself, not pretend that you can drink one day or smoke with the fellows one day and then one day be speaking from the pulpit or passing the sacrament. … Don’t be a hypocrite. If you follow who you are the way it should be, everything will work out.” (18) Contradicting yourself implies that you have declared something about your lifestyle or your beliefs. It just may be that people care less about what you stand for, as long as you stand for something and maintain that position no matter the situation. Alike to this player’s advice, another said, “Decide who you are and live it. … But you decide before how you want to be and hopefully you’ll have integrity to be honest with yourself. … What do you want to be? Because you’re going to have every chance in the world to not be that person.” (10) It is curious that this player remarked that someone would have every chance to go against his principles while in the NFL. His statement agrees with what has been stated so many times in this chapter, that this type of environment is home to more temptations than most. On the other hand, one player said, “There is plenty of opportunity to maintain the life you want as well as enjoying playing football as a job.” (16) Given this example, it is clear that you do not have to choose one over the other; there is ample room for living your religion in the NFL.

“Don’t be a member half the time” said another player, “don’t change who you are just because you are in the NFL, don’t adapt to the NFL. There are enough crazy, weird personalities in the NFL that the NFL accommodates and adapts to, the NFL can accommodate you as a member of the Church.” He concluded by advising, “If you are living the standards and being righteous, you will find other guys who are doing that themselves and you will gravitate toward each other.” (29) How fascinating it is for a player to recognize that the NFL already has an
assortment of “crazy, weird personalities.” It should, therefore, be more than acceptable for a member of the church to live in a “peculiar” way and not conform to how others are acting (See Exodus 19:5).

A simple theme of humility was repeated a few times in the interviews. These players who feel on top of the world expressed the importance to acknowledge that nobody gets to that spot by his own efforts. One player said it this way, “If you can be humble and just remember to remember who you are and what you represent you can do whatever, you can play as long as you want. … The blessings that Heavenly Father has for you can be taken away as fast as they were given, if you’re obedient or disobedient.” (23) This advice takes on more significance knowing that this player is speaking from personal experience more so than most; he is living proof that it can all be quickly taken away if you are ungrateful. He lamented that his career was cut short because he took the blessing of playing in the NFL for granted. One more player with similar counsel said, “Remember that there is a higher purpose for where you are going and how you got there and why you’re there. … just remember where your talents come from and always acknowledge that in everything you do.” (9) One more counseled, “I would just tell them to remember where they came from. The reason they are where they are today is because of their God-given talents. They were helped along the way.” (22) Unmistakably, these players have a specific set of talents that are extraordinary and unique, but they counsel other such athletes to remember that “The Lord gave, and the Lord [can take] away” (Job 1:21).

Since wives have been discussed so comprehensively in this chapter, it is fitting to end with a piece of advice regarding the wives of future NFL players. One of these players, when asked what counsel he had, said that when he was preparing to enter the league he wished he would have asked more questions specific to his wife. He said,
The other person it affects is your wife. I asked a lot of questions like, what did you do on game day or how did you handle this? But I didn’t really think to ask, what can me and my wife be doing? Or what about her, when she is bombarded with questions from other players’ wives? My wife didn’t have a missionary experience while I was on my mission, so that was a big missionary experience for her having all the questions fired at her from the wives. She would come home and tell me that she got asked a lot of questions. Had I talked to more people about those questions I might have been able to prepare her to let her know how it would be. (25)

This wife seemed very capable of addressing questions about her religious beliefs, but would have welcomed some warning about the types of things she would deal with while spending time with the other wives.

**Summary**

Some of the more profound issues that an LDS NFL player faces have been explored in this chapter. These players indicate that a Latter-day Saint must have a heightened awareness as he enters a profession with multiple pitfalls. The spiritual hazards that can be prevalent in professional sports need not affect anyone who conscientiously chooses not to participate in those kinds of things. It is impossible to escape all the temptations that can cause spiritual distress in one’s life, but the majority of these athletes stood strong and made it through their careers with their faith and devotion intact. Again, this does not imply that they were exempt from challenges and trials, but that they overcame them.

However difficult it may be to distinguish the one thing that helped a member of the Church stay true to their religious standards in the NFL, many of these players stated how crucial it was to have a faithful, devoted wife. Some of the many explanations given for why it was advantageous to be married while in the league are as follows: someone to come home to; the main reason not to go out and party with teammates; the person who encourages doing the little things to spiritually stay on track. While it was shown that being married was not an immunity factor for these players and their tempting environment, it certainly helped.
It is obvious that these players consider themselves extremely blessed because of their time in the NFL. Financial stability ranked among the biggest reasons, but most notable was the blessing of standing out and being a positive example to those around them. Being able to share the gospel to people who never would have heard it otherwise was among the greatest perks of their profession.

Finally, for somebody going into any kind of profession, especially one which requires heavy Sunday participation, the advice from these athletes is vital. They counseled others to remember their commitments to God, to the church, and to themselves. Regarding Sunday play, the majority felt that it was acceptable because this was how they provided for their family and earned an income; they would recommend this career to others as long as they took the appropriate precautions. While some had a few regrets about how their careers affected their families, there were no athletes who said they would change their decision to play in the NFL; if anything, the negative factors were outweighed by the positive.
Chapter 4

Conclusion

In this study I set out to explore some of the many facets of sports and religion that would be most relevant to Latter-day Saints. In partially examining the spiritual lifestyles of thirty professional football players, there have been some discoveries that can help church members address this controversial topic of Sunday play. The Sabbath element in this study is important because it sheds light on the difficulty of maintaining spiritual standards while having to dedicate so much time on Sundays to one’s profession. The key factor in all of this was the data collected from the thirty Latter-day Saints who have played in the NFL. These findings could benefit those trying to decide if they should engage in either sporting events on Sundays or a career which includes Sunday work hours.

In Chapter one, the details of this study, along with the data surrounding the interview process were presented. The Sabbath day from the creation until the current day was briefly discussed, how it has changed over the years, and how, today, the majority of the Christian world honors Sunday as the Sabbath day. The modern interpretation of the Sabbath by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was explained in great detail, along with how sports have been incorporated into the “Sunday play” discussion. Highlighted in chapter one is how leaders from the Church emphasize stories of athletes who chose not to participate in Sunday sporting events. An overview was also given on working on the Sabbath, showing that while youth are encouraged to look for jobs which do not require working on Sundays, similar counsel is seemingly absent when addressed to adults.

In Chapter two, the discussion began with the various levels of counsel that these players received from family, friends, and ecclesiastical leaders. This counsel mainly dealt with the
physical aspect of playing in the NFL and the spiritual aspect of playing on Sundays. Relatively few priesthood leaders had anything negative to say about the NFL as a career choice; those who gave cautions were rather optimistic of the good that could be done from the platform of the NFL. Sacrament meeting was explained and broken down into normal Sunday reunions and unique meetings away from the chapel. Several of these athletes received special permission to partake of the sacrament at another time and place. Church callings were described, and perhaps due to confusion in the interview process, a surprisingly low number of athletes held church callings during their NFL careers.

Chapter three highlighted the “lowlights” of the NFL, meaning the harsh environment and tempting atmosphere. Mentioned in depth was the importance of wives for these LDS athletes. Faithful, active wives had more of an impact on the spiritual well-being of these players than anything else! Having teammates who were LDS was also beneficial in maintaining religious standards. The two most apparent blessings of playing in the NFL were financial welfare and sharing the gospel with others. Players felt that being righteous examples for the church outweighed any drawback from playing on Sundays. They were optimistic towards others playing in the NFL as long as they took the appropriate spiritual precautions and maintained the standards of the church.

Can You Play in the NFL and be a Faithful, Active Latter-day Saint?

There has been a theme throughout this study concerning the NFL as an appropriate corporation for which to work. The matter is a difficult one to settle, and this thesis will leave things far from being resolved. One interview surrounding this topic stood out because of the openness with which the player spoke. He said,

My name will never be preached over the General Conference pulpit because I chose to play on Sunday. I understand that. There are good people who decide to play on Sundays.
I don’t pretend to be a doctor, or those people who have to work on Sunday, or a policeman or fireman, one of those occupations. But that is how I chose to provide for my family and I think the Lord supported me in that. He really did. The Lord supported me in how I chose to provide for my family. I know that he truly feels that my family is important. He supported me in that and put us in a place to be successful and meet other people and bring other people to church. (12)

It was somewhat surprising to hear him categorize his own profession outside the realms of those who “have to work on Sunday.” While it is true that the NFL is not a necessity, it is in fact a valid way to make a living. Then who has the final say in which jobs are fit for the Sabbath? Ultimately, it will not be the author of this thesis, but He whose Sabbath it really is.

It seems clear that the NFL is not going anywhere. If anything, it seems to be maintaining or possibly even improving its hold on society. One could argue that church members should not play in the NFL so as to make a statement that they will not lower their standards and contribute to a corporation that is intent on taking over the Sabbath of the Lord (they even succeeded in renaming the first Sunday of every February). This thesis is not intended to encourage people to let go of their convictions of the Sabbath day simply because it would be hopeless to fight against an organization as seemingly dominant as the NFL. There are at least twenty-seven LDS athletes who have played in the NFL and held strong to their beliefs. It can clearly be done.

There were several quotations from Chapter one suggesting that the overall position of the Church is against playing sports on Sundays, at least as far as youth are concerned. Almost every example given in General Conference concerns a young athlete trying to decide if he should play in a game on Sunday. Many examples ended with youth choosing not to play the game, and included some form of praise for their decision. The instance where the young girl chose to play ended with her feeling awful about her decision; she vowed never to play a game on Sunday again. A similar event happened with a child of one of the players I interviewed. He shared the following experience:
We let one of my boys make the choice to play in a game on Sunday. He chose to play. The only caveat was that he could play if he chose to and after the game we would come home and talk about it and he would tell us how he felt. We wanted to hear from him what it felt like to play on Sunday. At the end of the evening he came to us and just cried, “Daddy I don’t know what it was but it just didn’t feel right.” I explained to him that it doesn’t feel right because when you do things that aren’t what you’re supposed to be doing, nothing ever feels right. Feeling the Spirit is important, but feeling the absence of it is just as important. He never played another Sunday game after that by his own choosing. He had an early experience with the Sabbath. Some of the parents in my ward asked why we were doing that, letting him play on Sunday. I think it’s because I didn’t have a choice when I was growing up, I didn’t have ownership of the Sabbath because we were just made to. I wanted this boy to have ownership of it, because the earlier you can own something the more inclined we are to have stewardship over it. (13)

One may take the liberty to question the position of this father because he himself was playing on Sundays. There is a distinction between youth sports and a professional career. Again, it may seem unfair to distinguish between the two, but the data suggests that if a church member can get their spiritual foundation set before major opposition occurs, they will be better prepared to maintain their religious devotion. This does not, however, suggest that playing on Sundays will lead to poor choices later in life. In fact, it supports the idea that youth who choose not to play on Sundays are spiritually mature enough to make other big decisions that help keep them faithful to the standards of the Church.

One player explained that the spiritual testing he went through in the NFL made him a stronger member of the Church and more certain of his convictions and faith. I then asked him if that was what helped him the most to stay steadfast. His response was very powerful. He said, “I think it was before. I don’t think something during will make you remain steadfast. It’s, ‘hey, what kind of roots do you have before the wind blows? What are you built on before?’” (25) This is captivating because it puts a large amount of responsibility on the athlete prior to ever entering the NFL. If they want to stay committed to the gospel, they need to fortify themselves beforehand. This is further supported by the fact that the church specifically declares that sports
should not be played on Sundays in only three publications: *For the Strength of Youth*, *Principles of the Gospel*, and *Preach my Gospel*. In these publications, the Church is placing emphasis on the youth and new converts by helping them solidify their spiritual convictions. This study suggests that if church members can do this while they are young, they will be more apt to remain in the Church and follow gospel teachings.

In fact, one of the athletes mentioned something akin to this idea. While describing how he believed the world needs more good examples in the spotlight, he said, “So I knew that I could be a powerful example of goodness if I just remained steadfast to the lessons I have learned as a kid.” (27) If church members learn these lessons well while they are young, there is a greater chance that they will follow them when they are older. Therefore, if a prospective NFL player is spiritually sharp with his values and religious practices in line with church standards, he is more likely to stay true to those things throughout his career in the NFL.

Not to be misunderstood, these findings are not suggesting that church members need only fortify themselves until they choose a career, at which point they can rely on their past religious experiences to carry them through the difficult times. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stresses that all members continuously strive to keep their faith burning bright. In the most recent General Conference, President Thomas S. Monson testified, “I am confident that each of us has as his ultimate goal life everlasting in the presence of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. It is imperative, therefore, for us to make choices throughout our lives that will lead us to this great goal.”79 His counsel aligns with these players’ observations: good choices are to be made not only when we are young, but for the remainder of our lives.

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In the same General Conference talk, President Monson included specific counsel regarding the young men in a general priesthood meeting. He said, “Although there is no time in our lives when we are exempt from temptation, you young men are at an age when you may be particularly vulnerable.” The prophet acknowledged that youth face more adversity through temptations during this period of their lives. This study reinforces teachings that gospel principles need to be absorbed and internalized early on in a person’s life, so that they will be able to weather the storms that will come later. The Lord told the early Saints: “gird up your loins, and take upon you my whole armor, that ye may be able to withstand the evil day, having done all, that ye may be able to stand” (D&C 27:15). Putting on the “armor of God” is a matter of discussion for all church members, regardless of profession. Spiritual storms will affect everyone, and while winds often blow stronger in the NFL, church members everywhere need to gird up their loins “that [they] may be able to stand.”

Main Findings

These interviews indicate that there are certain individuals who simply will not bend to outside influences regardless of the conditions. One of the athletes I interviewed had a very proactive attitude about being a positive example and living the standards of the gospel. He related an experience, “I just talked to my buddy [name]. He is a Bishop, he played on Sundays for [# of years], he is a Bishop now. Me and him, we get it. There are spiritual warriors who can play that game and who can be a beacon of light. There are other people that just can’t do it. That’s okay.” (4) There may simply be church members who are not affected in the same way as others when it comes to the inherent spiritual dangers in the NFL. As difficult as it might be to accept, there may be some truth there. However, it would be hard to say definitively that some

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80 Thomas S. Monson, “Keep the Commandments,” 84.
are simply made to thrive spiritually in spite of Sunday play while others are not. There are
factors at play that contribute to how an athlete will cope to a profession in which Sundays are so
heavily involved.

There were several features of this study that were very interesting, but after analyzing
them they turned out to be less significant than originally predicted. Table 3 (below) presents
three different findings from the interview process. The first column tells if the athlete
participated in organized sports on Sundays growing up; the second column specifies if they
were a seminary graduate; the third column tells whether or not they served a mission.

As mentioned earlier, twenty-seven athletes are fully active in the church today; it is not
necessary to point out which ones are not. Suffice it to say that the three athletes who are not
fully active reported that they did not play sports on Sundays growing up. This is interesting
because of the amount of attention youth are receiving about not playing sports on Sundays. In
the case of these thirty athletes, playing on Sundays while in their youth was not a factor for
determining church activity later on. Only one player gave a definitive “yes” about playing on
Sundays growing up, while three others played on Sundays for some period of time.

The next group of responses deals with seminary. Seminary is an important element in
the spiritual development of youth in the church, and one more safeguard against the spiritual
storms of life. As a seminary teacher, I hoped that seminary graduation would make a difference
in the spiritual scheme of things for these athletes. Responses ranged from a player saying that
seminary helped him get back into the Church to another saying it really did not make any
difference. Several players confessed that they slept through it most of the time, or that they did
not have to try very hard to graduate. Sixteen players out of thirty graduated seminary. Two out
of the three athletes who are not fully active graduated from seminary. Several said they attended for a number of years but did not graduate. One athlete was kicked out of seminary.

**Table 3. Pre-NFL Religious Indicators/Markers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Youth Sports on Sundays</th>
<th>Seminary graduate</th>
<th>Mission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>A little</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>For 1 year then stopped</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Sometimes for Championships</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This includes only organized, competitive sports on Sundays. Five of these athletes were converts to the church and did not graduate from seminary or serve missions.

At just over half of these athletes graduating seminary, it left me wondering what role seminary played, if any, in helping these athletes be spiritually prepared for their futures. The flaw with this part of the study was that in the majority of the interviews I only asked if they graduated seminary and neglected to ask what effect seminary had on their spiritual progression. Only a few players shared how seminary was beneficial for them. One athlete said, “There came a point in time where I was a freshman in seminary and that is where I created and gained my
own testimony of the truth. And that changed my life. That changed my life.” (4) The data is unable to provide evidence of a link between seminary and sustained church activity among these athletes. With so many factors going into this study, it is difficult to determine just how profound an effect graduating seminary had on the lives of these athletes.

The final group of responses tells of church missionary service. Leaving family, school, work, and other things can be a very difficult decision for young men and women of the church. There are the same number of missionaries in this pool as seminary graduates, though not everyone who graduated seminary served a full-time mission. Two athletes who graduated seminary did not serve missions, while two athletes who served missions did not graduate seminary. Many who did not graduate seminary or go on missions were converts to the Church. Being a convert does not automatically exclude or even excuse someone from seminary or missionary service, but it would likely be less of an expectation for someone joining the church later in life as opposed to those born into the church.

As shown in Table 3, it is hard to determine how significant these spiritual indicators were for players’ activity in the church throughout and after the NFL. There simply is not enough evidence to suggest that seminary is key to church activity later on. The same goes for a mission and Sunday play as a youth. These indicators are certainly substantial, and the emphasis that the church places on them is an indication of how important they are. Yet, it is difficult from this small sample to establish a causal link between any one or all three and continued church activity for professional football players.

There is a spiritual indicator of a more personal nature that I asked every athlete, concerning temple marriage. The interviewees indicated whether they were married in the temple, married civilly and later sealed in the temple, or married civilly and not sealed in the
temple. For Latter-day Saints, a temple marriage is one of the highest spiritual pursuits and requires personal worthiness according to church standards. I opted to withhold specific data on temple marriage due to its personal nature. In the case of the three players who are not fully active in the church, there is a slight pattern in that they all lacked one of these four indicators of their religiosity. For example, one player did not graduate seminary, another did not serve a mission, and the third was never married in the temple. While the absence of these indicators are not obvious “red flags” to one’s spirituality, they suggest that there is a connection with foundational religious practices and continued activity in the Church.

This study indicates that professional athletes do not need to do all these indicators to remain faithful to their beliefs. Yet these interviews show that if they have already done those things, it demonstrates a sense of willingness to adhere to church practices which are meant to strengthen one’s spirituality. Also, within these indicators is a pattern of progression. Each spiritual indicator is done in a certain order. Playing sports on Sundays first becomes a possibility during the early years, then seminary is available during teenage years, next a mission, and then temple marriage. It is parallel to the principle of the gospel known to church members as “enduring to the end.” You move onward and upward in your spiritual progress. If members of the church take proper steps in building their testimony or solidifying their certainty regarding gospel principles, they will find a sense of spiritual safety and happiness to help them through the inevitable difficulties of life.

As King Benjamin from the Book of Mormon said, “And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength. And again, it is expedient that he should be diligent, that thereby he might win the prize; therefore, all things must be done in order” (Mosiah 4:27). Likewise, if potential NFL players, or
members of the Church in general, apply the teachings of the Church as they receive them in wisdom and order, there is a higher likelihood that they will stay true to their convictions once their convictions are tested.

**The Role of Regular Church Attendance**

One major finding from this study is that it was important for these athletes to do other things to replace what was lost by not going to church. Players shared how they read scriptures, held family home evenings, listened to general conference talks and good music, and whenever possible they attended church. To be fair, this group of athletes seemed to be the type of church members who did those things regardless of their circumstances, regardless of missing church. Also, Latter-day Saints are commanded to include some of these spiritual practices in their lives. However, it is likely that they were not simply supplanting church attendance with these already-important practices, but they were placing more emphasis on them during the season, and stressing them more consciously than usual.

For these players who missed church, many yearned for the off-season when they could return to full church participation. Several of them remarked how they would not miss church during the off-season, there was never an excuse. I heard numerous comments such as this: “We don’t miss church at all during the off-season. And that is all three meetings. Church attendance in the off-season is a priority.” (30) Although many players indicated that being unable to attend church did not affect them spiritually—it did not weaken their devotion to gospel principles—not one ever mentioned anything about being glad to miss church. Obviously, they may have felt uncomfortable admitting something like that in an interview, but the types of responses made it very clear that they would have attended if possible.
Areas for Future Research

I acknowledge that this study lacks a representative sample that includes more inactive church members who played in the NFL. In order to make the result of the study more universal and applicable, it is necessary to explore the lives of those who no longer associate with the church. A representative sample would better illuminate the relationship between Sunday play and continued church activity.

An intriguing area that could be further explored is the family dynamic in the lives of these athletes, especially those who are retired from the NFL. How are their families doing spiritually now that it is possible for the whole family to go to church together on Sundays? Did their time in the NFL hurt the spirituality of their children? There were no questions asked in the interviews about the children of these players, but several times athletes tied their answers into life experiences regarding their own kids. One of these athletes became very emotional when talking about his young children, and specifically when he realized it was time for him to retire from professional play. He had played for more than the average amount of time in the NFL and his kids were still young. He emotionally recalled,

So by the time my career ended my kids were giving talks in primary and I was missing those. When you’re not able to be there for your kids giving a prayer or be a part of the primary program, one of the things that let me know it was time for me to retire, besides my body holding up, I would be at the Stadium on Sundays, I remember … waiting for the opening kickoff against the [NFL team] on national television, and we had family who had come to watch the game, and after the game my dad asked me what I was thinking about the moment right before kickoff as the referee blows the whistle. And I said, you know what I was thinking about, I was thinking about [son’s] talk and if he will be able to do it the way he did for us in family home evening when he practiced it. And I thought, it may be time for you to retire. Because if you can’t be focused in a place like that where you have to give your entire attention to exactly what you’re doing, because otherwise you put people in jeopardy physically if you don’t do your job. I was standing there thinking about how [son’s] talk was going to turn out wishing I could be there, and I thought, maybe it’s time to wrap this career up and move on. (13)
This is a powerful recollection that highlights the importance of the family to this athlete. Even though he was having regular family nights where they discussed spiritual things and helped their children prepare for church participation, it is evident that he longed to be there for other crucial spiritual events in the lives of his children.

Likewise, a somewhat regretful tone was heard in a player who recalled his years in the NFL and the impressionable state that his young children were in at the time. He said, “The older I get the more I see how it influenced my family. I have—I don’t want to say guilt—but if I could go back I would do things differently with my children.” (14) He never specifically said what he would change, but it is clear that his time in the NFL affected his young family.

**It’s Great, Except for the Bad Parts**

Years ago, the church came out with a “Mormonad” poster depicting an ice cream sundae with a cockroach in it and the words “It’s great except for…” written across the top of the poster. Since then I have heard on multiple occasions people joke about media and other things that are mostly good except for the bad parts. I do not wish to portray the NFL as an ice cream sundae with a cockroach in it, nor would I prefer to present it as a cockroach sundae with ice cream in it.
Several players spoke fondly of their teammates, their coaches, their friends and ward members with whom they interacted while in the NFL. Regardless of how bad an environment may be, there are other options to better one’s circumstances. Athletes who choose to make a living in professional sports can choose to make their experience a positive one. Jesus Christ charged his disciples, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Not hiding one’s light under a bushel translates into the sporting world as not letting other players decide who or what you are going to be.

For those who believe in “things which are not seen, which are true” (Alma 32:21), there will always be “spiritual cockroaches” trying to spoil their sundae; in other words, there will always be other people trying to extinguish faith. Analogy aside, there is no profession and no place that is perfectly accommodating to church standards. All professions present inherent challenges, none are exempt. Those who have once committed to church and God will have every opportunity to stay true to that decision. After all, it is decisions which determine destiny, not professions.81

Post-script

Before I began the interview process for this study, I thought I had a fairly decent grasp of what was and was not acceptable for the Sabbath. I played collegiate soccer for one year and most Sundays were devoted to games, practices, or travel. At the end of my freshmen year I was hurting spiritually and not sure where I stood in relation to the church. Playing soccer on Sundays was not the only thing that hurt me spiritually, but missing church on a regular basis was a major factor that led to other types of challenges.

Ever since I began this research, I have had people ask me what my personal opinion is on the issue, and if I will let my children play sports on Sundays. After interviewing these athletes, delving into the responses, and making connections with what they said and what the prophets have said, I am convinced that youth should not play sports on Sundays. I desire that my children have a personal faith-building experience where they figure out for themselves that they are better off not participating in Sunday sports. Author C.S. Lewis spoke of the strength of those willing to fight for what they believe in, he said, “No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good. A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is.”82 I would never say that someone needs to play on Sunday so that they can feel the absence of the Spirit and therefore gain a testimony of the Sabbath day.

I think it would be a mistake for anyone to make life decisions based solely on what has been presented in this study. Even knowing what the evidence from this study suggests, I would never advocate an adult or a teenager to play sports on Sundays without them seeking God’s guidance. Just as important as seeking a personal confirmation, is being willing to abstain from playing in the professional arena if so prompted. There is much more to be considered. Most of these players sought direction from heaven, and felt that they had received divine approbation on their professional path. Though it is a noble desire to share the “good news” of the gospel and embody that message through your actions, it must be done with the sanction of God to have a lasting effect in your own life and the lives of those around you.

Appendix

The purpose of this appendix is to give a more in-depth look at the responses made by all thirty interviewees. The aim in including this is so that readers will be able to see a more fluid set of replies and be able to make some conclusions of their very own. As intriguing as it would be to include the entire transcript of each interview, this would unduly extend the scope of this study and is not necessary for understanding the main components found herein. Additionally, it would not be congruent to the agreement between myself and these athletes in connection with the Internal Review Board (IRB) at Brigham Young University. In conjunction with the IRB, the data from these interviews have been heavily redacted and contain no more than twenty-five percent of the original content. What is included is worthwhile and beneficial to not only the study, but to a wider audience of Latter-day Saints. In order to protect the identity of these athletes, all identifying factors have been omitted or changed using brackets or ellipses. Some of the responses were impossible to mask, and therefore were excluded entirely. In addition, many responses were trivial or inconsequential in nature and therefore did not seem to meet the scope of this appendix. I made no efforts to include similar interview questions for all thirty interviewees, but rather focused on meaningful content that was not brought up in the body of the thesis. There are also a number of questions that are unique to a particular player based on the direction that the interview took. The interviewees are listed in chronological order based on when I conducted each interview.

Interviewee #1

What about the off-season? How often did you go to church?
I didn’t miss during the off-season. I went every Sunday, for three hours. I was there every Sunday. It’s interesting, because during the season, I didn’t go to church but I was an ordinance worker in the [city] temple on Tuesdays which is our day off in the NFL. They called me to that calling, and I thought it was a great opportunity. Playing on Sunday is probably the hardest thing about the NFL. The way I was brought up, going from attending church every Sunday to now playing football on Sunday was definitely a big jump for me. What I had to do was find another avenue to feel the spirit. To feel, find another avenue to serve. For me it was going to the temple. … Some people feel like playing on Sundays is terrible, and they would never do it. But for me, I would never change it. There were things about being an NFL player that opened doors. Just because you’re not going to church the whole time, but when you go on splits with the missionaries and people recognize you, they open the door and want to listen to you because of the occupation you have. You also have the reach and influence. Your reach is a lot greater if you are an NFL player. People just want to listen to you because of that. Yeah you’re not going to church on Sunday, but as long as you’re finding other avenues to serve and feel the spirit and build the kingdom, I don’t think that playing in the NFL is a bad thing. In fact I think it’s quite the opposite. I think the Lord likes it. Because you’re able to move the work forward.
Were there other things that hurt your faith in the NFL?
It’s definitely not easy missing church. Yes you can do things on your own, like reading your Scriptures, and make a more concerted effort to feel the spirit. But it’s different. It’s not the same when you go to church and have a congregation, and you are singing, and having discussions with other members. That’s different. I don’t want to discredit the value that comes from going to church. If I had it my way, I would have gone to church every Sunday. If I can play football and go to church every Sunday I would do it. Did it hurt a little bit? Yes. You miss that. There are individuals in the locker room who don’t have the same belief as you, and they make fun of you. They question your garments. I kind of joked about it, and told them they couldn’t afford it. And they got really confused. I told them they would have to give 10% of what they make, and that stopped the conversation. So people teasing you, and other guys that drink and do things that you wouldn’t do either as a married man or even as a member of the church. However they ask you if you want to go to the strip club or do other things, but you just stand your ground and for the most part they respect that. But when you do something that is bad, I remember one time in practice and I had a bad practice and I dropped the ball, and I swore. I said it loud, because I was so upset. They stopped practice and everyone said, did we just hear you swear? So I made the decision to not do certain things way before I ever made the NFL. So when an opportunity presented itself, the decision was already made. It wasn’t hard for me to say no. I can see how maybe other people would struggle with that, but for me it wasn’t a struggle or even a temptation to go out and go to strip clubs with them. Every Friday night we used to go out with our position. These guys would say, [name] we know you don’t do that so we’ll drop you off at the hotel. But they respected that. But I can see how if someone doesn’t live up to what they believe, it would be easier for people to bug them about certain things, inviting them to go to places they shouldn’t go to. I remember one time someone asked me if I was faithful to my wife. I said yes, and they were shocked. Infidelity happens outside of football, it happens everywhere, and a lot of the NFL players were very faithful, they would have Bible study that I would go to. I would give an insight and they would say, whoa where did that come from? There are a lot of good things in the NFL. Every team has a chaplain, they have Bible study, and church service before every game. I would go to those if we were away and couldn’t leave the hotel. I would sit in there and listen and comment on things. But my experience in the NFL was a great one in every aspect, from personal experiences of growth, but also for spreading the gospel.

Interviewee #2
Growing up did you play any sports? What was Sunday like in your home growing up?
… I’m not positive but I remember going home and telling my parents that I made the competition soccer team, and my dad said. “Well, you’re not going to play on that team.” And I was like, “Well, I made the team”, and I thought it was weird. It turned out that that was a great thing for me. A lot of guys on that team ended up really struggling in life …
Were you able to hold a calling?
I remember Bishop [name] saying to [wife] and I, “I don’t want to give you a formal calling, but when you ever have an opportunity to speak to the youth I want you to do it. I want you to take that seriously, and I want you to want that to be a part of your life.” So that was it. I wasn’t even a Home Teacher, but he definitely wanted me active and a part of the ward, and there was a time in that ward where I worked with the young men, and I specifically remember one offseason working with the young men one of the kids didn’t show up to Quorum meeting, so we drove over to his house in my Camry, we loaded all the deacons up, and we went to his house, we didn’t have any room, so we put some of the Deacons in my trunk! And we drove back to the church, we brought him, it was awesome! We wanted him to know that we cared about him! It was funny; everyone was cracking up – it’s a good memory. …

Was there anything you did to stay aloof from the challenges in the NFL?
There were a whole bunch of things. #1 – Not going to church on Sunday was really hard because when you’re not in church, you’re not in church. You can’t replicate it; you can’t make it up. When you’re singing the songs of the restoration with a whole chapel of people you can’t recapture that. If you miss it, you miss it. That was hard. So what could I do? … Those are the main things; read my scriptures, say my prayers, listen to great music, surround myself with as much good stuff as I possibly could because I needed it all. And then when I came home in the offseason I was totally committed; you know, I wanted to make sure that Sundays were my days to worship, and I didn’t rationalize not going to church in the offseason. I said, “I’m not playing; I’m going to church.”

What would be your counsel about playing on Sundays?
That’s a tough decision for a lot of people. My daughter played club volleyball which required some Sunday tournaments, probably two Sunday tournaments each year, ... I think parents have that responsibility to raise and rear their kids the best way they know how; hopefully with the spirit, hopefully through prayer. The only advice I have for people is, … You stay as close as you can to the Spirit. You try and make the best decision you can for yourself and your family, and get counsel from your church leaders; that’s the best advice I can give. I know going into the NFL my parents were just like anyone would be, that’s normal. They are worried about the atmosphere in the NFL. It’s tough. [wife’s] parents were very worried – especially her dad. He wasn’t thrilled that I was going into the NFL. That’s a tough environment. It was my job; that was what I was good at; that’s what I was trained to do here at [university]; that’s how I took care of my family for years and I feel like it’s real similar to most people in the world… We’re put down here to make decisions and sometimes very hard decisions. We’re given the scriptures, we’re given the greatest counsel in the world by living prophets, and we gotta make our choices how we’re going to live our lives and it’s never simple or ideal, but you do the best you can.

What do you think is the best part and the worst part about being LDS in the NFL?
As a Latter-day Saint I have the Priesthood, I can ask people for Priesthood blessings to give me strength and power both for healing, for comfort, for added strength and added faith in difficult places and difficult times like the NFL. So each year I would get Priesthood blessings from
family members, from my Bishop, from people who I loved and respected very much which helped me a ton in my career. …

Interviewee #3

Tell me what sports and Sundays were like growing up for you?
Never play on Sundays, never was even a consideration. Never even had to confront that in high school at all.

Tell me about college.
… my focus and everything was football. That was all I thought about, was football. I served a mission because that’s what I was supposed to do. That wasn’t really one of those gung ho things, I went and did great, but it was a means to an end to play football. That was my goal. When I got to [university] everything was football, that’s all I thought about, I worked out all the time. That was my focus until I met my wife. That’s when my attitude changed.

What was the counsel of your wife, and any one close to you as far as playing in the NFL?
…But my only focus was football. Yes I was married, but my wife knew that I played football. I never sought counsel for that because that is all I cared about. When I was a Junior it became obvious that I would probably make the NFL. By my senior year it became a realistic option. I looked at a guy like Eli Herring at the time, now I have total respect for him, but I thought he was crazy. I could not believe in my mind that someone would pass up millions of dollars because they did not want to play on the Sabbath… When [player] went off into the NFL and had his experience, he seemed like he was doing great, religiously and everything else. Never dawned on me maybe you should rethink this option.

How often did you attend church?
…[a number of] teams I played with had LDS guys on it, but most of them were inactive. It’s amazing how many guys in the NFL who were LDS came from different schools … I think there were five guys from different schools on [NFL team] team with me. …

What about the off-season?
You are active by going to church, but not active in the sense that participating, because you are not, you don’t have any roots anywhere, since you have to go back and forth during the off-season. You’re never going to get really a calling, they might put you somewhere, so you’re active in the sense you’re going to church but not really participating. It’s a big difference in my opinion. Your testimony and everything really get strengthened by participating and contributing, serving. Again these things are what I have learned post football. …
Was there anything about the NFL that challenged your faith?
…It’s interesting because I acted like the best person since I was worried what people would say about Mormons because they knew me. So I always made sure I didn’t cuss, I did everything right. But my mind frame, true conversion, was getting worse and worse as I was there. … I made sure never to do anything that made the church look bad, I was probably better in the NFL than at [university]. … But in the NFL I was really aware of my actions, because I would hear people saying so-and-so was Mormon and they did this. I didn’t want to be that so-and-so. …

What advice would you give someone about playing on Sundays?
I have actually had that question. People have asked me if I felt like I was breaking the Sabbath playing in the NFL. In my situation I felt like maybe yes. I think a lot of it is how or why you are playing football. And what your focus and where your heart is. I think that is the most important thing. … But if you’re still trying to observe the Sabbath and dedicate yourself to God, I think that’s the most important thing.

What was the best part about playing in the NFL?
For all the rotten people I talked about, there are a lot of good people. And you can have a good influence on a lot of people. I think my experience in the NFL was that I was able to help people see [name] as a Mormon differently and not some weird cult or something. …

Interviewee #4

Did you play sports on Sundays growing up?
Nope. Sunday just shuts down. It just shuts down. My parents were members of the church, grew up in an LDS home, went to church every Sunday…. The time I had my sophomore year I had a very powerful testimony of prayer and Scripture study. The church and general conference became important. Little by little, line upon line and precept upon precept my testimony began to grow…

Tell me about college after your mission.
… When I came off the mission, my first year back was hard. … I thought, what does this game have to do with building the kingdom of God. This has nothing to do with baptizing souls. And yet it had everything, because God had given me this tool, this vessel, this body. … It was never really my goal to go to the NFL. It just never was. Until my senior year when I thought, okay, it’s a window of opportunity, so take it. Let’s go make this happen. …

What about the off-season?
Every Sunday. I would go to the stake center to watch general conference, I was fully committed to living the Gospel and going to the temple, going to church, showing up for firesides.
What counsel did you receive about playing in the NFL?
The majority of my counsel was to take names and kick butt. Go do it. We need more good people out. … Go have fun and preach the gospel. Go be a good example and make the most of it. And I loved it. I absolutely loved it.

Did your coach ever say anything about the NFL?
He said, [name], just keep doing what you’re doing. He would teach guys, it was so powerful. I knew when I went out there I was representing [university], mom and dad, my brothers and sisters, my last name, my bishop, my Ward. I was going to stay strong. I never questioned whether to go drink, to have sex. It was easy, super easy.

What was playing on Sunday like for you?
… It was easy. Because it was my job. The moment it’s not my job and I’m out waterskiing for fun, different ballgame. It was never an issue for me, I just treated it as a sacred day. Lord, this is your day, but you’ve given me a body and agency to go do something that I feel is in line. I never had a, you shouldn’t do this, moment. If I had, I would’ve told the Lord I wouldn’t play. Literally that was my prayer. If I’m not supposed to be there, let me know and I will move on. So playing on Sundays was awesome because my perspective was, sure, people are in church on Sunday, but people who need the example, I needed to be around them. … My perspective, my lens was that I am a missionary. I can go to church and raise my hand and say faith. Or I can go live faith in the locker room, on the field, in conversation, in Bible study. We had Bible study in [city], it was awesome. I was the only member on the team. I remember one time in the locker room talking to an All-Pro safety who asked me if I ever had sex. I said no, and he said what? He had everyone come over and made me tell them what I told him. I have never had sex. I am a virgin. Dude said, no way! You’ve never tasted alcohol? Never even swished it? No way. Thinking of that, that experience, most of the guys came up to me and said, mad respect, that’s awesome! They would ask me why. I told them that it was because my mom and dad told me that if you would wait to get married to have sex, it was sacred, within the bounds of marriage. They would ask me if I judge them. I would say no, Jesus is your judge, not me, I love you and I’m your brother. I would have conversations like this with people all the time. I had missionaries visit players all the time, giving them books of Mormon, I gave out books from the church and having conversations, being bold...

Did anyone criticize your choice of job when you came back from the NFL?
… There are some Sundays where I travel. But wherever I am at, if I can I go to church. It’s not negotiable. When I was baptized, I didn’t get it at the time, but I get it now. There are some things that are not negotiable. On Sundays we go to church. Monday nights we go to family home evening. Temple night every Tuesday night. It’s easy when you’re committed to be a disciple. If you’re not, holy smokes. …
Tell me about your family and the church.
…We ended up getting sealed to my parents when I was [age]. They weren’t very active growing up. I remember always just watching football on Sundays with my dad. He didn’t even baptized me. … My dad was interesting because he would say, all those members are fake. He would always pay his tithing, he was not very active every Sunday, but he was very giving. He gave of his time and his money, but he never went to church. My mom always went. When I was in primary they would sing the welcome song to me, and I would think, I’m part of your Ward! I grew up with great parents, they taught me how to love and how to always be there for people…

Tell me about Sundays growing up.
You were not supposed to watch TV on Sunday. We grew up strict. You weren’t supposed to go outside or play. You just had to sit there and look at the wall I swear. No going to the stores. It was funny because you didn’t go to the store, but all of a sudden family would come into town and we all went out to eat. It was interesting, yet they kept it holy, but at the same time we all went out to a buffet. …

Did you play sports that required Sunday play?
No. My mom was very adamant about not doing things on Sunday. … I remember one time I was playing basketball on Sunday and I sprained my ankle and she said, see, that’s what you get. See what happens when you go do things on Sunday? You get hurt. I always took that to heart…

Did you always plan on going to the NFL?
Yeah, that was always the goal. Growing up that was the one ticket that was instilled in me. This is the only way I’m going to change my family’s fate, was going to the NFL. It wasn’t, go get your education and do this, this, and this. It was football, football, football. My dad always said, football is going to be your ticket. And he was right, it was my ticket to get a free education, and it opened so many doors for me. I always felt like I could play in the NFL. …

What were Sundays like in the season, how many times did you go to church?
Sunday was an evolving deal in our house. As my wife and I got older and had more kids. My rookie year, I would go play in the games, family would be in town, we would go eat after games. Gosh I don’t think I did my rookie year. It wasn’t until my second, third, and fourth year where little by little my wife started implementing more and more like, we are not supposed to be doing this, we are not supposed to be doing that. We started planning better for when family came into town, we weren’t going and doing things after the games. We were going home and doing things at home and keeping the Sabbath day holy. She stopped coming to my games. She would go to church and take the kids to church because they were old enough. I would go home after. It was kind of a progression thing for our marriage and playing in the NFL. The more she started realizing, this is right. And every time she was right. …
To what degree did playing on Sundays affect you?
I don’t think it affected me at all. I think it makes you check yourself. … I think it has opened up certain doors for me. Speaking at firesides. I don’t think they would ask me to go had I not played. It has been its own missionary tool for me, considering me not going on a mission. I don’t look at it as affecting me. It definitely strengthened my testimony with regards to the Sabbath and keeping it holy. …

What advice would you give to an LDS athlete going into the NFL?
… It’s tough. You got money and fame, I see some of those guys who everyone wants to be like and wants to be in their life, and they don’t leave the locker room. They’re miserable. And I say, I’m going home. I miss my wife and kids. And they don’t want to go home because they’re miserable. It’s a tough world in the NFL, and it’s as real as the world is. It’s a great living, you can make a great living…

Interviewee #6

Tell me about your family growing up. What was religion like in the home?
We weren’t really active growing up. We went to church, mostly just sacrament and then went home. …

Did you play any organized sports on Sundays growing up?
No. There was never any conflict with sports on Sundays. But I did work quite a bit on Sundays growing up. Either bussing tables at a restaurant or mowing lawns or something like that, lifeguarding.

Tell me about getting ready for the NFL?
I didn’t have big plans to play in the NFL. I didn’t really like to look ahead too much. I just worked hard and did my best and didn’t worry about it. If the draft were held before my senior year I probably wouldn’t have been drafted. As the year progressed I moved up the draft. … I didn’t have plans to play in the NFL but I didn’t really put my feelers out for any other job either.

Did anything change over the next four years as far as church attendance?
No, that was probably consistent. Some guys are able to go to church if they play a Sunday night game but that never worked out for me. And also on Sundays I was too wound up. I wouldn’t want to go talk to people, I want to sit by myself and relax. …

Did getting married help you as a Latter-day Saint in the NFL?
Yes. It gave me another foundation. She is a great person, comes from a great family, has a great testimony. So that was definitely helpful. And it put more responsibility on me to make sure I was doing the right things. It was much easier to be married. Whereas when you’re single and
you’re trying to go to church, you don’t really feel like you have a place, you don’t feel comfortable, especially in the NFL when you’re moving around and don’t have a home Ward. So when I got married I felt more comfortable going to a married Ward. So I think getting married was definitely a good thing for me. As far as feeling comfortable in church.

To what degree if any did playing in the NFL affect you as a member of the church?
I would say it affected me positively. … I was never put in a position where I had to define who I was. So when I went to the NFL, for the first time in my life, I was the only Mormon basically. So I really had to stand up for my beliefs. In that aspect I think it made me stronger, and made me figure out why I was doing the things I did, and why I didn’t drink and party. People would give me a hard time, but when they figured out I was genuine they respected me for it. I think that was a testimony builder. … It was hard not being able to go to church, but when I was able to I appreciated it more. As a whole I think it was good for me.

What advice would you give to someone who was going into the NFL?
… As far as playing in the NFL, I would tell them to do it. It’s a great opportunity to be financially set the rest of your life, it’s what you’ve been working for your whole life. It would be a chance for you to be an example to people, members and nonmembers. Hopefully good things would come from other people watching you. Setting a good example for people.

Interviewee #7

Growing up what were Sundays like? Sports on Sundays?
No, no, … I kinda grew up by the letter of the law of the church – very strict. … There were no sports played on Sunday. We never did nothing on Sunday but you were either reading scriptures or you were with the family singing church hymns. You never went outside to play. It was really strict – no TV, no entertainment, nothing. So that’s how I was raised…

Did anyone give you counsel of a spiritual nature about the NFL?
No, …, and I think I was more encouraged to go and give it a chance and go and try it out, live a dream, and for me, too, I kind of wanted to do that because I saw it as an opportunity – in a sense I thought it was a spiritual way of – it was an opportunity for me to take care of my family, my parents. That’s kind of the way I saw it. It was a very personal thing for me to be able to do that. They said I had a big chance of making the dream come true and it might happen for you. I was too scared to think about it too much because I didn’t want it to not happen because my parents were getting old and I could help them retire, and we had bills. My dad was a hard worker, my parents were hard workers, … when I saw this opportunity that’s kind of where I just felt that’s where I needed to be to make this happen; I thought this was the blessing from my Heavenly Father to give me this chance to be able to make some money and take care of my family. I didn’t get anybody telling me anything that would make me think twice about playing on Sunday.
How many times did you make it to church your first year in the NFL during the season? … You know to be honest my first few years when I went into the NFL I was just so into it, trying to be there, trying to make the team, that I kind of forgot a little bit about the church and stuff. Not so much in the way of Sundays – Sundays didn’t even feel like Sundays to me anymore. It almost felt like I was in the grind every day. In the NFL you’re working from 6 in the morning to like 6 at night. All day in your first 2 or 3 years you’re on the grind trying to make that team and trying to fit in. Every day was just a grind. When Sunday came around it just felt like Monday or Tues or Wed or Thurs or Fri or Sat. It seemed like all the same day. I think when I started getting to my third or fourth year, when things started to settle down, I knew I needed that spiritual feeding; I was lacking the spiritual feeding. So I would try to make some time to try to plan it out – “How was I going to get to church?” Even if it was just for sacrament, I would go in the morning and partake of the sacrament and then from there I would go straight to the stadium to start getting ready for a game. So that’s kind of how it was in the NFL; at least for me it was. Whenever I could and the schedule would allow it; especially home games I would make it. In the NFL I think it was more of a personal worshipping; you read your scriptures, you pray, and anytime you had a chance or if someone asked you to come speak at firesides. I thought that was an opportunity – that was my way of getting my spiritual feeding. The actual going to Sacrament Meetings was really tough. I made it maybe 2 or 3 times, but I really felt where I was grounded spiritually and remembered who I was because when I would go and do service like speak at firesides that’s kind of where I felt I contributed… I think everyone was delighted to see an NFL player there coming to church. I think it really set the example for a lot of the young kids too. They really liked seeing that, and I think the Bishop loved seeing that, and all the leaders liked seeing that. “Look at this NFL player; he’s going to be playing in a couple of hours, and look he just showed up and I think that’s kind of how I gave back to the church – being an example for the young kids. They loved that; they ate that up. I was sitting in Sacrament and I would look over at the Sacrament table where the deacons sit and they would all be whispering – “That guy plays for [NFL team]!” That was an impression – you didn’t even have to say anything.

Interviewee #8

What kind of impact did missing church have on you during your time in the NFL? I would speak at firesides and things like that, speak to the youth. I’m the [church calling], I would tell the guys that when I was playing and couldn’t go to sacrament meetings you could kinda feel that spirit maybe, or you’re just not quite as in tune with the spirit for three or four months, you could feel it kind of slipping away a little bit. Especially if you aren’t doing all the other things you needed to do outside of church. Like Scripture study, family home evening, and all those things. Just having the opportunity of having the sacrament, you can feel a difference. When the off-season came around you are able to go and you could tell the difference. That is something I always try to incorporate in, tell the youth to attend their meetings and attend their mutual and try to get to everything, because it does make a difference. I always appreciate the
off-season because you could get back on that schedule. Not being able to go definitely affects you, not having that weekly Scripture study or talk that you need to hear, it affects you…

**What advice would you give to someone who’s LDS going into the NFL?**
My daughter went through this, she is a [sport] player. Back when I grew up we didn’t have clubs and all that stuff, it was school sports. We held my daughter off and then it was to a point where she wanted to play in college. The recruiting showcase tournaments were all on Sunday. Her games, championship games. We counseled with stake Presidents and Bishops and ourselves trying to figure out what we would do. Finally we decided that we would allow her to choose based on the information, and we would support her. If this is something she wants to do in college then we would make every effort to attend sacrament no matter what city we are in where the tournament is, before or after games, and she would need to do all the other things like seminary and mutual, making sure that she is doing all the other things as well. … We went round and round and the counsel was, you gotta make your choices but at the same time do all the other little things. That’s what I tried to do when I was playing, tried to do all the other little things. The difference was that my daughter could get to sacrament meeting before or after games. We always had to tell people that it was up to them and their family and heavenly father. We shouldn’t judge from the outside what people are going through and their decisions. It’s not easy for a lot of people to make that decision one way or the other. You’re giving up something. Make the decision and then do your best at it either way. Make sure you’re trying to attend all your other auxiliary meetings and things like that, things that will keep you close. …

**To what degree did playing in the NFL affect you spiritually?**
I think it helped to strengthen my testimony by being able to play. You are able to see what other guys are going through who don’t have the gospel in their lives. It’s allowed me to have that perspective on attending meetings and not attending meetings. It strengthened our family by doing all the other things outside of just going to church on Sunday. There are probably times when you are in peaks and valleys and you can feel when you’re not going to sacrament and maybe you’re not as in tune with the spirit. I think at the end of the day overall it helps strengthen my testimony knowing that we are being counseled to do things and we should do those we can. Looking back, I don’t know if I would change much of anything. It has allowed me to hopefully be a missionary in different cities where I was playing. Be able to speak to youth groups and things like that as well. After the fact, having done those things, hopefully have been able to be a positive influence, speaking at conferences, so I don’t know if I would change much of anything. … Overall I probably wouldn’t change a whole lot. It has definitely opened doors and allowed me to be out there as a positive influence to the youth and some of the things they are going through now.
Tell me about life growing up, about your family, and about religion.

I grew up in a very strong LDS family. My parents come from a very strong LDS background… I think playing on Sundays was definitely something different, but the hardest transition for me was during training camp, as sad as it sounds, and I tried as best as I could to not let this happen, but Sunday was just another day. It was a business day. It was a day to go and put in some work, get better at what I was doing, and then worry about the next day when practice and meetings were over. As sad as it sounds it was the biggest groundhogs day for me going into training camp and trying to transition … And then eventually Sunday became our main day to focus for our job. It was really hard at first. As sad as it sounds, I don’t know if numb is the right word, but I kind of became comfortable with practicing and playing football on Sundays. … Sundays were not your average Sundays. My mindset when I got up on Sundays was getting ready for the game, I had to make sure I knew what I was doing, I had to prepare mentally, physically, emotionally for football. Where before, over here, I had to make sure I got up on time to go take the sacrament or pass the sacrament or something like that. It totally changed the way I went about things. To be honest I felt, empty is not a good word, to be honest I felt lost. … Going out there, I guess I didn’t have as strong a testimony as I thought. But because of that, I think it helped me grow a lot. I could have either gone along with what everyone else was doing or eventually I would learn to gain my own testimony and really try to know if what I was doing was right. To be honest it helped me a ton. … In all honesty it was hard to go out there on Sundays. I remember the very first Sunday I went out there on the field, my wife had called me and said, good luck on the game, we will try to watch the game when we get back from church. When she said that I said, man I can’t believe I’m not going to church with them! This is so hard. And then walking out on the field, to be honest it didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel like a Sunday. Didn’t feel like what I was used to. It was a little uncomfortable. I think when somebody goes into something that they are unfamiliar with, it becomes uncomfortable. I remember looking in the stands and thinking, what am I doing out here? This is crazy, this is Sunday and I’m out here playing a football game. I prayed long and hard about it, and I didn’t think of it as, I’m going to have fun on Sunday. It was a means to provide for my family. So I took that perspective on it. It totally changed my mindset and my thought, it helped me stay grounded as far as my faith and being LDS go. It helped at the time because Sunday wasn’t just another football Sunday. I still got up, said my prayers, tried to catch a sacrament meeting before I went out to the Stadium, and kept in mind that this was a way for me to provide for my family and I will do the best I can with the talent God has provided me. …

Did you have a team chaplain or a team preacher?

We did for two years but they changed [coaching staff] and did away with our chaplain. It broke our hearts because he had been there for years and was one of the most awesome guys you would ever meet. He dealt with all walks of faith and was very open to everything. He was a great person to confide in and talk to, to get a taste of the gospel from a different perspective. It was nice because he was familiar about the LDS faith. We would talk about the book of Mormon and stuff. … For me it was nice on Wednesdays and Sundays, just to get your extra boost of religion
so to speak. I could tell the difference when we didn’t have it on Wednesdays as well. My focus was a little different, I wasn’t spiritually as strong as when I had it on Wednesdays as well. …

**How has playing in the NFL affected you spiritually?**

It has helped me gain a stronger testimony of the gospel. I went to both extremes, where I was on this super high where I feel like I didn’t need the gospel, to dropping down to this super low where I knew I needed the gospel more than anything, and then finding my middle place. Now I know I can’t get too high but I’ll never go that low because of the testimony I have for the gospel. I think it was because of being able to play on Sundays and going through those experiences. It has definitely helped me gain a stronger testimony of the gospel and really understand that football is definitely not my purpose. It’s a platform for me to show my talents that God has given me a way for me to express my gratitude by magnifying those talents which have been given. It has definitely been a blessing and something that I didn’t realize would help me gain a stronger testimony of the gospel and a better understanding of who I am and why I am here.

**Interviewee #10**

**Where are you from and if you were LDS growing up what were Sundays like?**

Grew up in [city]. Parents were longtime members of the church. We were religious; we attended church each week. My folks did all they could to get us there. We had to drive an hour to church for Sacrament Meeting. I think they tried hard, but we as kids didn’t try hard so we made it hard on them. But they wanted to be good LDS parents… All my buddies were non-LDS and were always pulling me away, and I hated going. …

**Growing up did you play sports on Sundays?**

No, never played on Sunday; I played on Sunday maybe once or twice only because they didn’t have it. If they did I would definitely play. Back then I would have, no doubt and no problem at all. My folks probably would have been fine then; kinda weird isn’t it?! It’s really odd; growing up in [state] you know we would go to lunch every Sunday. We’d go to a restaurant every Sunday; it was just kind of a family meal... So, yeah, I would have played on Sunday…

**Tell me about college life.**

… Then my second semester my freshman year some Stake President asked me if I wanted to go on a mission in a letter and I was like no chance! I just wasn’t where I needed to be. I don’t even know if I responded to the letter. My sophomore year I got a girlfriend and realized how way off track I was. Part of me knew that I needed to be going. I knew I wanted it but I just didn’t know how to get it. I didn’t realize you had to do it yourself; you couldn’t rely on others. We borrow testimonies all the time but you can’t live on a testimony of someone else. So I think it was after my sophomore year I finally got my patriarchal blessing (maybe the middle of my junior year) and that was when I realized that it was time to shape up, go to church, gain a testimony, prepare
for the next phase of life. Marriage. I was not dating anyone but I met a girl as I was transitioning into going into the NFL. That was when I realized that I had to be ready for a temple marriage. So I started going to church and was learning more about the gospel. I was young and immature – spiritually immature. I just didn’t know anything. But it came together; kinda cool. And that whole time period I had great friends, great people, two or three different girlfriends, and it was just me. It wasn’t my lifestyle, it was my lack of knowledge of the gospel that kept me from really getting into it.

**Did anyone say you probably shouldn’t go into the NFL? Anything negative?**
If it was negative it was only playing on Sunday and I did not have a problem with that. My folks did not have a problem with that. Even today my folks still go out to eat on Sunday and my dad works in the temple, and my mom works in the temple, and there’s no better member of the church. I think it’s just how you were raised. But no one really told me from a Sabbath day holy – that type of thing; it was more the platform you would have to make an impact. It outweighed any playing on Sunday. …

**How did not being able to attend church affect you?**
Given that I was young spiritually, when I say that, I mean that by not going on a mission you miss out on so much besides the physical development you grow up in ways to this day I still lack, just experiences, study, getting deep in the scriptures, really studying the scriptures. I think that when you have that development you would probably miss not going to church more because you’re so in tune with the spirit and you know how to identify it and you miss it whereas I never had that. I think what I missed is feeling the testimony of the need to have the spirit as often as you can because without it you set yourself up for some serious downside. What I think is a returned missionary knows and wants and craves it, understands the impact and the role in his life, where I didn’t have that and I would have grown and learned more about the power and the spirit in your life and the Holy Ghost. So that’s what I lacked! That’s what I missed. When I realized OK now I get it, it’s all coming together. This is real power. When I realized that, I realized what I missed and how much I’ve missed in development, in growth, because your spirit teaches and I didn’t have that; therefore, I was behind in all the teaching that I could have had. I really crave that now; I miss that. I’m [age] and man I missed so many years of the teachings by the spirit.

**Interviewee #11**

**Tell me about life growing up and what Sundays were like?**
So religion wasn’t a big issue. On Sundays it was probably like most days. If it was basketball season I’d be outside shooting baskets. If it was football season I’d be out there kicking a ball or whatever. I’d go golfing with my dad. So it just seemed like a regular day. … So Sundays seemed like a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday other than my dad didn’t go to work… When I grew up they didn’t play sports on Sunday. I don’t even think I practiced on Sundays with my
Did anyone give you counsel about the NFL? Anyone give you spiritual advice?
No. No. Once I became a starter and especially my Junior year I knew I was going to the NFL. … so there was no question that I was good enough to play in the league. … I had to decide if I wanted to keep going, go somewhere else, try again, or call it quits. It’s so hard to try to go on a team and keep a balance and try to play so I decided that was it, I would just try to get a regular job and move on with my life.

Did you hold a calling during season?
I was Executive Secretary to the Bishop; he was a sports guy, loved sports, loved [university], [NFL team], so we kind of home taught together. That was the only calling I had.

To what degree did missing church affect you if any?
I don’t think it affected me greatly. … I knew the reason I was doing this thing on Sunday was because it was my job. I knew that I wasn’t going to make that much money doing something else. I know that there are lots of people out there that say I will not play on Sunday in the NFL. I never had those feelings that it was a bad thing to do. I’m not saying it was like, “This is great; I get to miss three hours of church.” I never felt that way. But I also never felt like it was a hindrance. I home taught. I was trying to fulfill whatever calling I might have had to the best that I could. So when I was able to do something I didn’t shun away from it. It was only that I had to be at [stadium], playing, or being at the game. I just had the kind of attitude, it wasn’t an attitude – my feelings were that I wasn’t going to let it affect me to where I thought I just have to get to church – this is killing me doing this. I never felt that way. I just tried to make it a good thing – doing the right thing – and I knew it wouldn’t last forever. I mean, if you get to stay in the NFL for five years you have had a pretty good career. … So I knew it wasn’t going to be a long thing and so when it was over I knew it was over and I had to step up with my church things a little better I guess.

What counsel would you give a member of the church going into the NFL?
I really believe that I think it’s ok, I think it’s ok, I think it’s something that you’ve earned – not earned like you have the right, but this is what you do, this is how you’re going to make your living, but don’t take it for granted that because you’re doing this you use this now as an excuse that now that I’m an NFL guy I can go see R-rated movies, or I can do this, or I can look at that. Those things don’t change. You just have to make sure you live your life clean, morally clean, and if your bump in the road is getting paid playing on Sunday than that’s it and I think you’re doing ok. I definitely feel you’ve got to pray; … it’s definitely going to be your own choice.
Interviewee #12

Tell me about life growing up, about the church, and about Sundays.
My parents were both great examples of church membership, they were not perfect, but my dad was always very active with his priesthood and trying to do what’s right, offering blessings, doing that kind of thing. They made it work … We went on vacations to see church historical sites, shared family histories of stalwart members in our ancestry.

Did you ever play sports on Sundays growing up?
It never was a big deal until I started playing on some All-Star basketball teams. … my parents left the decision up to me, and I made the decision to play. It’s not something I regret necessarily. … I decided to play on Sundays. It was just kind of one of those conflicts, and I think as a family my parents would always travel with us to these tournaments and I do remember going to church and then playing. …

Tell me about the recruiting process for college.
To be honest with you, playing on Sunday was one of the top 10 concerns I had, may be one of the top five concerns. … Playing on the Sabbath was the big con. It wasn’t being away from home or going to this keep in school, I didn’t really care about that. Sundays were, football was going to be encroaching on Sundays, that was a big one. I made it a matter of fasting and prayer and I felt inspired that I made the right choice. In fact it was confirmed. … I considered the missionary side of things, the school, the better football, and then the Sunday thing. Even on my mission I questioned things, because it was Sunday that was sticking out. … Then I went on a mission and nine months into it I started having these doubts about my decision to choose [university]. It was probably the great deceiver putting doubts into my mind, but I made it a matter of prayer again on my mission. Elder Wirthlin came to my mission, and we were going through shaking hands, I shook his hand and he said, … do you play football? And I said, yes. And he said, do you play for us at [university]? And I said no. And he said, where do you play? And I said [university outside of Utah]. And he said, “even better.” It just timed up perfectly where I had this doubt, and put it to bed right there. That was an answer to my prayers, and it was the Lord’s way of putting me at peace with that decision…You do your best and the Lord understands individual situations. That is how the college thing played out. Actually we had a change of coaches, and I was in this leadership position my senior year. I brought it up to the coach that we not practice on Sunday and he did away with practices on Sunday. …

Where did you serve your mission?
…I think the mission for athletes is paramount for people to stay active in the church. I’m not saying that if you don’t go on a mission then you’ll be inactive later in life, but seven of us were LDS and only two of us served the whole time and we are the only two active in the church. The mission was a big part of that. It’s wrapped into this commitment. I knew I was going to go on a mission. There were schools I had to pass up because they wouldn’t deal with a mission.
How often did you attend the church during the season your first year in the NFL?
So at [city] I was at church for every home game for a little bit. [my wife] could stay for three hours. And then she would come to the game after church. [city] was just perfect for that. Then I got picked up by [NFL team] and we lived 40 minutes north of the city. Everything was downtown and we lived with family. I didn’t make it to church there but my wife did. [NFL team] was similar, where my wife would go to church. …

How did your time in the NFL affect you spiritually?
I feel like having to work on the Sabbath was not good for my spirit. Not that it was detrimental. But I have made this commitment in the last four months to be better and I have realized that the Sabbath is a powerful powerful way to re-center your life on a weekly basis. And it has taken me [#] years out of the NFL to get into this rhythm. … So do I regret anything of the NFL? Not one bit. Was it a challenge? Yes it was. I respect the heck out of Eli Herring. I would never call him crazy for doing it. Just like I would hope that he would respect the heck out of me, knowing I tried to do it the right way. Not to say that I am perfect by any means. I am nowhere near, I married way above myself, I applied the atonement to my life multiple times.

What advice do you give someone about Sunday play?
I think the Lord understands that this is a world where there are conflicts aplenty. I think the Lord understands our hearts, that if we try to make space for him and we tried to contribute and to serve others then he understands that. That has been my experience.

Interviewee #13

Tell me about growing up, about the church, and what Sundays were like.
When I was a boy, … we couldn’t watch TV on Sundays, music wasn’t played on Sundays in my home, and then I would go to the fireside at my Bishop’s house and he had a basketball hoop in the carport and all the kids showed up an hour before the fireside and we would play ball. I couldn’t understand why the bishop allowed them to play basketball on Sundays. … When you get to the Division I level, everyone entertained the idea of getting to the National Football League. You sort of sweep the Sunday thing under the rug. Because it will be a profession, but it will not be a profession you will have through your 40s and 50s that you will retire from and go be a mission president. First of all, the chances of you getting there are very slim. And then if you get there. The chances of you staying are more slim, and having a long extended career, very few people do that. … I hadn’t read the book of Mormon before [university], and I read it the second semester I got here and I got a testimony and I started to go to church on Sundays. The spirit of the Sabbath was never really, I just went to church because I knew I needed to be better than I was. … the Sabbath evolved for me over time. Although I had a testimony and I went on a mission and came back and got married and raised children, we went to church, but what we were doing on the Sabbath was very much what everyone else did. The reality is that I probably didn’t have a complete and full testimony of the Sabbath oddly enough until I went to the NFL.
And it didn’t happen right away either, because when I got there it was like leaving home again as a 17-year-old. … When the season ended, year after year, I started to notice the contrast of the Sundays where I played football, from mid-July to early January, and we started to go to church as a family, I started to notice the contrast in my life. Little by little. …I didn’t see much wrong with what I was doing. In fact, what I was doing I felt was a noble thing. I was active in the church, I was speaking of firesides when I could, I was being a good latter-day Saint, a faithful husband, and member of the church, I was well-regarded even by some of the leaders of the church who I would see on occasion at various events. They would thank me for being a good latter-day Saint. So I felt like I was always doing the right thing, but Sundays were increasingly over time, I could not reconcile, it was harder to reconcile my Sabbath worship. But I understand who, my father-in-law, who is a [profession], always said to me, listen, you don’t have to feel guilty about it, and he was a Bishop, and he would tell me, look on Sundays there are some professions that require you to work on Sundays. You’re fortunate that yours is seasonal. The other five or six months of the year you get to go to church. So when you are able to go to church, I think the Lord expects you to be at church. But when you can’t, I think the Lord understands. … So my epiphany came late in my football career. … So towards the end of my career, this is what we did. We would come home on Sundays, and we used to go after games with our friends to have dinner, there were restaurants that you could go to and nobody paid, the tab was always picked up by the restaurants. They were more than happy that you would come and eat at the restaurant. We started realizing even if we’re playing football on Sundays, let’s not go out to eat on Sundays, let’s go home, and let’s treat the Sabbath, despite the fact that we, even if I’m required by my profession to be, to play in a Stadium with 80,000 people screaming, when it’s over, let’s still treat the day like it’s the Sabbath and let’s come home and gather our children and kneel together, let’s pray, let’s do Sunday things. Sundays were then completely different near the latter end of my career. ...

Did your mission change the way you thought about your future as far as the NFL?
I don’t think so… I didn’t love the Sabbath, I didn’t crave it until Sundays weren’t available to me as they were to the rank-and-file of the church. It wasn’t until then that I craved the sacrament, I craved the sacrament… My experience on the Sabbath evolved. Like most things in life when they are taken away from you, you grow to appreciate it. If you’ve had it all your life, you like it and hopefully you appreciate it, but the full appreciation for anything is not there until it’s taken from you… So when something is taken away from you, you realize how precious it is, and you crave it, you crave it. … and then you realize that a lot of things were being taken from you for the experience of being able to play in the NFL.

How many times did you go to church during your first season in the NFL?
… If you are playing on a team that is a veteran team, coaches tend to give you more latitude. If you’re on a young team, coaches will schedule every hour of the day because they don’t want guys running around getting drunk and going to strip bars and getting into a fight at some bar. So they schedule meetings, they over schedule you if you are on a young team. Veteran guys want time with families, they have kids at home. Young guys, single guys who have tons of money and nothing to do, it’s a deadly combination. ... My rookie year I played for a guy named [name],
who later became [coaching staff] at [university]. He was [religion]. At training camp, he gave us half a day off on Sundays. We didn’t do anything until noon. And he would post on the bulletin board a list of all the churches around. He told us that he was giving us Sundays off in the morning because some of you are God-fearing. Some of you are not and you don’t believe in God, and that’s okay too, sleep in, watch a game, go play golf. But those who are faith-based here are all the churches, find one, go there and worship. I’m giving you Sunday mornings off to do that. That is rare. That’s who I went to when I left [university]. Other places, not so much.

**Interviewee #14**

**What were Sundays like growing up?**

My Sundays were, we would go to church every Sunday. We didn’t take days off or anything like that. Sundays we’d get up in the morning; usually church was early. We’d go to church and then sometimes we’d go out to Sunday brunch or lunch after church, but most of the time we’d come home. My dad was a [profession] so he didn’t work on Sundays.

**Were sports played on Sundays moving into your teenage years?**

When I was growing up they weren’t played on Sundays, but I remember when I was 13 they decided to have a Sunday league for 13, 14, 15 year olds. So since most of the 13 year olds didn’t play in the games they took all the 13 year olds and put them on four teams and they would play games on Sundays. My parents actually thought it was a bad idea. They didn’t like the idea of playing on Sunday. I played anyway, but they didn’t like it. They were mad at the league and talked to the league about it. That was the first time that I saw Sunday play.

**Did your wife give you any counsel or hesitation to go into the NFL?**

It was a good career. For me it was a good opportunity. I didn’t know how long I would play. I got drafted by [NFL team]. It was something I was going to do. I didn’t have any reservations about it at all.

**Could you guess how many times you made it to church in-season during your career?**

Probably none because we would go to the hotel the night before a game and we would be sequestered on the road or at home. So during the season, if we played a Monday night game at home we’d probably practice on Sunday. I may have in [#] years a handful of times, 2, 3, or 4, something like that.

**To what degree if any would you say playing on Sunday affected your spirituality?**

I think it helped me individually because I played on a team of 55 guys that were all different religions. When we were home or on the road at a hotel we would have a nondenominational chapel every Sunday and I would go to that chapel and I would participate… I think that seeing and listening to all these different religions talking cuz when we would go out of town they would have a prominent pastor or priest or entertainer that was religious come talk to our team.
At home our team chaplain gave the talk. On the road we would get someone from their town. So I think it was cool listening and seeing how others worshipped. Then to see my teammates whom I loved and see where they were in their spiritual life. It was very, very interesting.

**What was the biggest thing to maintain spirituality?**
Probably my wife. I didn’t really have a good righteous atmosphere. We would pray but it wasn’t consistent family prayer. We rarely held FHE like you should. On occasion we would do something. ...Thurs or Fri I would get home at 7:30 or 8 and we would do something as a family, so we always had a Family Night. Scripture study: we didn’t study the scriptures as a family. I dabbled but I didn’t have real strong holy habits of study. I kind of had to acquire those through the years. It was part of my spiritual experience.

**What would your advice be to a Latter-day Saint going into the NFL?**
…It’s a rationalization for sure. … you can’t balance it. If you’re working on Sunday you’re out of balance. You can’t balance it. You might think you can balance it, but you’re not balancing because the things they are doing they are against the doctrine. Now like I say, you can rationalize and do the best you can, but you’re out of balance.

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**Interviewee #15**

**Did you grow up LDS?**
Yes. My dad was inactive, my mother was active, when she was off work we would go to church and when she was working we would rarely go to church. My grandfather was the backbone of our whole family, he would take us to church when our parents couldn’t. …

**Did you serve a mission? And what were Sundays like at [university]?**
I decided to go on a mission because of the examples of [name] and [name]. They were mentoring me, I know they were just doing all that missionary stuff that they were doing when they came back from their missions, because they had me deep into getting into the church and figuring it out and finding out what the gospel was all about. I was into it but not as much as committing to going on a mission. Even though I planned on going on a mission I didn’t know it until that year. My [#] year I committed to going on a mission. It took [time] until I actually left. The mission was great, I had a great time, I learned a lot, I grew, my perspective is totally different, …. I didn’t play on Sundays until I got drafted.

**Did anyone give you any counsel about playing in the NFL?**
… nobody really mentioned anything about playing on Sunday. When I was young people would be talking about it, but they always brought up the situation with Steve young. It was always the Steve young thing. Steve young doing missionary work and playing on Sunday and representing us. Having to play Sunday was different, it was fun but different.
Did anything change about church attendance over your [#] years in the NFL?
… So I would go to church every Sunday, whether it was ours or another service by a chaplain. They mixed it up for us with different kinds of preachers and different denominations.

What helped the most to maintain your spirituality during your time in the NFL?
Reading my Scriptures. My wife was a big part of that. But it was really reading my Scriptures. It was cool to see guys on my team, on Sunday they were praising the big man upstairs. Right before the game you could feel the outward praise, everyone talking like that. It was different, as Mormons we are reserved, we keep it within ourselves. But with these guys you could feel the emotion when they would ask the Lord for help. On game day everyone was on a spiritual high, we had a team prayer, and then everyone was saying individual prayers on game day. It was cool to feel that dynamic, way different from what I’ve learned growing up. They were playing their gospel music and I loved it. Scriptures were the most consistent for me. Really reading them, trying to read every day was something me and my wife always had as a goal. That is what kept me in. There is a lot of weird stuff that goes on in the NFL. You can be praising Jesus on Sunday then going to a party right after, like a lot of my teammates did. …

How do you think playing in the NFL affected you spiritually?
You get tempted. I wanted something, and I could get it. Grow up wishing you had the cars, the clothes, and then you get to the NFL and you can have all that. It affected us a little bit, but helped us financially. We were grateful. For me there was one point when we just needed to be humble about this, not showy. Kinda got sucked into it a little bit. But I was thankful to have [name] there, he was a big part of me staying humble, telling me that this could be gone in a second. ... I think overall it was okay just because my wife was there to keep me in check. I think I was the same, and I would get a reality check from [name] and my wife when I was tempted. I think I was consistent from before the NFL to now.

Interviewee #16

Growing up, what was religion like in the home?
… we were active and inactive our whole lives. My mom is still active, my dad is not, or maybe is as of late, but we don’t talk about it because it’s not a topic we talk about. So yeah, we went every so often, I got baptized at the regular age. But it was never like some families I know where it is of the utmost importance. It was never quite like that. ... We grew up typical, tried not to use bad words, my parents didn’t drink or smoke. Looking back now, I think we did a fairly okay job living up to the standards of the church. But maybe it wasn’t taught like in the church way, maybe just what my mom wanted. We still watched TV on Sundays. I don’t know if that’s not the rule on Sunday, but I have friends who couldn’t do that on Sundays. We tried not to shop on Sundays, sometimes it happened.
Did you end up serving a mission?
No. I never went on a mission and it was never stressed or pressured from inside the family but there were lots of external pressures. The old guys in the ward telling me I had to go. I didn’t get it as bad but my older brother did, they really beat him up about it. But once I came along and had the football direction, and his prior experience, I only had a few guys that talked about it, never got it bad. I got off easy.

Your first year in the NFL, how many times did you go to church during the season?
During the season probably was once a month for me. But I know the other LDS guys on the team went more. Again, I just never had as strong a testimony as everyone else. And the other thing was, it was so important to me that I didn’t want to risk driving out there and being late. Waking up earlier than I needed to, and not playing good. It was that intense. I’m trying to paint the picture of how important football was for me.

Overall, how was your religiosity going into the NFL and as you finished up?
For me it was probably the same. There were some things that were quite obvious to me, but college was similar exposure to personalities and lifestyles of other people that aren’t LDS. So I never felt culture shock, thinking it over, you’re sheltered by living in [state]. But I knew I didn’t want certain things in my life, regardless of church, I just wasn’t into that. I’ve never been affected by other people, just because I don’t care. They can do what they want. I never felt pressured to alter my spirituality. It didn’t really alter or change anything by playing in the NFL.

How would you describe your church activity now?
…I never really had a testimony, because it is something I just did and I was always so focused on football. So I am actually still in the process of figuring out where I’m at…. I had never even read the book of Mormon, the book we base our religion on. I thought I should probably read it and see, we actually just finished now and we’re going back to reread it all. We also read the Bible. It was like, we have to figure it out. When you’re little it’s easy to do it because your parents do it, but I guess now I’m not a baby I should probably figure out what we think. So that’s where we’re at now, trying to figure it out. It’s intense. Because football in the past had been so important for me. Trying to learn about the church is consuming now. There is so much more material. I’m trying to learn about Jesus and get to know him. In the past I never would think about it like that. I still don’t even know what I think, but I know about Jesus, I’ve read the Gospels four times now and I think I probably should have done this a long time ago. How lame does that sound! It’s kind of cool now.

Interviewee #17

Tell me what life was like growing up and what the church was like.
My parents were both LDS, very active, my dad was in the bishopric growing up. My mom was diagnosed with [sickness]… my dad started going further away from the church. My mom was
always our rock. She passed away …. My dad didn’t care if I went to church or not. It was difficult at times, sometimes I would just drag my little brother to church, but we were active.

Tell me about getting married.
I don’t think I was where I needed to be at that time. Luckily I met the love of my life, she is awesome. But life happened and then we tried to get back on track. I’m grateful for the atonement. Now we’re trying to do what’s right and leaving the past in the past.

What counsel did you receive about playing in the NFL?
[name] really guided me. He was a huge factor for me trying to do what was right. If I didn’t have that guidance it would be a lot harder. He showed you that you can still be in the locker room but to do your own thing and to leave situations when they arose, because they always did.

What about the off-season?
I went to church weekly during the off-season. I married right! We always went.

What helped you most stay balanced as a Latter-day Saint?
I think just having a testimony. My testimony is simple. When I’m reading my scriptures, when I’m saying my prayers, when I’m going to church, when I’m doing all I can I feel happy. When I’m not doing those things, there is a big void. I think people can feel it. I think having a personal relationship with your heavenly father and with Jesus are a big, big deal. …

Tell me about your church activity now.
I love it. We are teaching the CTR six class. My daughter just got baptized. We are very active. The understanding and closeness we have as a family by trying to do what’s right and by becoming more spiritual, I’m sold on being active. A lot of times I wasn’t where I needed to be. And I think a lot of people don’t understand that, when you are away from the church it easier to stay away. But when you’re in the thick of it, trying to do what’s right, you can’t imagine going back to that feeling again, …

How do you think playing in the NFL affected you spiritually?
I was at [NFL team] for one year and I could feel my decline happening more because I was the only LDS player on the team. I wasn’t able to take the sacrament. Well, I guess I could have, but I didn’t have that support that I had in [city]. …

Interviewee #18

Did you playing sports on Sundays growing up?
No. Sports were always Fridays and Saturdays. It never bothered me playing on Sundays. The only time I ever played on Sundays was playing in the NFL.
Tell me about being married.
… The temple was a big deal. We got married in the [name] Temple. Just because you get into the temple, it’s still a lot of work, today I have to work hard, fight for my family. …

How many times did you attend church during your first season in the NFL?
… You have to manage it. You have to make time for your beliefs. … We also had Bible study with our team. That was cool because we all shared our thoughts. We all believed in Jesus Christ as our Savior, of course we all have different beliefs. I had a roommate once ask me why I went to Bible study when I didn’t believe the same as everyone else there, and I said, just because they are not LDS doesn’t mean that they aren’t God’s children. … So I would go to Bible study during away games and church for home games.

Did you hold a calling during the season or off-season?
I was the young men’s advisor. I love the young men’s. I wasn’t the most active guy, I have issues of my own, but I would invite the young men to do activities at my house. The young men noticed when I wasn’t coming to church and they would ask me if I would be there the next Sunday. Being with the youth was a big deal, because the youth are the future.

How was your spirituality affected by your time in the NFL?
I would be a fool if I said it hurt or helped me, because it was both. It was a learning experience. I was inactive and active. It was a give and take thing. But I knew that it was the right thing to do, and that’s all that mattered to me. There are families and individuals going through the same thing at this time and I can totally understand. Work, relationships, obligations that interfere with your religion and belief, but in the back of everybody’s mind I believe that they actually know what the right thing to do is. It did interfere and it didn’t at the same time. Because I had to find myself and that’s what it’s all about. We are not perfect, we are not the best at everything, but we are good at things. But it all comes down to each individual to make their decision and in the back of their head, in their heart and mind, in their soul they know what the right thing is. Adults are sometimes like kids, we need the right person to sometimes guide us along. …

What helped you most maintain your spirituality?
If you are raised the right way and you know that there is a Savior and a God, then everything else goes with the flow.

Interviewee #19

Tell me about religion and how Sundays were growing up.
… We were raised in the church and fairly active growing up. … We played sports growing up. About seventh-grade we were playing more competitively and games happened to be on Sunday. For about a year we tried that out and participated, but then my parents and I talked about it and decided that it was something I shouldn’t do. So I joined a less competitive league where games were on Saturdays. I was still able to play but didn’t have to worry about Sunday play…
Did you serve a mission and how did that shape your spirituality?
I served in [name of mission]. ... My dad didn’t serve just because at the time it wasn’t required or expected like it is now, so I didn’t have that example but I thought about it, prayed about it my freshman year of college when all my buddies were putting in their papers and I decided that I wanted to do the same. I really do credit [university] for making the decision to go on a mission.

What advice did you receive from family, or priesthood leaders about playing in the NFL?
It’s an exciting thing, which, as an athlete you are shooting to play at this level. So before you know what you’re getting into, that is your goal. To arrive at the doorstep and then decide, no I don’t want to do this. It wasn’t something I was going to turn down. ...

Did playing on Sundays ever make you hesitate about the NFL?
No, it came as part of the territory I think. Aspiring to play the top-level was a worthy goal and having games on Sunday was not ideal. But there are other occupations on Sundays that seem to be more acceptable. If you’re a surgeon and have to work on Sundays it seems to be more acceptable than being an athlete or an entertainer. …

How would you say not being able to go to church every Sunday affected you spiritually?
I don’t know if it affected me, I’m sure in some way it did. I appreciated it more when I had the opportunity to attend. The first Sunday back in [state] I did all three hours, it was a nice experience, to be relaxed and not worry about going and playing a game. But for the most part, missing multiple weeks in a row, there is obviously a difference when you can attend and renew your covenants. When you have more kids you want to be there with the kids and help out and be an example.

All things considered how would you say your time in the NFL affected your spirituality?
By being able to go outside of Utah and being in a place where there aren’t as many members, where the morals are a bit less, it can turn you away from your standards or actually strengthen you. Having a good support system from my wife and our family, we did have some good friends who were not members of the church who were teammates, they were good Christian people and we made good friends with them, we didn’t believe all the same things, but we could be examples to them and be friends with them. So actually I think it was strengthened by having my standards tested a little bit. It confirmed my desired to do what I think is right. As far as some of the things you hear and see, the things that happen not only in the NFL but other places, they are things you deal with and try not to dwell on them. You are in the locker room and hear things day in and day out and there are things that linger in your mind, but overall I think coming out and trying to stay strong in the church, I think I’m better off for having done that.
Interviewee #20

What was growing up like, and what were Sundays like growing up?
... Sundays were sacred, we would go to church every single Sunday. …

Tell me about the factors that led you to college and how you chose.
Motivation to go to college was from my parents. I was a kid and didn’t think that much about education, but they pushed education hard on us. I pushed football because that’s what I wanted to do and it led me to [college] before I went to [university]. So I spent two years in [state] ... I didn’t do anything on Sundays at that college. I had no obligations on Sundays, our head coach was LDS, we didn’t do anything on Sundays. It was an easy transition because it was just like home. …

What counsel did you receive about playing in the NFL and playing on Sundays?
None. I didn’t even think twice about not playing on Sundays, because it never was brought up. You are so busy thinking about just trying to make it that playing on Sundays wasn’t even a question because that’s like dreaming too far, because the NFL is such a cutthroat business that you can’t think that too far ahead, you just want to make it. There was no guidance. Every focus was on how to get there first.

Describe your church activity.
I’ve had lots of ups and downs. I’ve seen the world in different forms and I’m trying to live it in a different standard, and with the church there is not a lot of gray area, there’s lots of black and white. The standard is set very high so I’ve had a lot of ups and downs. I’m not giving up on the church. I’m still happy …

What counsel would you give a member of the church going into the NFL?
Even the church tells us that one of the most important things that we need to look at is families. As men they are providers for the family, and some employment is on Sundays. The NFL is just like that. It’s a job. A lot look at it as a game, because it is a game but this is our livelihood. It’s not an excuse, but even church leaders say that employment is very important. As long as a player will keep that perspective and keep the gospel and not fall into temptations, the demon ways that are glorified by this profession, as long as you try your best to stay away from that and understand that the reason they are working on Sundays is it is a job, it’s a thin line. Because you have to think of it as a game or you won’t play for fun. My advice is to understand those perspectives, it’s a game but it’s a job. Take it that way and provide for your family and make a good example for our church and your own family. It’s kind of like, the ox is in the mire.
Employment is employment and if that is their talent that God gave them and it just so happens that the world we live in now decides to do it on Sunday, you need to use your talent in that way and think of it in that perspective.
Interviewee #21

Tell me about growing up, did you grow up LDS, what Sundays were like?
… Athletics were always a big part of growing up. We were always active in church, my mom and dad very active, very very good people, raised us believers, and my siblings have all done great that way, my brothers have all stayed very committed to the gospel. But we watched sports on Sunday, we would worship and do all that we needed to do on Sunday. But my dad would come home on Sunday after his worship and do his missionary work, and some other things, but it was a long week and he was a hard worker, … and Sunday was a chance for him to put his feet up and relax, at least for a minute. … We would all rally together and watch Sunday afternoon basketball and football and we loved it, and it was our time together. We kept the Sabbath day holy at least in our perspective in our house, but it certainly included sports.

Tell me about the college recruiting process.
… When I was 17 I knew who I was, what I wanted and I knew at least I felt like I knew it was true. So I had been greatly influenced by all these wonderful people.

How did the mission affect your college football years?
… I hadn’t expected to play in the NFL that year. I only aspired to be [position] at [university].... When the NFL thing came up it was kind of like icing on the cake. Really, really exciting but I don’t know that I was prepared for it or had set my heart on it. So it was a great blessing and opportunity to do that, so that’s how it all transpired.

What counsel did you receive about going into the NFL?
For us as members of the church, For Mitt Romney to run for president, there has to be some Sunday activities associated with being president of the United States, so I had to observe the Sabbath the best I could. I had to try and figure out if I could take the sacrament. And many times I couldn’t pull it off, I couldn’t figure it out. One time I was playing the [NFL team], trying to do the right thing, and the hotel manager was a BYU graduate, Mormon guy. He pulled me aside and asked if I wanted to sacrament tomorrow. I said yes I do. He told me he would arrange it. He asked me when. I told him it would have to be early probably at 6:30 in the morning. He told me he would have two missionaries to meet me in a room with bread and water waiting for us. So I was coming down the elevator at 6:20 in the morning with my suit and tie, all by myself, and there was Gadianton robber stuff going on all around. I remember going to the room he told me about, and there were the two assistants to the president, waiting, all excited, and they knelt and one blessed the bread and passed it to me, all three of us took it, and then the water, and they shared a Scripture. And then I went on with the game that day. If I could find a way to do it, I would find a way.

What helped you most during your NFL years to maintain spirituality?
… [wife] had a calling in the Young women’s, and we had started building friendships and relationships with lots of good people out there, and got integrated into the ward. It was our choice to do that. We could’ve said, no we are really cool, we are in the NFL and only associate
with others like us, so keep your distance. But we wanted to associate with good people, and got involved, and they looked after us and took care of us. … Our first year in the NFL was a very good year, probably the best in our marriage. …

Was there anything about the NFL that affected your faith?
… I met some good awesome Christian people. The NFL paints a picture, a negative picture, but half of the guys are good Christian people, married, trying to do the right things. Most players are just trying to make it, stay in the league. Every Sunday morning, we had chapel. We had a team chaplain, who gave us spiritual messages every Sunday morning. It was evangelical stuff, but I would go and share a Scripture if they asked, I would voice my opinion, I would say a prayer if they would ask, I was very consistent in that setting. And then before games we would go into the locker room, hold hands, and pray. Prayers were very different, someone would start and then another guy would say part of a prayer and another guy would continue, and then someone would eventually conclude. If you are asked to conclude the prayer, it was kind of a big deal. I remember getting asked a few times by the captains of the team. They started respecting you as a believer, and as somebody that was a God-fearing man. Over time they realized, this is who he is and we kind of like it. And we respect that, and we are going to try to foster an environment for him so he can do what he needs to do. I was never judgmental, they could do their thing and I was still their friend, I would laugh, and have a good time. It was a great experience. I don’t have any regrets as I look back at it. I met some wonderful people.

Interviewee #22

Tell me where you’re from, about religion growing up, and what Sundays were like.
… I went to church with friends and my mom went to church but my dad would never be there. He supported me in my mission. I decided in junior high that I was going to go on a mission. Very loving very supportive parents. …

To what degree did seminary impact the rest of your spiritual life?
No knock against you, but my influence was mainly through my friends. ... It was really the out-of-school relationships I had, what we were doing on our free time, how we behaved on weekends, whether we chose to go to a party where there was drinking or not. Instead we were strictly involved in sports to stay out of trouble and other recreational activities like skiing. On a Saturday night we would go to the sports hall and play basketball. That was one thing I think really kept us away from environments we shouldn’t have been in.

Describe your church activity level in college.
I was active. I held callings like Sunday school teacher, I went to the singles Ward. I would miss an occasional Sunday here and there. It was really the rigors of personal life, sometimes I couldn’t get around to it because of the game, even though they were on Saturdays. But to be honest with you sometimes my body hurt so bad I couldn’t get up. I tried to go as much as I
could, I think I went the majority of the time, because honestly it helped me. I aligned my goals, and I really don’t think I would’ve gotten where I was able to without goals and aligning those goals with prayer and holding myself accountable through prayer and whatnot. I felt like I truly got another boost from heavenly father, and he helped me out whatever I was going through. College football’s tough, the NFL is tough and you need as much support as you can get. You look for that in all directions, and that was one direction that definitely helped me out.

What was the attitude about you being in the NFL from church members in Philadelphia? Our ward was totally different, it was not your typical Utah award. The church outside of Utah is a different planet. They are usually more understanding. Not once did I get frowned upon or looked at oddly by somebody in the church. Maybe they just understood it. They were good and not judging.

All things considered, how did your experience in the NFL affect you spiritually? Overall I think it was positive. I was able to see so much more that was out there. ... That experience in the NFL broadened my view of how great people are in general. Spiritually I think that is a huge attribute to refine. Had I been able to go a little bit more to church probably would’ve helped. But there are ways to make it work besides just going to church. I understand how the church works and it’s important. ... my spirituality may have suffered a little bit. ... But now in hindsight I feel like it was a great benefit to me. ...

What helped you most maintain your spirituality? My deep down testimony, just always knowing. I never really denied the truth. It’s like being a missionary, you asked people to read and gain their own testimony. Can’t deny the feeling you have. There is always a strength, the knowledge and power. My wife was a huge reason to stay as straight as I could. My wife and kids.

Interviewee #23

Tell me where you’re from, what religion was like growing up. … My dad is a convert, my mom grew up a member of the church. … They were pretty active until I was maybe 10. He fell away from the church … My mom stayed active, stayed strong, made sure we always went to church, which we always did. We never missed church activities. … I came back and stayed pretty active for the most part while I was in school at [university]. I was married and then got divorced. I was married pretty quick off my mission and then got divorced … I kind of fell away and became inactive after the divorce and was pretty inactive for a while. … I didn’t care, had no motivation to go to church. I didn’t push myself as hard as I should have. When I left [university] I signed … So I was out there by myself and went to church a few times, it was just a lot harder being away from home and being homesick and trying to go to church. But at the same time going to church was what made me feel better. It was something familiar. … I started getting active again, worked with my bishop and stake president.
so that I could be in good standing with the church and worthy again. I did really good for the first couple years … The last few years of my playing years I started to fall back, I kind of got lost and carried away with the limelight of things. I got too worried about being a people pleaser, not just with friends and teammates, but my own family and friends back here, stuff like that. I was easily influenced, blinded by a lot of dumb things I put myself in a pretty bad situation where I put my marriage on the line plenty of times. My wife stayed pretty active the whole time and if we were playing home games she made sure that she and the kids made it to the church during the away games when they didn’t come to my games. She was always strong. … I let the world get the best of me, went inactive again and I’m kind of slowly making my way back now.

**What advice did you receive about playing in the NFL? About playing on Sundays?**

I only heard about playing on Sundays in high school. I heard about Steve young and stuff like that. But when the time came and I knew I had an opportunity to play in the NFL, people knew that I was going to go regardless. But they knew that it was so that I could take care of my family, because of the situation I had been in growing up in, we had always been poor. We had always lived in a one or two bedroom apartment and we had always struggled. My mom has never had a good job; we were often on food stamps. We’ve lived with family members in their houses. It was a struggle. So everybody that knew me and knew what my family had been through, knew that regardless of playing on Sundays I was going to go. I wanted to take care of my family. …

**What part did playing on Sundays have in your falling back into prior temptations?**

It had a little bit of an effect. It was more of me, … I don’t think it had anything to do with not going to church because obviously I’d been on a mission and I knew what it takes and what needed to be done. The other two guys that were on my team didn’t go to church either, so I think it was more on me and my own decisions, some things that I was going through. Looking back, I was so determined to play in the NFL and take care of my family, I think it got to the point that it started to become stressful because all of this money started coming. … My sister said it best, she said I was a people pleaser, I worry too much about other people and their feelings about myself and my family. I’m stubborn and prideful, and I do whatever I want to do. Not being able to go to church, and obviously not doing what I was supposed be doing as far as reading my scriptures and praying every day and stuff like that, it’s so hard to get back in and so easy to fall back. As soon as I fell back it was a snowball effect, and it got worse and worse. …

**Are you and your wife sealed in the temple?**

No. And that is my fault. When you start to fall back, you fall way back. My bishop and other bishops have told me that it’s just like playing football, when you go out for football and train, you have to work out every day, training every day, keep your body in shape. As soon as you take days off, and take weeks off, it’s hard to come back. … There is a lot of work still to be done. That is the main goal, now that I have another kid, we don’t want to be in the situation of not being sealed. It should have been done a long time ago, but I set it back. That’s the main goal, that’s the only goal.
Interviewee #24

Were you LDS growing up? What were Sundays like growing up?

… I went to church every Sunday. … Waking up in the morning. I had to iron everyone’s shirts the night before trying to get ready for Sunday. Then we went to church and came back home and that’s when our big family dinners were. Church and then come home and kick back.

What about church after your rookie season?

In season it’s pretty consistent: Come Sunday we have meetings in the morning. The night before we have meetings at the hotel we stay at. So I don’t have the free time to go out and find a church or to go to church. There is no possible way I can go to church on Sundays during the season because I have to be two places at the same time. Off season definitely of course. We have off-season training but we’re off on the weekends so I’m going to church on the weekend. If I have a free Sunday during football season then I go to church. I look forward to not having things on Sunday, because I don’t get to go so often. I just have everything on Sundays.

In your own words can you describe your church activity level now?

It’s at a high, being in the off-season, I have that opportunity to go to church, especially with my family. Like I said, I’m not missing church in the off-season because I don’t have to work. So I take advantage of the times of I get to go to church. I’m on a spiritual high now, especially preparing to go to the Temple. There’s a lot of struggles that come with trying to going to the temple. I still need to keep that focus and faith.

All things considered, how has the NFL affected you spiritually?

My first year it killed me, my wife noticed it first and I didn’t notice at the time. Spiritually I was kinda dead, I’m not gonna lie. I tried to spend as much time as I could with the missionaries. I took them out to eat when I could, but that was me trying to search for more blessings, more of a spiritual side because I know I lacked a lot, not going to church and stuff like that. … My first year was hard. It was a struggle for me. Spiritually it was a challenge. The NFL comes with a lot of baggage. You can either take this stuff in or do your own thing, try to continue on with what you’re trying to do. It got to me.

What has helped you the most during your time in the NFL?

Praying, especially when you don’t feel like you can’t or don’t want to. That’s what helps with me. I hated it but my wife would always try to read scriptures with me. I got irritated by it but after the fact that were done reading it, you don’t even know why you are mad in the first place, everything’s cool. My wife was a big factor in my spirituality. She would try to make me happy and keep me spiritually going.

What counsel would you give a Latter-day Saint going into the NFL?

I guess I’d say being a member of the church, don’t forget where your roots stand in the church or where your place is in the church, or where the church is in your heart. Like my first year, it killed me because I was distracted, I’m not gonna lie. It was my fault, the thing was that I let it distract me. I embraced it. You either embrace it or you reject it. But I embraced it and just went with it and thought it was okay. But I knew I was off. Never forget where your roots stand in the church. …
Tell me about life growing up, what Sundays were like.

… Every Sunday we were at church no matter if we were on vacation or visiting other people or if somebody was sick, the family would go and mom and dad would come back after sacrament meeting and take care of whoever was sick. Church was really important to our family and one thing we did do was Sundays was one of the days my dad was home. He worked a lot during the week when I was younger and he was gone a lot so when he came home on the weekends, Saturdays and Sundays were our sports days with dad. If we had church late on Sundays, either 11 or 1, we would usually be at the baseball field in the morning hitting balls and working on stuff before church. Then we would come home have lunch and go to church. Or if we had an early church then after lunch or in the evening we would go as a family. It was always a family thing. Mom would walk the track with my sister while me and my brother would play football or catch with my dad. Or my mom would be in the outfield with my sister while we would hit balls. Church was always very important to us, going on missions and all that stuff was a very, very important part of our family.

Were there organized sports on Sundays growing up?

… A lot of times my baseball team, the travel teams would have games on Sundays and tournaments on Sundays. But I would play the Friday and Saturday games and not the Sunday games. Or I would have passing league football tournaments, one time me and my friends signed up for a camp and it was a Friday, Saturday, Sunday tournament, we played the Friday Saturday games and then when Sunday came we forfeited. I never had participated in a Sunday sporting event until the NFL.

Your first year in the NFL how many times did you attend church during the season?

During the season my first year, where my Stadium was at in relation to the chapel it was too far apart. Sometimes I thought that if I had a later game I could make it, but … there was no way. The only time I made church was during my bye week.

Describe your church activity during the off-season.

I was always there. We tried to be very involved. When we first got married, a Bishop from the ward that we became a part of, the married couples Ward told us that he wanted to challenge us to participate in as many events as we can, even the small things during the week, just doing things together will help you. We tried to live by that. So we were there every Sunday and trying to do things during the week with the ward. …

How did not going to church affect you religiously?

I think it definitely makes a difference, I think when you are not able to be there every Sunday… I will say that it is not easy. You definitely can feel a lack of, the difference of being in a church and being in the building and being around fellow members, participating and not just you kneeling by your bed during the sacrament, but participating in the whole sacrament in the Chapel. That makes a difference. Although the things I did get you by and puts you in a better place than missing it, I don’t think there is a substitute for going to the chapel and being there for all three meetings.
All things considered, did playing in the NFL make you stronger, weaker, or the same?
I think I would say stronger. Because any time that we are tested, although I was never worried about my testimony, it tests you. It tests your commitment level. If you’re not committed, you don’t have to worry about those things, you don’t have to feel like you have to be there. When you get out of the habit of going every Sunday, I can see how people become inactive only after missing a few months of church. Because you quickly get out of the habit, it’s just like any other habit, it takes a lot of repetition to get into habit and only a few to get out of the habit. I don’t think it was ever a test where I said, gee, I don’t know where I stand anymore, or I once lived them and now I don’t. It didn’t come close to that for me. Now I had to live it even harder and stronger. Because of the environment though, take Sunday out of the equation, and the environment during the week changed dramatically… Every single day of the week you have to stand firm in the way you live and the things you believe in and it is just daily. I look back and say, hey I’m stronger because of what I had to live through.

Interviewee #26

Were there ever organized sports played on Sundays?
Other than when I was in the NFL, no. I really did focus, and they knew the blessings of keeping the Sabbath day. I understood that that was one of the foundations of our religion. So I did everything I could to uphold that. My parents when I was in the house were very strict with that.

Did you take seminary in high school?
I was actually kicked out of seminary. It always irritated me to feel like I was being graded on my religion. I was too young and too naïve, to stubborn, too ignorant to stop and think, well this is an opportunity for me to learn about my religion. … Where I’m standing now, it’s like, man, as much as I love this Gospel and church now, I’ve got a true love for it now, I look back and think how disgusting and disrespectful my actions were. I assaulted the seminary teacher, he gave us a test and I put a bunch of sarcastic blasphemous answers on my test and he gave the test to my mom and my mom was crying and it upset me and so I got a hold of him in his office and let him know what I thought of him and it was bad, and I got kicked out. It’s one of the biggest regrets of my young life.

Tell me about the recruiting process for college.
… [university] is the only place I visited where the vices that I was doing weren’t shoved in my face and I still had as much fun on that trip as I did anywhere else. It was because I knew what I wanted to be and I knew what was right…

Tell me about college, did you serve a mission, did you get married while in college?
… I got in with the right friends at [university]. … these good friends really got a hold of me at the end of my freshman year and when they did I started to change. I cleaned up my behavior, I focused on the church a little bit more, I started to figure out what direction my life was headed. Then my Junior year, I met my wife … Who I found and who I married and what my marriage has done, and obviously I can classify [university] as being my best decision because I met my wife there. And now my marriage is the most important thing in my life, my wife. So I got
married … That of course changed everything, that gave me direction. I did not serve a mission at [university] because I truly did not feel ready to serve a mission. I knew the direction I wanted to head in but I was needing [university] to save me more than I was needing to go out in the mission field and save someone else. And that is what I was able to find through perseverance. But I was not ready to serve a mission and I was not a kid that would ever let someone persuade me to do something that I just didn’t want to do, or feel ready to do. … I didn’t want to make a mistake going on a mission and realize that that was a total mistake. It might’ve lead to mistakes on the mission and led to embarrassment or a further downfall of my testimony. So I chose not to go on a mission for very specific reasons.

All things considered, to what degree did playing in the NFL affect your spirituality?
Positively. Absolutely positively. I was able to be around millionaires that were so unhappy with who they were and where their life was headed, and I knew what that gap was. Whether it was how they were treating their wife or their children or their understanding of preexistence and the afterlife, or where to put their money, or what things were important. I watched multimillionaires live a very unhappy, disturbed life. I knew what I wanted to be, and I knew why I was more happy than those guys. It also gave me opportunities, even though I have limited knowledge of our church, I could explain to people that would ask what it meant to be LDS or what I was about. I was able to describe with the little knowledge that I had why I believed in the church. … those moments were very important.

Interviewee #27

Did you grow up LDS? What were Sundays like growing up?
I came from a strong family. My parents were dedicated to the gospel. … Sunday was not a stringent day for us. We went to church, it was important to go to church, but it was not lock down time. So if I wanted to go in the backyard and throw a football around, my parents didn’t say don’t do that. I watched many games with my dad on Sunday back then. So you can see that it was not really total dedication to what some people think Sunday worship should be. In fact, I will say this, honestly, my mother came from a pretty hard life. But they were totally dedicated to the Lord. She was totally dedicated to her family, but we were told that if we went to church maybe we could go play nine holes of golf after church. There were times where we did that, not all the time, but family was very, very important to them, and it was family night every night in our home.

Did you serve a mission and if so, where?
No I did not serve a mission. Back then, not too many players went on missions and came back and played. We were in an interesting situation, because I always dreamed of serving a mission. We started out with the athletic program and [coach] and others said that I could be a missionary right here. So it was hard for me to see all of my friends go on missions, and me not go. And it’s an interesting time in the young person’s life when your dream is kind of shut down. But once again, the Lord works in mysterious ways. I knew that an answer from heaven was what I was seeking, and what I received. And when you have that you just look forward and amazing things happened right after that decision. … I remember going with [prophet] to [state] and speaking to
10,000 members of the church there. Going to [country] with [prophet] and held clinics and spoke there with him. I went to [state] with [prophet] and held clinics and spoke to 10,000 members of the church there. So I said that if I wasn’t going to serve a full-time mission, I’m going to give everything I have to the Lord and to this university and so I was speaking almost every Sunday night at some fireside somewhere in Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, or wherever the athletic department wanted to send me. I just felt like that was my mission. …

**During your first season in the NFL, how many times did you attend church?**

… Whether I was playing on Sunday or not playing on Sunday, the NFL was not going to tell me what’s going to happen to me in the future. I knew what was going to happen. And I tried to keep myself spiritually sharp. I was the only member of the team. It was a challenge, it was a battle. My Sunday mornings when I didn’t go to church, I did my priesthood lesson, I took my booklet and did my priesthood lesson and always went to the game in a really good frame of mind, a spiritually positive upbeat frame of mind. I let the rest the day take care of itself. And I always thought, my kids are going to see this, I don’t know how many years I’ll play in the NFL. I don’t want to be that example. I knew that there were not enough good examples in the world. And if I could be a good example, and continue to speak and say, okay here is an NFL [player’s position] coming to tell me to make good choices, and good choices equal happiness, I’m going to listen to him. …

**What helped you most during your time in the NFL to maintain a sense of spirituality?**

… Like I said, I was the lone ranger, many nights I spent by myself at training camp while everyone else was out partying. But I wasn’t going to let the NFL dictate my eternal progression. … If we have our minds made up beforehand, that we are not going to participate in evil things, then we’re not going to do that. It’s not to say I’m perfect. Certainly I apply the atonement every day. … So I say that to you because when you are playing on Sundays, you have to find ways to keep yourself spiritually sharp. …

**Interviewee #28**

**Tell me what religion and Sundays were like in your home growing up.**

… My mom was Mormon and converted my father, who was a [religion]. We have always been members since I was born in the LDS faith. Sundays were really strict, my dad especially was a strict Mormon. No TV on Sunday, no schoolwork, no chores. Just reading scriptures and think about your day and think of Christ. He was really strict that way. It was always just church, go home read your scriptures. It has always been like that. Now it is totally different. I am not as strict as my father. I let my kids go outside and play, or watch TV, it’s total opposite of what my father did. And plus during the football season I’m not home on Sundays. Sunday now is going to church, get home, and then do what my kids want to do.

**Tell me about the recruiting process for college.**

It was crazy. It was fun because I got to take my parents places that they probably never would have gone. … I told my dad that he could take us whatever he wanted to go for my recruiting trips. … Other than that it kind of sucked because I was getting pressure from family members,
from teachers, reporters, so for me I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to please people because I was tired of all the hype and all that stuff. The trips were fun especially. It was pretty stressful for a 17 or 18-year-old kid. I went on my trip to [university] and met a couple of the players and just felt really comfortable there. One of the [position players] said, hey if you come here we are going to lift really hard, make each other better, and we’re going to make each other better at football too. That made me feel comfortable. … That is the main reason I went to [university], I felt like I would get better there and excel and have a good chance at going to the NFL.

**During your NFL years what would you say was the biggest challenge of the NFL?**

It’s different for everyone, but for me I have been so blessed. Being a member in the NFL has not been hard for me. Wearing garments in the locker room and people will ask me questions and you just tell them what it’s about, kind of trying to see if they are interested in learning. One guy will try to make fun of it and you tell them that it’s sacred and he stops. It’s never been hard for me to be a Mormon in the NFL. It’s who I am and people don’t make fun of it or say anything. I think the hardest part has been family. Relatives, Aunts and uncles and cousins asking for money. The hardest thing is managing your money and learning to say no. I have lost a couple family members who are trying to take every penny that I have earned. It’s been tough. But being LDS in the NFL has never been difficult for me. I have never partied before. Going home to my wife and kids, people see that. These high profile guys ask me questions about me and my wife and why we make things look so easy. I really just want to be with my wife and kids and have a relationship with the Lord. For a lot of those guys they love money and women and drinking and all that stuff. I think it’s easier for me because I have been a Mormon my whole life.

**Was playing on Sundays and issue for you?**

I thought about it before, but it’s never been an issue. I figure that heavenly father has blessed me with this talent and I should use it to provide for my family. During the season I pray more than I have ever before. I feel a little distant from the Lord but I figure that once I get to the off-season I will try to be the best number I can and try to serve as much as I can and try to make up for what I’m missing out on during the season. It’s never been a problem for me to play on Sundays. I look at it as the Lord has blessed me and why not use it and excel and use it for good. Showing God through me, it’s kind of like a mission for me.

**Tell me about your family, about the church and what Sundays were like growing up.**

… My dad had been inactive since I was eight until recently he started going back to church. Sundays were expected to go to church. We lived three quarters of a mile from the church building, we would get up and would throw roast in the oven and would go to church and come back and have a big family dinner. Then we would hang out and do whatever was to be done. We would never go to town or swimming or anything like that. But we would play a game as a family and hang out and we watched a lot of sports growing up in Sunday. We had the basic three channels and Sunday was the day they played the major sports games. So lots of basketball, football. My mom was a big sports fan and she played sports in high school. …
Did seminary have any impact on where you went to college, or to serve a mission?
Yes, seminary wasn’t a profound tipping point or anything, my personal conversion to the church and my testimony was a long gradual, like the sunrise and not like the lightbulb. Through years of living the Gospel and seeing the blessings of it, it built my testimony in my conversion to the gospel. There is no one moment, and seminary was the same way, it added fuel to the furnace but there were no explosive moments in seminary where I thought, oh I need to do this. I have a stripling warrior mother who was very righteous, and the standard was set early that when you graduate high school you go on a mission and when you get back from a mission you can get married and go to college and do whatever you want. I did have really good seminary teachers. I did have one seminary teacher who used to be a lawyer he felt that the Lord wanted to be seminary teacher, so he made preparations to leave his law career and there he was teaching seminary. That story stood out in my mind as something that is perceived to be glamorous or the worldly success of being a lawyer, and he was willing to listen to and follow the promptings of the Lord to do this rather than this. That came to my mind often once the NFL became a possibility. The junior year of college I was one of the best players on my team and in the conference and the NFL was knocking. That idea rolled around in the back of my mind as what if the Lord tells me to quit and walk away from the prestige and the glamour, would I be willing to? Would I have the faith? The story stuck.

What advice did you receive about playing in the NFL?
… So everyone that I talked to and the feeling I had about it was that there was a lot of good to be done, and you could still maintain your values and be righteous in what you are doing. The financial benefits that you get from being in the NFL, would provide opportunities to serve and to help. The benefits of playing in the NFL outweighed the setbacks of not being able to go to church on Sunday. … I tried the best I could to still keep the Sabbath day holy and attend my church meetings as regularly as I could. Sometimes it is unavoidable if we were out of town, or with other things going on. Wearing the temple garments in the locker room, I would take it off to get dressed for practice or lifting or games, and as soon as I was done I would put it back on. I wouldn’t linger in my practice gear and do other things. As soon as I could get back to my regular life I would. Same thing with playing on Sunday, as soon as I could get back to my regular life I would. We would try to avoid as much as we could going out to eat, or going out to movies, or doing anything other than work, the job that I had, just like other people who have to work on Sundays. I would go to work and as soon as the game was over I would get back to my family and get back to spending time together.

What helped you most maintain your spirituality during your time in the NFL?
… I did what I was supposed to do and I feel like I was blessed for it. Trying to be an active participant and having a temple recommend and being worthy of it made the rest of life easy, the football side wasn’t hard, to go to a banquet where they were serving alcohol, I was living my life in such a way that it wasn’t a problem, a temptation, or an issue. … there was no issue or temptation because I was living the gospel so much away from football it wasn’t hard to live it at the facility or with my teammates. …
Tell me about life growing up and what Sundays were like.
I grew up with my dad. There are two stages to it. I lived with my mom and dad until I was six. Then I lived with my mom until the sixth grade and we were LDS and attended church at our convenience. Mainly it was sacrament and then we would skip out and go do something fun. We weren’t necessarily strong in the church but we did it. Then I lived with my father from sixth grade until I was 15 and I was inactive during that time. My dad was not active and it was just me and him at the house. He was an alcoholic and still is to this day. That was a big thing I had to learn in terms of my faith. I had to find out for myself. I went to seminary when I got into high school and that kind of got me back into church. I attended church from 15, I would drive myself to church every Sunday and that happened all the way until I left my mission. …

Tell me about Sundays at [university].
... He had seen LDS kids return from missions and loved that leadership, so he loved LDS guys on the team. We had a unique schedule, every other college played on Saturdays, practiced on Sunday and then took Mondays off. We did the opposite, we took Sundays off and then practiced on Monday. We never had to practice or play on Sunday for the most part, except during training camps we had minor stuff on Sundays sometimes. There might have been one or two practices my whole time there on Sunday. …

What counsel did you receive about playing in the NFL?
… One of the main reasons I loved living in [state] was I felt like I was in the mission field. Serving a mission was one of the best things for my life. I just thought that this would be a great opportunity for me to continue the service that I had already started. …

Tell me about church attendance in the off-season.
That’s a no-brainer, I think it should be for anyone in the NFL, because when you get a chance to attend all your meetings, we make it happen no matter where we are at. Some of our family gets annoyed because even when we’re on vacation we attend…

Tell me about any of the challenges you have faced as a Latter-day Saint in the NFL.
… So people always ask if it’s hard to live the gospel in a given situation and it’s the exact opposite, that’s what makes it so much easier for me to live. It’s obviously your priorities to, because I’ve seen a lot of LDS guys that don’t live it. But they didn’t live it before, so there’s no way to expect them to live it when they get here. I don’t see many people who have come in with a strong testimony and then just lost it because of where they’re at. I’m sure there have been. But the people who come in strong stay strong and the ones who struggle are the ones who just don’t have that testimony or aren’t trying to strengthen it. …

What advice would you give to someone LDS going into the NFL?
My biggest advice is one in priorities, and that your faith, family, and football is the way it should lie. And that goes to anybody in any career. As long as you have your priorities correct and straight, if the Lord doesn’t want you there, and your priorities are right, you will know it. If you’re not paying attention to what the Lord wants for you, where you should be in life, and seeking the right counsel, then you might find yourself going somewhere you shouldn’t be. As
long as you got your priorities right, seek the counsel of the Lord, then you’ll be where you need to be. That’s the biggest advice. It’s a great opportunity for people when you get a chance to be an example. I’ve had so many doors opened the never would’ve been if I wasn’t an NFL player. I know that’s from a sharing the gospel standpoint just as much as anything else as well. …


**Sources With No Author**


