

EVERY ONE A WINNER

True stories of changed lives from the world of sport

JONATHAN CARSWELL
WITH EMMA NEWRICK

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FOR NICK HOWARD

Who showed me in theory and practice how to live
Colossians 1:10 on and off the pitch.

‘And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the
Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good
work, growing in the knowledge of God’

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I had wondered about leaving the acknowledgements page out of this publication, as I fear it gives the impression I think this book is a mighty achievement. It is not. However, to fail to acknowledge the following people would give the impression I could do it on my own – I could not!

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CONTENTS

Preface: Jonathan's Story.....	v
Chapter 1 Louise Watton: Javelin.....	1
Chapter 2 Euan Murray: Rugby	9
Chapter 3 Dan Walker: TV Presenter.....	15
Chapter 4 Debbie Flood: Rowing	21
Chapter 5 Barrington Williams: Long Jump.....	31
Chapter 6 Henry Olonga: Cricket.....	37
Chapter 7 Steve Lillis: Pool.....	47
Chapter 8 Chiara Clarke: Hockey	55
Chapter 9 Mark Moreland: Hockey	71
Chapter 10 Vinny Commons: Football	77
Chapter 11 Gail James: Javelin	83
Chapter 12 Derek Jefferson: Football	87

Chapter 13	Danny Sitton: Tennis.....	91
Chapter 14	Jonathan Stobbs: Fencing	97
Chapter 15	John Gillespie: American Football....	105
Chapter 16	Richard Leadbeater: Football	109
Chapter 17	Eric Liddell: Running	115
Epilogue:	123

PREFACE

JONATHAN'S STORY

Whether it is a profile on TV, or reading about our favourite player in Rugby World magazine, there is something about hearing a true story of someone's life that we enjoy. Intrigue or concern, a similarity or sheer nosiness, we just love 'peeping through the keyhole' and exploring their story.

This book is a collection of true stories. All of them are different. Some are told in the third person, and some by the people themselves. But all of these people are on some level involved in the world of sport, from household names who have reached the top, to those who simply report on others' successes. What each of these stories has in common is that every person has at some point in their life had an encounter that has turned their world upside down.

Though both excite me, there is something much deeper than my love of stories, or even sport, that has brought me, a dyslexic sportsman-wannabe, to get out my laptop and bash away at the keys to form a book. I guess it's actually down to the fact that I have a story too.

I wasn't academic at all, and hated school with a passion. I struggled with work and found it hard to concentrate on anything that wasn't on the sports field. While no county player or semi-pro, I enjoyed playing most sports, and loved captaining my school rugby team. At a time where life seemed too much, and the troublesome

teenage years were really affecting me, sport was a brilliant release and became something which gave me kudos with my mates, and an identity in school. But one crisp Saturday morning when playing a school thirty miles away, something was going to happen that, though I didn't know it at the time, was going to change the direction of my whole life. Whether it was deliberate or not, I'm unsure, but what I do know is that a size ten boot stamping down on a knee doesn't end well.

In the days that followed it transpired that my cartilage had been damaged, as well as my ligaments. Surgery followed, and several months of physio. Time spent sitting out of PE lessons, leaning on crutches as I watched everyone else get on with life, gave me plenty of time to reflect. Whether I was an over-analytical teenager I don't know, but I began asking some searching questions for which I had no answers.

What was I doing here? Where was I going? What was life all about, and how did I fit?

I had been brought up in a Christian family, with my dad a minister, so questions about God and life were not uncommon. I suppose I never doubted the teachings of Christianity – that Jesus was the Son of God who came to die on the cross for my sins, so I could be forgiven for all the wrong things I have ever done and have peace with God. The problem I had was that it was all so restrictive. Coming from the background I did meant no sports on Sunday – not because my parents were some legalistic religious nut jobs, but as Christians they wanted to honour God and keep Sunday special, different from other days. Instead, we travelled twenty minutes across town to attend church twice each week. To be honest, it bored me. There were two or three people there my age, and they seemed to enjoy it. I played along, accepting all that went on: singing

the hymns and answering questions in 'junior church', but only to fit in. When Monday came round again, I used to get on the coach, and in the forty minutes it would take to get to school, I would transform from a nice, Christian teenager, to the run-of-the mill 15-year-old lad who was too cool for religion.

I don't think too many people were aware of my double life. I longed to be accepted and to be liked. The trouble was that I was desperately unhappy, empty, and longing for more.

The months that followed after my discharge from hospital were horrendous. The memory of that time haunts me even now. I had a girlfriend, and my relationship with her was strong, but my life was spiralling down and out of control faster than I realised. Thoughts of suicide consumed me, and very rarely would the idea of actually carrying it out leave my mind.

The temptation to commit suicide grew and grew, until it seemed my only option. I remember talking to my girlfriend, saying my goodbyes to her, as I wouldn't be at school in the morning. When she asked why, I explained it was my only option to escape. I hung up the phone in tears, sick with pain, riddled with loneliness. No one could help me; I was on my own and wanted out.

I'm not sure why, though it was probably because of fear, but I didn't take my life that night. Instead, I woke up the next morning with the bottle of pills still in my right hand, and went off to school.

It was later that year that Mum and Dad asked if I wanted to go on a Christian sports holiday in Holland. My dad was speaking there, as he usually did, but so was another guy whom I respected a lot. His name was Vinny – you will meet him later in this book. Although my leg was still in a brace, restricting my movement to 20 degrees, I thought it was a decent idea, especially as Mum was paying! I

would be sitting on the back of a tandem when we went on cycling trips and wouldn't be able to do the activities that everyone else could, but nevertheless I still thought it was worth it. So I agreed to go, and my place was booked.

Despite not being able to join in all the sports and activities, I had a decent time. The brace around my knee, which looked more like a mechanical leg, earned me sympathy from the girls, which satisfied my need for attention.

There was a problem, though. Even though the girls were giving me plenty of time, and I was sunning myself in the south of Holland, I still felt dreadfully empty and my life seemed meaningless. I had no future, no plans, and no hope – just a longing that one day I might find out my true purpose. But I doubted I ever would.

My dad did the morning sessions at the camp, teaching about the Bible, and my friend Vinny spoke in the evening. Vinny had an incredible ability to hold my attention – probably because he was a football fanatic and an amazing sportsman. He told the best stories – the sort that would make the room fall quiet and have people on the edge of their seats.

What was striking about Vinny, though, was that he could tell me things from the Bible about God, and it would have the same effect on me. He had my full attention.

Somehow we had got to day nine of an eleven-day holiday and there was just one evening session left before the cabaret on the final night. Vinny was speaking again. I had taken my seat near the back, so that I could rest my foot on a spare chair and give my knee a break from being half bent. He started his talk with a story as usual, and from the moment he began he had me hanging on every word.

'Our greatest problem,' Vinny said, 'is not our situation, or our

feelings. It's not even what we wish we could do. The Bible teaches that our greatest problem is wrong thoughts, wrong actions, and wrong speech – all the wrong that consumes our lives. The Bible calls it "sin", and the reason it's our biggest problem is that it cuts us off from God himself, because he is perfect without exception.'

My 'sin', as Vinny described it, flashed through my head. Instantly I remembered all the stuff in my past that disgusted me. Then, almost as if he knew what I was thinking, Vinny said: 'Imagine I had a DVD of your life in my hand, and was going to show it to everyone here. It would be a complete fly-on-the-wall documentary, with nothing missing. Your proudest moments; the times of great celebration; but also the times of greatest shame and sadness; the times you were embarrassed that people saw what you did or said; the times you were relieved no one saw you – all on this one DVD, and on a big screen for everyone to see ...'

I was terrified at the prospect. I had just seen that DVD in my mind's eye. It was rank. If it was horrible for me, how much worse would it be to face the embarrassment and humiliation of everyone else seeing it? I couldn't bear to think about the disgrace. It was beginning to dawn on me that if God is pure and cannot tolerate any wrongdoing, and I was sickened by my sin – what on earth would God think?

'I guess if the DVD was of my life,' Vinny said, 'I would do one of two things: try to stop it from playing, or run a mile, never to return.' I felt the same; although I might not have stopped at one mile, but would have made it two or three.

'The problem is,' Vinny continued, 'we can neither stop it, nor run from it. The Bible teaches that man lives once, and after death faces God's judgement. We cannot escape. God is a God of love – there is no doubt about that. He demonstrates this love for us by taking the

punishment we deserve on himself. This is what the Bible says in Romans 5:8: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Because God loves us and those around us so much, he cannot sweep our wrongdoing under the carpet. That isn’t love or justice; rather that is just ignorance.’

I was intrigued but not convinced. I had heard this all before, of course. After all, I had grown up with this teaching. But for some reason, today, the penny was beginning to drop.

I knew I had done wrong things – I think everyone knows they have, if they are honest enough to admit it. OK, there might be people who appeared to be ‘worse’ than me – a paedophile or murderer, for example – but Vinny was saying the Bible taught that it wasn’t down to ‘better’ or ‘worse’, but rather ‘perfect’ or ‘imperfect’. I was sure I wasn’t the former.

‘Sin cuts us off from God, and that leaves us empty. We can try to fill our lives with all sorts of things, but nothing will satisfy.’ I knew what Vinny was saying was true – I had experienced emptiness for myself.

‘There is a way back to God, though.’ Vinny’s facial expression changed. Despite being quite a joker, he could be serious at times. The last ten minutes, as he told us about sin and the punishment it deserves, had been one of those times. Now however, a broad smile had spread across his face – I could see there was genuine excitement. ‘Though our sin cannot be tolerated by God, it has been dealt with through Jesus. Jesus died physically on the cross, but he also died spiritually too. He was cut off from God the Father and experienced the judgement that should have been given to us. The Bible teaches that God says “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool”’ (Isa. 1:18).

‘Suppose you’re playing football or rugby,’ he said, grabbing my attention once more, ‘and you put in an illegal tackle. The ref needs to punish you – that is what the rule book says. A ten-minute sin bin, a yellow card, or even the dreaded red one. You have done wrong and are being rightly punished for it. But just imagine if one of the opposition came in and took that red card for you; taking your place, taking your punishment even though they were not in the wrong. Well,’ said Vinny, ‘that is what Jesus did for you – to take the punishment that you deserved, even though he was innocent. Why? Because he loves you and wants you to come back to him – back home, as it were. This is how the Bible puts it: “Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God” (1 Pet. 3:18, NLT).’

I knew deep down in my heart this was true. This was my major problem – my sin had cut me off from Almighty God. I had been ignoring him for so long. Unfortunately it took a serious knee injury for me to take any notice of him. That night I prayed that God might forgive me.

Dear God, I have really messed up. My life feels ruined in so many ways, and I have so many regrets. Please will you forgive me? I have been running from you for ages. I can't change myself. I am trusting in you, trusting you can and will. Thank you.

That night I felt a massive weight lift off my shoulders. As I went to bed a few hours later and put my head on the pillow, I knew with total certainty that I was at peace with God. Not through my own good behaviour, but completely and absolutely because of Jesus.

Life has been far from simple since, but I have total confidence that what Jesus has done for me has changed my relationship with him, and my eternal destination. God, through the Holy Spirit, has been changing me ever since I asked Jesus to be in charge of my life. The Spirit of God impacts my thoughts, my actions and my desires. While I may still not do what I should all the time, the purpose of God is clear as I strive to do what he wants rather than just what I want. I am able to love God because he first loved me; as a result, I want to do what pleases him – not because it earns me any ‘brownie points’, but because I love him.

Anyone who spends any time with me (especially on the sports field) knows that I am far from perfect. I do love a tough tackle, and every now and again I let my aggression get the better of me, but I know that God’s undeserved kindness is all I need. The Bible says God’s grace is sufficient for us, for his power is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). I know I will go on making mistakes and doing things I shouldn’t, because I’m human. However, God is giving me the power to change, and even when I do fail, his love, kindness and forgiveness cover all the sin that I deserve to be punished for so that I am seen as ‘not guilty’.

And so that’s my story – the story behind the writing of these stories. Nothing flashy; nothing that would hit the headlines, but a real-life turnaround following an encounter with Jesus. And that is what this book contains – real-life stories of people associated with sport whose lives were changed, all because they encountered Jesus. So if you love a story, a true story, then read on ... and enjoy!

Jonathan Carswell
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