



Developing the  
SPORTS  
CHAPLAINCY  
PLAYBOOK  
BY CHANSIN ESPARZA

The pressure to perform and the demand for excellence can overwhelm an athlete. Those stressors are evident at every level of sport, from the sidelines of the Little League fields to the big lights of the multi-million-dollar stadiums.

"Athletes have a unique world, an incredible culture, a treasure chest with keys to success in life," said Miami Dolphins Sports Chaplain Vernon Shazier, a graduate of Baylor's Truett Seminary. "If we ask a player to run through a wall, he'll put on his pants and helmet and run through that wall. They learn discipline, control and hard work to excel – whether it's on a tennis court, football field or in a swimming pool – but too often that doesn't transfer into personal life or another career later in their lives."

Truett Seminary is seizing the opportunity to address this growing ministry need. Next fall, the Seminary will launch its first-ever Master of Arts degree in Christian Ministry with an emphasis on sports chaplaincy. The new program – made possible in part by a generous gift from Harold

(BBA, '52) and Dottie Riley – will train students to minister not only to professional athletes but also to youth athletic leagues, church recreation programs and missions outreach.

"Sometimes, sports chaplains are looked at almost as being sort of a rabbit's foot," said Associate Professor John White, who was hired to spearhead the program. "While you want to be a Good Samaritan, you also want to be a prophet bringing direction in a culture in which things have been mis-valued, devalued and overvalued."

The 54-hour master's degree features a combination of mentoring, spiritual formation and practical course work. Truett leaders believe this is the ideal program for those who desire to be sports chaplains.



White said Truett's program will offer a unique opportunity for students.

"How many Division I sports teams have a seminary and a program like this? There are none," he said.

White is one-of-a-kind, too. Few people concentrate their research on both religion and sport. While at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, his PhD research centered on theological ethics. White worked for Athletes in Action – a ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ – on college campuses for 17 years, raced as an amateur cyclist at the highest level in the U.S. and Europe, has numerous publications and wrote his dissertation on sports and Christian ethics.

"He's exactly the fit we were hoping to find," said Dr. Dennis Tucker, Truett's associate dean.

White, his wife, and their three teenagers moved to Waco from his most recent position as an assistant professor of theology at Cedarville University in Ohio. His class this fall is titled Studies in Leadership: Ethics and Ministry. This particular class is not sports-related, but White said he is excited to work in the context of a committed Christian university like Baylor where faith and sports matter.

"Sport is an area people think is harmless," White said. "This is one area of modern life that has not been subject to deep theological thinking. We've done it in other areas such as film, music and business, but my goal is to transform sports – to think holistically. Sport is good. God made us desire to play. But we want to make sure it is all directed to God."

The Riley family's financial contribution made this permanent professorship possible. Harold Riley played football for Baylor in the early 1950s and went on to become an All-American who was drafted by the NFL's Los Angeles Rams. He chose the business route instead and is the founder and CEO of Insurance Company of America. Riley was instrumental in securing funding for Baylor's Moody Library as well as giving money for scholarships and other projects. Riley has attained numerous awards for his achievements in athletics and for his generosity. He is also committed to ministry and his Christian foundation.

The Rileys join the Truett community in their excitement for the program and for being the first seminary that trains people going into sport ministry.

"We may reach a whole group of people who never would have thought about theological education as part of their preparation for their vocation," Tucker said. □