

Spiritual Lessons on

VICTORY & DEFEAT

By Mike Holmgren, as told to Greg Asimakoupoulos



Like many attendees of First Covenant Church in San Francisco, California, I was raised in a Swedish-American family. We lived above my grandfather's bakery, where Scandinavian breads and pastries kept us well fed. But on Sundays, all three generations of the Holmgrens were found at church, where the bread of life was generously dispensed.

As a child, my appetite for spiritual things wasn't substantial. Raised in the shadow of Kezar Stadium (home of the San Francisco 49ers), I was more fixated on my dream of one day wearing a 49er jersey than Sunday school lessons. Then, when I was 11, Billy Graham held a three-week crusade at the Cow Palace in San Francisco. My parents took my sisters and me almost every night. On the final night, Cliff Barrows led the audience in singing "Just as I Am." I couldn't stay seated and went forward to accept Christ just as I was: grubby tennis shoes and all.

But even as a Christian, I remained determined to make a name for myself on the gridiron. After leading my high school teams to the state championship, I was offered a scholarship to



Seattle Seahawks Coach Mike Holmgren took his team to the Super Bowl last season, but will tell you that it's not Super Bowl rings, but the crown of eternal life that Christ has won for us, that really matters.

She attended a Christian college, became a nurse, and was serving as a short-term missionary in Zaire. Her inspiring letters helped me realize how much I needed to trust the Lord in my disillusionment. As a result, I recommitted my life to Christ.

Proverbs 3:5-6 became the personal line of scrimmage at which I dug in: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean

play for the University of Southern California Trojans. Unfortunately, injuries kept me sidelined much of my college career.

I was gratefully surprised when I was drafted by the St. Louis Cardinals in 1970. But four weeks later, I was released. The New York Jets picked me up as a backup quarterback to "Broadway Joe" Namath, but before the preseason was over, I was cut again. My dream of playing professional football was over before it ever began. I was devastated.

About this time, a girl I had met at Mission Springs Bible Camp the summer after I became a Christian reemerged in my life. Kathy had taken her faith much more seriously than I.

not on your own understanding. In all of your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.”

Kathy and I married in 1971, and I began my coaching career at the high school from which I graduated. As our family of four daughters grew, so did my professional opportunities, and I moved up into the college coaching ranks. But ambition wasn't the demon it had once been for me. My wife and kids were a daily reminder of both God's blessing on my life and his priorities.

Then a job opened up in Utah. Some of our friends questioned our judgment in accepting it. But Kathy and I viewed my position as assistant coach at Brigham Young University (BYU) as a unique opportunity to share our faith with the players, coaches and students on a predominantly Mormon campus. It was during my time at BYU that the San Francisco 49ers invited me to become their offensive coordinator. Although I wasn't a player, God had fulfilled my boyhood dream to be a part of my hometown team.

Eventually, the media began to speculate that I'd be offered the head coach-

ing position of an NFL team, and I began to pray. When the offers came, it was clear to us that the needs of our daughters took precedence over my career, and I opted to stay with the 49ers. Sportswriters and colleagues scoffed, but God honored our choice. Later, at the right time for our family, I was hired by the Green Bay Packers to carry the mantle of legendary head coach Vince Lombardi.

In the six years I spent in Green Bay, I was fortunate enough to lead the Packers to two consecutive appearances in the Super Bowl. In 1997, we beat the New England Patriots. A year later, we lost to the Denver Broncos. I was blessed to coach a talented team of players who followed my leadership.

In 1998, I accepted the invitation to become head coach of the Seattle Seahawks. Although my decision wasn't understood by some, it seemed to be the direction the Lord was leading Kathy and me. During this past season, seven years of hard work paid off. Not only was I privileged to lead the Seahawks to their first playoff victory in 23 years, we won a chance to play in the Super Bowl by becoming NFC champions.

Although the outcome against the Pittsburgh Steelers wasn't what we anticipated, I was extremely proud of our team. I told them they had every reason to hold their heads high.

Win or lose, I learned a long time ago what really matters: It's not Super Bowl rings, but the crown of eternal life Christ has won for us by his victory on the cross. As the Swedish hymn writer Lina Sandell put it: "Though he giveth or he taketh, God his children ne'er forsaketh, his the loving purpose solely to preserve them pure and holy."

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