

THE POWER OF team work

Interview by
Cheryl Brunkow

We recently sat down to chat with Athletic Directors from two Christian colleges, Bob Bjorklund (Bethel University) and Matt Hill (University of Northwestern-St. Paul) about faith and work. Both men are long-time members of Calvary.

What got you into sports?

Bob Bjorklund From my earliest days, I was immersed in sporting activities with my family. I'm the youngest of five boys, and my older brothers were always playing something! That generated my love for sports. My earliest memories are of being out in the front yard playing touch football, stick ball—anything with a ball. We loved basketball the most.

Matt Hill Sports have been a part of my life for as far back as I can remember. I was always out shooting hoops in the driveway. My Dad coached my Little League team. We lived close to the elementary school in our suburb of Des Moines, so we'd get home from school, then grab our gear and head back to the playground for the REAL stuff, the activities we lived for. This was before video games, so we fished, skated, etc. We were always outside and active.

How did you become an A.D.?

MH I was teaching and coaching (Johnston High School in Iowa), and heard about a sports info director position at my alma mater [Matt is a University of Northwestern-St. Paul alum], and I applied for and was hired for that role. That led to becoming an assistant athletic director while coaching track. Then the A.D. left to go into development, so I was promoted to that role. This was Spring of 2000—almost 19 years ago! I continued coaching for two years when I first started the A.D. role, but that got to be too much, so I went to straight A.D. responsibilities.

BB I had an interest in athletic administration during my early teaching days. I did my undergrad at U of M, then taught in Buffalo Lake, MN, then went back for a Masters in Athletic Administration. I've also always been interested in coaching—so I started coaching high school boys basketball in Fergus Falls (did that for 17 years), then came to Bethel as men's basketball coach in 1997. I also assumed assistant athletic director duties and a teaching

role. It's common to combine multiple roles like that. In 2004 I moved into the A.D. role while I continued coaching. In 2006, I dropped the coaching and went to "just" full-time A.D. role [laughing at "just..."].

What were your early experiences in sports that helped you do your job well?

MH I learned the value of teamwork. Collaborating with people is key. Having a successful program is all about teamwork. And learning this early on is a great life lesson—being a team player translates into everything you do in life.

“My primary motivator is to launch adventurous Christ-followers.”

Bob Bjorklund

BB Lots of good mentors along the way were impactful. I had “aha” moments in the work place that taught me the importance of building trust. I get inspired by watching our coaches at Bethel leading their teams well. It's invigorating for me to be around devoted coaches and see the passion that they bring to their sport. Bethel student athletes are lucky to have this kind of talented leadership.

What motivates you most in your job as A.D.?

MH I went on to school to get licensed in teaching and coaching because I love seeing growth in people, especially in athletics. I love watching students mature during their years in college, and it's exciting to think that I've played a small role in that. I love watching coaches pour into their students.

We get to be a part of their successes (and their failures, which are also great learning experiences) in life. It's a big responsibility! People often cite coaches as the biggest influencer in their life. Good coaches—and bad coaches—can really have a lasting influence on people.

BB My background allows me to relate to the passion that students have for their sport. I love seeing that determination in action. I want everyone to feel that it's OK to really pursue their love of the sport, and be driven to be really good, and to combine it with excelling in academics as well. But my primary motivator would be to launch adventurous Christ-followers at Bethel University.

What brings you the most joy in your current position? What's the biggest challenge?

BB Joy? Seeing the student athletes “be where their feet are.” By that I mean being present in their circumstances, being present in the moment, and being able to play with freedom and joy. Challenge? I'm 100% convicted of the importance of Christian higher education and it's very frustrating to see the affordability issues in higher education. I want everyone to have the opportunity to experience this kind of quality education, but it's just not in reach for many due to the cost, and that's really unfortunate.



PHOTO: MOISES GOMEZ

MH Joy for me is graduation day. But this is both my best and worst day. I love to watch the student athletes get their degrees, the thing that they came to UNWSP to do. But I'm always sad about the student athletes that we're losing. We hope that we've played a positive role in their educational journey.

Like Bob, I think the biggest challenge is helping people see the value of Christian education, and knowing that the cost may keep kids from being able to pursue a college degree. There's also the challenge of helping students continue to be relevant in their faith. They are so young, and we want to help them develop their faith and stay strong. Many are leaving their faith between 18-20 years old, and I'm really aware of that and it challenges me.

How have your programs changed over the last 10-20 years?

BB The whole emergence regarding the importance of marketing, and the way we do our recruiting, and the way social media plays into everything has been a big change. That's a HUGE change. Many of our coaching team discussions are around the effectiveness of our recruiting in the manner that we currently do it.

Coaching has become more demanding because the student athletes are competed for so much now. So we have to put a lot of energy into recruiting. There's also been a big change in competitiveness—it's gotten so much more so. Lots of teams are really good. There aren't just a few shining stars anymore.

MH We became part of NCAA [National College Athletic Association] (through UMAC—Upper Midwest Athletic Conference, which consists of nine schools) in 2008. There's been lots of change since then. We've added sports and facilities, and it's all for the better! It's enhanced our ability to be competitive and step up a level. Both Bethel and UNWSP have seen large enrollment growth in our athletics programs, and at our universities.

I would agree with Bob regarding the change in high school student visibility. The students can no longer hide in small towns—social media finds them! So that increases everyone's competition for talented athletes all over the country and you have to be vigilant and stay on top of what's being posted about young athletes.

How do you prepare your athletes and coaches to interact with other athletes and coaches who don't necessarily share your faith?

BB I think it comes across in our genuineness and authenticity. But it happens over time, not immediately. It happens in games, at coaches meetings, etc. They consistently see authenticity and sincerity combined with boldness in our words and actions. Maybe the most important way we witness through our actions and inspire other coaches is during informal hallway interactions. Or formal meetings too. Being true to our faith and unashamed of it in all our interactions with athletes and coaches is the best way to share our faith.

MH We know that we're competing with schools that have both believers and non-believers on their teams. Our tag line in UNWSP athletics is "Compete with Purpose" and one of our values is "Invest in Relationships." So we encourage our athletes to compete intentionally while being relational. You're competing in the game, not with the person. We always ask other teams to pray with us, and almost all of them do. And whether we win or lose, we pray for the other teammates. Christ died in competition for our souls, after all!

“Many students are leaving their faith between 18-20 years old, and I'm really aware of that and it challenges me.”

Matt Hill

Also, we often get parents asking us to pray for their students, and it's an honor to do so. We used to put FCA [Fellowship of Christian Athletes] Bibles in the locker rooms at our school, and they would all get taken by athletes from other schools. FCA doesn't print that particular Bible anymore, so that's why we quit doing that.

Can you give me an example of a time you've seen Christ in your student athletes?

BB I've seen it dozens and dozens of times! Just this weekend during practice, the football guys were singing under the goal posts "In All We Do We Want to Honor You" and it was a very powerful thing to watch. And an athlete was picked to share a testimony during that practice. During these sharing times, athletes tend to tell their teammates how they have impacted and challenged them. I can't think of a time when an athlete sharing in practice or pre-game hasn't been very moving.

MH It's hard to pick out one! Just the other day we played River Falls in basketball, and Lance Westburg, who is Assistant Coach at River Falls and a UNWSP alum, offered to pay for dinner for our team. While at dinner he told the UNWSP team that their prayers would make a big difference for students on his team. It opened the door for lots of great conversations. It's really cool to see what a UNWSP alum has done since graduating, and that he's being a positive influencer for Christ at a secular school.

How do you envision programs changing in the future?

BB I think there's going to be issues with enrollment in higher ed, so we will continue to add sports to entice enrollment, like men's and women's lacrosse, for example. And facilities are always a challenge. We always have to keep up with the "Joneses." Facilities have to be good enough to entice enrollment, and good enough for the athletes currently enrolled in our programs. We're always looking at what we need, not always what we want, because it's rare that you can afford the "wants."

MH We've been in a growth mode in athletics and have larger roster sizes now than in previous years. We're working at being more competitive. We are currently in a capital campaign to add to our athletic buildings. We also need to get what we need and not what we want. It's all about recruiting again. And it's the old chicken and egg thing—we need facilities to grow, and we need growth in order to update the facilities.

Matt, what do you dislike about Bethel? Seriously, is it good to have rivalries? Are you rivals?

MH [laughing] We compete for students, but there's nothing I dislike about Bethel! Bethel offers all you can eat, so what's not to like about that? Seriously, I pray for Bethel, and I meet with President Jay Barnes for breakfast. I have lots of respect for Bethel. I just wish we weren't so close to each other! I wish we weren't recruiting against each other. We truly have the same mission, so we should be rooting for each other! I know Bethel students are of the same quality as UNWSP students, and the last four people I've hired have all been Bethel grads.

BB There are amazing connections between the two schools. Coaches from Bethel have gone to UNWSP, and I want UNWSP to thrive. We are good for each other. It's good for kingdom work. We like to say "nice win" to each other and support each other. [Editorial note: True! The interview started with Bob and Matt discussing weekend wins and congratulating each other on plays, strategy, and game outcomes.]

The uniqueness of this relationship between us in our positions is worth noting. But there is a human element to it. We sometimes wish we had the facilities the other school has, but in terms of jealousy or envy... we don't battle with that.

There's an interesting dynamic when our schools play each other pre-season. Attendance is high and there's a fun energy in the crowd, an energy that we don't always feel when playing other teams.

How's your golf game?

BB [Chuckles and shakes his head...] No time to golf.

MH [Laughing] I need some free green time from someone on our Board! [In reference to Dan Stoltz, CEO of Spire, who is on UNWSP Board of Directors.]

How do you balance a passion for sports without it overtaking God? How do you use that passion to glorify God?

BB I really liked Shawn Winter's "Work as Worship" sermon series last spring. It spoke to me and my passion for what I do. Since hearing that sermon series I say, "The job I GET to do..." not "The job I HAVE to do." But I enjoy my job so thoroughly that I battle getting too wrapped up in it. I fear I might love what I do more than I love Christ. This is something I'm constantly aware of.

There's another thing I recall from a recent message at Calvary. Shawn told a story in a sermon a while ago about a famous artist whose lifetime works were being auctioned off after his death. There was one small portrait of his son who'd been lost in the war, and it wasn't a great painting, but they started the auction with it. Once someone bid on it, the auctioneer announced that the auction was closed, and the person who had bid on that simple painting got all the other great works along with it. The lesson was, whoever takes the son gets it all. I enjoyed that story and used it this year when meeting with the fall and winter sports teams. It's all about Jesus. Your passion should be for Him. Whoever gets Jesus, gets it all.

MH God gave us sport. It's a gift from Him. I feel athletics are a form of worship, a way you can give your all to Him. But it's hard when you're a competitive person to not let winning or losing become an idol. Athletics are an avenue, a talent, that's the gift we give back to God. Physical talent is no different than artistic talent or musical talent.

You do have to remember you could do this job 24/7, and you have to intentionally focus on family and faith. You have to work to keep it in perspective.

Who has had the biggest impact on your career? On your faith?

BB Jerry Kindall. He was the Assistant Baseball coach at U of M when I was a student there. My first week on campus at the U of M I saw a poster for an FCA meeting, and I went and Jerry was there. And he was there every week after that, whether there were 5 or 50 student there. Jerry was both an example to me in my career and for how to live out my faith. I also had the privilege of growing up in a Christian family, so they were the most influential to me in my faith.

“The uniqueness of this relationship between us in our positions is worth noting.”

Bob Bjorklund

MH Andy Bales runs Union Rescue Mission on skid row in LA. He was my youth pastor growing up and made a big impact on my life. He's given his life to show unconditional love for people. He's actually lost a leg due to an infection he got while doing his work, yet he stays committed to it! He's modeled Christ's love for people. Period.

Do you feel community support for any of your programs?

BB Jay Barnes, all the way! He's Bethel's president and a huge supporter of athletics. We are all interconnectedly concerned and supportive of each other's departments at Bethel. Lots of thriving there.

MH Our president Al Cureton played college football, and he loves athletics and loves the interaction of faith and athletics. We are very intentional about sending our teams to concerts and plays. We want everyone involved in all aspects of our community.

How much of your job is fundraising?

BB Not a lot in the past, but it's becoming more important. Raising money is a team effort. We do some athletic rentals like basketball camps in the summer, etc., but that doesn't bring in big dollars.

MH 0% on paper, but I do auxiliary fundraising for minor updates and to pay for marketing. So I work with advancement on that. We do a lot of athletic rentals to generate minor revenue.

Any prayer requests for Northwestern/Bethel sports?

BB We always covet prayer that we would honor God in all that we do, and that we would be really good at launching adventurous Christ-followers. Pray for the effectiveness of our athletes as they graduate, that they would become world-changers.

No one goes on to do professional athletics from our colleges, so we are really training them for their careers and life through the lessons they learn in athletics. Teamwork is a very valuable life lesson learned in sports.

MH Pray that we would live out our motto to compete with purpose, that we would compete for Christ in all that we say and do. This is based on the words in Colossians 3:17, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." These aren't just words on paper, and we want our students to stay true to that mission and walk in faith.

Thanks so much for talking with me today! It's been inspiring to hear you speak with such passion about your jobs, your students, and most importantly, Jesus Christ.

BB It's been a pleasure!

MH Yes, thanks for giving us this opportunity to share.

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