



Danny Driver

Witness on the Sidelines

The world of professional football is a challenging place for anybody to work, Christian or not. Success is heavily dependent upon performance, and if you're not performing then in the harsh reality of professional football your chances of selection are slim.

During my first year at Ridley whilst doing one-to-one work with some young Christian athletes who compete nationally or internationally, I became increasingly aware of a calling to support those who compete at an elite level. Having got to know the Cambridge United first team chaplain, the opportunity opened up for me to experience chaplaincy work with their under-18s scholars.

The lads in the squad are semi-professional players who train several days a week whilst studying for a vocational qualification. Since October I've been to weekly training sessions and most home games. My role is simply to be there to listen and chat to any of the players, coaching staff or parents. Conversations range from none at all, to a brief two minutes, to the length of a match or session. Having played a lot of sport growing up, I know how frustrating it can be watching your mates play whilst you're on the sidelines, injured. The more mean-

ingful conversations I've had have tended to be with these players as they have willingly opened up about how they're finding it.

'They won't care how much you know', the team coach told me, 'until they know how much you care'. In what is a male-dominated environment, there have been few occasions where the lads have opened up about anything they are struggling with. Talking about struggles is perceived to be weak and the pressure to perform leaves little room for weakness. But as with all chaplaincy and pastoral work, relationship is key. As each week has passed and they've seen I'm around we've got to know each other more.

The pressure on footballers to perform leaves little room for weakness

Each time as I set off for the Abbey Stadium, the words of St Paul in Colossians 4:2-6 provide a firm basis for my prayer: that God may open up a door for a conversation about Jesus, and that my conduct and conversation would be grace-filled. Several times I've been asked, 'Why are you training to be a vicar?' or 'Why do you bother coming up each week?' or the occasional comment, 'I pray at times when I'm struggling'. For all the times when the talk is about football in general or how their college work is going, these brief moments—of

simple questions or deep statements about a spirituality they may not have fully acknowledged—make it worth it.

It's worth standing in horizontal driving rain whilst they train or play. It's worth it when at times no one acknowledges my presence there. It's worth it when there's just small talk. It's worth it when there are deeper conversations. It's worth it because Jesus cares about them and I want to make this known to them.

Sport chaplaincy is something that the Church for many years has seemed to neglect but the truth of the matter is there's one massive harvest field in professional sport. If you're reading this and have a sense of a call to sports chaplaincy or you know someone who may have a calling to sports chaplaincy...get involved. The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few!

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