

Baltimore Football Pro Points Fans to Christ

Matt Stover says he wants to use his football platform to help build the kingdom of God

Die-hard football fans know of Matt Stover.

The 37-year-old Texas native thrilled the NFL in 2001, kicking the Baltimore Ravens to the Super Bowl championship. Stover is so consistent in getting the ball between the goal posts that he is always one of the first players picked in any fantasy league and annually has been among the league's top scorers.

So when the can't-miss master of field goals missed three times the first game of the 2005 season, heads were shaking. This was not supposed to happen.

The following Tuesday night, at Stover's weekly men's Bible study, the guys let him talk and they prayed. "That was good," he said. "They had only seen me in success. If I was going to be an authentic man, I had to be able to talk when I failed too."

Success is somewhat of an understatement when applied to Stover's professional football career. Entering his 16th season this year, the Louisiana Tech graduate has climbed to No. 10 on the NFL's all-time scoring list, been on two Super Bowl champion teams and is known as one of the most accurate kickers ever to put on cleats.

After each field goal attempt and after each PAT (point-after-touchdown) kick, Stover thrusts both of his hands into the

air, pointing toward heaven. The routine-often caught on camera and broadcast to sports bars and living rooms everywhere-is his witness and now his trademark. "How can I not do it?" Stover asked. "I am giving the glory to God in all things. It is not about me, it is about Him."

For Stover, such a witness seems appropriate. "Football is what brought me to Christ," he explained.

Indeed, during a game in 1993, he says God got his attention. Stover-the last remaining Raven who was a Cleveland Brown before the team's move East-had missed a 19-yard field goal. Dropping to one knee right there on the field, he cried out, "Lord, help me."

It wasn't a complaint; rather, it was a prayer. "Wow, I thought. I didn't know I had that kind of reverence for God in me," Stover recalled.

A few months later, Stover attended a Professional Athletes Outreach retreat at which he came to realize that he had wrongly allowed football to become his god. "Before that it was all about me," Stover told Charisma. "I always had a knowledge of God, but never a relationship with Him."

Stover took the step to surrender his life-all of it, including football-to Christ. That was more than a decade ago. Today the kicker sees himself as a role model and has committed to use his sports platform to build the kingdom of God.

When Stover speaks before young athletes he emphasizes the need to take personal responsibility, specifically when it

comes to three big temptations all successful athletes face: money, athletic ability (pride) and sex. "I tell them that I had it, got it, been there and it is not it," Stover said. "Even in secular places, they come up to me and say that they are glad that someone is finally talking about these things."

At Christian venues such as Fellowship of Christian Athlete camps Stover candidly asks young athletes where they are in relationship to Christ. "A lot of athletes never take responsibility for their own lives," Stover said. "A lot of athletes grow up but remain boys."

Stover and his wife, Debbie, attend Grace Fellowship, an evangelical church in suburban Baltimore. They also support a crisis pregnancy center, an outreach to abused children and a nonprofit organization that assists the mentally handicapped.

For Stover, having the ear of young athletes is a gift. As he nears the end of his professional football playing days, he sees himself expanding his ministry, particularly to men. What he now tells young athletes he will continue to tell males of all ages: "We must take personal responsibility as Christians and as men."

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