

God in the NFL

Star quarterback Mark Brunell helped start a church in Jacksonville, Florida. And he's not the only pro athlete today who is scoring big points for Jesus.

Are you ready for some football?"

The tongue-in-cheek remark by worship leader Bill Hackworth wasn't off the wall, even though it was made from a church stage on a Sunday morning. His congregation, Southpoint Community Church (SCC) in Jacksonville, Florida, has several current and former Jacksonville Jaguars players, including Mark Brunell—the NFL team's star quarterback.

But the 500 worshipers are not interested in a game this Sunday. They have come to worship God.

What started in 1996 as a Bible study in Brunell's living room has mushroomed into a growing charismatic church with 850 members who envision building a 2,500-seat sanctuary. SCC officially formed in 1999.

"As exciting as these first three years have been, I know that it's only the beginning," Brunell tells the congregation.

"I liken it to a football game," adds Brunell, 32, an elder at the church who sometimes preaches when the pastor is away. "Basically, we've had one play and that's been the kickoff. We've just kicked this thing off. I believe the future is bright for this church. I believe Southpoint Community Church has a destiny, a purpose. God put us here for a reason."

SCC's amazing growth is the result of the work of Champions for Christ (CFC), a low-profile ministry that is credited for transforming athletes not just into role models, but also into ministers.

Reaching players from college and professional sports, including the NFL, the NBA and the NHL, CFC is the athletic arm of Morning Star International (MSI), a worldwide church-planting body that has 350 churches in Asia, Africa, Europe, North and South America, and Australia. (MSI, based in Nashville, Tennessee, is not affiliated with Rick Joyner's MorningStar Ministries of Charlotte, North Carolina.)

Four MSI congregations have started primarily with athletes, with SCC being the largest. With more than 100 NFL, 20 NBA and 10 NHL members, "CFC is a growing presence in big-league sports," ESPN The Magazine observed.

Bill McCartney, founder and president of Promise Keepers, believes CFC is "on the cutting edge of what God is doing in the kingdom" in ministering to players, who often have fame, fortune and a plethora of temptations.

"These guys are awesome," McCartney, 62, told Charisma. "There's fire in their camp. You can't be around these guys and not be ignited for the Lord. You tell a tree by its fruit, and this ministry bears good fruit."

Denny Duron, 50, senior pastor of First Assembly of God in Shreveport, Louisiana, adds: "Champions is one of the most powerful manifestations of the Holy Ghost anointing in this generation. Without a doubt, it is a God-appointed, God-ordained ministry that is committed to each athlete and his or her family. Champions will continue to grow because its foundation is an 'Acts of the Apostles' approach to evangelism

and discipleship.”

Tough Talk for Athletes

Advocating the baptism of the Holy Spirit, deliverance and divine healing, CFC is one of only two national, charismatic sports ministries. The other is Athletes International Ministries, which is affiliated with the Assemblies of God.

“It’s not just about praying a salvation prayer,” says Rice Brooks, 46, who co-founded CFC in 1991 with Greg Ball. “It’s about being disciplined, trained and developed. The Spirit-filled message is the power [athletes] need. They need all the weapons they can get.”

Ball, 43, CFC’s president, adds: “They need the kingdom of God in their lives. Then their lives are better after than when they were playing. It takes years to be a role model. The question is, ‘How are you building your house?’”

Brooks and Ball got their start during their affiliation with Maranatha Campus Ministries, the charismatic outreach founded by Bob Weiner in 1972. When Maranatha folded in 1989, its younger leaders carried their passion for evangelism into new arenas. Ball’s vision for reaching athletes only intensified—and his persistence has paid off.

Today, pro athletes associated with CFC include Brunell, Houston Texans lineman Tony Boselli, Washington Redskins defensive back Darrell Green and former Los Angeles Lakers forward A.C. Green.

Buffalo Sabres player Curtis Brown was 18 and playing his first year of professional hockey when he realized he needed a better life foundation. John Blue, a 10-year NHL veteran at the time who is now a CFC pastor, began witnessing to Brown.

“Here was a guy not only talking about the gospel, but he was actually living it,” Brown, now 26, says. “I had never seen that before. I always heard people saying, ‘You need to be a Christian.’ But their lifestyles never added up. Finally, here was a guy with a lifestyle to match, and that was very appealing to me.”

Blue led Brown to the Lord, and shortly after, he became connected with CFC. “If [Blue] had never stepped up and ministered to me, I wouldn’t be here today,” says Brown, who met his wife, Amy, through CFC. “If [Champions] weren’t obedient to the call of Christ on their lives, there would be a lot of athletes who wouldn’t be where they are today serving God.”

Indianapolis Colts punter Hunter Smith, 25, says 90 percent of his spiritual growth has been as a result of CFC. “They’re not on the defensive. It’s like: ‘You know what? You’re no different than anybody else. So don’t act like just because you’re saved, you’re a Christian, and you’re a professional athlete, you deserve special treatment. Or that you’re above accountability, discipleship and any of that stuff, because you’re not.’

“In actuality, we’re probably in need of it more as an athlete,” Smith adds. “Champions is a ministry that just steps in and says: ‘You know what? You may get offended, but here’s how it is.’”

But CFC leaders don't talk tough just to act tough. "When you tell a man the truth, and he knows that's your true motive, then there's a deep trust that's formed, and he's willing to listen," says Brooks, who is president and co-founder of MSI and senior pastor of 3,000-member Bethel World Outreach Center in Nashville.

Philadelphia Eagles defensive tackle Paul Grasmanis was willing to listen when a couple of Chicago Bears teammates—his team at the time—reached out to him in 1998.

"I was already saved before that, but I was a 'lone ranger' trying to walk the thing by myself and really being unsuccessful," says Grasmanis, 28. "I didn't know what lordship, accountability or discipleship was."

But thanks to CFC, Grasmanis has grown spiritually through Bible-based training.

"When I think of Champions, the first thing that comes to mind is family," says Grasmanis, who gave up alcohol and is now one of the leaders of a CFC outreach for players with the Eagles. "They've helped me walk with Christ, taught me discipleship and really got in my face and said, 'Listen, this is what's wrong in your life.'"

Buffalo Bills rookie offensive tackle Mike Williams says he was a Christian but "was sanctified" after he got connected with Champions four years ago while at the University of Texas in Austin.

"Champions means so much to me because it's the first time I really saw people who loved God and were on fire for God,"

Williams told Charisma. “They show it without any shame, and they don’t hide it. It’s not like, ‘OK, somebody’s looking, I can’t raise my hands to praise God.’ They don’t fake the funk.”

Jaguars offensive lineman Todd Fordham says Champions has enabled him to get “plugged into God.” “I no longer live a double life,” Fordham, 29, says. “Champions has taught me a lot about being a humble man in the NFL and being a godly husband and father. It has taught me to leave a legacy other than football, but something eternal.”

Needy Celebrities

CFC ministers bluntly refer to the NFL as “Not For Long,” because the average playing career is only a few years.

“A lot of times when you’re dealing with professional players, their initial response is, ‘I don’t need Jesus because I’ve got \$10 million,’” says Ron Miller, pastor of Morning Star Christian Church (MSCC) of Tallahassee, Florida, and a former Florida State University basketball player. “Money is their God. But as they come to the end of their careers, they ask, ‘What is my life about?’ It opens their heart up. I tell the players that the American dream without God always ends up as a nightmare.”

Broocks believes when athletes sell out for Christ, they have great potential to spread the gospel because they understand biblical principles of commitment, sacrifice and teamwork. “When they’re challenged to pick up their cross daily and follow Christ, they do it because that’s something they’re used to hearing,” Broocks adds.

McCartney, who won a national championship in 1990 as the football coach of the University of Colorado, says players with CFC try to live out Colossians 3:23, which says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men" (NIV).

"They understand that their competitive juices must be supported by the right motivation," he says. "They are not using their athleticism for themselves, but for the glory of God."

Champions' players receive constant reminders to set their hearts on heavenly things. Besides one-on-one discipleship and small-group fellowships, CFC holds annual gatherings.

"Many of you here have a destiny in God that's higher than what you'll ever achieve in the NFL," Ball tells about 150 athletes gathered in Austin for a CFC conference in June. "It's going to be over that quick. All that you'll have left is what you've built your life on. Your career should be always about the kingdom of God."

Many of the athletes agree, saying, "Yes, that's right." During the three-day annual conference, the CFC ministers don't pull any punches with the players.

"You'll never know football is an idol in your life until it's taken away," says Bryan Schwartz, 30, an associate pastor for MSCC in Austin and a former linebacker with the Jaguars. "If the game determines how your life is and how you treat your wife and family at the end of the day, then it's an idol. I know because football was my idol; it shaped my life. Keep your career with an open hand to God. I've been on both sides

of the fence. You can have football and God.”

Using football to introduce teammates and their families to God was the goal for Brunell and his wife, Stacy. After Brunell was traded to Jacksonville from Green Bay in 1995, the couple decided to get to know his teammates.

“Before we really started witnessing, having Bible studies and talking about the Lord, God allowed us to build relationships,” Brunell told Charisma. “We were friends with them and got to spend time with them, so they got to see our lives.”

A barbecue at their home turned into a Bible study, attracting about a dozen players and their families. After that ended, the Brunells brought in Ball to preach to the group. Brunell had known Ball since his playing days at the University of Washington, but the relationship grew during his time in Green Bay.

Amazingly, the first meeting in the Brunells’ living room on May 13, 1996, resulted in the conversion of several teammates. The next morning, former Jaguars players Joel Smeenge, Schwartz and Boselli were baptized in Brunell’s swimming pool.

A nonpracticing Catholic at the time, Boselli had “never heard the term born again” until Ball preached about it.

“I thought that was some whole other religion,” Boselli, 30, says. “I didn’t know what it meant to really be saved. Looking back, I had no idea what I was doing that night. I stood up simply because I wanted what pastor Greg was talking about. I wanted to know God in that way.”

Smeenge, a defensive end who is retired from the NFL, credits Brunell as being the group's pillar who attracted him to Christianity. "He had a joy in his life," says Smeenge, 34, who runs a landscape business with Fordham. "He had a great marriage, and he was raising his family right. His lifestyle was so convicting to me. I knew he was walking the walk and not just talking the talk."

Brunell, though, plays down his part. "It's like being a quarterback," he says. "You get all the credit, but you don't do all the work."

Not Just a 'Football Church'

With Ball discipling the new converts, the group began to grow as a spiritual family. During the 1996 NFL season, they continued to meet, with Ball flying to Jacksonville from Austin monthly to preach.

Former Jaguars wide receiver Will Moore was a Christian when he joined the team about that time, but he admits to being backslidden along with his wife, Phyllis. After being invited to the players' fellowship, Moore—who is retired from the NFL—says "the veil was taken off our eyes" when he heard Ball preach the Bible.

Both repented and have been part of the group since. Moore, 32, is now a pharmaceutical salesman and a CFC elder, and Phyllis works at the church.

By the 1997 NFL season, the athletes began to share with friends and business acquaintances how Jesus had changed their

lives. This sparked such an interest that the group began holding weekly meetings in a hotel. As many as 50 people began attending.

“Because we’re football players, we didn’t know church,” Brunell says. “As far as we were concerned, we were just reaching out to the team and the community, but it evolved into something different. Pretty soon there were more people from the community than there were athletes coming.”

By 1998, the group sensed God’s leading to bring in a full-time minister, so Russ Austin, an MSI pastor, was brought on board that fall. After holding meetings at the hotel for two years, the fellowship officially became a Morning Star church, with about 110 people attending the first service on February 28, 1999.

Shortly after, the congregation started drawing several hundred people, primarily through word of mouth. Today, more than 850 regular worshipers meet in a revamped warehouse, located in a Jacksonville office park.

The congregation hopes to build a 2,500-seat auditorium by 2004 on 150 acres near Interstate 95. Austin, SCC’s senior pastor, said the church has already paid off the \$2 million for the land.

Some in the faith community call it the “Jaguar Church,” but Austin is not fond of the term because “it doesn’t define the full expression of who we are.” Initially, the church bulletins asked guests not to seek out players for autographs, although it hasn’t been a problem. Still, Austin admits some

people visit to see the players.

"We have seen that happen from time to time," Austin, 46, told Charisma. "They come to check out where and how the players worship. But after 10 minutes, that goes away. The great desire we have at SCC is to be a place where you can experience the love and power of God. The person being showcased at SCC is our Lord Jesus Christ."

Fordham, who got saved and baptized at Brunell's home during his rookie year in 1997, says what has happened with SCC is "no doubt a God thing."

"I grew up in a church, but to actually see a church birth is really amazing to me," says Fordham, who like Smeenge leads an SCC men's Bible study. "There are so many stories of people coming to know the Lord and relationships being formed. I know that God's the only one who can do that."

SCC has been instrumental in bringing Andy and Barbara Jacobs together. While visiting her sister, who is a Southpoint member, she attended the church in 2000.

"We met at the altar," says Jacobs, 38. "I came up for prayer, and Andy was part of the prayer team. We were married in February 2001. He's from New York, and I'm from Mississippi, so there's no doubt God set it all up, including this church, for us to get together."

After an invitation from Boselli, Ernie and Linda Vadersen began attending the fellowship more than four years ago, and soon became Christians.

“Originally, I thought it would be cool to go to a church where the Jaguars went,” says Vadersen, 58, who along with his wife and two children are active SCC members. “I could not have been more wrong.

“This is truly a family church. This is not a football church; it’s God’s house. God allowed the house to be built by using football players, and He’s still using them today.”

During his sermon in May, Brunell, who oversees SCC’s high school and college outreach, agrees as he tells the congregation: “I have been walking in a miracle. How this church came to be and how people came together to form this family has been a miracle of God.

“In the book of Acts, you see a similar miracle. A bunch of people from different backgrounds come together. They get saved, baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, become a church family and start reaching out to their neighborhoods, communities and cities.

“Does that sound familiar? That’s what’s taken place here.”

Broocks, Ball and other CFC leaders believe that if God can use football to build a thriving church in Jacksonville, He can take hundreds more athletes and do the same—all over the nation.

Eric Tiansay is an associate editor with Charisma. An avid sports fan, he went to New Orleans in February to report on Super Bowl outreaches. He traveled to Jacksonville and Austin to prepare this report.

Using Sports to Win the World

Champions for Christ, a Texas-based outreach to athletes, is challenging sports stars to enter the ministry.

Say what you will about rich professional athletes. Rice Broocks and Greg Ball say preaching the gospel to sports celebrities is not an easy job.

“We didn’t start this ministry to reach disgruntled millionaires,” jokes Broocks, who co-founded Champions for Christ in 1991 with Ball. “People think it’s paradise to minister in Hawaii, but that’s not the case. There are hurting people in Hawaii just as there are in professional sports.”

Broocks and Ball, who met while attending Mississippi State University during the 1970s, started the ministry by reaching college athletes. Inevitably, some of the collegians they won to the Lord moved on to the NFL, NBA and NHL. Starting out with a shoestring budget, CFC now is a multimillion-dollar annual operation with 115 employees.

About 60 CFC pastors rotate among more than 30 professional athlete outreaches and nearly 100 college chapters. They are ordained through Morning Star International (MSI), a global church-planting body.

“I believe we’ve had the favor of God,” says Ball, who is CFC’s president and senior pastor of 500-member Morning Star

Christian Church in Austin, Texas. "There have been many great sports ministries that have gone before and are out laboring, few people have ever asked God for the high places."

To Ball, those "high places" include nationally known sports figures who influence American culture as much as movie stars and musicians.

CFC, however, is not just interested in conversions. Ball emphasizes the importance of discipleship, accountability and Jesus' lordship.

"Learn to be a disciple of Christ first and then you become a leader," adds Broocks, who is president and co-founder of the Morning Star network and senior pastor of 3,000-member Bethel World Outreach Center in Nashville, Tennessee.

Champions' approach to train athletes has been effective. There are four MSI congregations birthed primarily with athletes, with 850-strong Southpoint Community Church (SCC) in Jacksonville, Florida, being the largest.

Ball says about 90 percent of the CFC ministers are former athletes, including former NHL goalie John Blue and ex-NFL linebacker Bryan Schwartz. Additionally, St. Louis Rams tight end Ernie Conwell is set to join Broocks' staff as an associate pastor at the end of this football season. Conwell and former Washington Redskins Tim Johnson, already an associate pastor in the Nashville church, have played in the Super Bowl.

Many of Champions' pro athletes also see themselves becoming CFC ministers someday.

"I believe God has called me to full-time ministry when I retire," Houston Texans lineman Tony Boselli says. "I don't know what it is for sure, but I believe it is to preach the gospel."

Champions' athletes have a strong bond that goes deeper than the superficiality of the game. Many players and their families also hold a strong allegiance to CFC and refer to the ministry as their "covenant family." The families of Baltimore Ravens quarterback Jeff Blake, former Rams linebacker Robert Jones and Buffalo Sabres center Curtis Brown have relocated to Austin to be a part of Ball's church.

The emphasis on familial ties helped CFC overcome a controversy in 1998. Curtis Enis, then a Chicago Bears rookie, fired his agent after being converted through a CFC outreach. He then hired a Christian financial planner who attended Ball's church.

The fired agent's firm reportedly lodged complaints with the NFL over CFC's influence and tactics. Several national magazines and newspapers, including Newsweek, Sports Illustrated and The New York Times reported that some teams asked the league to investigate the ministry out of concern that CFC was asking players to give huge amounts of money to the organization.

"Champions for Christ stands financially neutral on how and with whom athletes should invest their money," CFC's Web site says regarding financial integrity.

Mark Brunell, quarterback for the Jacksonville Jaguars and a

key member of the MSI church in that city, says the Enis controversy was a spiritual attack against the ministry.

“It was a real ugly period. We were slandered,” Brunell says. “There were a lot of accusations against us. We prayed and just stuck together. We were honest. We didn’t challenge anyone. We turned the other cheek. We didn’t want to make it ugly because it was ugly enough.”

Ball says it was a case of “guilt by association,” and he noted that Enis is no longer affiliated with CFC. “We were blamed for something we had nothing to do with,” he told Charisma. “But God used it. Because of the controversy, God turned around what appeared to be bad into something good. We grew more that year than we had previously.”

The CFC staff have put the Enis flap behind them and are focusing on expansion plans. A \$50 million headquarters complex is on the drawing board, featuring a church, Bible school, fitness facility, music studio and ball fields—all for the purpose of reaching more pro athletes for Jesus.

Says Ball of the ambitious project: “It’s going to take God to do it because it’s way beyond us.”

Faith in the End Zone

Many professional athletes say the spiritual temperature is rising in the NFL.

St. Louis Rams quarterback Kurt Warner thanked Jesus after winning the Super Bowl. Players from opposing teams huddle together for prayer after games. It appears that God is everywhere in the NFL these days.

But several players affiliated with Champions for Christ (CFC), a charismatic sports ministry, have a more mixed perspective on whether there's a full-blown religious revival going on in professional football—the most popular sport on television.

When tight end Ernie Conwell joined the Rams seven years ago, there weren't many believers. Yet today, he told Charisma, it is "a Christian team." The Chicago Tribune went so far as to declare that the Rams—who have a paid, full-time chaplain—"may be the most religious team in professional sports."

"I think there has been a spiritual awakening in the NFL," adds Conwell, 30. "I've seen a lot of guys open up their hearts to the gospel. I've witnessed to many guys on our teams, and some have received the gospel and become born again. So I think there are signs of revival."

Jacksonville Jaguars quarterback Mark Brunell, a teammate of Conwell's at the University of Washington, hasn't seen a dramatic spiritual shift since the Green Bay Packers drafted him in 1993.

"I don't think it's any different," says Brunell, who was traded to the Jaguars in 1995 and led the team within one game of Super Bowl XXXIV in 2000. "I think you have three groups of people—those who are unsaved, those who are saved and keep their faith to themselves and those who are very outgoing

about Christianity. But I haven't seen that much difference."

Meanwhile, Brunell's best friend and former Jaguars lineman, Tony Boselli, says players are more spiritual.

"You see guys kneeling in the zone, pointing to heaven and praying afterwards, which are all great things if we as athletes are living the life off the field," says Boselli, who now plays for the Houston Texans. "But I think what [the non-Christian players] really want to see is a life lived out. They want to see the authentic Christian life in the locker room and off the field."

Philadelphia Eagles defensive tackle Paul Grasmanis says he hasn't seen a revival in his seven years in the NFL but that now is the "perfect time for ministry." Building relationships with teammates is the key to presenting the gospel later, he believes.

Grasmanis, fellow Eagles defensive tackle Cory Simon and another player started having a home Bible study together two years ago. Last season it became a full-fledged CFC outreach, featuring pastors who preached and discipled the athletes and their wives.

The outreach was dubbed "God's Squad" by ESPN The Magazine. Currently held on Monday nights at Simon's home, the event draws at least 30 people. Grasmanis hopes it will grow to become a church, similar to the congregations started by CFC athletes in Phoenix and Jacksonville.

The outreach has also broken racial barriers. Says Grasmanis:

"[Simon] is from from the ghetto. And I'm a country boy from west Michigan. God has taken two people from opposite ends of the cultural spectrum, and He's knitted us together. We're able to go into high schools and other places to speak to issues. It's a boundary breaker. They see a black guy and a white guy together as close friends. It just breaks boundaries. It's awesome. It's just God."

Big Guys and a Big God

A growing number of pro athletes are experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit.

When Todd Fordham first heard about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the Jacksonville Jaguars offensive lineman had a faith dilemma.

"At first I was scared because I was never taught to believe in that aspect of Christianity," says Fordham, who was raised in a Southern Baptist church in Georgia. "I was basically clueless. But through the grace of God, I saw in the Bible that there is power through the laying on of hands and speaking in tongues."

Baptized in the Holy Spirit during a Champions for Christ (CFC) conference in 1997, Fordham and other players are embracing the Spirit-filled life promoted by the charismatic sports ministry, which also teaches deliverance and healing.

During his rookie year in 1999, Indianapolis Colts punter Hunter Smith was introduced to Champions, which reintroduced him to the charismatic experience.

"When [CFC president] Greg Ball came to Indianapolis and gave a teaching on it, I knew that God was leading me to experience His fullness and to move in the power and the gifts of the Spirit," says Smith, who claims he now has a new spiritual boldness.

"I don't think the baptism of the Holy Spirit is just about experiencing some supernatural thing," says Smith, who was raised in the Church of Christ. "It's about surrendering every part of your will to everything that God has for you."

Buffalo Sabres center Curtis Brown, who came to Christ and was filled with the Holy Spirit in 1997 through CFC, knows that Christians "get into a whole theological debate" over charismatic phenomena.

"But I believe the gifts of the Holy Spirit are for today," says Brown, who rarely attended church while growing up in Canada. "How do I know that? Because I see it in the Word, and I see people operating in these gifts."

Brown compares living the Christian life without the Holy Spirit's power to playing ice hockey with only one skate. "If I'm really going to live for God, I want every gift, everything that will help me out because we don't live in a perfect world. By not taking advantage of what God has intended for me, I'm setting myself up for more defeats than I should have," Brown says.

St. Louis Rams tight end Ernie Conwell was filled with the Holy Spirit in college while attending his brother's Vineyard church in Washington state. Although he is 6 feet 2 inches tall and 255 pounds, and can pick up a refrigerator, he says

he has to “rely on the Holy Spirit to fully live the Christian life.”

Jacksonville Jaguars quarterback Mark Brunell, a teammate of Conwell’s at the University of Washington, says he edifies himself regularly by speaking in tongues.

“I pray in tongues before football games,” says Brunell, who grew up Baptist and was baptized in the Holy Spirit during college. “I pray in tongues before I preach, and it builds me up. I cannot imagine life without that gift.”

Fordham, Brunell’s teammate, remembers that it “blew him away” when he received the ability to pray in the Spirit. “That night during praise and worship [at the CFC conference], I took the boundaries away from God in my life,” says Fordham, who is 6 feet 5 inches tall and weights 310 pounds. “I said: ‘Here I am, Lord. I want all that You want in my life.’ I raised my hands and started speaking in tongues. I was just giving it up to God.”

Giving Back With Changed Lives

Pro football star Darrell Green has used his platform to educate youngsters in the ghetto.

Launching an urban educational ministry that has been commended by both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush isn’t a day in the park, although that is how it started for Washington Redskins cornerback and longtime Champions for Christ (CFC) supporter Darrell Green.

In December 1988, Green volunteered for a Fun Days in the Park event for underprivileged children sponsored by the District of Columbia Parks and Recreation Department. Green, however, was not prepared for what he saw—youths who lacked food and clothing, educational resources and family support.

“Driving home that night, I began to weep because God revealed to me that no one at the park was any different because I came and signed a few autographs and held a few babies,” Green told Charisma. “The people that I had just left were still living in poverty and hopelessness.”

At that moment, Green knew he had to do more. “The next day I called a lawyer because I had no clue what I needed to do to establish a foundation. But from that day on, it became clear to me what I would do with my life,” Green says.

With a passion to ensure that children have an opportunity to succeed, he started the Darrell Green Youth Life Foundation and began by sponsoring Days in the Park events. But the scope of the inner-city poverty problem was bigger than he realized.

“So many children face such incredible odds,” says 42-year-old Green, who is playing his last year in the NFL after 20 years with the Redskins. He opened the Darrell Green Youth Life Learning Center in 1993 in Washington, D.C., which addressed a threefold mission: nurture the child, heal the family and rebuild the community.

“Teddy Roosevelt once said that if you only educate a man’s mind, but you do not deal with his heart, you end up creating menaces to society,” says Green, who has been married for 17 years and has three children. “So we have a holistic program

designed to serve four areas: physical, intellectual, relational and spiritual.”

Between 35 and 40 children spend two to four hours daily at the center. Instructors monitor their schoolwork, often tutoring one-on-one. Youngsters also receive college placement counseling, job-training advice and technical and computer training.

Besides establishing a record of academic excellence and positive behavioral changes, the Learning Center is considered a vanguard for character building that has been recognized by Bush and Clinton.

“By having the Learning Center to go to, I wasn’t tempted to get into trouble with my friends, and I’m very grateful for that,” says Sonia White, 20, one of the center’s first students in 1993 and who now attends college.

Currently, there are five centers nationwide. Recently, the organization added a Youth Life Foundation Training Institute, where Green and his staff teach others how to establish and operate similar youth learning centers. Within the next 18 months, there may be as many as three centers operating in the Washington area, and others scheduled for Baltimore, Houston, Indianapolis and Cleveland.

CFC president Greg Ball believes Green has “probably done more for the kingdom of God than anyone in the NFL.”

“These learning centers are true generational transformers, where kids are being trained and basically taught how to read and understand the gospel,” Ball says. “Darrell’s a man of

character and great role model. He's an example that the covenant of God works. He epitomizes Proverbs 22:1, which says, 'A good name is more desirable than great riches.'

"When you talk about giving back, he's giving back with changed lives," Ball adds.

Brett Fuller, 41, chaplain of the Redskins and senior pastor of Grace Covenant Church in Herndon, Virginia, where Green is an elder, says despite Green's Super Bowl championships, numerous Pro Bowl appearances and the NFL's Fastest Man title, his crowning achievement will be the learning centers.

"He would want to be best remembered for the centers," says Fuller. "It is one of the finest works that anybody could establish any place."