

A Gator for God

Tim Tebow of the University of Florida is the youngest player to win college football's Heisman Trophy. But the humble missionary kid says he is passionate about winning a more important prize.

On a muggy evening in May, Tim Tebow stepped into a stadium in Starke, Florida, and was greeted by a familiar chorus of shouts and applause. The University of Florida (UF) star quarterback briefly blocked the sunlight from his eyes as he gazed into a sea of orange and blue. And then he did something unlike any feat he had ever performed on a football field—he grabbed a microphone and invited hundreds of people to commit their lives to Christ.

"You have a choice to make right now," Tebow said. "Jesus is knocking on the door of your heart, and He wants to come in, but it is a choice that you have to make."

And with that, he asked the crowd of more than 2,000 people to join him in a prayer for salvation. Music played quietly as people poured out of the stands—the first, a teen dressed in a cadet's uniform. On the sidelines, a father and son knelt together with their heads bowed and baseball caps in hand as hundreds of others surrounded Tebow.

"Jesus says when you ask Him to come into your heart, you become a child of God, and I am a child of God," Tebow said after he prayed. "That's why I am so happy to have so many new brothers and sisters in Christ. I am so happy."

Tebow's ease in this ministry setting belies the fact that he is best known for his athletic ability. Last December he became the first sophomore to receive the prestigious Heisman Trophy, which recognizes the most outstanding player in college football each year. His prowess on the field—he threw for 32 touchdowns last season and ran for 895 yards and 23

scores—has earned him the nickname “Superman.” But though he has one of the most recognizable names in college sports, Tebow openly tells fans that his love of football isn’t what drives him. “My biggest passion in life isn’t football,” he told the Florida crowd. “It’s about telling as many people as I can about my relationship with Jesus Christ because when I get to heaven I don’t want Jesus Christ to look at me and say, ‘Timmy, you could have told all those people, but you chose not to.’”

Rather than basking in his prominence, Tebow seeks to use his platform as a tool for ministry. “In today’s society, people look up to football players,” Tebow says. “For me, there are people watching, so I take the opportunity to ... speak because I may be the only Jesus that they see. I may be the only person that they’ll listen to. If I don’t take that opportunity to share with them, maybe no one will.”

A Pregnancy and a Prayer

Long before Tebow ever picked up a football or donned a jersey for the Florida Gators, his mom, Pam Tebow, says God seemed to have a special plan for her son. She met Bob Tebow in the late 1960s while both were students at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Pam was a freshman studying journalism when she met Bob, a sophomore, while he was publicizing an event for Campus Crusade for Christ, a college-based evangelism and discipleship organization.

Four years later, during the summer of 1971, the new graduates married. Soon afterward their family included a daughter, Christy. Pam Tebow says before she knew it there were three more children—Katie, Robby and Peter. Then in 1985, with four small children in tow, the couple moved to the Philippines to build the Bob Tebow Evangelical Association (BTEA).

Pam Tebow says the ministry saw countless conversions, and the family was adjusting to missionary life. The Tebows had lived

abroad for two years when Pam and Bob began praying about adding to their family, asking specifically for a baby boy whom they would name Timothy.

“We started praying for Timmy by name,” recalls Pam Tebow, who discovered her pregnancy while she was recovering from a coma brought on by amebic dysentery, an illness caused by parasites living in contaminated drinking water. “We just felt like God had a special plan for him.”

The illness required Tebow to take a series of aggressive antibiotics that she discontinued the day she discovered her pregnancy. But because her doctors thought the antibiotics had caused irreversible damage to the newly formed fetus, they advised Tebow to “discontinue” the pregnancy. She refused, believing that God would sustain her child’s life.

“I was not about to have an abortion,” Tebow says. “They said it was just a mass of fetal tissue, but we knew better.”

Tebow continued working with the ministry and homeschooling her children, but six months into the pregnancy she began experiencing excruciating pain. She was rushed to a remote hospital, where doctors diagnosed her with placental abruption, a condition that occurs when the placenta detaches from the uterine wall. The physicians warned Tebow that her baby—who doctors believed had sustained damage early on—would never survive a second blow.

Expecting the child to be stillborn, doctors urged Tebow to reconsider abortion, telling her that she could contract a potentially fatal infection if she refused. “They believed I should have an abortion to save my life,” Tebow recalls.

She again refused the doctors’ advice and was flown to a hospital in Manila, where she was placed on 24-hour bed rest and monitored closely by a physician. Two months later, she gave birth—on her due date, August 14, 1987—to a baby boy.

“He wasn’t so little,” she recalls. “He was just very skinny and had trouble eating. Today, he has certainly made up for that.”

Indeed, he has. A wrecking machine on the football field, Tebow now weighs 235 pounds and stands at 6 feet, 3 inches tall.

Growing Up Tebow

When Tebow was 3 years old, his family moved back to the U.S., where they settled on a 44-acre piece of land on the outskirts of Jacksonville, Florida. The property was every adventurous kid’s dream—dotted with vast fields, a small lake and a handful of farm animals.

It is where Tebow spent much of his childhood and where he and his tightknit siblings learned to play creatively. Pam Tebow remembers the children making miniature golf courses in the middle of cow pastures. “Things like that really cause you to grow closer,” she says. “You either have to get along or you have problems.”

But Tebow and his siblings did more than simply play on the land—they learned their parents’ core values, beginning with their faith in God. “We really wanted to pass on our value system to teach them about their heritage, not only as a family, but as Christians,” Pam Tebow says.

Bob Tebow, who continued his work with BTEA, often split his time between the Philippines and the U.S. When he was home, he taught his children—specifically the boys—to mend and build fences, help their neighbors and have a strong work ethic. And while the children learned from their father on their farm, they learned from their mother in the home.

Pam Tebow was deeply committed to homeschooling the five children. “One of the keys about homeschooling is that you have a chance to teach them about life,” she says. “It’s not

all about academics.

“It’s about teaching them everything they need to know to be successful in life—about finances, avoiding wrong friends, not buying the new car because everybody else has a new car. The schools are not going to teach those things.”

The five Tebow children spent countless Sundays sitting in the pews of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, a congregation Bob and Pam Tebow are still part of today. But when Tim Tebow was just 7 years old, he and his siblings began spending their summers visiting their family’s ministry among the mud-hut villages of Mindanao, a remote, largely unevangelized mountainous island in the Philippines.

“With an estimated 42,000 *barangays* [villages] in the Philippines, more than 64 percent of them do not have a single evangelical church,” Bob Tebow explains on BTEA’s Web site. “In a country of 87 million, the number of people who have never heard the gospel is staggering.”

Tebow befriended the villagers’ children, often playing football with them. But he also spent his days helping to feed children in the family’s orphanage, Uncle Dick’s Home. The orphanage took in its first child—an infant whose mother died during childbirth—in 1992. Today it is home to more than 50 children.

Faith—On and Off the Field

Back in the U.S., an athletic young Tebow had his eyes focused on his favorite sport, football. He watched as then-Florida quarterback Danny Wuerffel dominated UF’s football field; and when he was just 9 years old, Tebow rejoiced when Wuerffel won the Heisman Trophy. But he also watched Wuerffel off the field. And what he saw, he says, influenced his life greatly.

“He was someone who my parents kind of chose for me to look up to as a kid because he was good on the field, but more

importantly he was great off the field,” says Tebow, who plastered his childhood bedroom walls with clippings about Wuerffel’s athletic accomplishments.

As a homeschooled child, he was eligible to compete in high school sporting events under Florida legislation enacted in 1996. Recognizing his potential, the family decided that Pam and Tim would leave the farm and move into an apartment in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, so Tebow could play football for a local public school, Nease High School.

Tebow’s high school coach, Craig Howard, quickly took notice. “People can always lead with words but not always with their actions,” says Howard, former head football coach at Nease High School. “Timmy was the hardest worker I’ve ever been around. His work ethic was uncompromising, and all of those around him were affected by it.”

Howard witnessed a teen who infused his faith into everything he did. “He was always giving the glory to God,” Howard says, recalling the countless games that began and ended with prayer led by Tebow. “That was a part of the whole experience with coaching him.”

By his senior year, Tebow had become one of the top quarterback prospects in the nation, and recruiters were quickly lining up at his doorstep. After an intense recruiting battle between UF and the University of Alabama, Tebow opted for an orange and blue jersey and officially became a Florida Gator in 2006.

That year, as a freshman, Tebow helped lead the UF football team to win a national championship between back-to-back national basketball titles. Then in 2007, as the starting quarterback, he turned heads for his prowess on the field and was awarded a string of prestigious awards before winning college football’s most coveted award, the Heisman Trophy.

Tebow says his pulse raced last December as he sat alongside

two other contending college quarterbacks and one running back in New York City's Nokia Theater on a freezing December evening. Wuerffel, Tebow's longtime hero, was also nervous. "I was pulling for him so much and was just thankful that he won and proud of the way he represents himself, his family, his school and his Savior," Wuerffel says.

Coach Howard also was there. "I knew he was going to win. I just felt it," says Howard, who currently coaches at Lake City Columbia High School in north Florida. "He's always given the glory to God, the honor to God ... even when he won the Heisman Trophy."

The entire Tebow family was there as well. Tebow's brother Robby, who directs the Jacksonville chapter of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA); his brother Peter, an Orlando-area engineer; and his sister Katie, a businesswoman and homemaker in Atlanta, were close by. But Tebow's oldest sister, Christy, who is a missionary, had to catch a last-minute flight with her husband and daughter to be there.

"I was sitting in front of the stage, and my family and coaches were behind me," Tebow says. "My sister and her family got to fly in ... and it was awesome to have them there. "

After Tebow was awarded the Heisman, Wuerffel was the first to congratulate him, shaking his hand and giving him a hug. "That meant an awful lot to me," Tebow says. "It took me a few seconds because of my emotions, and then I gave God credit first and accepted the award on behalf of my teammates. We think of it as a team award."

His historic achievement of being the youngest player to win the trophy instantly made big news in the sports world. But for Tebow, the moment was not about him; the moment was about God. "Thank you," he said at the time, clutching the 25-pound, bronzed statue in his massive hands. "I'd just like to first start off by thanking my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who

gave me the ability to play football, and He gave me a great family and a support group and great coaches and everything around me.”

The win became a defining moment in Tebow’s life because as he accepted the award he also accepted the platform that came with it. “The Heisman really doesn’t change who a person is, but it changes the perception people have of you, and it opens doors for you to use your platform,” he says.

Tebow used that platform in mid-April to speak to a crowd of inmates at a Florida prison. His message was simple, yet bold: “No matter how bad your life has been, eternity can be great,” he told them. “It’s not how you start, fellas; it’s how you finish.” By the time he walked away, 95 inmates had given their lives to Christ.

Now in his junior year, Tebow is majoring in family, youth and community sciences. He hopes to play in the NFL one day and to follow in Wuerffel’s footsteps by becoming involved in ministry. He often speaks to groups of young men through FCA, challenging them in their faith, and he leads a weekly Bible study from his on-campus apartment.

“He challenges me because he has everything in the world at his fingertips, and he’s using his resources wisely to glorify God and to impact this world,” says UF senior Joey Reichardt, a lifelong Gator fan who has followed Tebow’s football career.

For Tebow, the awards are meaningful. But the focus remains on the prizes that truly matter the most. “I’m very competitive, and I want to win that championship, and I want to win the Heisman again, but it really doesn’t matter because I’m focused on eternity and winning more important prizes—winning rewards in heaven.”

Suzy Richardson is a freelance writer based in Gainesville, Florida, and a Florida Gator herself.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE: To read about other Christian athletes who are using their prominence to share their faith, [click here](#).