

What's In A Name?

✖ If you ever run into Lance Berkman, do me a favor. Don't tell him I named my first son after him. As someone I've interviewed three times before and will likely interview again in the near future, it's probably best he doesn't think I'm less like a journalist and more like a crazed, stalker-fan.

The truth is that I really didn't name my son after Lance Berkman. Sure, he's my favorite player. Sure, he plays on my favorite team (the Houston Astros). Sure, Lance Berkman sounds an awful lot like Lance Bonham, but I promise you, it wasn't altogether intentional.

Of course, if that were the case, I could argue that Lance Berkman is an excellent choice as a namesake. Forget the fact that he's a five-time All-Star and one of the best players in the game. I'm more interested in Berkman's personal integrity and spiritual aptitude. That's the stuff role models are really made of.

My third interview with Berkman took place earlier this month for a pair of Fellowship of Christian (FCA) projects. And while many "jocks" are considered all brawn and no brains, Berkman does a lot to dispel that myth-especially when it comes to Bible theology.

In fact, Berkman plans to finish up his degree at Moody Institute during down time on the road this season. It's something he finds easy to do thanks to a growing desire to understand God's Word.

"The thing about the Bible that's amazing to me and still brings me a sense of awe is how well the principles work when applied to your daily walk," Berkman told me. "People say faith is blind but when you put your faith into practice, you start to understand that it's not. God doesn't expect you to abandon reason. There's so much good, practical advice for

living. It's not just for the after-life, but it's for how you can live properly now. You can benefit greatly from the principles the Bible espouses. Every time I read it, it just blows me away how accurate and how well the Bible handles the human experience."

That's some pretty steep wisdom for a guy who's best known in the baseball world for his ability to blast homeruns from both sides of the plate.

Berkman went on to tell me that his favorite Bible verse is John 15:5 which says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (NIV).

"It's my favorite because a lot of people who will say, 'Well, I'm a good person,'" Berkman said. "There's a theology out there that says if the good you do outweighs the bad that you do, that means you're a good person therefore you're in good standing with God. That verse really hits home for me because anything we do that's good apart from the power and the name of Jesus Christ, not that it doesn't count, but from a spiritual standpoint, it's not edifying. It's not worth much. The only way that we can truly have a purpose and an enriching life experience is to do all things in Christ and through the power of Christ. What happens when we're all about doing good works and we're doing that outside of the power of Christ is that we end up getting the glory and the whole point of this deal is that God gets the glory. That verse beautifully illustrates that point."

Ironically, John 15:5 is my favorite verse too. Just kidding. But again, who does this guy think he is? Billy Graham?

In the clubhouse, that actually might be a pretty fair comparison. His fun-loving, gentle nature has allowed him some serious influence amongst teammates. He is a bold advocate for the Baseball Chapel ministry and regularly speaks at Christian

family day events before thousands and as the Chapel's player representative before a handful of his peers.

"The key to dealing with people in general is that they have to know that you care about them," Berkman said. "You have to deal with people in gentleness. You have to come along side of them. You can't push them. You can't pull them. You have to walk with them. In order to do that, you've got to demonstrate care for that individual. That's my whole thing. I want my teammates to know that I care about them personally. I care about what happens with them on and off the field. When you are in that position, you earn the right to speak into their lives. I try to let guys know that I do care about them and consequently I think they'll listen to me when I have something to say."

And on the field, Berkman is a fierce competitor. He wants to win and he's not ashamed to say so. In fact, Berkman believes that his Christian faith implores him to strive for the best.

"If I'm out there, I'm out there to win," he said "Christians have done a disservice to the faith by backing off from that. People respect determination. They respect desire. They respect people that want to be good and be excellent in all areas of their life. If you're claiming to be a Christian and yet you're not working as hard as you could or you're not giving a full effort or you're not competing to win or competing at a high level, people aren't going to take you seriously in other areas. I've always thought Christians should work harder than anybody else."

Yes, I'll admit it. I'm a big fan of Lance Berkman. Yes, that probably had a little something to do with why my son's name is also Lance. I suppose my story could have been a little more comical. After all, I could have named him after my original favorite player (now a coach with Berkman's Astros).

His name? Jose Cruz.

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