

WNBA Star Tamika Catchings Offers Advice to Christian Super Bowl Players

Reigning WNBA champion and committed Christian Tamika Catchings has a recommendation for Super Bowl quarterback Colin Kaepernick and other followers of Christ as they prepare to play in Sunday's big game between the San Francisco 49ers and the Baltimore Ravens.

"The biggest advice I'd give to Colin is to enjoy the moment," Catchings told Charisma News. "As for Christians: [Before the game] find time to be in solitude and seriously *be* with God."

Good advice. Obviously, Catchings knows something about the frenzy and pressure of big-time sports competition. And she knows something about faith too.

At 6-foot-2, Catchings was an All-American forward at the University of Tennessee and is a three-time Olympic women's basketball gold medalist. She was honored as the WNBA MVP for the 2011 season, and in October last year she led the Indiana Fever to the Women's Professional Basketball title, a first for her and for the team.

The Fever beat the Minnesota Lynx three games to one, and Catchings was named the finals' MVP. Her performance impressed sports pundits, but she was quick to credit her teammates, and to point to God.

This Fever team gelled both on and off the court. Injuries took a toll during the season, but every time a player went down, someone else came off the bench and stepped in, determined to play hard and win. "A lot of people doubted we would make the playoffs," Catchings said. "So winning the championship was kind of crazy."

In some media interviews after claiming the title trophy, the Indiana forward compared the Fever's feat to great biblical battles such as the one in which Gideon's outnumbered army defeated the Midianites (see Judges 7).

"That is how I felt. We were the underdog," Catchings told Charisma News. "Every night [before each game] I found myself talking to God. No phone, television, computer or people—just me and God. I found that it steadied me and prepared me for what was ahead."

Every Sunday when not on the road, Catchings found herself at church, alongside a growing number of teammates. At one point, six of the 11 players on the Fever's roster worshipped together at New Life Christian Center in Indianapolis, Catchings's longtime church home. The teammates who built a spiritual sisterhood included Tammy Sutton-Brown, Sasha Goodlett, Shavonte Zellous, Erlana Larkins, and Karima Christmas.

"When people make a conscious decision to get up and make the spiritual connection, it is special," Catchings said. "The discipline has changed my life and changed my approach to how I play basketball. All of the skills and abilities I have come from God."

Growing up in the Chicago area, Catchings developed her athletic skills at an early age—not a surprise since her father is former professional basketball player Harvey Catchings. But it wasn't easy. The surefire future WNBA Hall of Famer was born with a hearing disability in both ears.

"To this day, I cannot hear certain tones and pitches," she wrote in a Jan. 21 article for the *Huffington Post* titled "How I Overcame Disability to Become a National Champion." For many years, she wore a hearing aid and went to speech therapy, but eventually jettisoned both in favor of lip and body language reading.

Catchings no longer thinks of herself as being at a disadvantage. In fact, she told Charisma News, "I know that it is only by the grace of God that I stand here today. I think that God has allowed me to use my hearing disability and all of the adversity that I have faced as an example for so many all over the world."

The basketball star was brought up in a family that prayed, but she concedes that going to church during her childhood often felt like a social event or a way to earn something else she wanted. In fact, if the Catchings children missed church on Sunday, they were not allowed to participate in other fun activities during the week. It wasn't until her sophomore year in college that she discovered what it meant to have a personal relationship with Jesus.

Catchings and a few Lady Volunteers women's basketball teammates attended a church service in Knoxville, Tenn. The guest speaker asked, "Who is your daddy?" That resonated with the young women. Catchings' parents were divorced; one teammate never knew her father; and another had parents who loved each other and were still married.

"The preacher talked about not being so focused on our earthly dads, but being more focused on our heavenly Father," Catchings says. "At that point we made more of a commitment, realizing the impact He [God] has had on our lives."

Catchings' faith was tested in her senior year at Tennessee. Her goal had been to be drafted and play professional basketball, and this was the time to show that as an athlete she was worthy. But she tore an ACL (anterior cruciate ligament), was sidelined and panicked.

"I freaked out, just for a moment," she says. "Then I was feeling peace. I realized that I had put basketball first and God second. He was saying, take a step back. God wasn't about to let basketball take over the way it had through a period of

my life.”

Catchings will recount some of her faith journey when she speaks at the Fellowship of Christian Athletes’ Road to Victory banquet in Chattanooga, Tenn., on March 5 () and during other upcoming events. She will also have stories to tell of playing basketball in China and helping the inner city youth of Indianapolis, where she now makes her off-season home.

After winning the WNBA championship, Catchings didn’t slow her pace. In early November, she headed to China where she played hoops as a member of the Guandong Dolphins. The Dolphins compete in the Chinese women’s professional league, and travel throughout the great nation. Each year a number of WNBA players sign to play with Chinese clubs, but the rosters mostly consist of Chinese nationals. Catchings led the Dolphins in scoring (24.2 points a game) and helped them gain a playoff berth, though the team lost both of its post-season games.

Catchings’ fervor and commitment are endearing and contagious. For each of the last 12 years, she has hosted a holiday youth basketball camp during the week between Christmas and New Year’s Day. In 2012, being host meant playing a basketball game in China on Christmas Day, then immediately traveling through 13 time zones to be with the youth in Indianapolis. The journey went well until she arrived in Chicago, where she learned that her connecting flight was canceled due to bad weather. Undaunted, Catchings rented a car and drove the last stretch—seven hours along weather-beaten roads.

“If you keep working at it, if you keep setting goals, if your attitude’s right—I had a bad attitude when I was young, I had a lot of transformation through the years of being who I am today,” she told WISH-TV when she arrived at the camp. “Just being able to talk to them [the 200 camp participants] and show them that hey, when you work hard, you’ll get rewarded.”

Catchings and her sister, Tauja, started a foundation called Catch the Stars (). In addition to sponsoring the basketball camp, the foundation hosts a reading program and a back to school celebration.

As for Colin Kaepernick and the other Christian players in Sunday's big game, they may do well to consider Catchings' take on competition as she is coming off the WNBA championship. Here is what she often says at pregame chapel services: "We have to be able to go out there to battle, but all of us in this room—even though we are on opposite teams—we all play for an audience of one, which is God.

"So whether we win or lose, we are still winners in His eyes. We need to *not* be focused and tuned into the need to win or be saying 'I can't lose.' We need to be focused on Him and be sure that, no matter what, at the end of the day, our glory is for Him."